

ABSTRACT

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 PHILOSOPHY OF THE ABSURD

Matthew Hamilton Bowker, Doctor of
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Directed By: Professor C. Fred Alford, Department of
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Compared to the unmistakable impact of absurd theatre, literature, and art on contemporary European and American cultures, the philosophy, morality, and politics of the absurd have remained relatively obscure. Few interpretations of Albert Camus' philosophical contribution have successfully defined the meaning of absurdity, its components and dynamics, or its moral and political consequences. This dissertation attempts to clarify these areas of absurd thought by applying the logic of ambivalence to Camus' philosophy of the absurd, revealing its compelling diagnosis of extremism and indifference, its experiential grounding for post-traditional values, and its unique appeal for moral and political maturity.

After reviewing the recent history of the concept of absurdity in Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nagel, and elsewhere (Chapter 2), I offer detailed analyses of Camus' absurd and the contributions of his scholarly critics (Chapter 3). I introduce the concept of ambivalence in the work of Eugen Bleuler, Sigmund Freud, Melanie

Klein, Otto Kernberg, and relevant sociological and political researchers (Chapter 4) to argue that the absurd is best understood *not* in skeptical or existential terms, but as an ambivalent ‘position’ with respect to countervailing desires, primarily a desire for unity and a kind of *principium individuationis* (Chapter 5). These ambivalent desires are implicated in the moral and political tensions between self and others, absolutes and limits, creation and destruction, even good and evil.

Applying this interpretation to Camus’ *The Stranger* and its main character, Meursault (Chapter 6), and to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Rebel*, *The Plague*, and other works (Chapters 7 and 8), I argue that the destructive ideologies Camus decried may be understood as defenses against the ambivalence of the absurd, while an absurd morality demands mature and creative resolutions of contradiction, resistance against defensive reactions, and deliberate moral and emotional identifications with others and enemies. Analyses of two controversial cases, Camus’ defense of Kaliayev and the ‘fastidious’ Russian assassins of 1905 and Camus’ unpopular stance on the Algerian War (1954-1962), are offered as miniature case-studies to ground conclusions about the meaning of absurd morality and politics (Chapter 9).

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By

Matthew Hamilton Bowker

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Advisory Committee:
Professor C. Fred Alford, Chair
Professor Joseph Bami
Professor Stephen Elkin
Professor James Glass
Professor Vladimir Tismaneanu

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Preface

This dissertation has its origins in two fairly humble and not-so-scholarly sources: the indefinable pleasure I have always taken in absurd things, absurd ideas, and absurd experiences, and the mundane intuition that a great many moral challenges have to do with learning how to live with (or in, or through) contradiction. While I am tempted to speculate that absurdities offer a strange and frightening pleasure because they afford us brief opportunities to satisfy otherwise forbidden desires for senselessness, selflessness, even craziness, contending with contradiction is likely a bit more complicated. If the difference between success and failure in managing contradiction has anything to do with balancing strength and gentleness, with being able to forgive and forget when necessary, *too much* of any of these things, too much absurd glee or too much fear of absurdity, too much comfort with contradiction or too much discomfort with it, can lead to hypocrisy, rigidity, a divided self, or worse.

At least on my reading, questions of how to balance senselessness with good sense, strength with gentleness, and contradiction with coherence are the central questions of the philosophy of the absurd. They are also the implicit questions asked by most theorists of ambivalence. In this work, then, I use ambivalence to interpret the philosophy of the absurd in the hope that doing so will reveal something not only about the harrowing and thrilling experience of absurdity, but about the challenges, dangers, and moral and political consequences of living with contradiction.

It is not unreasonable to wonder if resurrecting the poor philosophy of the absurd after all these years is really warranted, especially when there are so many newer theories and so many other serious problems one could choose to write about.

Perhaps the best justification for doing so is that at a time when so much postmodern thought and critique seems undercut by its own hermeneutical stance, “lost in texts,” as a teacher of mine put it, the absurd is something we can feel and, I dare say, something that *feels real*. Attempting to ground absurd moral and political reflection not in narratives, discourses, or intertextual spaces, but in the complex but powerful emotions of absurdity, is part of this dissertation’s attempt to explore a neglected path in absurd philosophy and its application to moral and political theory, a path that leads directly to the question of how we ought to face the conflictual, contradictory, and absurd challenges of our time.

The reader will be very happy to know that it is *not* my intention to use the philosophy of the absurd to fashion a new theory of ambivalence. Although I think Albert Camus may be considered a theorist of ambivalence of sorts, I do not suggest that ‘absurd drives’ replace *Eros* and *Thanatos*, nor do I propose that an ‘Absurd Personality Disorder’ be added to the DSM. Instead, this work argues that we may use ambivalence and its related constructs as analogies to give richer content and consequence to the philosophy of the absurd.

That marks the first disclaimer: that as a work of political theory and not of psychoanalysis or psychology, ambivalence plays a secondary and supporting role. The second disclaimer is that while I have come to believe in the expressive, heuristic, and philosophic potential of the absurd, I have sought to adopt neither a pro- nor anti-Camus stance. The voluminous and often cantankerous critical literature on Camus compels me to claim (or at least to pretend) neutrality.

Beloved by artists, university students, and humanists of all kinds because of his (deceptive) simplicity and his willingness to be a sensitive moralist in a cynical age, Camus is mocked by both serious philosophers and political realists on largely the same grounds. His critics have a point: there are moments of naïve and ‘bad’ philosophizing, idiosyncrasy, and unreasonableness in Camus’ expository works. But his defenders have a point as well: there is something noble and admirable about Camus’ serious contemplation of moral dilemmas, his honest indignation at suffering and cruelty, and his unflagging commitment to humanity.

It is unfortunate and ironic that the contemporary champion of *la mesure* (measure) has been treated so *extremely* by both his adherents and his detractors. I feel obliged to try a more balanced approach. I hope that this work will be read as constructive criticism of Camus’ philosophy of the absurd, not only because it proceeds without assuming either a disparaging or a valorizing tone, but, more importantly, because it analyzes, criticizes, and interprets Camus’ thought in the hope of constructing a refined model of the dynamics of the absurd.

Dedication

For Julie,
who makes even the absurdities of life
blissful

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to all of the members of my advisory committee for their thoughtful attention, their time, and their efforts throughout this process. I am particularly grateful for the instruction, support, and friendship of my advisor, Fred Alford, for nearly eight years of graduate school, or, as I like to think of it, about one quarter of my life so far. Jim Glass gave me numerous opportunities to learn and to lead, and not always in ways that I expected. Assisting his film courses taught me as much as it taught the enrolled students, and profoundly changed me as a student and a teacher. Vladimir Tismaneanu has served on every committee I have ever asked to assemble and has always offered brilliant and incisive criticism, in spite of the fact that I have never done anything to deserve his great kindness. Steve Elkin has graciously read and insightfully commented on this work and is someone from whom I should have learned much more in my time at Maryland. And Joseph Brami has been a genuinely kind and thoughtful advisor even in this late phase of my graduate studies; I would have liked to have made his acquaintance sooner as well. I am also thankful for having had the opportunity to work with Dorith Grant-Wisdom, who advised me about the prospectus for this dissertation. In our time together at College Park Scholars, I learned a lot about what it means to be a teacher and I feel even more fortunate to have become her friend.

My wife, Julie, to whom this work is dedicated, has made this dissertation, my other work, and my life possible in an exact sense and in more ways than can be enumerated. I could write another dissertation about how wonderful Julie is, how deeply I love her, and how lucky I feel to have met her at one of those mixers for

graduate students where, apparently, *nobody* ever meets *anybody*. But if I did, she would have to suffer me through another writing process and I would just end up dedicating that work to her as well.

Through what can only be described as his radical combination of strength, intelligence, and kindness, my father, Robert, shaped my heart. He gave me endless opportunities in life, some directly related to the opportunity to spend a couple of years thinking about absurdity. Perhaps in more ways than he knows, he has helped me to be (or to try to be) a difficult kind of person to be.

My mother, Judith, who died unexpectedly in 2004, was my kindred spirit and dearest friend. She would have been embarrassed by a eulogy, so I will simply say that among her countless gifts to me, she taught me how to appreciate the complex simplicities and simple complexities where truth, poetry, humor, and even absurdity can be found. She certainly would have liked to have seen this work completed, although she would have made a genial wisecrack or two about its contents. We would have had a good laugh about it. I miss her terribly.

I am always thankful for the love and support of my sister, Sarah, and her husband, Nicholas, and I am truly grateful to my mother- and father-in-law, Nancy and Ed Wojslawowicz, for their constant encouragement, their thoughtfulness, and most of all, for the generosity of their affection which has made me feel like one of their own.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A Stranger in the Lone Star State

In August 2006, then-White House Press Secretary Tony Snow revealed that President George W. Bush had been reading Albert Camus' famous novel, *The Stranger*, while vacationing at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. When asked to comment, Snow said that President Bush "found it an interesting book and a quick read" and that he and the President had discussed its meaning. "I don't want to go too deep into it," Snow explained, "but we discussed the origins of existentialism" (Dickerson 2006).

Satirists seized upon the otherwise trivial news item for its offerings of political humor. Lee Siegel blended Bush's no-nonsense rhetoric with the terse 'American' style Camus used to fashion the memorable voice of Meursault, fusing the two figures together in his *New Republic* article entitled "Strangerer" (Siegel 2006), while writers with more of a political axe to grind reveled in the ironic contrast between Bush's and Camus' positions on just about everything, from religious faith to the use of military force to capital punishment.

One might be surprised that sharper contrasts were not drawn between the President who dubbed himself 'the decider' and Camus' Meursault, who decides next to nothing. The closest anyone came to making such a comparison was apparently in the vague suggestion floating around the Press Room that the President was going through an 'existential' foreign-policy crisis, or, as Maureen Dowd called it, "a Carteresque malaise-in-the-gorge moment" (2006). Tony Snow reportedly (and

somewhat tastelessly) rebuffed this suggestion by insisting that “he [the President] doesn’t feel like an existentialist trapped in Algeria during the unpleasantness” (Dowd 2006).

A few writers who were familiar with Camus’ work understood that the greatest irony of all was the discomfiting parallel between the racial and colonial violence between the lines of *The Stranger* and America’s questionable and controversial war in Iraq. While not all were familiar with Conor Cruise O’Brien’s or Edward Said’s scathing critiques of Camus’ colonialism, John Dickerson understood that Bush’s taking-up of the novel was ripe for “geopolitical literary misinterpretation” (2006). Half-sarcastically concerned that a Camus-Bush connection would be misunderstood in the Middle East and around the world, Dickerson proclaimed it to be “the first time that national security demand[ed] an official version of literary criticism” (2006).

Putting aside concerns about national security and international perception for a moment, it is curious that this otherwise insignificant Presidential tidbit aroused so much fascination. The rest of the President’s summer reading list, which reportedly included a study of Robert Oppenheimer and a biography of Abraham Lincoln (meaning the President was reading about absurdity, atomic weapons, and a divided nation all at once), made less of a media splash (Gopnik 2006). A few critics were offended by what they saw as a misguided attempt by the White House to bolster Bush’s image as an intellectual, but I think the fascination that the story sparked in those who had read Camus derived from a genuine interest in how the President understood *The Stranger*, how he felt about Meursault’s crime, and what he thought

of the text's subtler critiques of interpretation, legal judgment, and modern culture.

The reason that President Bush's reading (or anyone's reading) of *The Stranger* is a fascinating subject is that the novel poses a particular challenge to its readers. Meursault's blankness and equivocality seem to demand interpretation, but the novel critiques and even condemns interpretation in its second part. *The Stranger* places its audience in a difficult position, demanding that we reflect upon and struggle with our own judgments as we strive to resolve the contradictions we face. It would be fascinating, for some at least, to know how President Bush interpreted *The Stranger* because our interpretations and judgments of absurd works tend to reveal as much about us as they do about the works themselves.

Waiting at San Quentin

The absurd made headlines about fifty years earlier (after all, it doesn't happen very often) by sparking a similar fascination, although in a different context, when the San Francisco Actors' Workshop performed Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* before fourteen hundred male prisoners at the San Quentin penitentiary (Esslin 2001, 19-21). No live theatrical performance had run at San Quentin since 1913, and *Waiting for Godot*, which had unsettled audiences since its debut in Paris, had apparently been chosen not on artistic grounds but for the simple reason that "no woman appeared in it" (Esslin 2001, 19).

The big question was: how would the men react to *Godot*? But contrary to prejudices and doubts about the inmates' abilities, the play was reportedly "immediately grasped by an audience of convicts." One prisoner offered his interpretation to the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "Godot is society." Another said,

“He’s the outside.” A teacher at the prison explained that the play was well-suited to its audience because the men clearly understood “what is meant by waiting... and they knew if Godot finally came, he would only be a disappointment” (Esslin 2001, 20). A review of the play in the prison paper demonstrated a similarly impressive interpretation of Beckett’s work: “We’re still waiting for Godot, and shall continue to wait. When the scenery gets too drab and the action too slow, we’ll call each other names and swear to part forever — but then, there’s no place to go!” (Esslin 2001, 20)

Part of the power of absurd literature, theatre, and even philosophy seems to derive from its ability to capture the imagination of any audience, to depict through mystery and strangeness something that is, nevertheless, recognizably human, and to call forth our creative and interpretive faculties, allowing us to read ourselves into the story. However, those same mysterious properties often seem to obscure and confuse the absurd, leaving us with a shallow understanding of the experience.

While being able to define absurdity clearly would surely spoil the fun of reading an absurd novel or seeing an absurd play, failing to answer (or even to ask) questions about the nature of absurdity prevents us from thinking clearly about what it means to feel or to be absurd. And without such clear thinking, the conceptual and critical contribution of the absurd to the study of philosophy, psychology, literature, and moral and political philosophy will remain severely limited.

Unfortunately, most theoretical interpretations of the absurd have only added to our confusion. Some seem to have wholly mistaken the concept, while others have merely reduced it to banality. Our interpretive failures with respect to the absurd are

particularly marked in the area of absurd moral and political philosophy, in spite of the fact that these areas were the natural intellectual home of thinkers like Camus.

What is the *moral* of the absurd story? What are the consequences of absurd thought and feeling? Can the absurd help us to contend with moral and political dilemmas in a postmodern climate? Critical failures to ask or answer these questions are especially disconcerting if we confess that we now face, in new guises perhaps, many of the same dilemmas with which absurdists contended in the mid-twentieth century.

In this work, I try to show that we have been wrong to assume that the absurd derives its power from its vagueness, as we have been wrong to fear that analyzing absurdity will ruin its magic. This investigation finds not mystery but powerful ambivalence and contradiction at the heart of the absurd; forces that give the absurd its vital tension, its meaning, and its power. The absurd, as this volume interprets it, challenges us to devise interpretive, creative, and mature responses to this ambivalence.

Absurd Climates

It is certain that the concept of absurdity has made an impression on contemporary thought and culture. Apart from Camus' well-known works, it has been impossible to ignore the absurdity in Franz Kafka's trials, judgments, and penalties, Samuel Beckett's and Eugene Ionesco's groundbreaking dramas, Václav Havel's unique blend of art and politics, even Paul Goodman's famous sociological analysis, *Growing up Absurd* (1962). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an absurd intellectual climate seemed to take hold of Europe. From the work of Nietzsche to the rebellions of the Romantic poets, from Romain Rolland's famous declaration, "*Je*

hais les mots à majuscules” to the absurd surrealism of the 1930s, cultural and political events seemed destined to produce what John Cruickshank would call the “inevitable attitude” of absurd revolt expressed in the works of Malraux, Sartre, and Camus (Cruickshank 1960, 6). Camus described his own writings as an effort to confront that absurd climate, to come to terms with the conflicted age into which he was born (Cruickshank 1960, viii). In an interview with Nicola Chiaromonte, Camus said that his intentions had always been to write “the story of a happy man,” but that he often considered such a project impossible because he and his peers “of the generation that has become mature from 1938 to 1945 have seen too many things. I don’t mean too many horrors, but simply too many contradictory, irreconcilable things” (Cruickshank 1960, 4). Living through the terrible contradictions of the 1930s and 1940s in an already absurd climate demanded not stories of happy men, but new ways of seeing, thinking, and acting that contended honestly with absurdity.

That Europeans of the mid-twentieth century faced an absurd world, compelling them to partake in a kind of absurd *gestalt*, is suggested particularly strongly in the work of André Malraux. Malraux’s *Tentation de l’occident* finds occidental rationalism and the fragmentation of life responsible for an “*une absurdité essentielle*,” an essential absurdity “*au centre de l’homme européen, dominant les grands mouvements de sa vie*” (Henry 1975, 58). Garine, the hero of Malraux’s *Les Conquérants*, finds neither evil nor the potential for good in his society, only absurdity: “*Je ne tiens pas la société pour mauvaise, pour susceptible d’être améliorée; je la tiens pour absurde*” (Thody 1989, 116n). And Patrick Henry writes that, in the work of Malraux and André Gide, two of Camus’ foremost literary idols,

“the key word ‘*absurdité*’ has finally been pronounced and with this acknowledgement we have reached the epitome of anti-rationalist thought. Western man finding himself in a universe whose key has been lost can do nothing but proclaim the fundamental absurdity of his existence” (Henry 1975, 58).

On Malraux’s account, we are confronted with a fundamental absurdity because we are “the first civilization in the world to be deprived of transcendence” (Cruickshank 1960, 6). But it was perhaps even more than that. The absurd climate grew out of an awareness of the failures of the Enlightenment and the groundlessness of its grand narratives, to be sure. But it also arose in response to what absurdists saw as the *responses* to that transcendental deprivation, to the disparity and contradiction between the promise of freedom, equality, and progress and the reality of war, terror, and totalitarianism, between the violent conquest of peoples, nations, and nature and the doctrines of civilization and progress that justified those evils. Perhaps as much as that “*grandeur et misère*” with which Charles Taylor famously characterized modernity (Isaac 1992, 2), the absurd climate was generated by the stark contrast between our creative and moral possibility and what Abraham Heschel described as our seemingly limitless “capacity to hurt... the immense expansion of power and the rapid decay of compassion” because of which “life has, indeed, become a synonym for peril” (Braiterman 1998, 69).

The Absurd in Moral and Political Philosophy

Germaine Brée tells us that the philosophy of the absurd was at the center of an acute intellectual, moral, and political crisis the magnitude of which she compares, quite

boldly, with the end of the Roman Empire. Brée finds the concept of absurdity to be representative of “a whole trend of twentieth-century European thought which grew out of a painful awareness of the impossibility of finding a rational justification for any system of moral values” (1964, 26). The absurd thought which developed from such painful awareness, she worries, may no longer be understood by contemporary thinkers who no longer feel the acute agony of that climate. But even if our awareness is no longer ‘painful’ (perhaps eventually pain yields to irony), moral and political philosophers ought to be able to sympathetically engage the absurd tradition. After all, its fundamental concerns are ours.

In the absurd climate, as in the postmodern climate, we find ourselves “bereft of externally imposed or intellectually authoritative standards of behavior... left entirely to [our] own devices in the midst of an existence that lacks any intrinsic meaning” (Willhoite 1968, 6). Suspicious of traditional sources of value and authority, the absurd climate is akin to the postmodern condition described by C. Wright Mills (1959) and defined even more famously by Jean-Francois Lyotard as the state of “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1984, 260). In this climate, traditional stories, myths, principles, and heroes no longer legitimate moral and political values. For Mills (1959, 166), our “happy assumption of the relation between reason and freedom” is shattered while, for Lyotard, we are forced to recognize that our knowledge-claims are grounded in logically unjustified ends, rather than the other way around.

The dilemma of the absurd and postmodern climate, then, is one of finding legitimate grounds for moral values without recourse to metanarratives, traditions, or

absolutes. It is the dilemma of defining and defending moral values in a world of plural values, multiple ‘narratives’, and numerous ‘language-games’. This dilemma is, of course, a central problem, if not the “supreme problem” of contemporary moral and political philosophy (Willhoite 1968, 4-5). And Camus’ philosophy explicitly addresses it, although rarely by playing the particular ‘language-games’ of philosophical academic disciplines.

If Thomas Thorson and Fred Willhoite are correct in asserting that “Camus’ thought is ‘to the point’ in political philosophy in a way that little else is in our time” (Willhoite 1968, 7), they would seem to hold the minority view. Very few theorists would say that Camus’ work converses with that of better-known contemporary political theorists like John Rawls (1996, 1999), Robert Nozick (1974), or Jürgen Habermas (1985, 1998), even though it is possible to understand the works of these theorists as attempts to defend modern values in an absurd moral climate. Of course, scores of critics have argued that these vaunted attempts have failed to face the full impact of absurdity and postmodernity insofar as they rely upon conceptions of reason, freedom, or subjectivity inherited from the grand narratives of the Enlightenment.

Neither has the philosophy of the absurd been heeded in critical and alternative discussions about what appears to be a political philosophical point of impasse. That discussion has included Frankfurt School critical theorists like Herbert Marcuse (1989, 1991), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2002), post-structuralists like Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) and Michel Foucault (1980, 1995) among others, as well as a vast array of ‘alternative’ theoretical responses represented

by the quite distinct contributions of Hannah Arendt (1958), Alasdair McIntyre (1984), and Richard Rorty (1989), just to name a few. Each of these theorists has received more serious political and social philosophical scrutiny than has Camus.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the philosophy of the absurd has been almost entirely ignored in the related political philosophical debates over the limits of liberalism and democracy in a postmodern era. One of the easiest ways to uncover these limits is to ask: How much illiberality must liberal tolerance tolerate? Whatever answer we give will be informed by a basic tension at the heart of liberal democratic thought, a tension Chantal Mouffe treats in her *The Democratic Paradox* (2000) and which John Gray names the *Two Faces of Liberalism* (2000): the tension between a liberalism that prioritizes specifically liberal values and a liberalism that prioritizes the plurality and incommensurability of values (see also Crowder 2007). In the ensuing debate over these limits and tensions, which might be characterized more simply as a debate about the extreme limits of freedom and justice, Camus' thought, particularly his work on revolution and rebellion in *The Rebel*, may have something to say.

“Absolute freedom,” Camus writes, “is the right of the strongest to dominate. Therefore it prolongs the conflicts that profit by injustice. Absolute justice is achieved by the suppression of all contradiction: therefore it destroys freedom... The revolution of the twentieth century has arbitrarily separated, for overambitious ends of conquest, two inseparable ideas” (1956b, 287-291). And Camus' solution to this dilemma, that “to be fruitful, the two ideas [justice and freedom] must find their limits in each other” (1956b, 291), is a potentially instructive solution which I treat more

extensively in Chapters 7, 8, and 9. Of course, it is not yet clear *how* an absurd philosophy could begin to reconcile justice and freedom, and it is no easy task for any philosophy. I will argue that the absurd offers a unique solution by grounding its vision of moral limits and political action in the dynamics of ambivalence and the norms of creativity and maturity.

Mine is not Václav Havel's otherwise compelling argument that absurdity and meaninglessness are complementary opposites, that "the outlines of genuine meaning can only be perceived from the bottom of absurdity" (Havel 1990, 113). Havel means not only that the irony and humor of absurdity make it possible for us to suffer and sacrifice, but that absurdity and idealism are "only two sides of the same coin... [that] without the constantly living and articulated experience of absurdity, there would be no reason to attempt to do something meaningful" (1990, 114). The ambivalence I refer to is of a different kind, perhaps less comprehensive but a bit more precise. This volume argues that the philosophy of the absurd grounds moral value in the maturity and creativity of our responses to ambivalent desires to lose and to preserve the self. In doing so, the philosophy of the absurd explicates the psychological and social forces which compose an absurd 'position' with respect to those desires as well as the moral and political implications of our reactions to them.

For over fifty years, scholars have poured over Camus' life and works looking for answers to practical political questions about "the proper way to organize politically and... [the] criteria for making choices in a political context" (Willhoite 1968, 7). But these efforts have failed to yield any compelling formulas for political action and have tended to distort the philosophy of the absurd while trying. In his

well-known book on Albert Camus and Hannah Arendt, Jeffrey Isaac contends that both thinkers deserve consideration as democratic theorists of civil society. But in order to classify Camus as a democratic theorist, Isaac is forced to ignore the more radical and ambivalent aspects of Camus' thought, only to confess at the end of his work that he remains uncertain about what type of rebellious or democratic politics he, or Camus or Arendt, might recommend (Isaac 1992, 258).

Camus, himself, was known to have felt that "the most acute human problems are not political and cannot be solved by political action" (Cruickshank 1960, 126-127). In spite of Camus' obvious political commitments, Germaine Brée has noted that "political problems were of interest only in so far as they touched one of his major preoccupations, that is, the daily life of human beings, their freedom and the human justice meted out to them on this earth" (1964, 8). While Camus disdained conformism and political indifference, he continued to believe that "fundamental human problems will persist whatever progress may be made in the improvement of social and political institutions and that any effort aimed at perfecting mankind by collective means is doomed to failure" (Willhoite 1968, 47). Perhaps Serge Doubrovsky put the paradoxical political relevance *and* irrelevance of Camus' philosophy of the absurd best when he described it as "an ethics rigorously separated from politics, or, if you prefer, inseparable from the sort of politics that can be reduced to ethics" (Brée 1962, 18).

If we are to search for the moral and political philosophical implications of Camus' absurd, we must *not* look for clear maxims, concise principles, or simple statements of value that define absurd moral and political action. Those who have

done so have been disappointed, or worse. What may be worse than disappointment is the reduction of the philosophy of the absurd to platitudes about democracy and dialogue, leaving us with an absurd theory that is far too simple to be of any service in the face of real moral or political dilemmas. Rather, what this dissertation hopes to reveal is Camus' complex, non-systematic, and often personal appraisal of experience, action, and emotion that, with some extrapolation and interpretation, may help us to frame questions of moral and political theory in a different light. Although the absurd is incapable of providing clear-cut answers to specific moral or political problems (at least to the difficult ones), absurd philosophy may offer a grounding for moral and political reflection and an appeal to think about moral and political philosophical matters differently.

An Absurd World

It would be a good time for the philosophy of the absurd to offer whatever moral and political contributions it has to offer, for the early twenty-first century seems poised to re-create, and perhaps even to globalize, an absurd climate of its own. The last half-century has been marked by rapid global and technological changes, increasing disparities between the very rich and the very poor, and a heightened degree of social and cultural dislocation, all of which have generated a widespread sense of "political fatalism and chronic insecurity" (Held et al. 1999, 1).

In the renewed absurd climate, we face many of the contradictions of the mid-twentieth century, contradictions between progress and poverty, freedom and tyranny, peace and warfare, fundamentalism and tolerance, but we face them in the context of rapidly shifting social, political, cultural, and psychological boundaries. The

‘contradictory, irreconcilable things’ that Camus’ generation witnessed seem to be multiplied by the “push and pull... mix and break” of globalization (Chan and McIntyre 2001, 4). This ‘push and pull’ refers to the ambivalent dynamics and “fundamental contradictions” of globalization to which increasing numbers of individuals and groups are subjected: contradictions between “inclusion and exclusion,” “market and state,” “growing wealth and impoverishment,” “the economy and the environment,” the “national and the global citizen” (Castles 1998), “unification versus fragmentation,” “powerlessness versus appropriation,” “authority versus uncertainty,” “personalized versus commodified experience,” and ontological security versus existential anxiety (Giddens 1991, 181-208).

For years now, scholars from a variety of fields have argued that the contradictions implied by global change have profound effects upon local and personal experience as “intensive [change] reaches through to the very grounds of individual activity and the constitution of the self” (Giddens 1991, 184). Yet, the institutions in which individuals might find shelter from global change and crisis may be in crisis as well. In his essay on Antonin Artaud, Eugene Ionesco described the absurd effects of the condition in which “our culture no longer contains ourselves (or only contains an insignificant part of ourselves) and forms a ‘social’ context in which we are not integrated” (Esslin 1960, 10). If Ionesco is right, then even the declining relevance of geographic borders and the intensifying global transfer of cultural artifacts suggest the growing political and psychological significance of absurdity. But, of course, wondering about the contemporary political significance of absurdity is only productive if we can arrive at a clearer understanding of what the absurd is.

Whose absurd? What absurd?

A great deal of attention has been paid to Camus' life and his fiction. But while the absurd as we know it is undeniably shaped by Camus, there is no reason why we must approach the absurd *as* biography, as the outlook of a single individual. Unlike other works on this subject, therefore, this dissertation does not treat the philosophy of the absurd as an aspect of Albert Camus' personality or as the support-system for his fictional creation. Instead, I critique and interpret the philosophy of the absurd as a theory in development, as a potentially fruitful, but as yet unclear, theoretical possibility. Unlike other psychodynamically-informed treatments of the absurd, I do not seek to psychoanalyze Camus or to reduce him or his work to psychiatric categories. Rather, I attempt to analogize the absurd with a relevant (but relatively simple) psychoanalytic construct, in order to give some substance and contour to the philosophy of the absurd. My hope is that doing so will re-open a discussion about the absurd that has been closed for some time due to a variety of unfortunate circumstances, not least a misplaced biographical orientation of critics.

This volume takes up the task of clarifying and re-interpreting the philosophy of the absurd in part because 'the philosophy of the absurd' has become impossibly obscure. Because it has found no clear disciplinary home, because it has lacked conceptual clarity almost from the start, because of a skewed critical orientation, and because of the striking absence of even a preliminary moral and political theory of the absurd, the philosophy of the absurd is in a state of sickness unto death. This unfortunate state of the philosophy of the absurd was made apparent in 1994, when Albert Camus' unfinished novel, *The First Man*, was edited and posthumously

published. After more than thirty years of relative scholarly disinterest, the appearance of *The First Man* sparked a minor recrudescence of critical attention to Camus. The book was hailed as a ‘magical Rosetta stone’ to Camus’ entire *oeuvre*, was praised and reviewed as one might expect, and was eventually put aside. But while the late novel was analyzed (and psychoanalyzed) as revelatory of Camus’ personality and artistic vision, there was virtually no discussion of its contribution to the meaning or status of the philosophy of the absurd. While the controversies surrounding Camus’ life had survived, the philosophy had all but passed away.

For the philosophy of the absurd to be of service in addressing moral, philosophical, political, or social issues, even in its own subtle way, we must attain a clearer sense of its scope and meaning. But here we face another problem. For Søren Kierkegaard, the first philosopher to make extensive use of the term, the absurd was the paradox of faith. For Sartre, it was “the given, unjustifiable, primordial quality of existence” (Cruickshank 1960, 45n). For philosophers like Thomas Nagel, the absurd is the disparity between our serious pursuit of our goals and the ultimate insignificance of our efforts, while scholars of European literature classify a work as ‘absurd’ if it manifests “extreme forms of illogic, inconsistency, nightmarish fantasy,” a rejection of “usual or rational devices,” and a “use of nonrealistic form” (Holman in Balogun 1984, 44). Eugene Ionesco’s famous definition of the absurd is “that which is devoid of purpose” (Esslin 2001, 23), while, for Václav Havel, the absurd is akin to “the experience of the absence of meaning” (1990, 201). Sociologists like Stanford Lyman and Marvin Scott (1970) define the absurd as the meaning-making condition of individuals in social contexts, while Paul Goodman

(1962) understands absurdity as a lack of fit between individuals' needs and what social institutions can offer. A recent study in the psychology of advertising even sought to operationalize 'absurdity' by "incongruously juxtaposing pictorial images, words, and/or sounds that viewers perceive to be irrational, bizarre, illogical, and disordered," examples of which included "ads for Camel cigarettes..., the Energizer Bunny, Joe Isuzu, the Coca-Cola Polar Bears, and the California Raisins" (Arias-Bolzman 2000, 1).

This absurd laundry list merely hints at the profound confusion and disagreement about the meaning of absurdity across disciplines, fields, and eras. And I have not even mentioned Camus' understandings of the absurd, which, too, are almost impossibly varied. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* alone, Camus treats the absurd as a sickness, a dichotomy, a paradox, an attitude, a climate, and a human condition. Among other things, he describes the absurd as "a feeling that deprives the mind of sleep" (Camus 1955, 6), a "divorce between man and his life" (6), an "odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent" (12), a moment when "the stage sets collapse" (12), a "revolt of the flesh" (14), "the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photograph" (15), "the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (28), "lucid reason noting its limits" (49), a "gap" (19), a "condition" (20), a "passion" (22), a "revolt" (25), a "datum" (31), an "equation" (50), and a "wager" (52). The next two chapters of this dissertation are specifically addressed to the problem of clarifying the meaning of the absurd, in its recent history and in Camus' thought. But the interpretive work this entire volume

undertakes is, in a sense, an effort to give the philosophy of the absurd greater conceptual clarity, substance, and force.

With a theory as rich as the philosophy of the absurd, it is tempting to find connections between it and any number of more complex philosophical, hermeneutic, or psychoanalytic theories. But applying these more complex theories would probably serve the interpreting construct more than the interpreted one, and, in this case, it would only further obscure the already muddled concept of absurdity. Thus, I have sought to explain and interpret the absurd in the simplest terms possible without doing violence to its subtleties. As this volume sees it, the absurd is about desire. The absurd describes conflicting desires between losing and holding onto the self, ambivalent desires which then pose moral and political challenges, and which, we may speculate, may themselves be affected by changing political and cultural conditions that place new demands on selves. I argue that understanding the absurd as ambivalence is enough (and not too much) to see the philosophy of the absurd clearly and to identify its most significant moral and political implications.

The Organization of this Work

This dissertation begins with a brief history of the philosophical concept of the absurd, from Nietzsche to Nagel, as it were (Chapter 2). Taken together, these various approaches have contributed to our understanding of, as well as our confusion about, the meaning of the absurd. It would be impossible to review every theory, interpretation, or representation of the absurd, so, with one exception (I think a

justified one), I limit myself to relevant *philosophical* accounts of the absurd in order to situate Camus' thought and my interpretation of it in an appropriate context.

In Chapter 3, I examine Albert Camus' philosophy of the absurd. I discuss its virtues and its flaws, while reviewing the most significant critical scholarship on Camus' work to offer a few simple but necessary clarifications. Specifically, I analyze the nature of the absurd, the status of the absurd, and the relationship between the descriptive and normative treatments of the absurd in Camus' work.

In Chapter 4, I introduce the concept of ambivalence in selected psychoanalytic and social scientific contexts, highlighting the work of Eugen Bleuler, Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, Otto Kernberg, along with some relevant sociological and political researchers. I give the subject of ambivalence a bit more attention than one might expect in a political theory dissertation because it forms the cornerstone of my interpretation of the absurd and its moral and political consequences in later chapters.

In Chapter 5, I apply the analogy of ambivalence to the absurd by carefully examining Camus' work (primarily *The Myth of Sisyphus*) to reveal its underlying forces, tensions, and dynamics. I describe the ambivalence in Camus' philosophy of the absurd as an ambivalence between the desire for unity and a *principium individuationis*, although this conflict involves related ambivalences about self and others, absolutes and limits, creation and destruction, and good and evil. This chapter analyzes specific passages from a number of Camus' texts with reference to the dynamics of ambivalence described in Chapter 4.

In Chapter 6, I apply the analogy between absurdity and ambivalence to Camus' most famous novel, *The Stranger*, but *not* by arguing that the character of Meursault is absurd. Rather, I try to show that Meursault is *taboo* in a Freudian sense, revealing an ambivalence about his behavior among those who condemn him. This chapter argues that Meursault's apathy and indifference represent taboo offenses against the ideals of freedom and autonomy envisioned in the kingdom of ends, described in Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). This more complex relationship between Meursault, ambivalence, taboo, and the absurd, reveals that the role of absurdity in *The Stranger* is more subtle than is generally thought.

In Chapter 7, I turn to Camus' *The Rebel* in order to explore the meaning of absurd *révolte*, Camus' preferred expression of the moral and political consequence of the absurd. I treat in detail the difficult relationship between the condition or 'position' of absurdity and its moral consequences in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. I seek to highlight the most important distinctions between *révolte*, rebellion, and revolution, as these distinctions are crucial to my (and any) interpretation of absurd morality.

In Chapter 8, I apply my interpretation of the absurd from Chapters 5 and 7 to the moral issues raised in *The Rebel*, arguing that absurd morality insists upon a mature and creative response to the ambivalence of the absurd. This response involves a tolerance and integration of ambivalence, a measuredness and self-limitation, a resistance against extreme or defensive reactions, and a kind of moral resourcefulness. While it can not produce a formal ethics, I claim that the philosophy of the absurd can offer a unique grounding for moral values.

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 9, I examine the political philosophical implications of the absurd moral grounding described in Chapter 8. Specifically, I explore two very different (and very difficult) political cases: (1) Camus' defense of Kaliayev and the Russian assassins of 1905 and (2) Camus' controversial stance on the Algerian War (1954-1962). I reflect upon these cases to see if Camus' views are more comprehensible in light of the interpretation of the absurd this volume has offered, and to draw broader conclusions about the meaning of absurd politics.

Throughout the work, I maintain that it is necessary to be clear about the concept of the absurd, and I analyze Camus' texts closely in an attempt to achieve a more precise understanding. I do not, however, preserve any strict distinction between the terms 'the absurd' and 'absurdity'. I use the term 'the absurd' a bit more often mainly because Camus does (*l'absurde*), but where Camus and others have suggested a difference between 'the absurd' (as a kind of abstract thing) and a feeling of 'absurdity' (as a sentiment), I try to show that this distinction is misleading and unproductive.

My contention in this work is that the absurd (or absurdity) may be interpreted as a special kind of ambivalence and, thus, as an aspect of psychological experience that demands a morally mature response. Absurdist's cries of spiritual anguish are evidence not that the absurd is 'evil', nor that its speculations about metaphysical solitude are 'true', but that the absurd represents a kind of 'position' that contends with powerful, agonizing, and ambivalent feelings about self and others, unity and separation, creation and destruction. The absurd moral agent must carefully manage his ambivalence, resist the temptations of extremes, recognize his own fallibility and

involvement with evil, and seek to make reparations when he falters. The ideal of maturely-integrated ambivalence, then, may serve as a kind of psychodynamically-informed absurd moral stance that requires that we hold together (without smashing together) what we are tempted to split apart, devalue, or deny. As such, the philosophy of the absurd offers both a grounding for moral and political thinking and an appeal for a unique kind of psychological, moral, and political maturity.

Chapter 2: A Brief History of the Philosophy of the Absurd

Our present confusion about the absurd results not only from a lack of attention to Camus' theoretical contribution, to which all but one of the following chapters of this work are addressed, but from the many competing philosophical understandings of absurdity, which I review here. In ordinary language, we use the word 'absurd' interchangeably with 'incongruent', 'irrational', 'senseless', and 'ridiculous', but these synonyms stand in an unclear and uncomfortable relation to the philosophical meanings of the term. In fact, in standard dictionaries, 'absurd' is often given two or more separate meanings. The first is generally that which is "utterly or obviously senseless, illogical, or untrue... laughably foolish or false," while the second is "the quality or condition of existing in a meaningless or irrational world" (*Random House Webster's College Dictionary* 1991). This humorous double-sense of 'absurd' suggests that even the *word* may be charged with a kind of ambivalence, a tension between comedy and tragedy, laughter and despair.

The word 'absurd' is actually derived from the Latin *absurdus*, which means "out of harmony," what is unharmonious to the ear (see Esslin 2001, 23), but its likely root is not *surd*, meaning 'deaf', but *svar*, meaning 'tune' or 'sound' (Halsey 1882, 151). While this chapter refers to Camus' work, its goal is to briefly treat *other* absurd theorists in order to highlight key themes and debates within the development of absurd thought and to give the reader a sense of the various interpretations of absurdity, which are perhaps as discordant as the etymology of the term implies.

Because the absurd remains such a muddled concept, attempts to trace its heritage have had only the most limited success. To give but one example, John Cruickshank sees in Camus' absurd "a contemporary manifestation of a scepticism as old at least as the Book of Ecclesiastes" (Cruickshank 1960, 44). But Cruickshank's equation of both Ecclesiastes and absurdity with skepticism seems strangely shortsighted for such a thoughtful critic. Most studies have focused, instead, on the absurdity inherent in Qohelet's key word, *hebel*, translated often as 'vanity', but which literally denotes 'breath', 'breeze', or 'vapor' (see Fox 1989, 29; Fredericks 1993, 12n; Dor-Shav 2004; Berger 2001). These studies have argued that the sense of the term, and of that key phrase which so often follows it, *reut-ruah*, or 'chasing after wind' (Jastrow 1919, 204n), are not far from the contemporary notion of absurdity. Unfortunately, very few of these studies have been clear about what that contemporary notion of absurdity entails.

Michael Fox's study of Ecclesiastes specifically unites Qohelet's words with Camus' absurd philosophy and makes a detailed argument for the relationship between the two. "The best translation-equivalent for *hebel* in Qohelet's usage," says Fox, "is 'absurdity', understood in a sense and with connotations close to those given the concept in Albert Camus's classic description of the absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*" (1989, 31). What is lacking in Fox's account of this relationship, however, is a thorough examination of the concept of the absurd, itself. For instance, while making the case that the words of Qohelet are "absurd," Fox describes the absurd to be "humanity's condition of existence" (1989, 32), "an affront to reason" (1989, 31), and "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” (1989, 31). At the same time, Fox argues that “to call something ‘absurd’ is to claim a certain knowledge of its quality: that it *is* contrary to reason — perhaps only to human reason, but that is the only reason accessible to humans without appeal to revelation” (1989, 35, emphasis in original).

J.L. Crenshaw’s *Ecclesiastes* appears to agree with Fox’s conclusions but to mistake the absurd, and in doing so, perhaps to mistake Qohelet. Crenshaw writes: “Life is profitless; totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible’s strangest book. Enjoy life if you can, advises the author, for old age will soon overtake you. And even as you enjoy, know that the world is meaningless. Virtue does not bring reward. The deity stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death” (Fredericks 1993, 13). While Benjamin Berger claims that there are affinities between Qohelet, Camus, and Leo Chestov, he equates ‘utter absurdity’ with ‘total negation’, only to bundle Camus with “existentialists,” like Heidegger and Sartre, all of whose work is taken to express “the inchoate nature of this universe, and the irrationality of existence” (2001, 164). Berger concludes from these comparisons that absurd rebellion is “merely indifference to, and accepting of, the absurdity of existence” (2001, 168), an interpretation which is quite obviously shortsighted.

In addition to Qohelet, scholars have discovered absurdity in the *Akedah*, the story of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac (see the discussion of Kierkegaard below), as well as in the Book of Job (Gordis 1968, 112-121). Paul Archambault’s *Camus’ Hellenic Sources* (1972) traces Camus’ thought to the works of Homer, Euripides, Lucretius, and Augustine, among others, while it has become more

common to discuss the relation between the absurd and Pyrrhonic, Humean, or other branches of skepticism (see Gabhart 1994). Donald Crosby's *The Spectre of the Absurd* (1988) finds the seeds of modern nihilism, which he equates with both absurdity and existentialism, in the thought of Descartes and other early moderns. A number of Camus' best-known critics like Germaine Brée, John Cruickshank, and Philip Thody have pointed out the intimate relationship between Camus' thought and that of Blaise Pascal (see McNulty 1992, 53n). Patrick Henry (1975) has suggested that, in addition to Pascal, Camus' absurd owes its development to Voltaire and the tradition of anti-rationalist thought. And Avi Sagi (2002) begins his book on Camus with a history of the concept of alienation, thereby connecting Camus' absurd to the thought of Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger. In fact, Camus references many of these same thinkers in his notebooks and essays.

But because these studies suffer from the same lack of conceptual clarity about the meaning of the absurd, it remains impossible to draw consistent or useful conclusions from their comparisons. Because the remainder of this dissertation is devoted to offering a clearer interpretation and understanding of Camus' philosophy of the absurd, and because it would be impossible to review the idea of absurdity in all of its contexts and fields, the following brief overview limits itself, with one exception, to the most recent and most relevant philosophical treatments of the absurd, where we can more readily observe the concept's historical outlines.

Friedrich Nietzsche

It is unusual to begin a discussion of the absurd with Nietzsche, but it is helpful to note the philosophy of the absurd's ethical, psychological, and political resonances with the work of Nietzsche, whom Camus acknowledged as a guide and "spiritual ancestor" (Sefler 1974, 415). Although Nietzsche is still widely misunderstood, perhaps more than most philosophers, the destruction of values he advocated was intended to make room, as it were, for the creation of new, if sometimes unattractive, values. Camus even seems to imply that without Nietzsche's powerful negations, his call for the transvaluation of values, and his subjection of ideals to genealogical and psychological scrutiny, the philosophy of the absurd may have never been possible.

It is fair to say that Nietzsche's universe becomes Camus' absurd climate, one in which both idealism and nihilism are seen as dangerous and decadent illusions. Camus weaves his own thought with that of Nietzsche throughout *The Rebel*, but addresses him specifically in the lengthy section devoted to "Nietzsche and Nihilism" (1956b, 65-80), where Camus writes of Nietzsche's discoveries as the advent of a new world: "From the moment that man believes neither in God nor in an immortal life, he becomes responsible for everything alive, for everything that, born of suffering, is condemned to suffer from life.' It is he, and he alone, who must discover law and order. Then the time of exile begins, the endless search for justification, the aimless nostalgia, 'the most painful, the most heartbreaking questions, that of the heart which asks itself: where can I feel at home?'" (Camus 1956b, 70).

Nietzsche's anguish at this new world, his exile, alienation, responsibility, and his call for the creation of new values are visible in almost all of Camus' works. And

Nietzsche's hope, which Camus understands to be "to render the situation untenable to his contemporaries," to "arrive at the extremity of contradiction," and to rush "with a kind of frightful joy... toward the impasse into which he methodically drives his nihilism" (Camus 1956b, 71), is, like Camus', to confront nihilism, but only in order to exceed it.

Of course, to exceed nihilism, Nietzsche had to resurrect the classical, tragic worldview that also flavors much of Camus' thought. Nietzsche's formulation of the contrast between the Dionysiac and Apollonian principles, between intoxication and the *principium individuationis* (Nietzsche 1956, 22), is not at all dissimilar to the formula of a basic ambivalence by which we will interpret Camus' absurd. Camus' absurd vision of life as incommensurate is, indeed, deeply informed by Nietzsche's perception of life as "an incarnation of dissonance" (Sefler 1974, 419). Nor are tragic ethics and aesthetics far removed from Camus' absurd literature and drama (see Lazere 1973, 21). Phillip Thody claims, for example, that Camus' play, *Caligula*, "announces his discovery of the absurd" with the words, "'Men die and they are not happy'" (Thody 1989, 47), words that echo the tragic wisdom of Silenus, Dionysus' sometime companion (see Nietzsche 1956, 29).

Within this tragic context, Nietzsche's philosophically pessimistic ethos refused to escape suffering through abstractions or *ressentiment*. In his *Critical Backward Glance on The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche asks if the true tragic spirit, a spirit of pessimism, perhaps a proto-absurd spirit, may actually be a sign of health and strength, of facing the world on one's own two feet. And by contrast, he wonders if the reconciliations one makes for the sake of optimism may not be a sign of

decadence (Nietzsche 1956, 3-9). This line of thought is not at all dissimilar to the spirit of the absurd inquiry articulated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where Camus transforms an investigation of the necessity of physical suicide into a scathing critique of 'intellectual suicide' and a call for the creative development of new values. The idea that an 'absurd' climate could also be a healthy one in which it is possible to rediscover oneself, one's role, and one's limits, is an idea inspired by Nietzsche's revival of the tragic spirit.

Like Camus, Nietzsche is not satisfied with a morality of license. Rather, "the essence of [Nietzsche's] discovery consists in saying that if the eternal law is not freedom, the absence of law is still less so. If nothing is true... then nothing is forbidden... But, at the same time, nothing is authorized; there must also be values and aims in order to choose another course of action... If fate is not guided by superior values, if chance is king, then there is nothing but the step in the dark and the appalling freedom of the blind" (Camus 1956b, 71). This contradictory situation, both the freedom and the emptiness of a world without values, leads Nietzsche to his conclusions of lucidity, necessity, and affirmation. To the question, "How can one live freely and without law?," Camus finds that "Nietzsche at least does not flinch" (1956b, 72). Nietzsche's bold reply is that "Damocles never danced better than beneath the sword. One must accept the unacceptable and hold to the untenable." But Camus also recognizes that "from the moment that it is admitted that the world pursues no end, Nietzsche proposes to concede its innocence, to affirm that it accepts no judgment since it cannot be judged on any intention, and consequently to replace

all judgments based on values by absolute assent, and by a complete and exalted allegiance to this world” (1956b, 72).

Herein lie the roots of the most significant disagreement between Camus and Nietzsche, for “this magnificent consent, born of abundance and fullness of spirit, is the unreserved affirmation of human imperfection and suffering, of evil and murder, of all that is problematic and strange in our existence,” says Camus (1956b, 72). Nietzsche, like all of the revolutionaries (as opposed to the rebels) Camus reviews in *The Rebel*, goes too far. His *amor fati*, “which begins with the recognition of fatality,” ultimately results in “a deification of fate” and in “the individual’s absolute submission to the inevitable” (1956b, 72-73). Nietzsche’s rejection of judgment and idealism ends in an “exaltation of evil” (1956b, 74).

Thus, Camus finds Nietzsche’s stance to be collaborationist with crime, cruelty, and murder. Of course, Camus was well aware that the abuse of Nietzsche’s work by anti-Semites and Nazis was the very opposite of his true message and meaning. Nevertheless, Camus points out that Nietzsche’s work *does* contain the seeds of a rational justification for evil. Camus claims that Nietzsche’s path from rebellion to affirmation, “from the negation of the ideal to the secularization of the ideal,” gives him an “involuntary responsibility” for the ideologies of superhumanity and domination which neither Nietzsche nor Camus would support (1956b, 77).

While Nietzsche might strike absurd philosophers as overly insistent that suffering must be accepted, and overly willing to sacrifice the many to the exceptional few, Camus seems to forgive him these eccentricities for his incalculable

contribution to the development of the philosophy and psychology of the absurd, which likewise accepts suffering as an unfortunate fact and offers a tragic ethos as a basic orientation to the world. But perhaps what later chapters will recall the most about Nietzsche's contribution to the absurd is his insistence upon the impossible, his demand, mirroring Camus' demand, that we "accept the unacceptable and hold to the untenable" (Camus 1956b, 72).

Søren Kierkegaard

Literature reviews of the concept of the absurd often begin with the work of Søren Kierkegaard because of his early use of the word in relation to paradox and because, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus famously criticized Kierkegaard for taking a leap of faith over absurdity (1955, 37-50). But the simplest way to introduce Kierkegaard's thought on the absurd is by way of his interpretation of the *Akedah* in *Fear and Trembling* (1843), where he discovers in Abraham the quintessence of faith, a faith that believes "on the strength of the absurd" (1985, 65-70, 75-76, 83-85).

Kierkegaard understands Abraham's journey toward Mount Moriah as the apex of a paradoxical life. When he has to think about it, Kierkegaard says he is "virtually annihilated... all the time aware of that monstrous paradox that is the content of Abraham's life" (1985, 62). Kierkegaard is "constantly repulsed" at this paradox and his thought, "for all its passion, is unable to enter into it" (1985, 62). In the face of the impossible contradictions between Abraham's love for Isaac, God's promise to make Abraham a father and a father of nations, and God's command to sacrifice Isaac, Kierkegaard argues that Abraham acts and believes absurdly, meaning

that Abraham believes “that God would not demand Isaac of him,” while at the same time being “willing to offer him if that was what was demanded” (1985, 65).

In Kierkegaard’s terms, Abraham transcends and suspends ‘the ethical’ on the grounds of a particular and absolute relationship to God. What is complex and perhaps problematic in this interpretation, is that ‘the particular’ is the realm of sin as much as salvation. When we move from heeding the particular self to heeding universal ethics, we subordinate our personal interests to the universal. But for Kierkegaard, there is a step *above* the universal, which Abraham is the first to take. That step is the step of faith, which is a particular, personal, irrational, and absurd relationship to the divine. Kierkegaard’s famous *problema*, “the teleological suspension of the ethical” (1985, 83-95), describes Abraham’s predicament and his eventual choice of a particular faith over a universal ethic. “Abraham represents faith, and that faith finds its proper expression in him whose life is not only the most paradoxical conceivable, but so paradoxical that it simply cannot be thought. He acts on the strength of the absurd; for it is precisely the absurd that as the single individual he is higher than the universal” (1985, 85).

The absurd, for Kierkegaard, is the paradox, and the paradox is faith. To put it a different way, faith is the only thing that can hold together the absurd and contradictory elements of the paradox. If he were to proceed logically, Abraham would be in trouble: he would be either a criminal or a sinner, either insufficiently ethical or insufficiently faithful. As opposed to a rational reading of the *Akedah* (for instance, Kant’s reading that God could not possibly have ordered Abraham to do such a monstrous thing), Kierkegaard claims that “*only* the true God can demand of

Abraham the sacrifice of Isaac. It is in the (sickening) unreason, in the incomprehensible enormity of precisely such an injunction that the believer will recognize God's authentic summons" (Steiner 1998, 107, emphasis in original).

It is difficult to call Abraham's a 'leap' of faith because the journey to Mount Moriah takes three days, but through his 'journey' of faith, Abraham, in some bizarre sense, accomplishes both what God commands and what ethical duty and paternal love demand. He believes 'on the strength of the absurd' because only the absurdly contradictory ideas that (a) God *is* commanding Isaac's sacrifice, (b) God does *not* wish to sacrifice Isaac, and (c) Isaac will be killed *and* will not be killed, are able to hold or resolve the paradox. In the simplest terms, "faith does the impossible" (Mooney 1981, 109).

Kierkegaard, himself, appears to have suffered crises of faith, experiences of absurdity and anguish which he recorded dutifully and eloquently in his journals, papers, and even major works. Camus called him the most engaging philosopher to confront the absurd, one who "for a part of his existence at least, does more than discover the absurd, he lives it" (Camus 1955, 25). Paul Ricoeur said of him that "no one else has ever transposed autobiography into personal myth as he did," that "to understand him one would need to be able to grasp [his] unprecedented combination of irony, melancholy, purity of heart and corrosive rhetoric, add a dash of buffoonery, and then perhaps top it off with religious aestheticism and martyrdom" (Ricoeur 1998, 12-13).

In spite of his extraordinary complexity, there are very few accounts of the feelings that precipitate absurdity that are as simple and straightforward as the one that follows, from a student sermon Kierkegaard delivered in 1841:

Was there not a time also in your consciousness, my listener, when cheerfully and without a care you were glad with the glad, when you wept with those who wept, when the thought of God blended irrelevantly with your other conceptions, blended with your happiness but did not sanctify it, blended with your grief but did not comfort it? And later was there not a time when this in some sense guiltless life, which never called itself to account, vanished? Did there not come a time when your mind was unfruitful and sterile, your will incapable of all good, your emotions cold and weak, when hope was dead in your breast, and recollection painfully clutched at a few solitary memories of happiness and soon these also became loathsome, when everything was of no consequence to you, and the secular bases of comfort found their way to your soul only to wound even more your troubled mind, which impatiently and bitterly turned away from them? Was there not a time when you found no one to whom you could turn, when the darkness of quiet despair brooded over your soul, and you did not have the courage to let it go but would rather hang onto it and you even brooded once more over your despair? When heaven was shut for you, and the prayer died on your lips, or it became a shriek of anxiety that demanded an accounting from heaven, and yet you sometimes found within you a longing, an intimation to which you might ascribe meaning, but this was soon crushed by the thought that you were a nothing and your soul lost in infinite space? Was there not a time when you felt that the world did not understand your grief, could not heal it, could not give you any peace, that this had to be in heaven, if heaven was anywhere to be found; alas it seemed to you that the distance between heaven and earth was infinite, and just as you yourself lost yourself in contemplating the immeasurable world, just so God had forgotten you and did not care about you? And in spite of all this, was there not a defiance in you that forbade you to humble yourself under God's mighty hand? (Kierkegaard 1980, x-xi)

This excruciating melancholy and anxiety seems to be brought on by painful contrasts between comfort and despair, defiance and submission, the desire for and the disdain of heavenly comfort, even the pleasures and agonies of life and death. And these contrasts lead us to despair and, potentially to the absurd. Indeed, for Kierkegaard,

having faith on the strength of the absurd is the only cure for this extraordinary despair.

Kierkegaard's individual is faced with paradoxes and contradictions even in everyday life, in his desire to ask for temporal help from God (which implies that God should correct his perfect creation) and in his search for the forgiveness of his sins (which implies that an omniscient God could 'forget' the sin). At these moments of contradiction, "the possibility of faith presents itself in this form: whether he will believe by virtue of the absurd... (Here lie all the paradoxes)" (Kierkegaard 1938, 238). But what gives cogency to Kierkegaard's vision of the absurd is the recognition of a special kind of paradox, and the choice to see in it something divine. "Not every absurdity is the absurd" (1938, 362-363), says Kierkegaard, because everyday absurdities pale in comparison to the absurd by which faith is possible, just as intelligible contradictions which can be resolved through reason differ from the absolute paradoxes that define absurd faith.

"The absurd is not one distinction among others embraced by the understanding. It is not the same as the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen" (Kierkegaard 1985, 75). Rather, the absurd is an insoluble problem and an impossible solution, a paradox and its paradoxical solution. Kierkegaard explains:

If I really have powers of reflection and am in a situation in which I have to act decisively — what then? My powers of reflection will show exactly as many possibilities pro as contra. The meaning of which is that I, like all men, shall be pleased to observe that there is a providence, guidance, a God, and that my powers of reflection, or those of any man, only enable one to learn and become aware of this fact; that here, if I may so express myself, is where one pays the turnpike money. Now what is it that I have come up against? *The absurd*. And what is the absurd? It is, as may quite easily be seen, that I, a rational being, must act in a case where my reason, my powers of reflection, tell me: you can just as well do one thing as the other, that is to say where my

reason and reflection say: you cannot act — and yet here is where I have to act... The absurd, or to act by virtue of the absurd, is to act upon faith, trusting in God. It is perfectly simple. I must act. But reflection has closed the road, so I take one of the possibilities and turn to God saying: This is what I do, bless my action, I cannot do otherwise because I am brought to a standstill by my powers of reflection. (1938, 291, emphasis added)

If one is foolish enough to believe that genuine reflection can lead to genuine action, Kierkegaard thinks, then one either has no powers of reflection, because reflection always throws up possibilities both pro and contra, or one does not know the meaning of action (1938, 291-292). Rather, the only solution to the paradox that cannot be resolved through reason is faith.

When we test ourselves and fail to comprehend the paradox, our reason knows itself better and becomes less naive. Kierkegaard's journal entry of 1847 could have been the words of Maimonides on the lesson of Job: "For it is the duty of the human understanding to understand that there are things which it cannot understand and what those things are. Human understanding has vulgarly occupied itself with nothing but understanding, but if it would only take the trouble to understand itself at the same time it would simply have to posit the paradox" (1938, 194). The relationship to truth that Kierkegaard offers, therefore, is a negative one, through the absurd and through the failure of reason. Gregory Schufreider explains that for Kierkegaard, "a naïve reason, which has not come face to face with paradox cannot know itself, is a reason confounded by its finitude, for it generates the illusion of infinity as it endlessly circles within its own domain, but never tests the limits. Self-conscious reason, on the other hand, knows its boundaries by having come up against them, and this is exactly the way in which it serves 'to distinguish the paradox negatively'" (1983, 69).

Schufreider sensibly reads Kierkegaard's absurd as a "category" (1983, 61), a "class of ideas which are in principle unconfirmable" (67), and as "reason's consummate playmate" (83). He analyzes Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* (1846) in order to define his absurd as "the most extreme form of paradox" (Schufreider 1983, 77), by which he means that it is inherently unknowable but *not* nonsensical. The absurd is "the proper object of faith" (Schufreider 1983, 78), recognizable through reason, and yet it represents a set of ideas which "reason relates to in a strictly negative way in admitting that it can neither understand nor dismiss them, and thus they call forth a form of belief which is in no sense conditional upon reason" (1983, 71).

Because of Camus' criticism of Kierkegaard for taking the leap of faith, and because of the apparent differences in their opinions about God and religion, the relationship between the two absurdists has become confused. Although Kierkegaard's despair and Camus' absurd sentiments have certain affinities, the two thinkers clash most dramatically over the recommended response to the absurd. On one hand, Camus hears Kierkegaard's worry that "if man had no eternal consciousness, if at the bottom of everything, there were merely a wild, seething force producing everything, both large and trifling, in the storm of dark passions, if the bottomless void that nothing can fill underlay all things, what would life be but despair?" (Camus 1955, 41). But Camus argues that in the face of such despair, Kierkegaard chooses to deify the absurd, to make the absurd into God, and so to take a leap of faith toward an absolute which he admits he can not comprehend. While Camus' response is to refuse faith because faith resolves the contradictions and

tensions of the absurd, Kierkegaard responds to the absurd by taking it as the catalyst for faith and even as faith itself.

Or, at least, that is Camus' understanding of Kierkegaard. But it is possible that Camus' critique is too hasty, for the two shared a contempt for easy answers that suggests that their visions of absurdity may be a bit less disparate. For Kierkegaard, one must act by virtue of the absurd *without* becoming content in one's inability to resolve the paradox. If the believer rests content in the unintelligibility of his faith, then it becomes easy, trivial, and no longer an expression of true spiritual belief. "Faith must not rest content with unintelligibility; for precisely the relation to or the repulsion from the unintelligible, the absurd, is the expression for the passion of faith" (Kierkegaard 1846, 255). That is, for Kierkegaard, faith recognizes in the absurd the face of God *and*, at the same time, is repulsed by it. It must both reject the absurd and adhere to it passionately. Faith becomes "objective uncertainty along with the repulsion of the absurd held fast in the passion of inwardness" (1846, 255). This ambivalent formula of absurd faith fits only the person of faith and "no one else, not a lover, not an enthusiast, not a thinker, but simply and solely the believer who is related to the absolute paradox" (1846, 255). It involves the believer in a contradiction which exposes the tension of Kierkegaard's absurd, a tension that will be echoed in my interpretation of Camus.

Kierkegaard introduced us to "the baneful confusion in talking about faith," which results from the fact that "the 'immediate believer' cannot apprehend the thought that the content of faith is... the absurd, and that to become a believer everyone must be alone with the absurd" (1938, 386). The difficulty is to understand

that the content of faith is absurd, but “nevertheless to believe it” (1938, 386). In this state of confusion and contradiction, “the believer is not dialectically consolidated as ‘the individual’, cannot endure this double-vision — that the content of faith as seen from the other side is the negative, the absurd. This is the tension of the life of faith, in which one must try to remain” (1938, 386-387). While Kierkegaard’s solution of faith is in certain respects antithetical to Camus’, the two share more than we might think: the absurd, for both Kierkegaard and Camus, is a tension, a contradiction, and an ambivalence which one must nevertheless strive to endure, to maintain, and not to deny. George Steiner even suggests that we ought to think of Don Quixote, Dostoyevsky’s Prince Muishkin, Antigone, or Cordelia when we watch as Kierkegaard “wrestles with the contraries of the apostolic” (1998, 111). On this point, Kierkegaard joins thinkers like Nietzsche and Camus who use the concept of the absurd to give definition to the extraordinary struggle ‘to accept the unacceptable and hold to the untenable.’

Jean-Paul Sartre

Sartre did not use the term ‘absurd’ very often and his understanding of it is perhaps less persuasive than Camus’. Nevertheless, Sartre’s commentary upon Camus’ use of the term and Sartre’s much ballyhooed quarrel with Camus, which only partly concerned the meaning of the absurd, recommend that we briefly discuss him here. Philip Thody summarizes Sartre’s view in appealingly simple terms: “If there is a God, [Sartre] argued, the world is not absurd... Everything in it has a purpose, and the first chapter of Genesis tells us that this is a good one. But if you don’t believe in God, argues Sartre, then there is no reason for anything to exist at all... The world is

therefore, in Sartre's view, absurd in the sense of having no ultimate reason for its existence" (Thody 1989, 45-46).

But Sartre's absurd is perhaps a bit more complicated than that. In *La Nausée* (1964, 126-129), Roquentin encounters things that give him the frightening sentiment that everything is "*de trop*," which is a kind of hallmark of Sartrean absurdity. "*De trop*" means not only 'in the way', but 'too much' or 'superfluous.' The world is *de trop* (in the way), for Roquentin in large part because his life and his intellect are *de trop* (superfluous). What Roquentin feels before the roots of chestnut tree is the melting away of his intellect before an irreducible physicality. When he feels that everything is beastly and monstrous, covered with a sticky filth, he seems to be giving voice to the experience of *de trop* in the face of primordial things, things without abstraction, categorization, or intellectuality. Roquentin says:

The word absurdity is coming to life under my pen: a little while ago, in the garden, I couldn't find it, but neither was I looking for it, I didn't need it: I thought without words *on* things, *with* things. Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the sound of a voice, only this long serpent dead at my feet, this wooden serpent... But faced with this great wrinkled paw, neither ignorance nor knowledge was important: the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence. A circle is not absurd, it is clearly explained by the rotation of a straight segment around one of its extremities. But neither does a circle exist. This root, on the other hand, existed in such a way that I could not explain it. (Sartre 1964, 129, emphasis in original)

When faced with things that refuse to be understood, Roquentin is stricken with an illness, a nausea. It is in the diagnosis of this illness that the absurd and the existential have been thought to meet. Hayden Carruth's *Introduction to Nausea* perhaps unwittingly illustrates how Sartre's and Camus' notions of absurdity would become confounded. Carruth writes: "Jaspers has written: 'The non-rational is found

in the opacity of the here and now... in the actual empirical existence which is just as it is and not otherwise.' Why is it not otherwise? Why *is* it at all? What is this is-ness? Isn't it simply nothing, or rather Nothingness, the unknowable, indispensable Void? What could be more absurd, 'non-rational,' meaningless? The mind of man, which he did not ask to be given, demands a reason and a meaning — this is its self-defeating cause — and yet it finds itself in the midst of a radically meaningless existence. The result: impasse. And nausea" (Sartre 1964, xi, emphasis in original). Carruth thus equates the non-rational with the absurd, comparing Sartre's vision of the contingency and gratuitousness of existence to the irrationality and impasse which Sartre would read into Camus' absurdity.

Sartre's basic understanding of absurdity derives from his proposition that the mind is *de trop* in a non-rational world, usually expressed as "the contingency of being" (Sartre in Cruickshank 1960, 45n). In his "An Explication of *The Stranger*," Sartre blends his understanding of the absurd with Camus' when he claims that Camus' absurd is "both a state of fact and the lucid awareness which certain people acquire of this state of fact" (1962, 108). Sartre refers to Camus' statement that "if we are able to refuse the misleading aid of religion or of existential philosophies, we then possess certain basic, obvious facts" (Sartre 1962, 110). Among these, Sartre singles out the 'facts' that "the world is chaos," that "tomorrow does not exist," and that "man is *not* the world" (1962, 110, emphasis in original). Meursault is an absurd person, for Sartre, because he "does not hesitate to draw the inevitable conclusions from a fundamental absurdity" (1962, 109).

Sartre's interpretation of *The Stranger* is telling about an important distinction between Camus' and Sartre's understandings of absurdity. For Sartre, the source of the absurd is "our inability to *think*, with our words and concepts, what happens in the world" (1962, 115, emphasis in original). And Sartre finds historical precedents for the fragmented, minimalistic narration of *The Stranger* that expresses this inability in "what Hume did when he stated that he could find nothing in experience but isolated impressions," in "what the American neo-realists do when they deny the existence of any but external relations between phenomena," and in "Voltaire's method in *L'Ingénu* and *Micromégas*, and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*" (Sartre 1962, 118). Sartre interprets Camus' absurd, therefore, as an attempt at non-rational thought, as an expression of the lack of essences or absolutes that would otherwise explain experience and justify being.

The "extremes of the absurd" in Sartre's analysis, connect *The Stranger* to *The Myth of Sisyphus* as explorations of "chance, death, the irreducible pluralism of life and of truth, the unintelligibility of the real" (Sartre in Showalter 1989, 11). Indeed, Sartre's premise, that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is Camus' "precise commentary upon [*The Stranger*]" (1962, 108), has likely contributed more than any other interpretive proposition to persistent misunderstandings of both Camus' famous novel and his philosophy of the absurd. Sartre argues that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is "the theory of the novel of absurdity," that *Myth* "teaches us how to accept our author's novel," and that *Myth* is Camus' "philosophical translation of his fictional message" (1962, 111-112). Sartre then defines Meursault's absurdity in ways that careful readers will find excessive, if not altogether unjustified.

According to Sartre, Meursault, who is “neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral... belongs to a very particular species for which the author reserves the word ‘absurd’” (1962, 108). But Sartre seems to have made an interpretive leap here, for while *The Myth of Sisyphus* describes the absurd as a subjective experience of conflict and tension, Meursault appears to have no such experience and to feel no such tension. Indeed, as Donald Lazere argues, “Meursault is not in the least disturbed by his subjectivity... he is more an object than a subject” (1973, 154). Furthermore, Meursault is very nearly the antithesis of the rebellious, heroic absurd individual that Camus defines in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Adding further confusion to the concept of absurdity in relation to the works of both Camus and Sartre is the insistence of many critics to confuse the absurd with the existential, leading to regular classifications of Camus as ‘an existentialist’, often warping his meaning thereby. In response to this confusion, which persists to this day, Camus said in a 1945 interview with Jeanine Delpech: “No, I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names linked. We have even thought of publishing a short statement in which the undersigned declare that they have nothing in common with each other and refuse to be held responsible for the debts they might respectively incur. It’s a joke, actually. Sartre and I published all our books, without exception, before we had ever met. When we did get to know each other, it was to realize how much we differed” (Camus 1968, 345).

Perhaps if this statement had been heeded, the famous quarrel between Camus and Sartre would have been less explosive. Much of the quarrel between the two men was personal, and it is beside the point of this chapter to reproduce all of its terms, but

it may be helpful to address the most salient theoretical, moral, and political disagreements that resulted from Camus' and Sartre's differing understandings of the absurd.

The most significant difference between Camus' and Sartre's understanding of absurdity may be understood as a debate about the singularity of the concept. For Sartre, absurdity results from a single source, the unjustified contingency of being, while for Camus, as we will see, absurdity is, itself, a tension, the result of contradictory forces. As Avi Sagi points out, "Camus' emphasis on the claim that the absurd does not spring from one single source has Jean-Paul Sartre as its immediate target, and he expressly states that he wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* against Sartre's existentialist philosophy" (2002, 56). Sartre, too, was aware of a difference between the two thinkers' meanings of the absurd, although even in recognizing this difference, Sartre read aspects of his existentialism into Camus' absurd. Sartre said that "Camus' philosophy is a philosophy of the absurd. For him the absurd arises from the relation between man and the world, between man's rational demands and the world's irrationality. The themes which he derives from it are those of classical pessimism. I do not recognize the absurd in the sense of scandal and disillusionment that Camus attributes to it. What I call absurd is something very different: it is the universal contingency of being which is, but which is not the basis of its being; the absurd is the given, unjustifiable, primordial quality of existence" (Sartre in Cruickshank 1960, 45). For Camus, the absurd is a kind of double-vision, not a single 'fact' that can be deduced from a proposition or postulate. Camus' absurd, as I hope

to show, is more akin to a conflicted or ambivalent experience than to the rational conclusion of absurdity that Sartre's approach suggests.

As subsequent chapters will argue, Camus' absurd, because it is not a conclusion, and because it is not entirely rational, involves an emotional and creative response, whereas Sartre's would seem to inspire only a methodical response. Sagi agrees that "Camus is not an existentialist, if by this we mean the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre or of Martin Heidegger... [Camus] is interested in the 'how' instead of the 'what' that explains the 'how'; his existentialism is an existentialism of action" (2002, 28-29). That course of action is summed up in Camus' famous riff on the Cartesian *cogito* in *The Rebel*: '*Je me révolte, donc nous sommes*', "I rebel — therefore we exist" (1956b, 22).

As we will see, absurd rebellion paradoxically relies upon pre-existing values and, at the same time, creates those values. Camus will claim that, while appearing to be negative, "revolt is positive in a profound way since it reveals those elements in man which must always be defended" (Cruickshank 1960, 97). This claim highlights a second significant difference between Camus' and Sartre's visions of the absurd. While the existentialist must deny the pre-existence of all values and essences, including the values implied by a universal human nature, Camus' absurd takes a somewhat more complex, even ambivalent stance toward them. John Cruickshank explains:

Existentialism denies the existence of a permanent and universal human nature. It also denies the existence of permanent and universal values deriving from such a concept. Sartre asserts that values do not pre-exist. They are simply invented or made by man as he performs acts and accepts choices in the process of living... No doubt Camus is unsure about the metaphysical status of values, but he does make some of them independent of the

individual. He is not saying that such values are absolute or eternal in the traditional sense. But contrary to Sartre he finds their pre-existence, in some form, essential to his picture of what it means to be a human being. (1960, 97)

Camus' absurd, unlike Sartre's, contains a contradiction which limits, but does not completely exclude, the possibility of human nature or other universal values. The meaning of this limited rejection will be taken up in much greater detail in Chapters 7 and 8.

For Camus, "the only reasonable freedom" will not be found amidst the postulates of existential philosophy but in "that which the human heart can experience and live" (1955, 59-60). That is, for Camus, freedom itself must be bounded by experience and measured with reference to other values, while for Sartre, the individual's freedom is superior and anterior to the creation of values, making individual freedom and responsibility absolute and inescapable. Put another way, Camus' absurdity emphasizes the limits of freedom and asks how to arrive at a definition of what we must *not* choose, while Sartre's existentialism emphasizes the absence of limits given our inescapable and radical freedom to choose.

The limitedness and ambivalence in Camus' absurd rebellion is not altogether unlike what Sartre decries as *mauvaise foi*, bad faith. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre writes that "the double property of the human being, who is at once a facticity and a transcendence" may give rise to bad faith, which, very much like Camus' absurd revolt, "does not wish either to coordinate them [facticity and transcendence] or to surmount them in a synthesis... Bad faith seeks to affirm their identity while preserving their differences. It must affirm facticity as being transcendence and transcendence as being facticity, in such a way that at the instant when a person

apprehends one, he can find himself abruptly faced with the other” (Sartre in Sherman 1995, 61). In Chapter 8, I will argue that Camus’ vision of the absurd leads him to advocate an ethical position which in many ways resembles Sartrean bad faith, but that such a position, upon further consideration, may be defensible rather than condemnable in spite of that resemblance.

Related to the notions of freedom and bad faith, Simon du Plock has raised an interesting comparison between Sartre’s Orestes in his play *The Flies* and Camus’ hero, Sisyphus, that serves to summarize the subtle but critical differences between Camus’ and Sartre’s absurd (2005, 18-19). In Sartre’s play, Orestes defends his murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra on the grounds of freedom and reason. Orestes then rejects the threats of the gods and the avenging Furies, shouting at Zeus: “Your whole universe is not enough to prove me wrong... I am doomed to have no other law but mine. Nor shall I come back to nature, the nature you found good; in it are a thousand beaten paths all leading up to you — but I must blaze my trail” (Sartre 1989, 117-119). Sartre’s Orestes is sure of himself, even in his acts of murder, denying that the world of the gods has anything at all to do with him; indeed, he and Zeus “glide past each other like two ships in a river, without touching” (1989, 119). In the end of Sartre’s play, Orestes rebukes his people, compares himself to a pied piper, and exiles himself from his kingdom with the avenging furies shrieking after him.

By contrast, Camus’ hero, Sisyphus, whose crime is not murder but rather an escape from death, accepts his punishment and lives within the limited context of that punishment. Like Camus’ prototypical hero, the (ill-defined) hero of *The Rebel*

combines good and evil in complex ways and confronts the contradictions of his actions. Sometimes, he even “knows what is good and, despite himself, does evil” (1956b, 285). By *both* rejecting and re-creating pre-existing values, by recognizing the presence and consequence of both good and evil, by embracing both the freedom and the limits that Orestes refuses, absurd heroes like Sisyphus and the ideal rebel are able to find the balance that Camus’ absurd ethos recommends.

Perhaps the best way to articulate this difference between Camus and Sartre is to compare Sartre’s Orestes to Melanie Klein’s (see Klein 1975b, 283-284; Alford 1989, 130-134, 184). Klein’s Orestes actually resembles, much more than Sartre’s, a Camusian absurd hero. For Klein, and according to the more traditional understandings of Aeschylus’ trilogy, Orestes’ sufferings lead to the eventual transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides, the striking of a precarious balance between ‘old’ justice and ‘new’ justice, and the integration of opposites that respects both the limits and progress of civilization. For Klein, Orestes’ *hubris* is not excessive because his actions reflect both a sense of *dike* (justice) and guilt that Agamemnon’s and Clytemnestra’s acts of murder did not. That is, Orestes somehow finds a way to hold on to the agonistic tendencies that would otherwise tear his kingdom, and himself, apart. He integrates love and hate, revenge and repair, says Klein, because “he never gives up the urge to cleanse himself of his crime and to return to his people whom presumably he wishes to govern in a benevolent way. These intentions point to the drive for reparation” (Klein 1975b, 286). Because Sartre’s Orestes refuses to admit any laws or limits other than his own, because he exiles himself, rejects the possibilities for integrating the ambivalences at the heart of the tragedy, and fails to

inspire the transformation of the cruel Furies into the more benevolent Eumenides, he hardly faces the complexities of the drama, and his solution is not one that permits further personal, moral, or political development.

This philosophical difference concerning ambivalence and limits seems to have played a significant role in shaping Camus' and Sartre's opposing views about politics, an opposition made apparent in the now well-known and thoroughly analyzed 'break' between the two thinkers. The break was made official upon the (1952) publication of an unsparing critique of *The Rebel* written by Sartre's disciple, Francis Jeanson, in *Les Temps Modernes*. It was worsened by Camus' reply, and worsened still by Sartre's violent response to Camus' reply. Jeanson had accused Camus of being "separated from reality" and of having become "an unrepentant idealist" who had lost touch with history (Jeanson in Aronson 2004, 143). Against these charges of anti-historical idealism, Camus had claimed that his sole thesis in *The Rebel* was "that whoever seeks to serve history for its own sake ends in nihilism" (Camus in Aronson 2004, 144). *The Rebel*, Camus insisted, had argued merely that something apart from history, some value or norm, must inform and guide the direction of history in order to prevent the rationalization and justification of revolutionary abuses.

But Camus' response was angry; perhaps not violent, but sharp. And it was clear that Camus had intended to indict not primarily Jeanson, but Sartre. Sartre, in response, "publicly flay[ed] Camus in the most personal terms," by "explain[ing] Camus's anti-Communism as an evasion of personal growth and a refusal to fully live in the changing and demanding real world," and by leveling charges that Camus'

acrid response to Jeanson evinced “a racism of moral beauty” (Sartre in Aronson 2004, 148-149). “You rebelled against death,” Sartre wrote to, or rather *at*, Camus, “but in the industrial belts which surround cities, other men rebelled against social conditions that raise the mortality rates. When a child died, you blamed the absurdity of the world and the deaf and blind God that you created in order to be able to spit in his face. But the child’s father, if he was unemployed or an unskilled laborer, blamed men. He knew very well that the absurdity of our condition is not the same in Passy as in Billancourt” (Sartre in Aronson 2004, 153).

The excessiveness of this attack on Camus, itself, has been taken to suggest a difference between Camus and Sartre, for while Camus wrote his response with indignation but a stylish restraint, Sartre’s vehemence exploded in an all-out assault on Camus, which partially succeeded in destroying Camus’ reputation in France. David Sprintzen believes that this exaggerated response may have even resulted from a kind of self-hatred on Sartre’s part. “Sartre’s critique of Camus,” Sprintzen says, “is really an attack on the being that Sartre had been, which he now projects onto Camus. A careful reading of Sartre’s critique of Camus in *Les Temps Moderns* shows that he did not pay careful attention at all to what Camus had actually said. He rather imputes to Camus precisely those positions that he, Sartre, once held but had since come to repudiate” (Sprintzen 1988, 296n).

But regardless of the motives and tenor of this quarrel, the line of argument between the two men makes apparent the difference between Camus’ and Sartre’s visions of the limits of absurd revolt. *The Rebel*, itself, is a direct attack on the theory and practice of historical revolution and the justifications of violence offered by

revolutionary thought, while “Sartre, in his essay on Baudelaire, takes the opposite view to Camus on the question of the relative merits of revolt and revolution. The aim of the metaphysical rebel, he says, is to keep intact the abuses from which he suffers so as to be able to continue his rebellion against them. The revolutionary, on the other hand, is actively concerned to change the world of which he disapproves... From Sartre’s point of view Camus’ preference for revolt over revolution is sentimentality, ineffectualness and ‘bad faith’ in the existentialist meaning of the term” (Cruickshank 1960, 103).

The argument between the two men was not limited to books; it eventually centered upon Camus’ *terre natale*, Algeria. Camus had advocated limited steps toward a peaceful resolution of the Algerian War (1954-1962). For reasons I will discuss more fully in Chapter 9, Camus considered French Algerians like himself to be ‘native’ Algerians to some degree, and while his sympathies were with both sides, he opposed French withdrawal. Sartre denounced Camus’ position as bad faith, vacillation, and colonialism. Taking direct aim at Camus, Sartre’s introduction to Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* argued: “If you’re not victims when the government you voted for, when the army in which your younger brothers are serving without hesitation or remorse have undertaken race murder, you are, without a doubt, executioners” (Sartre in Jacoby 2004, 27). Their disagreement over rebellion, revolution, and reform therefore illustrates that what may appear as minor differences between the philosophy of the absurd and existentialism can, in fact, generate radically different moral and political philosophical conclusions. In the end, one is tempted to say that Camus’ moral and political instincts, like his mythical heroes, are

a bit more complex than Sartre's, but we will have to return to these themes of complexity and maturity in discussing Camus' absurd morality and politics in later chapters.

The Theatre of the Absurd

To even mention the *theatre* of the absurd in the context of a dissertation devoted to the *philosophy* of the absurd is fraught with danger, for we risk losing our focus, losing hold of the concept amidst an array of different absords, absurd literatures, absurd plays, absurd styles, and absurdities of language. We also risk misunderstanding the theatre of the absurd if we imagine that a philosophical analysis of the concept of absurdity can capture the voice and power of absurd drama. But in spite of these risks, it is warranted to make a single exception to my promise to treat only recent philosophical accounts of absurdity because the absurd theatre remains one of the most influential contexts of the term in shaping our ideas about absurdity, and because the following example is useful to preface later discussions of ambivalence and the absurd.

Martin Esslin is widely credited with coining the phrase 'the theatre of the absurd' in his landmark study of the same name which treats those whom we now call 'absurd' dramatists: Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, and others. Esslin finds "metaphysical anguish" to be the central theme of the plays and playwrights he studies (Esslin 2001, 24); he therefore situates the absurd in a mid-twentieth century attitude of uncertainty and loss. "The hallmark of this [absurd] attitude,"

Esslin writes, "is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting,

that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war. By 1942, Albert Camus was calmly putting the question why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide” (Esslin 2001, 23).

But it is Ionesco who supplies the operative definition of absurdity for Esslin’s analyses. In his well-known essay on Kafka, Ionesco argued that the “absurd is that which is devoid of purpose” and that when “cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Esslin 2001, 23). This loss of transcendental, cultural, and spiritual moorings seems to provide the framework for Esslin’s approach to the concept of the absurd, but neither Esslin nor Ionesco is particularly concerned to provide a precise, systematic, philosophical definition of absurdity. Instead, Esslin offers a robust yet vague conceptualization of the term and moves on to assert, quite rightly of course, that it is *not* the treatment of the subject of metaphysical anguish that makes a play absurd.

“A similar sense of the senselessness of life,” Esslin points out, “of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity and purpose, is also the theme of much of the work of dramatists like Giraudoux, Anouilh, Salacrou, Sartre, and Camus himself” (Esslin 2001, 24). Yet Sartre’s and Camus’ plays, for instance, are hardly absurdist in style or form. These authors tend to discuss the absurd *rationally*, with lucid and relatively logical arguments. Camus, for one, discusses absurdity “in the elegantly

rationalistic and discursive style of an eighteenth-century moralist, in well-constructed and polished plays” (Esslin 2001, 24). By contrast, the theatre of the absurd “strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought” (Esslin 2001, 24). Here we confront the limit of the usefulness of comparing the theatre of the absurd with the philosophy of the absurd, a limit this section of this chapter meets, but hopes not to cross.

Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is perhaps the most widely recognized absurd play, and while it can not possibly speak for all absurd theatre, a brief consideration of its relationship to the concept of absurdity suffices for the purposes of this chapter. Not a logical conclusion about the contingency of being like Sartre’s absurd, the absurdity of *Godot* seems to be a product of its complex web of tensions and ambivalences, the most noticeable of which is the paradoxical identity of Vladimir and Estragon. The contradictory and complimentary heroes of the play almost appear as two sides, two halves of a single, torn individual. As Esslin points out,

In eating his carrot, Estragon finds that the more he eats of it, the less he likes it, while Vladimir reacts the opposite way — he likes things as he gets used to them. Estragon is volatile, Vladimir persistent. Estragon dreams, Vladimir can not stand hearing about dreams. Vladimir has stinking breath, Estragon has stinking feet. Vladimir remembers past events, Estragon tends to forget them as soon as they have happened... It is mainly Vladimir who voices the hope that Godot will come and that his coming will change their situation, while Estragon remains sceptical throughout and at times even forgets the name of Godot... The opposition of their temperaments is the cause of endless bickering between them and often leads to the suggestion that they should part. Yet, being complementary natures, they are also dependent on each other and have to stay together. (2001, 48)

One is tempted to say that the subject of *Waiting for Godot* is the tension between these contradictory aspects of ourselves and others. Vladimir and Estragon are different, even opposite, but are also identical. They long to part, but cannot bear parting, so they must remain together. In doing so, they express their hostile interdependence as well as their profound conflictedness about themselves and each other. “*Estragon*: Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me! *Vladimir*: Did I ever leave you? *Estragon*: You let me go” (Beckett 1956, 38).

It is precisely this playing on the difference between one self and two, between one identity and two, in Beckett’s plays that Litowitz and Newman take up in their fascinating study “The Borderline Personality and The Theatre of the Absurd.” Litowitz and Newman point out that the very opposition of Vladimir’s and Estragon’s character-traits serves to “dramatize their complementarity” (1967, 272). In spite of their seeming differences, the two characters fit and fuse together so often that the boundaries of their identities are often radically blurred. At the same time, the two men appear deeply anxious about their relationship, about their connectedness, and about the dreaded loss of the other. Christopher Lasch has remarked that the theatre of the absurd often “centers on the emptiness, isolation, loneliness, and despair experienced by the borderline personality. The affinity between the theater of the absurd and the borderline’s ‘fear of close relationships,’ ‘attendant feelings of helplessness, loss, and rage,’ ‘fear of destructive impulses,’ and ‘fixation to early omnipotence’ inheres not only in the content of these plays but... in their form” (Lasch 1979, 89).

The “disturbance in the differentiation in the object relationship” between absurd characters like Vladimir and Estragon has deleterious effects on the possibility of meaningful reflection and interaction (Litowitz and Newman 1967, 272), which certainly is part of the absurdity of *Godot* when witnessed on stage. Vladimir and Estragon rely on each other’s help to complete a single thought, and yet they seem unable to think anything through because of their constant need to chatter (Litowitz and Newman 1967, 273).

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.

Vladimir: You’re right, we’re inexhaustible.

Estragon: It’s so we won’t think.

Vladimir: We have that excuse.

Estragon: It’s so won’t hear.

Vladimir: We have our reasons.

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

[...]

Vladimir: What do they say?

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.

Estragon: It is not sufficient.

Silence.

Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like ashes.

Estragon: Like leaves. (Beckett 1956, 40)

In this passage, one of the most beautiful in the entire play, Vladimir and Estragon talk so they do not have to hear the silence, the rustling of dead voices, the sounds of their own thoughts. Each seems to depend on the other to save him from himself, and

yet, when together, their conversations often throw one or both of them into despair.

An exaggerated variation on these themes of identity-loss, internal conflict, and emptiness appears in Beckett's *Endgame*, where each character seems to be a fragment, a part of a single and rather unhappy self. Here we have a sort of monodramatic version of Sartre's *Huis Clos*, a depiction of the complex and hostile interdependence of competing drives, feelings, and sensory functions within an individual from which there may be 'no exit'.

Clov: Why do you keep me?

Hamm: There's no one else.

Clov: There's nowhere else.

(*Pause.*)

Hamm: You're leaving me all the same.

Clov: I'm trying. (Beckett 1958, 6)

In *Endgame*, Clov serves as the eyes and legs, while Hamm, blind and bound to a wheel-chair, possesses the will and emotional force. Hamm's hated and legless parents, Nagg and Nell, reside in trash cans by the wall. Clov feeds Hamm, but Hamm stores all the food. The world outside is absolutely lifeless, and the drama of the play revolves largely around whether Clov will leave Hamm for the lifeless world, effectively killing them both (see Esslin 2001, 62-65).

Esslin endorses the monodramatic reading of *Endgame*, noting the psychological resonance of "the enclosed space with the two tiny windows through which Clov observes the outside world; the dustbins that hold the suppressed and despised parents, and whose lids Clov is ordered to press down when they become obnoxious; Hamm, blind and emotional; Clov performing the function of the senses for him — all these might well represent different aspects of a single personality,

repressed memories in the subconscious mind, the emotional and the intellectual selves” (Esslin 2001, 66). Esslin even discusses the various levels on which the interdependence of many of Beckett’s characters might register.

The peculiar psychological reality of Beckett’s characters has often been noticed. Pozzo and Lucky have been interpreted as body and mind; Vladimir and Estragon have been seen as so complementary that they might be the two halves of a single personality, the conscious and the subconscious mind. Each of the three pairs — Pozzo-Lucky; Vladimir-Estragon; Hamm-Clov — is linked by a relationship of mutual interdependence, wanting to leave each other, at war with each other, and yet dependent upon each other. ‘*Nec tecum, nec sine te*’. This is a frequent situation among people — married couples, for example — but it is also an image of the interrelatedness of the elements within a single personality, particularly if the personality is in conflict with itself. (Esslin 2001, 67)

Thus, the tension between Vladimir’s and Estragon’s ambivalent qualities, and between their confused identity and separateness, is vitally related to the meaning of absurdity in *Godot*, and perhaps in Beckett’s absurd and in the theater of the absurd more generally.

The real subject of *Waiting for Godot* is, of course, “not Godot but waiting” (Esslin 2001, 50), for it is in their waiting that the limits and contradictions of Vladimir’s and Estragon’s thoughts, emotions, and relationship become apparent. While it often seems that Vladimir and Estragon have known each other since birth and that they may even have been born together (see Beckett 1956, 9), their personalities and their relationship are brought into relief by their condition of attending a savior figure who may never arrive. If Vladimir and Estragon could emancipate themselves from waiting, if they were certain Godot would come or if they could accept that he would never come, if they felt strongly that they should not continue to wait or if they felt strongly that they could do something else, neither the

drama nor the characters would strike us with the same absurdity. “*Vladimir*: Well? Shall we go? *Estragon*: Yes, let’s go. *They do not move. (Curtain)*” (Beckett 1956, 60). Is Godot worth waiting for or is he just false hope? If one abandons hope in Godot, what else is there? Is even interminable waiting more pleasant than having to face the fact that one has nothing to do? Vladimir’s and Estragon’s indecision and ambivalence about Godot, about what to do, is also at the center of their despair and is responsible for part of the absurdity of the drama.

The emotions of Vladimir and Estragon conflict and oscillate, making it impossible for them to commit to either individual or coordinated courses of action. Indeed, the two frequently struggle in an equivocal or ambivalent manner with the very subject which Camus identified in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as the sole philosophical problem of the absurd: whether or not to commit suicide. Of course, Vladimir and Estragon broach the subject with disarming and humorous nonchalance, but become grave and frightened at the thought that one will leave the other alone.

Vladimir: What do we do now?

Estragon: Wait.

Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting.

Estragon: What about hanging ourselves?

Vladimir: Hmm. It’d give us an erection.

[...]

Estragon: Let’s hang ourselves immediately!

Vladimir: From a bough? (*They go towards the tree.*) I wouldn’t trust it.

Estragon: We can always try.

Vladimir: Go ahead.

Estragon: After you.

Vladimir: No no, you first.

Estragon: Why me?

Vladimir: You’re lighter than I am.

Estragon: Just so!

Vladimir: I don’t understand.

[...]

Estragon: (with effort). Gogo light — bough not break — Gogo dead. Didi heavy — bough break — Didi alone. Whereas —

Vladimir: I hadn't thought of that.

[...]

Estragon: Let's don't do anything. It's safer."

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he says.

Estragon: Who?

Vladimir: Godot. (Beckett 1956, 12)

In addition to the ambivalence of their relationship and the absurdity of their waiting, Vladimir and Estragon face a complex and seemingly contradictory social world represented by Pozzo and Lucky. Vladimir struggles to articulate his protest of the treatment of Lucky, Pozzo's slave. "It's a scandal," says Vladimir, "to treat a man... like that... I think that... no... a human being... no... it's a scandal" (Beckett 1956, 19). Estragon is less bothered; he utters a quiet protest, but continues gnawing on a bone. Pozzo eventually replies to these vague protests that he "might just as well have been in [Lucky's] shoes and he in mine. If chance had not willed otherwise. To each one his due" (Beckett 1956, 21).

These obviously contradictory explanations for the status of Pozzo as master and Lucky as slave ('because it is chance' *and* 'to each one his due') connects the tangible violence between Pozzo and Lucky to a broader confusion about the human condition. Pozzo explains: "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh" (Beckett 1956, 22). In these absurd cycles of weeping and laughter, mastery and slavery, and in the contradictory explanations for each, we begin to see a familiar theme of the absurd. Vladimir and Estragon are confused, conflicted, and outraged by Pozzo's suggestion, one that almost reminds us of Qohelet's cry that "all things come

alike to all” (Eccl. 9:2, AV), that there is evil and iniquity under the sun, that we labor (or we wait), and yet we are governed by chance. Litowitz and Newman argue that this outrage, directed against the characters of Pozzo and Lucky, actually reflect Vladimir’s and Estragon’s tortured relationship with their “bad, sadistic, and depriving” mother (Litowitz and Newman 1967, 274). Godot, in this interpretation, represents the fantasy of a perfect, loving mother who will eventually save and embrace the men. But whether we imagine Godot as fantasized mother or as God, and whether we conceive of Pozzo and Lucky as an externalization of a bad memory or, perhaps more plausibly, simply as symbols of the brutality and chaos of the world, Vladimir and Estragon are conflicted about whether to hope for Godot’s unlikely arrival or to resign themselves to the depravity and eventual blindness and deafness of Pozzo and Lucky.

The absurdity of a play like *Waiting for Godot*, therefore, is related to the contradictions and ambivalences that unfold, in layers, throughout the drama: the absurdity of the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon, the absurdity of the world they see depicted in the sado-masochistic relationship between Pozzo and Lucky, their uncertain waiting for a savior who seems to promise to come but never actually arrives, their ambivalence over whether to stay or go, live or die. Indeed, if *Waiting for Godot* “is a poem on time, evanescence, and the mysteriousness of existence, the paradox of change and stability, necessity and absurdity” (Esslin 2001, 61-62), its most direct commentary upon the issues usually treated in the philosophy of the absurd comes in the incomprehensible ramblings of Lucky, who is ordered to

“think” on demand. His disquisition begins when Pozzo jerks the rope that serves as his leash and commands him to “think, pig!”:

Lucky: Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing... (Beckett 1956, 28-29)

Here, most dehumanized character in the play embarks upon the most abstract and sophistic reflections. Of course, he does so absurdly, robbed of all coherence, and only on the demand of his brutal master. Beckett therefore simultaneously gives expression to and ridicules the philosophical roots of absurdity, which ought to serve as a kind of warning. While it is helpful to remark in *Godot* and elsewhere some of the absurd ambivalences which this volume will build upon, we must depart from the theater to return to a final philosophical approach to the absurd more in keeping with the scope and limits of this study.

Thomas Nagel

Although Thomas Nagel’s treatment of the absurd responds to Camus’, his is an independent rather than essentially critical reaction that represents a contemporary, philosophical approach to the concept. Nagel discusses those everyday instances in which we say that something about our lives is absurd, taking the example of a person who remarks that “nothing we do now will matter in a million years,” as a typical case (1971, 716). Nagel explains this remark as one of many things we say “to

convey the absurdity of our lives,” to express our feelings of futility, to give voice to the feeling that “we are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale” (1971, 717). But one of the complexities of Nagel’s approach is that while he finds this basic intuition of the absurd to be more or less correct, he believes that the standard reasons given in support of it are inadequate. Thus, he affirms the intuition, rejects the standard explanations, and then supplies a new definition of the absurd in an attempt to clarify the concept.

“The sense that life as a whole is absurd,” Nagel claims, “arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself” (1971, 718). Nagel’s absurdity involves us in a “transcendental step” in which we become conscious of the fact that we are human, and, by the same token, that we are unable to exceed our human strivings (1971, 725). Our intuition of the absurd involves a “conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” (1971, 718). This means absurdity is “the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt” (1971, 718). This is the intuition of the absurd that Nagel will wish to defend: an intuition of the limits of human certainty, purpose, and significance.

But although Nagel’s intuition of absurdity expresses something “difficult to state, but fundamentally correct” (1971, 718), he is compelled to argue against what he takes to be the typical explanations for it. For instance, against the “million years”

argument, he replies: “Whether what we do now will matter in a million years could make the crucial difference only if its mattering in a million years depended on its mattering, period” (1971, 716). And against the notion that we are absurd because our actions are ultimately pointless, Nagel asserts that “life does not consist of a sequence of activities each of which has as its purpose some later member of the sequence” (1971, 717).

Therefore, Nagel wants to question the reasoning behind what he feels is an undue pessimism associated with absurdity. In response to the absurd, Nagel thinks we continue to engage in cosmically pointless activities because they are, nevertheless, important to us. “When we recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity” (Nagel in Gordon 1984, 15). So instead of agonizing over “the dragooning of an unconvinced transcendent consciousness into the service of an immanent, limited enterprise like a human life” (1971, 726), Nagel recommends that we “approach our absurd lives with irony” instead of “heroism or despair” (1971, 727). Singling out Camus’ Sisyphean scorn as a “romantic and slightly self-pitying” attempt to resolve the absurd, Nagel says he offers a more grown-up, better-adjusted response to absurdity.

However, as I.J.H. Williams has pointed out (1986, 308), Nagel seems to have designed a peculiar definition of the absurd only to deny its importance. This move makes us suspicious that his absurd man is a kind of straw man, one whose problems and tensions Nagel defines in a way that diminishes them. Nagel argues for an ironic stance toward absurdity because “if *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either” (Nagel in Westphal

and Cherry 1990, 202). But, the premise that equates ‘the feeling that nothing matters’ with the absurd is Nagel’s, not Camus’ or any other major absurd theorist’s.

Westphal and Cherry are correct in asserting that Nagel’s position requires that we imagine a difference between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ perspectives on ourselves and our commitments, that we ‘internally’ commit to things which, from an ‘external’ point of view, may be seen as pointless (1990, 199). But while Nagel goes too far by reducing the absurd to insignificance, Westphal and Cherry go even further, denying not only the significance of the absurd but even its existence. These authors argue that the entire idea of an ‘outside’ perspective on our lives is unnecessary, that there are things we can do (like “dine, play backgammon, make merry with our friends,” *à la* Hume) that negate the “wrongly set” problem of the absurd, which only amounts to “colourful rubbish” (Westphal and Cherry 1990, 203).

The flaw in both of these approaches is their excessively cognitive orientation. Nagel denies the importance of the absurd by claiming that we have no rational grounds for demanding that all of our actions be meaningful or significant. Since Nagel finds this to be an unreasonable demand, he thinks we can manage it well enough just by ironically carrying on the business of living our lives. It does not seem to occur to Nagel that the feeling or experience of absurdity might be valid or powerful even if it does *not* have a reasonable set of propositions to back it up. In a well-known essay on the logic of ambivalence, Patricia Greenspan takes up this question, yet while she challenges the notion that emotions must always be perfectly rational, Greenspan also defends the rationality of conflicting emotions on the grounds that “an emotion is appropriate as long as there are adequate reasons for it,

whatever the reasons against it” (1980, 237). In the chapters that follow, I will argue that this cognitive or rational bias has caused us to look for the absurd in all the wrong places, preventing us from seeing the ambivalent emotions at its heart, emotions which are powerful and consequential regardless of the adequacy of ‘reasons’ for or against them.

In spite of these unfortunate tendencies, Nagel does the philosophy of the absurd a service by attempting to understand it not as a mythical collision between the human and the natural worlds, but as a product of two countervailing intuitions, as “a collision within ourselves” (Nagel 1971, 723). Jeffrey Gordon specifically argues against this approach by returning to what he takes to be Camus’ formulation of the absurd: the result of the collision between ourselves and the world (1984, 17). Gordon claims that our intuition of the arbitrariness of our ends is less relevant to absurdity than *the fact* of our ultimate meaninglessness (1984, 20). Thus, a mouse’s life *is* absurd, even though the mouse does not know that it is. Gordon finds this move to be a triumph, wondering how Nagel’s answer, which is that the mouse’s life is *not* absurd because the mouse does not even know it is a mouse, can stand. Oddly enough, while Gordon critiques Nagel on skeptical grounds, asking how Nagel can be certain of the cosmic unimportance of his actions (Gordon 1984, 27), Gordon somehow argues that what he sees as Camus’ absurd (the figurative confrontation between people and the world) is more sensible than Nagel’s. Gordon, like others, seems to insist that meaninglessness and arbitrariness are ‘essential’ properties of the world while, at the same time, claiming that we must remain skeptical about any claims we might make about the world.

Unfortunately, Nagel's, Westphal and Cherry's, and Gordon's examinations of the absurd are misguided from the start insofar as they look for 'reasons' and 'facts' that might justify absurdity. In the following chapters, I will argue that the only sensible way to speak about absurdity is to approach it as desire, emotion, and experience, not as essential properties of the world or 'facts' about meaninglessness discerned by the mind. These and other important clarifications of the philosophy of the absurd depend upon an analysis of the work of Albert Camus and his numerous critics, to which I now turn.

Chapter 3: Albert Camus and his Critics

Although the absurd has an ancestry that reaches back to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and perhaps even further, to Pascal (1670), Montaigne (1580), Augustine, Qohelet, and others, contemporary discussions of the philosophical concept of the absurd must begin and end with the work of Albert Camus. His collection of philosophical essays, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) was the first serious attempt to investigate the meaning of absurdity in a thoroughgoing manner. In spite of the limitations of his work, Camus succeeded in giving greater substance to the concept of absurdity, and in subjecting it to critical scrutiny in order to seek out its concomitants and consequences. In addition to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus' four other major works, *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), *The Rebel* (1951), and *The Fall* (1956), have come to define (although not very clearly) the contemporary understanding of the philosophy of the absurd.

Camus is regarded as an integral part of the Francophone canon for these three completed novels and two lengthy essays, as well as for his lyrical essays, particularly *Noces* (1938), his short stories, especially "The Adulterous Woman," "The Guest," "The Renegade," and "The Growing Stone," collected in *Exile and The Kingdom* (1957), and his plays, particularly *Caligula* (1938), *Le malentendu* (1943), and *Les justes* (1950). But Camus is also known for his passionate political writings for *Alger Républicain* and the resistance journal *Combat*, where he published, among other pieces, his four famous *Letters to a German Friend* (1943-1944). And today, along with the posthumous publication of *The First Man* (1994), many fans and critics read

Camus' personal *Notebooks*, which, in fact, often give the appearance of having been written in order to be read.

When it was announced that Camus would receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, he was only forty-three years old, the second youngest person ever to receive the award. Camus was said to have been dismayed by his reception of the Nobel, saying repeatedly, "I wish Malraux had got the prize" (Todd 2000, 372). Roger Quillot reported that upon hearing the news, Camus was deeply troubled, "anguished, like someone buried alive" (Todd 2000, 372). Of course, while Camus was a bit ambivalent about public praise and while he revered Malraux, he also may have sensed that a Nobel at such a young age threatened to prematurely end his literary career, which would be cut short, instead, by the tragic car accident that killed him in 1960.

Near the end of his life, Camus' reputation among the French public had waned. Jacques Laurent referred to Camus' Nobel as the crowning of "a finished oeuvre" (Judt 1998, 87), and Lucien Rebatet wrote cruelly that "this prize which falls most often to septuagenarians is not at all premature in this case, because since his allegorical *La Peste*, Camus has been diagnosed with an arteriosclerosis of style" (Todd 2000, 373). While there was praise for Camus at that time as well, critics on the Left "fell over one another to bury [Camus]," whose "philosophical naivety" had occasioned the quarrel with Sartre discussed in the previous chapter, a quarrel which had "severely damaged [Camus'] credibility on the intellectual left and permanently undermined his public confidence" (Judt 1998, 88).

Before his Nobel, even as early as 1945, Camus had been “France’s leading public intellectual... the moral voice of his era” (Judt 1998, 88). Germaine Brée refers to Camus’ early notoriety as inspiring “a certain hagiography” by which he had become the conscience of his generation. Even in 1952, after Hannah Arendt met Camus in Paris, she wrote to her husband that he was “undoubtedly, the best man now in France. He is head and shoulders above the other intellectuals” (Arendt in Judt 1998, 87). But this kind of praise had become less common by the 1950s, when Camus’ works and his public life caused animated controversies that reduced the public’s estimation of him. Camus’ moralistic tone got him accused of having become a “secular saint” (Todd 2000, 374), not unlike his character, Tarrou, in *The Plague*. Sartre’s and Jeanson’s personal rebukes of Camus tried, and succeeded to some degree, to cut his image down to size. Even well after his death, Patrick McCarthy would introduce Camus to readers as “a bad philosopher” whose “honesty could be devious and [who] was insufferably self-righteous” (1982, 6-7).

But it is likely that Camus’ lofty style belied a certain philosophical humility. While often indignant about moral ills, Camus rarely took an absolute stance against anything more morally controversial than torture or wanton murder. In working out his positions, Camus seems to have been aware of his own limitations, often attempting to discount his contributions and his worth as a systematic thinker with comments like, “I am not a philosopher and I never claimed to be one” (Camus in Judt 1998, 90), and “I don’t think I’m worth a red cent as a philosopher; what really concerns me is knowing how one should act” (Camus in Willhoite 1968, 6).

Statements like these, while not altogether humble, do illustrate that Camus' primary concern was morality, not logic or theory.

Indeed, dedicated scholars of Camus' work recognize that he belongs not in the tradition of twentieth century existentialist philosophers like Sartre, but alongside moralists and essayists like Montaigne, Pascal, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Gide. Camus certainly would have been more comfortable in this company, and perhaps his work would have received a more generous reading there as well. Nevertheless, as he remarked to Madeline Chapsal with characteristic balance, "one must live among one's contemporaries, smiling when it is possible. You see, our intellectual society, whether leftist or rightist, is almost always frightfully mean and nasty, and would be a sure sign of decadence, were there not some warm-hearted exceptions" (Camus in Todd 2000, 375).

Camus' public denouncement of both existentialism and Marxism, his critique of revolution in *The Rebel*, his highly-publicized break with Sartre, and his equivocal stance on Algeria lost him a great number of admirers on the Left. Some saw his refusal to endorse Communist revolution and Algerian independence as signs of bourgeois and colonial complacency. Even *The Plague* drew criticism from the Left because its explicit subject was a disease rather than a war or an occupation. Since the novel was written and published in a time of terrible political and ideological conflict, critics like Roland Barthes and Simone de Beauvoir found its symbolism especially misleading. Why write an allegory about a plague, they asked, which implicates no particular historical evils and which simplifies the political questions of combating the disease? Camus defended himself and his novel in a letter to Roland Barthes

(1955), which claimed that *The Plague* was applicable to “any resistance against any tyranny” because “terror has several faces. Still another justification for my not having named any particular one, in order to better strike at them all” (Camus 1968, 340). In Chapter 8, I discuss *The Plague* in a bit more detail to assess its moral implications and to evaluate Camus’ choices of symbols, battles, and heroes.

Recently, scholars have questioned the breadth and depth of Camus’ political critique, wondering exactly who is included in the absurd fight and what issues he deemed worth fighting for. These inquiries revolve around matters of race and empire, making them among the most divisive topics debated in the context of Camus’ politics. In addition to Camus’ expository writing and public positions on the Algerian issue, some have even read Camus’ fiction as indicative of a failure to confront colonialism, racism, and violence in North Africa. For instance, In *The Stranger*, Meursault’s victim, “*l’Arabe*,” is given no other name in the text; like other Arab Algerian characters in Camus’ work, he is not much more than a ghost. Likewise, in *The Plague*, the Arab quarter is ravaged by pestilence but is almost completely ignored; even the heroes of the tale, Rieux and Tarrou, do not carry their battle against the plague that far.

Some have claimed that Camus was simply unable to bridge the gap between his Europeanness and what should have been his sympathies for colonized Algerians. Conor Cruise O’Brien’s *Albert Camus of Europe and Africa* (1970) has made the greatest impact in examining issues of colonialism and race with respect to Camus’ life and work. O’Brien contends that Camus’ books and articles bury, as it were, beneath the invasion of France by Germany, beneath the invasion of Oran by the

plague, the earlier invasion of North Africa by France. Few would maintain that Camus consciously sought to perpetuate oppression and injustice, but O'Brien and others have argued that Camus was blinded by his proximity to the Algerian issue, perhaps even resorting to fantasy and a kind of willful self-delusion to justify a quasi-colonial stance.

There remains a heated debate over whether Camus' work attempts to expose the inhumane divisions of race, class, power, and privilege in North Africa or whether it tacitly approves of these divisions. In Chapter 9, I specifically take up the issue of Camus' complex and unpopular rejection of both Algerian independence and French reconquest. There, I attempt to relate Camus' position on political conflicts like the Algerian War for independence to a renewed theoretical understanding of the absurd. Addressing these controversial questions in light of the links between the philosophy and politics of absurdity is a method which has been largely ignored, and one which depends upon a clearer understanding and a more effective interpretation of the meaning of Camus' absurd.

The Meaning of Camus' Absurd

Camus' philosophy of the absurd often strikes us as absurdly ambiguous. Olivier Todd noted in his authoritative biography that while Camus' absurd had broad application and "worked on several different levels," the thought-processes in Camus' expository writing often "seemed rapid, punchy, and fluid. He sought a certain lucidity without quite attaining it" (Todd 2000, 144).

Tony Judt agrees that Camus "was investing the word [absurd] with many of his own very concrete and deeply personal experiences — in particular, his difficult

relationship with his mother, an illiterate and almost silent presence/absence during his impoverished childhood in Algiers” (1998, 90). For Judt, Camus’ absurd referred to precise, personal sensations, and it is true that Camus’ expressions of the absurd are often tinged with very unique emotional resonances.

By contrast, however, Robert de Luppé’s *Albert Camus* defines Camus’ absurd as “the meaninglessness of life,” indeed, the meaninglessness of “everything.” For Luppé, “in a broad sense the absurd is everything which is without meaning: therefore the world is absurd... just as I myself am absurd” (1966, 5-6). Jacob Golomb takes an equally grand but perhaps even more transcendental tack by claiming that “Camus invites us to accept the immanence of the absolute absurd,” as opposed to making leaps of faith (1994, 268). But what exactly ‘the absolute absurd’ is and how exactly it could be ‘immanent’ are not at all clear. One bizarre step further and we reach Jean Onimus’ not entirely sympathetic reading of Camus, where the absurd is explained as the condition depicted in the stories of Christ, but *only* if “the final pages of the gospel are ripped out” (1965, 49).

We may understand why there so many competing versions of Camus’ absurd if we turn to Camus’ work, itself. In the first essay of *The Myth of Sisyphus* alone, Camus describes the absurd in an astounding variety of ways. He refers to either “the absurd” or “absurdity” as: “a feeling that deprives the mind of sleep” (1955, 6), a deprivation of “the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land” (6), a “divorce between man and his life” (6), a “divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints” (50), something that one “believes to be true” that must “determine [one’s] action” (6), an “odd state of soul in which the void becomes

eloquent” (12), “the metaphysical state of the conscious man” (40), a moment when “the stage sets collapse” (12), a “definitive awakening” (13), a “revolt of the flesh” (14), “the denseness and strangeness of the world” (14), “the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photograph” (15), “the elementary and definitive aspect of the [mortal] adventure” (15), “the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (28), “lucid reason noting its limits” (49), a “climate” (12), a “universe” (12), a “contradiction” (18), a “gap” (19), a “condition” (20), a “confrontation” (21), a “passion” (22), a “revolt” (25), a “comparison” (30), a “datum” (31), an “equation” (50), an “awareness” (52), and a “wager” (52).

These impossibly numerous understandings of the absurd have led many investigators to offer up a vague definition of the absurd as the lack of correspondence between the human and natural worlds. One such investigator is John Cruickshank, whose seminal work, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (1960), uniquely advanced our understanding of Camus by attempting to clarify his two most important ideas: absurdity and revolt. It was Cruickshank, almost as much as Camus, who established the understanding of the absurd as “something which arises from a confrontation between the human desire for coherence, for understanding, and the irrationality, the opacity, of the world” (Cruickshank 1960, xiii). This basic orientation to the absurd as a kind of human tragedy has guided nearly all interpretations of the absurd since Cruickshank’s work first appeared in 1959.

Cruickshank notes that Camus’ vision of absurdity begins with a dualism, a “tragic ambivalence,” which results from Camus’ love of life and his concomitant

awareness of the inevitability of death, his sense of *nascentes morimur*, of being born to die (1960, xi). Cruickshank argues that this simple dualism — the richness of life and the certainty of death — is elevated to the level of paradox even in Camus' early work, with the positive side elaborated in *Noces*, and the negative explored in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1960, x-xi).

But Cruickshank is not unaware of the confusion and contradiction that weighs upon Camus' absurd. He argues that Camus' formulation of absurdity "seems to involve a *petitio principii*" (a circular argument), and that it contains numerous verbal and logical contradictions (Cruickshank 1960, 62). Summarizing the various senses of the absurd as presented in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, Cruickshank argues that "Camus gives the notion of the absurd three different meanings during the demonstration of his *cogito*: (i) it is the whole tragic paradox of the human condition and a subject of scandal and complaint; (ii) it is a situation that we are called upon to maintain as fully as we can; (iii) it is an attitude of revolt (the wager of the absurd) which somehow requires us to use the absurd in sense (ii) above against the absurd in sense (i) above. These different meanings of the term 'absurd' involve three different kinds of relationship and are both confused and confusing" (1960, 63).

In spite of the great confusion, Cruickshank settles on an explication of Camus' absurd as "the absence of correspondence or congruity between the mind's need for coherence and the incoherence of the world which the mind experiences" (1960, 41). Thus, the absurd ought not be understood as "an existing object," says

Cruickshank, but as “a relationship with an experiencing mind as one of its terms, a confrontation between “existence and the individual mind” (1960, 51).

Now, these clarifications of Camus’ absurd are helpful if one wishes to get a vague sense of Camus’ basic intentions, but they remain inadequate as complete explications of the concept. Indeed, Cruickshank admits as much in his thorough critique. One gets the sense that Cruickshank finds the philosophy of the absurd to be compelling but logically hopeless, arguing that the entire question of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, stated by Camus to be the question of a logic unto death, the question of the relationship between the absurd and suicide, is meaningless and tautological (1960, 47).

But Cruickshank partly defends Camus by pointing out, correctly and significantly for our purposes, that Camus’ goal in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is not to present the reader with a systematic philosophy of the absurd, but rather to describe the feeling and sensibility of the absurd. “What we primarily have in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*,” writes Cruickshank, “is a testimony to a certain widespread state of mind rather than a strict philosophical scrutiny of it” (1960, 47). That his is an accurate assessment of Camus’ intentions is clearly confirmed in a short prefatory note (Camus 1955, 2), discussed below. Cruickshank is right to suggest that this prefatory note has been too often ignored by readers and critics.

But while Cruickshank neither apologizes for nor condemns Camus’ absurd, he does offer a piercing analysis of its major logical problem: the confusion of the unknown with the unknowable (Cruickshank 1960, 52; Hall 1960, 27). The problem with which critics of *The Myth of Sisyphus* have contended, as much as any other, is

what seems to be a leap from epistemological skepticism to essentializing descriptions of the human condition, a leap from uncertainty and doubt to a bold characterization of the relationship between the human being and the world. Camus' absurd has been said, therefore, to jump from a recognition that the world is *not known* to a claim that the world is inherently *unknowable* (Cruickshank 1960, 52). But this jump presents itself as such only if we take an overly cognitive orientation to Camus' work, only if we mistakenly assume that it begins as methodical doubt or epistemological skepticism.

Many philosophically-inclined critics have tended to conceive of the absurd as originating in just such a condition of doubt, which encourages them to equate absurdity with a skeptical stance. Cruickshank, himself, is guilty of taking this route. "One is indeed tempted to describe *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* as Camus' *Discours de la méthode*," Cruickshank writes. "It is founded on a doubt that extends to the evidence of both sense and mind. It derives its own particular kind of *cogito* from this doubt. It produces a provisional morality also, though this provisional morality of Camus would be much less generally approved — if perhaps more widely practiced — than that of Descartes" (1960, 43). Similarly, Gary Madison claims that, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus undertakes "an inventory of consciousness... in quasi-Cartesian fashion... asking in effect... What exactly do I know with certainty?" (Madison in Shaw 2004, 867). And as we have already discussed, Cruickshank and others have frequently treated Camus' absurd as a variant of the skeptical method, as "a contemporary manifestation of a scepticism as old at least as the Book of Ecclesiastes" (Cruickshank 1960, 44).

Donald Lazere attempts to address this matter of the leap from the unknown to the unknowable by splitting the absurd into two categories: metaphysical and epistemological absurdity. The former type of absurdity is constituted by “the brevity of life and inevitability of death, the indifference of the natural universe to human existence and of men to one another’s existence, and the absence of a God and an afterlife that would give this life a transcendent purpose or universal system of moral values” (1973, 52). Epistemological absurdity, on the other hand, Lazere understands as “the limitations of human understanding in general — the foundering of reason in logical dilemmas, the mind’s failure to explain or unify experience totally, the frustration of our ‘nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute’” (1973, 52).

Unfortunately, Lazere’s distinction is suspect, for not only does Camus resist making broad, sweeping metaphysical claims about the non-existence of God or human purpose, but logically, if one admits to ‘epistemological absurdity’, then one could never find the grounds to postulate ‘metaphysical absurdity’. That basic conundrum is the central problem with confusing the unknown with the unknowable, and Lazere’s answer does not resolve it. Moreover, when Camus *does* wax metaphysical, any methodical or skeptical reasoning he once professed seems to be completely forgotten. For instance, Camus’ well-known argument in his *Fourth Letter to a German Friend*, that a human being “has a meaning... because he is the only creature to insist on having one” (1960, 28), may be aesthetically pleasing but is logically outrageous. Cruickshank and others have described Camus’ tendency toward illogic as “a failure to separate clear thinking from an emotional attitude” (Cruickshank 1960, 47). But I think Camus’ emotional attitude, rather than being

entirely obfuscating, actually offers important clues about the meaning of Camus' absurd.

In the end, critics like Cruickshank and Lazere are not entirely to blame for approaching Camus' absurd in this way. As discussed briefly in the previous chapter, Camus often invoked skeptical and Cartesian motifs as basic touchstones for his thought, even formulating his absurd formula as a neo-Cartesian *cogito*: '*Je me révolte, donc nous sommes*', "I rebel — therefore we exist" (1956b, 22). But even if Camus is guilty of creating such confusion, to suggest that absurdity is primarily a survey of doubt is to impoverish the concept and to run headlong into the dilemma of the unknown and the unknowable. Camus should have been able to recognize that his absurd did not begin in methodical doubt but in tension, conflict, and contradiction. For, as even Sartre was able to see, Camus' absurd "is not... the object of a mere idea; it is revealed to us in a doleful illumination" (1962, 110). In this and the following two chapters, I attempt to show that although Camus' absurd fails to hold the center of a coherent skeptical analysis, it does achieve limited success in describing absurdity in emotional terms as an "intellectual malady," as Camus himself defined it (1955, 2).

The Status of Camus' Absurd

It is not possible to fully comprehend the meaning of the absurd unless we clarify its status. That is, we must ask and answer the question: What *type* of thing is the absurd? We are repeatedly told by Camus and his critics that the absurd is a cosmic conflict, manifested in the irreconcilable differences between human beings and the natural world. Some critics have interpreted the absurd to be the doubt and

uncertainty that results from those metaphysical differences. But on this issue, it seems that critics have taken Camus (and Camus perhaps even took himself) too literally. To really understand the status of Camus' absurd, we must approach his descriptions of absurdity as metaphors. When we do, we see that the 'facts' and 'truths' of the absurd are metaphors for the feelings and experiences of absurdity.

One of Camus' most famous definitions of the absurd is the "confrontation of this irrational [world] and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (1955, 21). And some of Camus' most beautiful and memorable prose treats absurdity in just this way, as a tragedy of cosmic proportions. Camus metaphorically locates the absurd between the person and the world. "The absurd," he writes, "is not in man (if such a metaphor could have meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together" (1955, 30). He therefore depicts the absurd as a kind of incommensurability, found in "neither of the elements compared" but "born of their confrontation" (1955, 30). Camus even attempts to give mathematical dimension to this metaphor of the absurd by defining it as a comparison between two discrete (although nebulous) terms, in which "the magnitude of absurdity will be in direct ratio to the distance between the two terms of my comparison" (1955, 30). These formulations of the absurd as contrast, confrontation, or comparison compose the traditional understanding of Camus' absurd, which many readers and critics have followed.

But the conflict and confrontation Camus describes is not what we might imagine. The confrontation of the absurd does not play itself out in bloody battles between the human hero and the cruel world, but in the much more subtle conflict and

negotiation between desire and unfulfillment, longing and refusal. Camus' absurd consists of "the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (1955, 28). The gentler metaphors of silence and need seem to have become lost behind the stronger metaphors of conflict and confrontation. Even as a metaphor, the absurd resembles not so much a clash between titanic forces as the painful silence of a broken relationship.

Remembering that we are still chasing after metaphors, we may ask, what is this 'world' with which we have, or do not have, a relationship? What is it that we need and desire and who or what is silent? I try to offer answers to these strange questions by replacing their metaphysical overtones with emotional ones in Chapters 4 and 5. For now, Camus' elliptical answer is that the absurd is "that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe, and the contradiction that binds them together" (1955, 50). Like a truly unhappy or broken relationship, the disappointment and resentment created by absurdity is all that links the individual and the world together. Indeed, "it binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together" (1955, 21).

According to Camus, we feel a kind of love and a kind of hatred toward 'the world that disappoints', and this constellation of feeling is what binds us to the absurd.

These metaphors of confrontation, disappointment, and divorce have been taken by many critics as evidence that Camus' philosophy requires the assertion of a fundamental difference between human consciousness and the physical world.

Ostensibly, only a radical and insurmountable difference can explain why the world might disappoint our desires and remain silent, as it were, when we would have it

speak. But there is no reason why we must assert such a difference and there are a number of good reasons not to.

First of all, Camus would have rejected such a proposition if it had been set before him. Camus shared Nietzsche's view that "when one speaks of humanity, the idea is fundamental that this is something which separates and distinguishes man from nature. In reality, however, there is no such separation: 'Natural' qualities and those called 'human' are inseparably grown together" (Sprintzen 1988, xvi). As I will show in Chapter 5, Camus' treatment of nature and the relationship between humanity and nature can not be reduced to an absolute split between the human and the natural worlds. In fact, Camus will argue *against* such a split, encouraging us to recognize and to experience the complex, interdependent, and ambivalent relationships between individual, social, and natural 'worlds'.

Second, if we assert a fundamental difference between two categorically discrete types of being, we only return to the problem of the unknown and the unknowable described above. Camus asks (rhetorically), "What constitutes the basis of that [absurd] conflict, of that break between the world and my mind, but the awareness of it?" (1955, 52). Here, we get a little closer to the emotional quality of Camus' absurd, but even conceiving of the absurd as the *awareness* of a break has its problems. How could we be aware of a break with something that is fundamentally beyond our awareness? It is not terribly sensible to assert that there is a property of a thing that refuses us and that this property is the thing's absolute unknowability. These problems find no solutions as long as we understand the notion of 'refusal' to be the result of a categorical difference between the human and natural worlds.

It is also worth pointing out that this description of a conflict, a divorce, and an absolute difference has strong elements of denial and projection to it, as it avoids any involvement in the conflict and insists that our absurdity is caused by an essential and insurmountable disjunction between us and a ‘world’ which only disappoints us. It is more informative to read Camus’ metaphor as an expression of ambivalence, for Camus is claiming that sometimes we refuse and sometimes we feel refused, that while part of us desires, part of us rejects. After reviewing the concept of ambivalence in Chapter 4, I will return to an exploration of these themes of desire, rejection, and ambivalence in Chapter 5. But, for now, we can see that even though Camus’ metaphors are better poetry than philosophy, it is important to get the metaphors right in order to contextualize and eventually interpret his account of the absurd.

Finally, when critics insist upon understanding Camus metaphysically, they work against the very spirit of the absurd investigation. “If you want to unify the entire world in the name of a theory,” Camus wrote, “the only way you will do so is to make the world as gaunt, as blind, and as deaf as the theory itself” (Camus in du Plock 2005, 22). In fact, one of Camus’ goals in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is to challenge all the doctrines that “explain everything” and that therefore “debilitate [him] at the same time” (1955, 55). It is fair to say that a strong argument *against* metaphysical theorizing is present in most, if not all, of Camus’ expository works.

In spite of the temptation to imagine the absurd as a cosmic clash and a metaphysical difference, Camus relied on metaphors of desire and relationship, and he returned to an explicitly emotional vocabulary when he felt it was important to explicate the real meaning and status of the absurd. In his brief prefatory note to *The*

Myth of Sisyphus, likely added in response to early criticism, Camus wrote: “The pages that follow deal with an absurd sensitivity (*sensibilité*) that can be found widespread in the age — and not with an absurd philosophy which our time, properly speaking, has not known” (1955, 2). Camus then defined his purpose in the work in perfectly clear terms: “There will be found here merely the description, the pure state, of an intellectual malady (*mal de l’esprit*). No metaphysic, no belief is involved in it for the moment. These are the limits and the only bias of this book. Certain personal experiences urge me to make this clear” (1955, 2).

Camus opens *The Rebel* in similar fashion, by describing the “absurdist sensibility” as an illness and the study of it, a diagnosis. “If it was legitimate to take absurdist sensibility into account,” he writes, “to make a diagnosis of a malady to be found in ourselves and in others, it is nevertheless impossible to see in this sensibility, and in the nihilism it presupposes, anything but a point of departure, a criticism brought to life” (1956b, 9-10). These clarifications alone should challenge us to re-evaluate many years of overly literal interpretations of Camus’ absurd.

In their place, we should notice that as Camus develops his argument in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he describes the emotional experience of absurdity as a “distressing nudity” (1955, 11), a “strangeness” (14), and an “odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent” (12). We even find Camus insisting upon the significance of the *feeling* of the absurd with respect to its idea, its *notion*. Camus writes: “The feeling (*le sentiment*) of the absurd is not, for all that, the notion (*la notion*) of the absurd. It [the feeling] lays the foundations for it [the notion], and that is all. It is not limited to that notion, except in the brief moment when it passes judgment on the universe.

Subsequently it [the feeling] has a chance of going further. It [the feeling] is alive; in other words, it must die or reverberate (Camus 1955, 28-29).

Oddly enough, some critics use this passage as evidence that conscious notions of the absurd are what define absurdity and its consequences (see Sprintzen 1988, 53-54). Perhaps they draw such conclusions because of a translation issue which I have attempted to address above: while the English is confusing because of repeated ambiguous references to 'it', the French is clear because of the differences in the gender of the nouns, *le sentiment* and *la notion*. Once the translation has been clarified, it becomes apparent that, while the exact relationship between the feeling and the notion of the absurd is never quite clarified by Camus, it is the *feeling* of the absurd that grounds the notion, the feeling that has a chance of going further, the feeling that is less limited, and the feeling that is alive.

Such privileging of emotional over cognitive interpretations of the absurd is apparent again in *The Rebel*, where Camus insists that it is not callous logic or shallow resentment that motivate absurd rebellion, but genuine emotions, even love.

In the act of rebellion as we have envisaged it up to now, an abstract ideal is not chosen through lack of feeling and in pursuit of a sterile demand. We insist that the part of man which cannot be reduced to mere ideas should be taken into consideration — the passionate side of his nature that serves no other purpose than to be part of the act of living... When Heathcliff, in *Wuthering Heights*, says that he puts his love above God and would willingly go to hell in order to be reunited with the woman he loves, he is prompted not only by youth and humiliation but by the consuming experience of a whole lifetime. The same emotion causes Eckart, in a surprising fit of heresy, to say that he prefers hell with Jesus to heaven without Him. This is the very essence of love. Contrary to Scheler, it would therefore be impossible to overemphasize the passionate affirmation that underlies the act of rebellion and distinguishes it from resentment. (1956b, 19)

Understanding the absurd in emotional terms is really the only way to make sense of passages like these. It is also the most straight-forward way to interpret the analogy Camus draws in *The Myth of Sisyphus* between the absurd and Eurydice, Orpheus' beloved, in which love and attention keep the absurd and the beloved alive. "Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it" (1955, 54).

Although Camus is often tempted to mythologize and to symbolize the absurd in ways that tempt us to imagine essential conflicts between human beings and the natural world, it is really the *feeling* of conflictedness to which those myths refer that interest Camus. In fact, understanding the absurd not as metaphysics but as emotion opens up interpretive avenues in one of the more problematic areas of Camus' thought: the relationship between the absurd description of experience and the possibility of an absurd morality.

Absurd Facts, Data, and Values

Any interpretive approach to Camus' philosophy of the absurd must strive to elucidate the meaning of absurdity. But any interpretive approach to the absurd must also seek to reconcile the descriptive with the normative accounts of the absurd, a difficult task since Camus' absurd appears to *shift* from one to the other, from a fact to a value, especially between *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* (see Cruickshank 1960; Hochberg 1965; Sagi 1994, 2002). Such a shift, especially when left unaccounted for, is clearly a cardinal sin of reasoning. The goal in this section of the chapter is to introduce the problem of the normative shift. I offer an extended

exploration and interpretive solution to this problem as it relates to absurd morality in Chapters 7 and 8.

John Cruickshank, Herbert Hochberg, and others have fairly criticized Camus for making a value out of what was, at first, a description of an unfortunate condition. Over-zealous supporters of Camus, on the other hand, tend to reply with specious reasoning to this criticism. In an attempt to save the philosophy, Camus' advocates have suggested that the thesis of absurdity may be accompanied by unspoken *a priori* judgments. They claim, for instance, that honest recognition of the 'fact' of the absurd entails a normative orientation toward that fact, that if something is 'true', then it must be preserved as truth (see Duff and Marshall 1982; Golomb 1994; Sagi 1994).

These unconvincing proposals have been provoked by the difficulty critics face in harmonizing a prominent argument in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that "everything is equivalent" (1955, 45), with the ethic of revolt and rebellion advocated as the primary ethical stance of the absurd person in both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. It is easy to see the tension between these two positions if we ask: Why should one rebel if all events, all things, and all values are equivalent? Don't rebels need to believe in values, in better and worse, maybe even in best and worst, in order to motivate and justify their rebellion? And if the absurd is 'true', what does one rebel against? Should one rebel *against* the absurd or preserve the absurd as a truth? Germaine Brée directed even more difficult questions at Camus' philosophy: "Against what exactly is mans' revolt directed? Against death, or the limits imposed upon his reason, or the inscrutability of the cosmos? What is a revolt that ends in the acceptance of a Sisyphus?" (1964, 208).

In response to her own difficult questions, Brée can only insist that “whether it be seen in man’s mortality, or in the irremediable incoherence of his experience and his drive for rational unity, or in the insignificance of his life and his passion for absolute values and meaning, Camus adopts one term [the absurd] to express all facets of the essential obstacle” (1964, 210). She claims that “Camus aimed at nothing less than to operate a radical transmutation of values, to elicit from the notion of the absurd a positive response to life instead of the negative one he discerned around him” (1964, 199). But of course, while her characterization of Camus’ work is not inaccurate, understanding the absurd as an ‘essential obstacle’, or as that which elicits a ‘positive response’ to life, does not offer much additional clarity.

The Sisyphus symbol is particularly perplexing because of its central importance in Camus’ thought and because Sisyphus is a confusing, changing hero, who does not “quite correspond to the general climate of Camus’ thought, even when Camus stretches the image by drawing on diverse aspects of the story and personality of Sisyphus” (Brée 1964, 206). Sisyphus, of course, is condemned to eternal, futile labor, but, for Camus, much of the absurdity of our condition seems bound up with our mortality. We are confused because Sisyphus seems to change from a mortal rebel against the gods to an immortal *condamné*. Sisyphus accepts his task, which is his punishment for rebellion against the gods, but it is not clear whether absurd rebellion is symbolized in his crime or in his acceptance of his punishment. In the end, Sisyphus finds contentment by struggling toward the summit, which is why Camus proclaims, “*il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux*,” “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (1955, 123). But, as Brée points out, we are forced to ask ourselves: what

summit? “The ethics peculiar to Camus’s four preceding heroes are derived from the assertion that there is no ‘upward’ path. But Sisyphus is now a moral hero, a stoic, convinced that, in spite of the gods, man’s dignity requires him to “struggle toward the summit” (1964, 208).

The four preceding heroes Brée refers to are Don Juan, the Actor, the Conqueror, and the Artist or Creator. Camus invokes these symbolic figures in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to express the absurd attitude toward life, the ethos or style of absurdity (1955, 68-118). These images, while imperfect and even regrettable in many ways, are *not* defenses of values or moral ideals in any traditional sense. They are absurd ‘styles’, reflecting, sometimes imperfectly, the absurd attitude or stance, a way of living, a “style of life worthy of a man” (Brée 1964, 209). As I will attempt to show in later chapters, this absurd stance is what makes the creation of values possible.

The guiding principle of these styles was defined by Camus as an ‘ethic of quantity’, although, as I hope to show in Chapters 7 and 8, the very notion of ‘quantity’ must be revisited in order to understand Camus’ meaning. Donald Lazere offers an interpretation of the absurd ethical ‘style’ that has become quite common among contemporary critics: that the absurd denies the reality of transcendent values in order to place supreme importance on the value of individual life. For Lazere, Camus’ ethos of the “quantity of life” in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which appears to advocate “not the best living but the most living” (Camus 1955, 61), coincides with an argument implicit in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Plague*, *The Rebel*, and elsewhere: that individuals should never die for an abstraction. These reflections suggest to

Lazere that absurdity recommends a kind of simple individualism. Lazere describes what he sees as Camus' ethic thus: "Once we affirm every individual consciousness as an absolute value, we become bound to seek a social system that promotes maximal length, intensity, and freedom for each individual's life. Hence we must oppose war, capital punishment, and any ideology that subordinates human flesh and blood to abstractions such as nationalism or bourgeois property" (1973, 138).

But such an ethic tends to strike us as overly simplistic, particularly in its opposition to issues that are not exactly moral paradoxes, such as war, premature death, or the sacrificing of human beings to nationalism and bourgeois property. Furthermore, it risks absolutizing individual life in such a way that, if ever faced with a more complex moral dilemma, might undermine the very causes it seeks to defend. If nothing were as valuable as a long and intense individual life, then there would be no grounds for social, political, or moral values, for there would be nothing to defend except oneself and nothing for which risking one's own well-being would be worthwhile.

Avi Sagi's attempt to resolve Camus' apparent fact/value shift is more complex, but ultimately returns us to an unhelpful formulation of the absurd. Sagi recognizes that in order to make sense of absurdity, one must reconcile the two uses of the absurd; he proposes we think of them as "the absurd as datum and the absurd as concept" (Sagi 2002, 47). Sagi claims that the absurd, whether we know it or not, "is present in our lives without analyzing its meaning: it exists" (Sagi 2002, 47). He even goes so far as to claim that absurdity is "an essential aspect of human existence" (Sagi 1994, 284). This essential absurdity that 'exists' in our lives may nevertheless be a

matter for thought, an object of knowledge, meaning that the absurd is an “undecoded, vague (implicit) datum” (2002, 47), that “rests on the structure of an absurd human existence” (1994, 281).

The term ‘datum’ can be a bit misleading in this case, because ‘datum’ suggests some correspondence with an objective reality or with something that we could, at least theoretically, verify. But Sagi intends to argue that Camus is best understood “when viewed through the prism of the ontology and epistemology of Husserl and Heidegger... although [Camus] disagrees with Husserl regarding several basic issues” (1994, 282). Sagi compares the absurd to the Heideggerian *existenzial* because “just as the *existenzial* is an ontological structure in human existence, so is the absurd” (2002, 48). “At the beginning of the process,” Sagi writes, “consciousness appears to be constituted by the sense of the absurd although, in truth, it is merely awakened by it. We are thus led to conclude that the revelation of the structure or the conception of the absurd is a process of explication which, according to Camus, is identical to the process of self-explication taking place within consciousness” (1994, 281). As we explicate this primordial thing that is the absurd, although we can never fully explain it, says Sagi, we are elaborating a kind of self-knowledge.

Sagi declares this self-knowledge, then, to be the grounding for the normative aspect of the absurd because self-knowledge, according to his ontological-existential approach, is an “expression of a metaphysical concern” which is “ethical, in the sense of a return to concrete existence moulded by acquaintance with its foundations” (1994, 282). The idea is that ‘realizing’ the absurd leads to us a choice about whether to accept absurdity or not. This choice is “imbued with ontological-existential

meaning — reflecting the human readiness to explicitly actualize the ontological structure typical of *dasein*” (Sagi 1994, 283). This choice to accept the absurd, according to Sagi, while not precisely derived from an ethical system, is something that we ought to do in the name of transparency and truth.

I find this approach not only excessively abstruse, but misguided in its interpretation of Camus and his conclusions. The decision to ‘accept the absurd’ is taken by Sagi to be a reflection of the call of authenticity, coherence, transparency, and “the return to factuality... the authentic decision, the culmination of human existence” (Sagi 1994, 283). But these thinly-veiled values are given no explanation or justification, meaning they find no clear place in Camus’ absurd philosophy. What is worse, asserting that the recognition of the absurd ‘data’ of our existence leads us to absurd ‘values’ like authenticity and self-awareness fundamentally misrepresents Camus’ thought. In order to align his existential values with Camus’ thought, Sagi is forced to conclude that the goal of the philosopher of the absurd is to “accept the basic facts of existence” (1994, 283). Perhaps because of these conclusions, Sagi attributes to Camus’ absurd an ethic of *amor fati* (Sagi 1994, 283). These conclusions and attributions could hardly be more incorrect: not only did Camus call for absurd rebellion against realism and against absolute affirmations of fate, but he explicitly rejected Nietzsche’s *amor fati*, insisting that we *not* accept reality but re-create it, change it, and struggle with it.

On one hand, an ‘ontological-existential’ interpretation of the relationship between absurd data and absurd values leads us astray by exaggerating the degree to which we must accept the absurd as truth. On the other hand, declaring that the

absurd is an evil, something only to be combated or defeated, errs in the opposite direction. Thomas Merton specifically argues against the idea of the absurd as truth, criticizing the notion that Camus “preached ‘the absurd’” (1981, 182). Rather, Merton believes, “[Camus] wants his reader to recognize ‘the absurd’ in order to resist it” (1981, 182). But Merton’s view is flawed because he neglects the valuable potential of the absurd and understands it, instead, as a sub-species of evil. The absurd, for him, is “simply one face of ‘the plague’ which we must resist in all its aspects,” while the plague refers to “the tyranny of evil and death, no matter what form it may take: the Nazi occupation of France, the death camps, the bourgeois hypocrisy of the French system... Stalinism, or the unprincipled opportunism of certain French Marxists” (1981, 182).

Faced with the fact/value problem, some critics have argued, with a hint of desperation, that Camus’ must have made his absurd intentionally inscrutable. Germaine Brée thought that “perhaps the ambiguity is deliberate, for the enemy is the absurd in all its forms and it must be mastered” (1964, 209). But, of course, it is not at all clear that the absurd should be described as ‘the enemy’ any more than it should be described as an ally, or as the truth. I will argue that the answer to this fact/value problem lies in ‘mastering’ absurdity in a different sense. Because the absurd is itself ambivalent, it requires that we contain and maintain the tensions inherent to it in order not to be diminished or overwhelmed by it. This interpretation accords with Camus’ *Fourth Letter to a German Friend*, in which Camus argues that the absurd is the shared beginning of both the Nazis and the Resistance, and therefore, that what really matters are the conclusions one draws from it (1960, 30). The absurd, on this

account, is not evil or truth, but the truth of the absurd is that our responses to it may lead us to evil. Unfortunately, neither Camus nor his critics have yet offered a convincing account of how one avoids those ‘evil’ responses or how one might arrive at ‘good’ moral and political responses to the absurd.

Jeffrey Isaac’s well-known *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion* argues that the sense of absurdity is something shared by Camus and Arendt, something that signals “the exhaustion of the vital energies of modern culture” (1992, 93). Absurdity, itself, is the result of the twentieth century’s “monstrous disjuncture between human purpose and outcome that could only invite an intense feeling of unredeemable exile, a sense that the world was emptied of all meaning and that human living was pointless” (1992, 93). The basic problem that Camus and Arendt face is the modern rebel’s recognition that the foundations of ethical and political values are suspect and even dangerous, but that the rejection of all foundations and all values is intellectually and practically disastrous as well. Camus’ task, according to Isaac, is to find a way between absolutism and nihilism, to assert or discover a relative ethical and political stance that can withstand the pressures of both absolutism and nihilism.

Isaac’s book contends that Camus would endorse a basically democratic politics, a preference for intersubjective and dialogic communities, and a defense of ethical reflexivity. Although Isaac admits that Camus’ absurd fails to coalesce into a coherent social theory and is marked by a noticeable “lack of theoretical rigor” (1992, 240), he finds Camus’ absurd to be “much like Arendt’s ‘human condition’” in that it reflects a “dissonance,” a “product of the human encounter with a world that is ‘measureless’ and ‘silent’ vis-à-vis compelling human needs and purposes” (1992,

119-120). But, confronted with this silence, the supplicant/rebel does not withdraw and, somehow, this frustrating encounter with the world becomes a source of value. “Absurdity involves, then, not just the absence of an ultimate answer, but a question, as well as a questioner, whose inquiry attests to the value of human life and to the importance of the freedom to ask elusive questions and dream elusive dreams” (Isaac 1992, 120). According to Isaac, the absurd itself attests to a value because values are what elude us in the absurd.

At times, Isaac seems to refuse to allow the full force of Camus’ absurd to come to light. For instance, he cites a well-known passage from *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “The absurd does not liberate; it binds. It does not authorize all actions... All systems of morality are based on the idea that an action has consequences that legitimize or cancel it. A mind imbued with the absurd merely judges that those consequences must be considered calmly” (Camus in Isaac 1992, 98-99). But the ellipsis here is Isaac’s, not mine, and the five sentences Isaac skips over are quite significant:

... ‘Everything is permitted’ does not mean that nothing is forbidden. The absurd merely confers an equivalence on the consequences of those actions. It does not recommend crime, for this would be childish, but it restores to remorse its futility. Likewise, if all experiences are indifferent, that of duty is as legitimate as any other. One can be virtuous through a whim... (Camus 1955, 67)

Passages like this one give us greater difficulty in deriving a political or ethical theory from Camus’ work. They demand a more complex and more subtle interpretation of Camus’ absurd theory, which, at times, insists that all experiences and all consequences are equivalent in terms of moral value. This value-equivalence does not

mean that one ought to be criminal any more than it means one ought to be moral, but many critics seem to wish to ignore this entire problem, to stop short of this radical component of the absurd, likely because any strictly philosophical approach to the absurd can not resolve the contradiction.

While Isaac draws many reasonable and illuminating conclusions about Camus' politics, he avoids the problem of how to connect these particular conclusions to the philosophical concept of the absurd. My interpretation recommends that we understand the absurd as a 'position' of ambivalence that holds implications for values, a position which must be worked through and to which mature and creative resolutions must be attained in order to sustain the possibility of values which are, in a sense, unreal.

Fred Willhoite Jr.'s *Beyond Nihilism: Albert Camus' Contribution to Political Thought* (1968) offers an interpretation of Camus' work as 'existential', which causes confusion until one realizes that Willhoite means only that Camus' work is personal and based on experience rather than derived from the set of philosophical propositions we have come to know as existentialism. Willhoite understands Camus' absurdity to be "a wrenching and inescapable existential reality... [Camus'] way of expressing his inability to discern either a cosmic or a divine order of which man is a part and which makes human life ultimately coherent" (1968, 49). But in spite of Willhoite's insistence that Camus is a personal thinker, Willhoite finds that the absurd has a "metaphysical basis" which consists in "the confrontation of Reason with the impenetrability of the world" (1968, 32). The impenetrability of the world, the

impossibility of communicating with what Camus calls ‘the sacred’, is seen to be pivotal in turning Camus toward communication and communion with others.

This notion becomes, for Willhoite, the central good in Camus’ political theory. Willhoite defines Camus’ moral and political good as “dialogic communion,” which Willhoite draws from Martin Buber’s notion of dialogue and his distinction between *I-Thou* and *I-it* relationships (Willhoite 1968, 64-69). “Dialogic communion” is a slightly vague norm in which communication, comprehension, and dialogue are valued over their opposites: directives, monologues, and deafness. The appropriate attitude of the absurd person is that of the “genuinely free dialogic attitude that exalts and enhances life” as opposed to the “monological hardness and fanaticism that leads to death” (Willhoite 1968, 66). But, perhaps like Lazere, at this point in his analysis, Willhoite risks emptying the absurd morality of any real content. If the absurd merely values ‘life’ against ‘death’, it probably will not help us address complex moral problems. Nevertheless, although Willhoite’s absurd moral theory remains a bit vague, his idea of dialogic communion and his provocative argument that a fitting example of absurd revolt would be the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s are ones I will revisit in the conclusion of this volume.

This volume argues that the link between the descriptive and the normative aspects of absurdity is apparent when we resist those tempting defenses that prevent us from perceiving, confronting, and managing the complex and contradictory emotions of the absurd. My interpretation of Camus’ argument is that the ambivalence of absurd experience must be integrated before any genuine moral or

political understanding, communication, or action can occur. I treat this formulation of absurd morality and politics extensively in Chapters 8 and 9.

The interpretation of the philosophy of the absurd I offer in the following chapters permits us to discuss absurdity in emotional terms, rather than in terms of cosmic conflicts or metaphysical differences. As Camus' philosophy of the absurd is about confronting our conflicted experience "without appeal" to abstractions (1955, 60), it is hoped that removing unnecessary speculative and philosophical complexities from the absurd will allow it to find its real voice and power. To this end, the following chapter introduces the concept of ambivalence in psychoanalytic and social scientific contexts in order to more firmly ground the interpretation of the absurd on which the remainder of this volume rests.

Chapter 4: The Concept of Ambivalence

Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast!
— Goethe, *Faust*

Over the past thirty years, increasing numbers of researchers in political and social scientific fields have argued that uni-valent, one-dimensional models of human attitudes are inadequate to describe the complexity of experience. Social psychological assessments and investigations of ambivalence have been applied to a wide range of topics, from parenthood to race relations, from the selection of presidential candidates to attitudes about abortion and the death penalty. For over a century, psychoanalysts have argued that ambivalence, in various shapes and guises, is at the heart of psychological life. It might even be argued that ambivalence (although not always going by that name) has been treated as a central aspect of the human condition since Goethe, Pascal, Montaigne, Shakespeare, even in classical Greek tragedy and the wisdom books of the Tanakh.

This dissertation argues that a fruitful analogy may be drawn between the philosophy of the absurd and the concept of ambivalence. It is important to clarify, however, that I do not wish to *reduce* either Camus' work or the idea of absurdity to any of the more traditional psychoanalytic categories of ambivalence, e.g., ambivalence about mothers, ambivalence resulting from the Oedipus conflict, or ambivalent sexual or destructive drives. Instead, I seek to use our understanding of the dynamics of ambivalence, an understanding that has been informed by psychoanalytic and social scientific study, to explore what I find to be very similar dynamics in Camus' concept of the absurd. In this chapter and in chapters that follow,

I use ambivalence as an *analogy* to explicate the absurd, primarily by applying the mechanics of ambivalence, if you will, to the emotional material of the absurd. In Chapter 5, I apply these mechanics to the absurd directly, by attempting to understand Camus' thought as an expression of ambivalent desires related to the loss and preservation of the self. In Chapter 6, I argue that linking absurdity and ambivalence is especially helpful in making sense of one of Camus' best-known yet still controversial works, *The Stranger*. In Chapters 7 and 8, I argue that the concept of ambivalence permits us to give meaning to the famous but ambiguous concept of absurd rebellion, as presented primarily in *The Rebel*. But before any of this is possible, it is necessary to introduce the concept of ambivalence, which is the goal of this chapter.

While the psychoanalytic understanding of the term 'ambivalence' still guides contemporary usage, a number of recent studies and applications of the concept have dislodged it from a purely psychoanalytic context. For instance, the philosopher Philip Koch uses the term 'ambivalence' to refer to all kinds of "conflicted feelings" (1987, 258n). Likewise, Ihor Zielyk's taxonomy of ambiguity and ambivalence defines ambivalence as "the taking of a mixed stance toward a social object or category of objects" (1966, 57). Steve Harrist, in his interesting phenomenological investigation of ambivalence, takes ambivalence "in the broadest sense," meaning simply "attraction and/or aversion... so as not to prematurely restrict the horizon of inquiry" (2006, 87). Harrist construes ambivalence as "both sides are strong" or "both sides have their own worth" (2006, 91) and his interviews begin with the simple question: "Can you describe a time when you had more than one feeling?" (2006, 94).

A psychodynamically-informed but nevertheless broad definition of ambivalence as conflicting emotions serves us best in attempting to clarify the meaning of the absurd. Such a definition respects the etymology of the term as dual (*ambi*) emotional forces (*valences*) while distinguishing it from ‘ambiguity’, which denotes indeterminacy or uncertainty. It also follows standard usage: “A duality of opposed emotions, attitudes, thoughts or motivations, which a person simultaneously holds towards a person or object, is the centerpiece of the standard psychoanalytically shaped definition of ambivalence” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). More importantly, this definition permits us to make use of the psychodynamically-informed understanding of ‘ambivalence’ as it was established by Eugen Bleuler and Sigmund Freud in the early 1900s and later developed by Melanie Klein and others. In this chapter, I will briefly review these approaches to ambivalence, along with the role of ambivalence in the study of borderline personality disorder and even its integration into sociological and political research, in order to lay a foundation for the analogy with the absurd that follows.

Eugen Bleuler

Eugen Bleuler, a contemporary of Freud, used the term ‘ambivalence’ in his *The Theory of Schizophrenic Negativism* (first published in 1910), but it is his *Dementia Praecox or the Group of Schizophrenias* (completed in 1908 but not published until 1911) that is widely credited as the first comprehensive psychoanalytic investigation of ambivalence (Graubert and Miller 1957, 458; Harrist 2006, 87; Lorenz-Meyer 2001, 3-4). In both of these works, Bleuler defined ambivalence as the simultaneous presence of contradictory thoughts, feelings, or volitions. As such, he found

ambivalence to be present in ‘healthy’ and ‘normal’ individuals as well as in those whom he diagnosed with *dementia praecox*, or precocious dementia, otherwise known as schizophrenia.

While Bleuler is regarded as the founder of the concept of ambivalence, his approach may have been rooted in a reading of Freud’s *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. After reading Freud’s thesis of the ‘contrasting pairs’ at the heart of sexual perversions (discussed briefly below), Bleuler apparently wrote an energetic letter to Freud to tell him of his epiphany that “our entire life is regulated by an interplay of contrasting forces. We find this in the chemical, as well as the nervous and psychic areas” (Bleuler in Makari 2008, 208). But Bleuler’s now rarely-read texts are illuminating because he treats ambivalence more explicitly than Freud does in his early work.

Bleuler characterizes ambivalence as both a universal and potentially pathological phenomenon.

Even for the healthy everything has its two sides. The rose has its thorns. But in ninety-nine out of a hundred instances, the normal person compares the two aspects, subtracts the negative from the positive values. He appreciates the rose despite its thorns. The schizophrenic, with his weakened associative linkings does not necessarily bring the different aspects of a problem together. He loves the rose because of its beauty and hates it because of its thorns. Thus many simple as well as complicated concepts and, above all, many complexes have for him both affective signs, the plus and the minus, which appear side by side, or alternately, one after the other. Certainly even under normal conditions, synthesis may be omitted. The healthy, too, feels something like ‘two souls in his breast’; and he, too, would be less inclined to speak so much of sin if it did not also have some pleasant connotations. (1950, 374-375)

While ambivalence, for Bleuler, is universal, what distinguishes the ‘healthy’ individual from the schizophrenic patient is the ability to associate, or link, the

ambivalent aspects of an object together and to experience it in both its positive and negative aspects. The presence of excessive or unresolved ambivalence therefore evinced an inability to reconcile or neutralize opposing feelings.

In *Dementia Praecox*, Bleuler classified ambivalence as one of four fundamental diagnostic characteristics of schizophrenia, along with “inappropriate affect,” “loosening of associations,” and “autism.” He understood ambivalence as an “association disturbance” which resulted in “the tendency of the schizophrenic psyche to endow the most diverse psychisms with both a positive and a negative indicator, at one and the same time” (1950, 53). At the root of the diagnostic criterion Bleuler established, ambivalence was not the sole issue; rather, ambivalence combined with an association disturbance to prevent the individual from recognizing, holding, or otherwise integrating contradictory feelings or forces.

The difference between ambivalence among ‘healthy’ individuals and ‘sick’ ones, therefore, is not precisely the presence of ambivalence, but rather the ability to hold it together, to sustain a consistent view of an object in spite of its ambivalent appraisals. Whereas the ‘healthy’ individual will come to accept his or her ambivalence as a mixed stance toward an object, the schizophrenic in Bleuler’s theory is forced either to oscillate between all-good and all-bad impressions, or to split the object in two, one loved and one hated. Of this difference between the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’ experiences of ambivalence, Bleuler explains that “in the case of an idea which arouses both negative and positive feelings, the difference is not always sharply appreciated even in health, or otherwise expressed, when a normal person loves something or somebody on account of one quality but hates them on

account of another, the result is not an entirely unitary feeling tone, either the positive, or the negative outweighing at times. The ultimate conclusions are not necessarily drawn by the split psyche of the schizophrenic. The mentally sick wife loves her husband on account of his good qualities and hates him at the same time on account of his bad ones, and her attitude towards each side is as though the other did not exist” (1912, 31-32).

Ambivalence, for Bleuler, was not merely sexual, nor was it purely a conflicting emotional appraisal of an object. Rather, Bleuler outlined three basic types of ambivalence, each of which he tried to give equal independence and weight: affective ambivalence, ambivalence of the will or *ambi-tendenz*, and intellectual ambivalence (1950, 53-55; 1912, 31). In the *Theory of Schizophrenic Negativism*, Bleuler summarized these various expressions of ambivalence concisely: “to accompany identical ideas or concepts at the same time with positive as well as negative feelings (affective ambivalence), to will and not to will at the same time the identical actions (ambivalence of the will) and to think the same thoughts at once negatively and positively (intellectual ambivalence)” (1912, 31).

But while he maintained a degree of distinction between these categories, Bleuler knew that they were, in fact, highly interdependent. “These three forms of ambivalence,” he wrote, “are not easily distinguished from one another... Affectivity and will are merely different facets of the same function; even the intellectual contradictions often cannot be separated from the affective. A mixture of megalomania with delusions of persecution and inferiority may result from wishes and fears, or from assertion and denial of one’s own stature. The patient is especially

powerful and at the same time powerless; the beloved or the protector becomes just as easily the persecutor without surrendering his previous role” (1950, 54). For Bleuler, individuals expressed ambivalence not only in affective terms, but in ambivalent thoughts, ambivalent beliefs, and ambivalent actions.

Bleuler quotes a patient, whom he describes as a “philosophically educated catatonic,” who describes his experience of intellectual ambivalence: “When one expresses a thought, one always sees the counter-thought. This intensifies itself and becomes so rapid that one doesn’t really know which was the first” (Bleuler 1950, 54). This is a rather lucid expression of the experience of ambivalence which most of Bleuler’s patients do not articulate. In fact, Bleuler observes that many of his patients are unable even to note the contradictions in their thoughts, feelings, or actions. Suspecting that one of his patients is hearing voices, Bleuler asks him, “Do you hear voices?,” which the patient denies. Bleuler then asks, “What do they say to you?,” to which the patient replies, “Oh, all sorts of things” (1950, 54). Bleuler even finds marked unconscious and unrecognized ambivalence in the delusions of his patients, as in the example of a “Catholic paranoid patient... [who]... claimed to be persecuted by the Pope who nevertheless wanted to shower the patient with millions of dollars” (1950, 54).

But we should not see in these examples anything categorically distinct from the ambivalence that the ‘healthy’ person feels. Bleuler wishes to remind us that, while certain expressions of, defenses against, and responses to ambivalence may be taken as a diagnostic sign of schizophrenia, no one is exempt from ambivalence or from the pressures that it generates. Rather, Bleuler finds ambivalence at work even

in ordinary life. Just as his patient tries to escape a locked ward moments after telling him (with what appears to be sincerity) that he has no further interest in escaping, when Bleuler enters a large store, he confesses that “I wish to get something at a particular counter; I carefully determine the one I do not wish to go to, but then it is that very one to which I go” (1950, 375).

While Bleuler defined and applied ‘ambivalence’ broadly, to refer to any number of conflicting ideas, emotions, beliefs, affects, and volitions, Freud would narrow its reference but afford it an even greater significance. And while both men would recognize ambivalence in everyday life, Bleuler emphasized its presence in schizophrenic patients, while Freud would emphasize its role in neurotic individuals and groups. While it is not incorrect to say that Freud’s operating definition of ambivalence was “the co-existence of [love and hate] simultaneously directed towards the same object” (Freud in Graubert and Miller 1957, 460), such a definition understates and over-specifies the profound ambivalences and conflicts that inform almost all of Freud’s thought: ambivalences not only about love and hate, but about pleasure and pain, survival and the self, life and death. Indeed, just as Freud would modify his metapsychological theory and his vision of the content and composition of instincts, his thought on the etiology and development of ambivalence would change throughout his life.

Sigmund Freud

While it would be impossible to entertain a complete discussion of Freud’s thought on ambivalence, it is useful to briefly review Freud’s use of the term and to show that ambivalence was central to his vision of psychic experience, especially in relation to

neurosis and repression. Freud's use of the concept of ambivalence is commonly traced to his *A Phobia in a Five-Year Old Boy* (1909), better known as the case of Little Hans, although ambivalence plays a role in earlier works like *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (1905), and even in his and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), where Freud saw the origin of psychoneurotic symptoms in the repression of traumatic "incompatible ideas" (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 27, 33).

Freud's purpose in *The Interpretation of Dreams* was to "elucidate the processes to which the strangeness and obscurity of dreams are due and to deduce from those processes the nature of the psychical forces by whose concurrent or mutually opposing action dreams are generated" (Freud in Abel 1989, 39). In the short section rather fittingly devoted to "*Absurd Dreams*," Freud argues that dreams regularly reflect emotional conflict and that dreams of a dead loved one, for instance, are marked by an "especially profound ambivalence of feeling which controls the relation of the dreamer to the dead person" (1900, 295-296). Freud notes that it is common in such dreams for the deceased person to alternate, as it were, between being dead and alive; and he interprets this as a fantasized indifference. "This indifference, of course, is not real, but wished; its purpose is to help the dreamer to deny his very intense and often contradictory emotional attitudes, and so it becomes the dream-representation of his *ambivalence*" (1900, 296, emphasis in original). Here, dreamed indifference protects against ambivalent feelings, feelings that are especially intolerable when concerning a deceased loved one. Of course, Freud would return to

many of these ideas and relate them to identification, melancholy, and mania in his *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917, 250-251, 256-258).

In his *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*, Freud finds that “certain perverted tendencies regularly appear in contrasting pairs” that reflect unresolved ambivalences and polarities of pre-genital phases (1938, 571). For instance, the anal-sadistic phase is governed by a highly-charged polarity of activity and passivity, which, Freud suggests, mirrors the ambivalent nature of sadism and contains many of the “contrasts which run through the whole sexual life” (1938, 598). This polarity between activity and passivity was one of three basic ambivalences (also subject vs. object and pleasure vs. pain) that composed basic axes of conflict between desires and the choice and cathexis of objects in his early work (see Graubert and Miller 1957, 460). The presence of these pairs of conflicting desires, Freud notes later, was “happily designated by Bleuler by the term *ambivalence*” (1938, 598).

In *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* (1909), otherwise known as his study of the Rat Man, Freud relies heavily on the concept of ambivalence to explain the patient’s behavior and treatment. One cannot do much better in this case than to quote Freud at length:

The chronic coexistence of love and hatred, both directed toward the same person and both of the highest degree of intensity, cannot fail to astonish us. We should have expected that the passionate love would long ago have conquered that hatred or been devoured by it. And in fact such a protracted survival of two opposites is only possible under quite peculiar psychological conditions and with the cooperation of the state of affairs in the unconscious. The love has not succeeded in extinguishing the hatred but only in driving it down into the unconscious; and in the unconscious the hatred, safe from the danger of being destroyed by the operations of consciousness, is able to persist and even to grow. In such circumstances the conscious love attains as a rule, by way of reaction, an especially high degree of intensity, so as to be strong enough for the perpetual task of keeping its opponent under repression.

The necessary condition for the occurrence of such a strange state of affairs in a person's erotic life appears to be that at a very early age... the two opposites should have been split apart and one of them, usually the hatred, have been repressed. (1963, 73)

In this case, Freud is arguing that a basic ambivalence between love and hatred, along with a repression of the hatred (rather than a resolution or 'conquest' of the hatred), have set the course of neurosis. "We shall find it impossible," Freud writes, "to escape the impression that a relation between love and hatred such as we have found in our present patient is among the most frequent, the most marked, and probably, therefore, the most important characteristics of the obsessional neurosis" (1963, 74).

For Freud, ambivalence is at the root of neurosis but it is not exactly its efficient cause. Rather, ambivalence, which is universal, is exaggerated and exacerbated to different degrees by different individual reactions to it. In neurosis, the presence of intense feelings of both love and hatred spark repression, in which the hatred is merely 'driven down into the unconscious' where it survives and persists alongside conscious love. Neurotic symptoms, then, may be understood as attempts to cope with ambivalence "while effectively preserving it and restraining behaviour" (Lorenz-Meyer 2001, 4). Later, in *The Dynamics of Transference* (1912) and in *The Unconscious* (1915), Freud would depict the unconscious as a 'reservoir', a 'seething cauldron' for those intolerably intense or persistent ambivalences which must be held down by the organized personality (see Giovacchini 1982, 12)

While hatred remains in the unconscious, defensively intense conscious feelings of love must counteract them, contributing to a greater ambivalent conflict within the individual. This process of repressing one feeling and exaggerating its

opposite compose part of Freud's concept of reaction-formation, elaborated in his later *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1925). With the cooperation of the unconscious, ambivalence can therefore divide ambivalent feelings, paralyze the will, or displace ambivalent conflict over any number of everyday matters. The compulsive individual, for instance, repeats his protective measures in order to compensate for the growing doubts he has displaced from his ambivalent love and hatred onto his memory, his observations, his intentions, and even the reliability of others or the physical world (Freud 1963, 74-77).

Indeed, Freud finds the root of the Rat Man's neurosis to be his repression of and reactions to his ambivalent emotions, resulting in three dis-integrated personalities: an unconscious personality full of passionate and evil impulses, a cheerful and sensible personality that functioned well with others, and a personality that consisted mainly of reaction-formations against the unconscious, full of spiritualism and asceticism (Freud 1963, 80-81). This personality dis-integration, like neurotic symptoms, preserves the unconscious repression of the ambivalence which gave it rise.

In his (1909) *Analysis of a Phobia of a Five Year Old Boy*, Freud famously attributed Little Hans' emotional difficulties to ambivalence rooted in the Oedipus conflict. Freud argues that "Hans really was a little Oedipus who wanted to have his father 'out of the way', to get rid of him, so that he might be alone with his beautiful mother and sleep with her" (1909, 111). The wish that his father 'be away' becomes a wish that his father "be permanently away – that he should be dead... And Hans deeply loved the father against whom he cherished [*sic*] these death-wishes; and

while his intellect demurred to such a contradiction, he could not help demonstrating the fact of its existence, by hitting the father and immediately afterwards kissing the place he had hit” (1909, 112). Hans’ identification with the father, which expresses love and admiration as well as the urge to take his place with respect to the mother, is in Freud’s later words “ambivalent from the very first” (1959, 47). And, of course, for Freud, the Oedipus conflict itself was that “nucleus of desire, repression and sexual identity” which leaves in its wake “a lifelong ambivalence towards the keeping and breaking of taboos and laws” (Wright 1998, 14).

In *Repression* (1915) and in his *Introductory Lectures* (1916-1917), Freud describes the incomplete or ineffective neutralization of ambivalence which permits the child (or neurotic patient) to ignore ambivalences that would otherwise generate conflict in the adult because of the development of the adult personality and a greater unification of the ego (Graubert and Miller 1957, 460-461). The conflicts implicit in the Oedipus situation involve “contrary — or, as it is better to say, ‘ambivalent’ — emotional attitudes” which are not neutralized in childhood and which are ineffectively neutralized in neurosis because, in both of these cases, ambivalent attitudes remain along with their contradictory emotions in the unconscious (Freud 1966, 412-413). That is, the conflicts implicit in the Oedipus situation may take on a pathological character if they are inadequately resolved. In fact, the persistence of unreconciled ambivalent attitudes is apparent not only in children and neurotic individuals but, Freud would speculate later, in so-called ‘primitive societies’ and in groups (see Freud 1959, 15-16n; Graubert and Miller 1957, 459). Indeed, these ambivalences would return to Freud’s thought in *Group Psychology and the Analysis*

of the Ego (1921), where he compares Oedipus dynamics to the processes of identification and idealization of group leaders (see Freud 1959, 43-46; Freud 1961b, 30). The “primordial ambivalence” at the root of Freud’s concept of guilt in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) is also an ambivalence of this kind, an ambivalence about the killing of the primal father that symbolizes the conflicts at the root of collective life (1961, 94-95).

But before both *Group Psychology* and *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud had applied the concept of ambivalence to ideas of social and moral development in *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Here, Freud argues that “the basis of taboo is a forbidden action for which there exists a strong inclination in the unconscious” (1938, 832). Drawing analogies between taboo prohibitions and neurotic symptoms, both of which reflect distressing ambivalences about the demands of collective existence, Freud argues that like neurosis, “taboo has grown out of the soil of an ambivalent emotional attitude” (1938, 855).

Taboo restrictions are most remarkable in areas of life that are central to collective existence (like religious or political authority, marriage, intercourse, childbirth, and death). Freud claims that these areas of life also reflect the most profound ambivalences among group members who must negate powerful but frightening desires, maintain severe renunciations, and manage persistent anxiety about the tensions between these forces. “The persistence of taboo,” says Freud, “teaches that the original pleasure to do the forbidden still continues.” Individuals therefore “assume an ambivalent attitude toward their taboo prohibitions; in their unconscious they would like to do nothing better than to transgress them but they are

also afraid to do it; they are afraid just because they would like to transgress, and the fear is stronger than the pleasure. But in every individual... the desire for it is unconscious, just as in the neurotic” (1938, 831).

The central psychic characteristic of the taboo society is the “ambivalent behavior of the individual to the object, or rather to an action regarding it” (Freud 1938, 830). As in neurosis, the division between conscious and unconscious desire is the key to persistent ambivalence and to the taboo reaction against it. The individual longs to act in a way that is forbidden; indeed, “he sees in it the highest pleasure, but he may not carry it out, and he even abominates it. The opposition between these two streams cannot be easily adjusted because — there is no other way to express it — they are so localized in the psychic life that they cannot meet. The prohibition becomes fully conscious, while the surviving pleasure of touching remains unconscious, the person knowing nothing about it. If this psychological factor did not exist the ambivalence could neither maintain itself so long nor lead to such subsequent manifestations” (Freud 1938, 830).

Freud argues that the vehemence with which taboos are punished reflects not just a criminal sanction, but a defense against ambivalence toward the taboo object. Therefore, taboo offenders, either those who have committed taboo crimes or those who have come into exceptional circumstances that give rise to ambivalent emotions, threaten the group with ambivalence, so to speak, and are treated like carriers of a deadly contagion or epidemic (Freud 1938, 824). “Persons or things which are regarded as taboo may be compared to objects charged with electricity; they are the seat of tremendous power which is transmissible by contact, and may be liberated

with destructive effect if the organisms which provoke its discharge are too weak to resist it” (Thomas in Freud 1938, 823).

Like the neurotic who has a *délire de toucher*, a phobia of touching anything unclean, prohibited, or otherwise ‘impossible’, the group punishes, exiles, or cleanses itself of taboo through elaborate expiations. Thus, Freud concludes that the danger that the taboo person presents to the group must be the danger of imitation, the possibility that the taboo person will discharge, as it were, his ambivalence onto others and unsettle their renunciations. The taboo person is punished precisely because of his “propensity to arouse the ambivalence of man and to tempt him to violate the [taboo] prohibition” (Freud 1938, 832). This understanding of ambivalence grounds my interpretation of *The Stranger* in Chapter 6, where I will argue that the relationship between Meursault and the absurd may be understood if we recognize and define Meursault’s taboo as one that activates a repressed ambivalence about freedom and autonomy and one that demands, therefore, a special kind of punishment.

Throughout his various treatments of ambivalence, Freud is clear that conflict is a part of normal psychic life, not just that of taboo societies or individuals suffering from neurosis. And although we are not always consciously aware of our ambivalence (indeed, *because* we are not), we should not forget that “the emotional life of man is in general made up of pairs of contraries... Indeed, if it were not so, repressions and neuroses would perhaps never come about” (Freud 1909, 113). Freud even footnotes his observations on ambivalence with two lines of poetry from C.F. Meyer that may summarize the role ambivalence plays in Freud’s thought as a basic

element of the human condition: “In fact, I am no clever work of fiction; / I am a man, with all his contradiction” (Freud 1909, 113n). It is at least partly because Freud viewed the human experience as one of ambivalence, one in which our mental life is “perpetually agitated by conflicts which we have to settle” (Freud in Abel 1989, 39), that he often insisted that there was no clear line between neurosis and normality, that “an unbroken chain bridges the gap between the neuroses in all their manifestations and normality... We are all to some extent hysterics” (Abel 1989, xv).

Freud would fundamentally reconsider his instinctual and metapsychological theories in later works like *On Narcissism* (1914), which spelled the beginning of the end for his theory of the sexual- and ego-instincts, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), which led him to posit the life and death drives, and in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), where Freud revised and expanded his theory of psychic structure. In later works, the primary ambivalences are considered to be the result of the contrast between Eros and Thanatos, the drives toward life and death, rather than as polarities within and between drives. In Freud’s later vision, life itself is “a compromise of the two drives, a phase between the initiation of life and its end” (Graubert and Miller 1957, 461-462), and ambivalence is a kind of incomplete compromise. But even of this significant modification to his theory Freud writes that “our views have from the first been *dualistic*, and to-day they are even more definitely dualistic than before — now that we describe the opposition as being, not between ego-instincts and sexual instincts but between life instincts and death instincts” (Freud in Abel, 41-42, Freud’s emphasis).

Thus, regardless of the instincts, drives, or structures in conflict, Freud's understanding of psychological experience was always informed by the premise of basic ambivalences and contrasts. And what is of particular interest to us about Freud's approach to ambivalence is perhaps not even the specific content of ambivalences as he saw them, but the psychological significance of their enduring tension and the intense pressure experienced by individuals and groups to react to, resolve, or repress them. When faced with dangerously ambivalent feelings, the Freudian self is at a sort of cross-roads: either aspects of that ambivalence are repressed, split-off, and driven into the unconscious where they persist, or the ambivalent feelings are (perhaps adequately, but never completely) resolved through integration into the mature personality.

Melanie Klein

Melanie Klein, by her own accounts a Freudian, but whose work diverged from Freud's in several ways (see Alford 1989, 23-26; Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 120-121; Minsky 1998, 33), posited basic ambivalences at the heart of the psychological life of the child. Setting aside metapsychological differences in the origin and direction of drives and the nature and significance of internal and external objects, the central place that Klein affords to ambivalence and reactions to it are, for our purposes, the more significant continuity with Freud's work. For Klein, "the central conflict in human experience... is between love and hate, between the caring preservation and the malicious destruction of others" (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 142). It is worth a brief discussion of Klein's work to remark not only her

understanding of ambivalence, anxiety, and integration, but one of the defensive reactions to ambivalence that her work emphasized: splitting.

One of Klein's earliest uses of the term 'ambivalence' comes in her 1921 paper, "The Development of a Child," in a discussion of Fritz's wishes and beliefs about his parents' omnipotence and omniscience. Working out the limits of his own power and abilities as well, Fritz occasionally admits his own ignorance and frequently inquires whether his father is ignorant, too. Klein writes that this "clearly shows an ambivalent attitude," for "while the answer that papa and mamma too do not know something seems at times to content him, at other times he dislikes this knowledge and tries to modify it by proofs to the contrary" (Klein 1975, 15). Fritz's ambivalent attitude is related to his estimation of his parents' power and, therefore, to his power and his relation to them in the dynamics of the family. Klein explains:

[Fritz] once told his mother that he had caught a fly and added, 'I have learnt to catch flies.' She enquired how he had learned to do this? 'I had tried to catch one and managed it and now I know how.' As he immediately afterwards inquired whether she had learnt 'to be a mamma' I think I am not mistaken in considering that — perhaps not quite consciously — he was making fun of her. This ambivalent attitude — explained by the fact that the child puts himself in the place of the powerful father (which he hopes to occupy at some time), identifies himself with him but yet on the other hand would fain also do away with the power that restricts his ego — is certainly also responsible for this behavior in reference to the omniscience of the parents. (1975, 16)

Here, the concept of ambivalence invoked in reference to the limitations of Fritz's power (Klein refers to his 'reality-sense' and his 'omnipotence-feeling') relates to Oedipal ambivalence and the conflicts he feels about the possibility of destroying his parents, and his fears of being destroyed by these feelings.

But for Klein, ambivalence is present even before Oedipal issues arise. One might say that, for Klein, we are ambivalent at birth, experiencing almost immediately a conflict between life and death instincts (see Segal 1964, 12-13). Even before children face Oedipal desires and restrictions (and they face them earlier for Klein than for Freud), Klein thinks ambivalence confronts infants who fear not reprisals from fathers, but the consequences of aggression and the projections of their own anger and rage. Basic ambivalences exist, even at a very young age, between experiences of comfort and frustration, between feelings of love and gratitude and feelings of envy, anger, and fear. The contrasts between the infant's fantasies and feelings compose "an instinctive emotional ambivalence towards the mother" which plunges him or her into "a desperate conflict between alternating emotions of love and hate which cause acute anxiety" (Minsky 1998, 33).

Klein finds that the earliest and most radical solution to the presence of ambivalent feelings is to split the world, the parent, the breast, and even the self into two categories, absolutely good and absolutely bad. The goal of splitting is "to keep persecutory and ideal objects as far as possible from one another, while keeping both of them under control" (Segal 1964, 13-14). Splitting is a reaction to ambivalence in the sense that it seeks to prevent conflicting feelings from coming into contact with each other, so that the bad does not destroy the good. Thus, bad and good are separated and exaggerated, making both poles increasingly extreme. "It is characteristic of the emotions of the very young infant that they are of an extreme and powerful nature. The frustrating (bad) object is felt to be a terrifying persecutor, the

good breast tends to turn into the ‘ideal’ breast which should fulfill the greedy desire for unlimited, immediate, and everlasting gratification” (Klein 1975b, 64).

The splitting ‘solution’ to early ambivalence is the ground of what Klein calls the paranoid-schizoid position; ‘paranoid’ because it involves a fear of persecution by ‘bad’ things, and ‘schizoid’ because the world and the infant now exist in split pairs. Paranoid-schizoid defenses are accomplished through rather complex processes of projection, introjection, and identification which are not necessary to review fully here. But there are two crucial points about this position we should observe. First, Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position and the later depressive position are *not* strictly analogous to developmental phases which are passed through and overcome in due course. The characteristic problems and processes of these positions may reappear well into adulthood, and not only for individuals suffering from mental illness (see Segal 1964, xii-xiii; Minsky 1998, 33-34). A second and related point is that in the struggle to contend with ambivalent experience in both a loving and an anxiety-ridden environment, splitting is, at first, a *necessary* defense for the developing child. Splitting, like ambivalence itself, may serve first as a healthy protection against overwhelming threats to the self. But, if severe splitting continues, it becomes a regressive defense that precludes further development.

Originally, ambivalence handled through splitting allows the child to begin to develop relationships with imaginary ‘good’ objects. “Ambivalence,” Klein writes, “carried out in a splitting of the imagos, enables the young child to gain more trust and belief in its real objects and thus in its internalized ones — to love them more and to carry out in an increasing degree its phantasies of restoration of the loved object.

At the same time the paranoid anxieties and defences are directed towards the ‘bad’ objects” (1975, 350).

And yet, those objects which the child has split apart and endowed with good and bad properties must be eventually reconciled in the on-going search for balance between super-ego, id, and reality (Klein 1975, 205). With each successive encounter with loved people and a fulfilling environment, with each split and each renewed attempt to synthesize the good and the bad, Klein argues that the extremity of the imaginary objects decreases. “Each step in the unification leads again to a renewed splitting of the imagos. But as the adaptation to the external world increases, this splitting is carried out on planes which gradually become increasingly nearer and nearer to reality” (1975, 350).

An increasing ability to tolerate ambivalent emotions, therefore, depends upon a succession of pleasant or at least adequately reassuring experiences in reality. “Through being loved and through the enjoyment and comfort [the child] has in relation to people his confidence in his own as well as in other people’s goodness becomes strengthened, his hope that his ‘good’ objects and his own ego can be saved and preserved increases, at the same time as his ambivalence and acute fears of internal destruction diminish” (Klein 1975, 347). It is only after a certain security has been attained that ambivalence, which, itself, is “partly a safeguard against one’s own hate and against the hated and terrifying objects,” may gradually decrease (Klein 1975, 350).

If the tolerance and integration of ambivalence fails, then the persistence of “extreme” imagos, identifications, idealizations, and devaluations generate even

greater ambivalence, psychic conflict, anxiety, and defective relations to reality (Klein 1975, 204-205). In her 1929 paper, "Personification in the Play of Children," Klein understands neurotic children in terms of their failure to synthesize the highly polarized identifications and imagos of the developing super-ego, which are manifestations of ambivalent feelings toward the parent (1975, 204). The greater the polarity of ambivalence, the more difficult it becomes to reconcile the opposing forces in a working synthesis. And in her later 1945 paper, "The Oedipus Complex in the Light of Early Anxieties," Klein describes the case of a ten-year-old boy, Richard, who suffers from nightmares, anxiety, depression, and general inhibitedness due to his inability to find such a synthesis.

Richard's difficulty managing his ambivalent desires toward his mother and father are expressed in his nightmares, in rather fascinating drawings of birds and submarines, and in his play where he is a navy destroyer named 'Vampire' who bumps into ships symbolizing Klein and his mother. So, in her analysis, Klein helps Richard to integrate his ambivalent feelings about his mother and to reconcile his phantasies and splits with his real parents. Klein explains: "When Richard had become able during his analysis to face the psychological fact that his loved object was also his hated object... he could establish his love for his mother more securely. His feelings of love had become more closely linked with his feelings of hatred... He was therefore no longer driven on the one hand to form such a terrifying picture of the bad mother. Whenever he could allow himself to bring the two aspects of the mother together, this implied that the bad aspect was mitigated by the good one... The trust

in his own constructive and reparative tendencies, as well as in his internal and external objects, had increased” (1975, 396-397).

For Klein, successful tolerance and integration of ambivalence means that the child is able to see parents and significant others as real persons, just as successive non-threatening experiences in reality permit the child to tolerate greater and greater degrees of ambivalence. This ability to tolerate ambivalence represents the beginning of the depressive position, in which the child recognizes whole or integrated objects and is able to relate to them (see Klein 1975, 286-289; Segal 1964, 55). The depressive position is the result of the gradual abandonment of radical splitting and the gradual integration of the good and the bad into whole people and a whole self, both of which may have good and bad qualities.

The old paranoid threats of persecution and terror are replaced in the depressive position by new challenges, like jealousy, guilt, and anxiety. But beneath these challenges of the depressive position lies ambivalence. According to Klein, the child in the depressive position feels powerful guilt and anxiety about the welfare of the objects that he may consume, incorporate, or destroy in fantasy (see Klein 1975, 272-273; Segal 1964, 56-57). No longer operating with absolute separations between the good and bad aspects of himself and objects, the child now worries that the bad qualities of himself, even bad wishes or thoughts, may harm or ruin the good things he loves, both inside and outside of himself.

Klein’s depressive position is the basis for reparation and reparative morality, in which the child seeks to make amends for any injuries he causes. In time, the child realizes that reparation is possible and that all is not lost. For Klein, gradually

diminishing guilt and anxiety allow the child to trust in the integrity of internal and external objects, at which point he may rely less and less on facile defenses like splitting (Klein 1975, 346-348; Alford 1989, 34-35, 84-87). Because the good and bad qualities of objects are less divided, and because the child identifies with the good objects to a greater degree, he seeks less frequently to split off and expel bad objects, knowing that there is a chance the good objects will be expelled as well (Klein 1975, 265-266). At the same time, he learns that his fantasies can not destroy people in reality, and so gains confidence in the integrity of objects and himself.

The depressive position is therefore the announcement of a more mature, more moral, and more creative position: one in which the child seeks to manage his or her ambivalence, feels a growing responsibility, desires to make reparations to others, and constructs a more integrated identity on proto-moral grounds (see Minsky 1998, 41). Indeed, “the pain of mourning experienced in the depressive position, and the reparative drives developed to restore the loved internal and external objects, are the basis of creativity and sublimation... to recreate and to create” in the name of care, reparation, and preservation of the good (Segal 1964, 62).

Thus, in Klein’s theory, ambivalence is, itself, ambivalent. The agonal forces that increase the child’s anxiety eventually permit the child to enter and work through (although never completely) the challenges of the depressive position. And the splitting reactions to them are at first developmentally adaptive, then regressive and destructive. Although Klein wrote almost exclusively of children, she thought that continued splitting “under the stress of ambivalence to some extent persists throughout life” (Klein 1975b, 75n), arguing even that “we have an example of this

[splitting of imagos] in the phantastic belief in a God who would assist in the perpetration of every sort of atrocity (as lately as in the recent war) in order to destroy the enemy and his country” (Klein 1975, 203n). For Klein, ambivalent experiences of good and bad, love and hatred, rage and care may be taken as important components of both individual and collective psycho-social life. Her approach suggests that, with maturity, it is possible to achieve and contend with ambivalence through the gradual abandonment of splitting and related paranoid-schizoid defenses and the discovery of moral and creative resources in the personality. Klein’s particular emphasis on splitting, projection, introjection, idealization, and devaluation, therefore, leads us to a related area of psychoanalytic thought on ambivalence where splitting is marked: the borderline personality.

Ambivalence and the Borderline Personality

While we should not overlook the dangers and limitations of psychiatric diagnoses, the concept of ambivalence is very closely related to the clinical understanding of the borderline personality, and it is worth a moment to reflect upon this relation. Almost all theorists of borderline personality emphasize that it presents with dis-integrated, contrary, or conflicting affects and behaviors. Otto Kernberg’s ‘presumptive’ diagnostic elements include: anxiety, polysymptomatic neurosis, paranoid-, schizoid-, and hypomanic-personality structures, impulse neurosis and chemical addictions, emotional lability, narcissistic personality, and other signs of instability (1975, 8-21). These symptoms of emotional lability and seemingly dis-integrated personality are often conceptualized to be rooted in a defense against unbearable conflict, in the taking of an extreme posture to protect the self from the terrifying threats of ‘bad’

self- and object-representations (see Kernberg 1975, 5-7; Kernberg 1984, 12-13; Cooper and Arnow 1984). Recent interpersonal theories have argued that borderline symptoms suggest the presence of heightened psychological conflict (Benjamin 1993; Kiesler 1996). And a recent empirical study revealed that individuals with borderline diagnoses evinced a higher degree of ambivalence and inconsistency with respect to self-assessments of warmth, dominance, and other qualities (Hopwood and Morey 2007). This recent theory and research suggests that a non-integrated emotional conflict or ambivalence may be at the root of the constellation of affects and behaviors generally classified as borderline.

Borderline individuals (so called because they appeared to be on the ‘borderline’ between neurosis and psychosis) are not unable to distinguish between the categories of self and others. However, a borderline individual may have a great deal of difficulty integrating his identity and his perceptions of himself and others. This is referred to as “identity diffusion,” and it entails a “poorly integrated concept of self and of significant others... reflected in the subjective experience of chronic emptiness, contradictory self-perceptions, contradictory behavior that cannot be integrated in an emotionally meaningful way, and shallow, flat, impoverished perceptions of others” (Kernberg 1984, 12).

The aspects of borderline personality disorder of greatest relevance for our purposes are its defensive organization against contradiction and its related tendency to split. Otto Kernberg emphasized the borderline tendency to revert to primary-process thinking and to rely on primitive defenses like splitting, denial, early forms of projection, projective identification, omnipotence, and devaluation (Kernberg 1984,

15-17). Splitting, as we have discussed, means essentially to deny ambivalence, conflict, or contradiction by dividing the world into separate and extreme categories of 'all good' and 'all bad'. The borderline personality tends to undertake and maintain such splits in order to protect itself from dangerous aspects of the self and others, in order to preserve a tenuous hold on the 'good'. Kernberg explains that "bringing together extremely opposite loving and hateful images of the self and of significant others would trigger unbearable anxiety and guilt because of the implicit danger to the good internal and external object relations; therefore, there is an active defensive separation of such contradictory self- and object-images; in other words, primitive dissociation or splitting becomes a major defensive operation" (Kernberg 1975, 165). Since the notion of giving up the split threatens to contaminate the 'good' with the 'bad', we may say that the borderline personality splits in order to avoid a kind of ambivalence, to avoid a situation in which good and bad might co-exist in the self or in others.

Unfortunately, splitting is not only a result of the threatened and defensive self, but can be a cause of continued anxiety and instability. That is, the reversion to this type of defense against ambivalence does not help the individual develop the capacity to tolerate ambivalence or to integrate conflicting emotions or experiences. Rather, as Kernberg points out, "splitting... is a fundamental cause of ego weakness, and as splitting also requires less countercathexis than repression, a weak ego falls back easily on splitting, and a vicious circle is created by which ego weakness and splitting reinforce each other" (Kernberg 1975, 29). This vicious circle manifests itself in continued splitting and dis-integration, as well as labile or rapidly changing

affects and emotions, radical shifts in thoughts and feelings about the self and others, and “sudden and complete reversals of all feelings and conceptualizations” about the self or others (Kernberg 1975, 29).

While an emphasis on splitting has become a sort of hallmark of the borderline personality, so have its interpersonal consequences. Like the clinical narcissist, the borderline personality struggles not only with a diffuse and dis-integrated self-concept but with an inability to relate effectively to other people. The borderline individual has difficulties relating with others because of his “defective object-constancy or incapacity to establish total object relations” (Kernberg 1975, 166), which means that his intensely felt and rapidly changing emotions and ideas prevent him from seeing himself and others as whole, real people with both positive and negative qualities.

Integration of ambivalent or contradictory perceptions of others is made especially difficult due to the borderline’s “constant projection of ‘all bad’ self and object images [which] perpetuates a world of dangerous, threatening objects, against which the ‘all good’ self images are used defensively, and megalomaniac ideal self images are built up” (Kernberg 1975, 36). That is, although the borderline individual’s defenses are attempts to protect himself by splitting the world into impossible contraries, they perpetuate an experience of life in which the precarious and ephemeral ‘good’ inside is constantly threatened from both within and without. The fact that the borderline individual deals in such excessively abstract, extreme, and unreal images further precludes any realistic assessment and understanding of self and others, which perhaps only reinforces the tendency toward interpersonal

emotional shallowness and paranoia (Kernberg 1975, 166-167). Thus, the tendency to split, to radically idealize, and to radically devalue makes any rapprochement with a stable social reality increasingly problematic.

As we will see in subsequent chapters, both ambivalence and splitting are extremely important themes in Camus' reflections on the absurd. Sometimes Camus' own protests, such as "I want everything explained to me or nothing" (1955, 27), rely on a kind of splitting, a sort of petulant insistence on all or nothing. But, more often, Camus' thought on the morality of the absurd is an argument *against* the dangerous consequences of splitting the world into absolute good and absolute evil. Camus' absurd person, as we shall see, lives with profound ambivalences about losing himself in an 'all', asserting himself against a 'nothing', and affirming, rejecting, or remaining indifferent to good and evil. But Camus seeks to articulate and interpret these dangers (albeit without using psychological language) in order to avoid the facile solution of splitting the world and the self into absolute good and bad.

In spite of these connections, it is imperative that we not confuse the absurd, itself, with the borderline personality, or any other specific psychiatric diagnosis. For the purposes of this volume, I loosely refer to splits and related defenses as reactions to a kind of ambivalence, inasmuch as they defend the self against the threats and anxieties created by the mixing of highly-charged contraries. And yet, as we shall see, no particular defensive reaction exhausts the *many* possible responses one may have to ambivalence or to the absurd. Camus will address the desire to be indifferent and the desire to be committed, to be univocal and to be silent, to be perfectly separate and to be inextricably linked, to be natural and to be human, along with many other

ambivalent emotions, none of which accord perfectly with any single psychoanalytic theory, but all of which may be informed by a broad understanding of the dynamics of ambivalence.

Ambivalence in the Social Sciences

In the following chapters, I hope to show that Camus' philosophy of the absurd relies on mechanics that are similar to the dynamics of ambivalence discussed here. But I also hope to show that the concept of ambivalence is relevant and applicable not only to individual psyches and close emotional relationships, but to political and social challenges and our responses to them.

Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians like Robert Merton (1976), Clifford Geertz (1968), and Robert Jay Lifton have all argued that the ambivalent demands made by social roles and cultural norms and institutions require a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between self and society, as individuals struggle to respond to incongruities in their environments and to the "absurdity" implied by "the absence of 'fit'... between individual self and outside world" (Lifton 1993, 94). In *Boundaries* (1970) and *The Protean Self* (1993), Lifton argues that individuals in the postmodern world are aggrieved by crises, conflicts, dislocations, contradictory possibilities for identity, and a collapse of the boundaries by which we formerly defined ourselves. While these contradictions may lead some to fundamentalism, fragmentation, and despair, Lifton argues that others may respond to them creatively, with novelty and protean fluidity (see Lifton 1993, 190-232).

"High modernity," as Giddens (1991) calls it, or late modernity in connection with globalization, is often described as an era not only of particularly rapid change,

but of increasingly contradictory and ambivalent pressures, of a “push and pull... mix and break,” that operates on levels from the global to the personal (Chan and McIntyre 2001, 4). If Roland Robertson’s (1995) term, “glocalization,” expresses some of the ambivalence at work, Stephen Castles has outlined it more fully. Castles highlights nine (admitting that the enumeration is arbitrary) “fundamental contradictions” at the heart of the processes of global change: contradictions between “inclusion and exclusion,” “market and state,” “growing wealth and impoverishment,” “the Net and the self,” “the global and the local,” “the economy and the environment,” “modernity and post-modernity,” the “national and the global citizen,” and “globalization from above and from below” (Castles 1998). Framing these issues as ‘contradictions’ that interpenetrate the spheres of politics, economics, citizenship, self, time, and space, Castles’ work makes for a convincing argument that ambivalence is a fundamental dynamic of contemporary globalization.

In only slightly different terms, Anthony Giddens’ well-known *Modernity and Self-Identity* describes the psychological impact of a world full of increasingly intense ‘dilemmas’. These dilemmas are of an ambivalent nature: “unification versus fragmentation,” “powerlessness versus appropriation,” “authority versus uncertainty,” “personalized versus commodified experience,” and ontological security versus existential anxiety (1991, 181-208). Giddens sees the likely result of these dilemmas to be either a ‘return of the repressed’ or the development of a ‘life politics’. In either case, Giddens’ ‘reflexive selves’ must strive to heal the terrible rifts in their experience occasioned by these dilemmas, beneath which lies a constant and “looming threat of personal meaninglessness” (1991, 201).

Many theorists have argued that the ambivalent forces of globalization can not even be expressed as a single movement, a single ‘modernity’, or a single process of globalization, but rather in terms of “multiple modernities,” or as a “dialectically synthetic process that embraces the contradictory dynamics” of globalization (Chan and McIntyre 2001, 16). In particular, transcultural theorists of globalization define their subject in an illustratively ambivalent (if not absurdly confusing) way:

Transculturation of modernity is imaginative and materialistic. It is fueled by transborder imaginations, which are hybridized and heterogeneous, deterritorialized and reterritorialized, continuous and discontinuous. Cultural imaginations are often stereotypically inflated, temporally compressed, historically flattened and contextually reworked... However, these transborder imaginations are also embodied within material exchanges, which are managed by nation-states, transnational agents, local firms, and the market... The real lasting power of globalization lies in the transculturation of daily routines and habitual activities which de-skill and re-skill individuals into ‘modern’ subjects. Transculturing modernity is global, transnational, reciprocal, social, and personal. (Chan and McIntyre 2001, 16-17)

However we characterize the challenges of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, large-scale political and social change is increasingly recognized as reaching “through to the very grounds of individual activity and the constitution of the self” (Giddens 1991, 184). Advances in communication and media technologies have likely played a part in saturating contemporary selves with ambivalent possibilities and greater awareness of conflict and contradiction. As increasing exposure to others, to difference, and to contradiction has made “crises... a normal part of life” (Giddens 1991, 184), it may even be responsible for a condition Kenneth Gergen calls “multiphrenia,” which is “the splitting of the self into a multiplicity of self-investments” (2000, 73-74). For Gergen, the “social saturation” brought on by frequent but discontinuous contact with an increasing number of others, of options,

and of possibilities causes a sort of over-population of the self, where we exceed even Whitman in containing greater and greater 'multitudes', to the detriment of our values and relationships (Gergen 2000, 68-80).

T.K. Oommen reminds us that "the rise and fall, construction and deconstruction of different types of boundaries... make up the very story of human civilization and of contemporary social transformation" (Oommen in Chan and McIntyre 2001, xiii). On this account, the disparities between forces of the global and the local, enrichment and impoverishment, progression and reaction have profound psychological impacts because they break down, change, and reform symbolic and cultural boundaries. Globalization, itself, may be understood as "trans-boundary movements and their associated effects" (Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998, 669), taking place across national, cultural, geographic, and psychological borders. Since the boundaries and borders we construct, accept, or maintain allow us to make sense out of contradiction and diversity, and since "boundaries and identity are thus different sides of the same coin, with the former creating and being created through the latter" (Chan and McIntyre 2001, xv), individuals confronted with global change face increasingly ambivalent conditions while suffering impairments to the cultural, psychological, and symbolic resources available to cope with them.

Empirical social scientific researchers have approached the relationship between ambivalence and politics from a somewhat different direction, primarily investigating individuals' ambivalent attitudes toward contemporary social and political issues. Jennifer Hochschild (1981) conducted a series of now well-known interviews that explored individuals' unresolved value-conflict about social justice

and social policy. Feldman and Zaller (1992) have examined the role of ambivalence in relation to economic ideologies and views of the welfare state. Alvarez and Brehm have examined ambivalence, along with equivocation and uncertainty, in American's attitudes toward abortion, racial policy, and the IRS (Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Craig and Martinez 2005). McGraw, Hasecke, and Conger (2003) have investigated the relationship between, and consequences of, both ambivalence and uncertainty in the processes of candidate evaluation. And Stephen Craig and colleagues (2005) have argued that many Americans hold ambivalent attitudes toward gay and lesbian rights, partly as a result of 'core value conflicts'.

Many of these social scientific studies operationalize the term 'ambivalence' in ways that are in line with its psychoanalytic tradition, but with an attitudinal emphasis and a slightly softer touch, as either "the coexistence of both positive and negative evaluations of an attitude object" (McGraw, Hasecke, and Conger 2003, 423-424) or "the presence of conflicting evaluations or beliefs held by a single individual about an attitude object" (Craig et al. 2005, 6; see Cacioppo, Gardner, and Berntson 1997). In recent attitude research, ambivalence has been framed as but one dimension of 'attitude-strength', that is, as one of many dimensions of attitude assessment which, along with importance, intensity, elaboration, certainty, and commitment, help complete the picture of respondents' attitudes and/or attitude-changes (Craig et al. 2005). But in political research, some form of 'value-conflict' seems to inform many discussions of ambivalence (McGraw, Hasecke, and Conger 2003, 424). For Albertson, Alvarez, and Brehm, for instance, ambivalence 'occurs' when "coincident predispositions induce wider response variability... [and when]...

respondents' expectations of values are irreconcilable" (Craig and Martinez 2005, 17).

How to measure ambivalence also presents interesting problems to social and political researchers. Thompson and Zanna (1995, 261) argue that ambivalence was left out of attitude research for many years because of the prevailing 'all-or-nothing' models of attitude-formation which insisted upon consistency. Kaplan's (1972) well-known method of measuring ambivalence suggested a scale that calculated the degree of intensity and conflict in order to avoid confusing ambivalence with indifference. Indeed, researchers have argued that attitude assessments must include not only a positive-negative dimension, but also an ambivalence-indifference dimension, which could measure the important differences between a neutral stance, where conflicting emotions are hardly present, and an ambivalent stance, which may look mathematically similar, but where the conflicting emotions are experienced with much greater intensity (see Priester and Petty 1996, 431).

But political and social scientific investigations of ambivalence are likely to disappoint the moral or political theorist or the psychodynamically-inclined thinker. For one thing, these discussions rarely, if ever, discuss the reactive potential of ambivalence that colors more psychodynamically-informed accounts. Unlike the psychoanalytic accounts we have reviewed above, very few ambivalent attitudes are conceptualized as intolerably threatening or as requiring complex or unconscious processes of repression, dissociation, splitting, or denial. And unlike psychoanalytic and sociological theories of ambivalence, most social and political scientific research

has focused on the manifestations of ambivalent attitudes in political or social behavior, without thoroughly considering their causes.

Neil Smelser, particularly in his compelling essay “The Rational and the Ambivalent,” has claimed that the concept of ambivalence presents a profound challenge to social scientists, one that should force us to re-examine many of our paradigmatic assumptions guided by the theory of rational choice. Smelser’s argument is that the consideration of ambivalence should check the “totemic status” of rationality and the corresponding decline of interest in non-rational or extra-rational understandings of social and political subjects (Sica in Smelser 1998, 1). He takes social scientists to task for our tendency to “eschew dualistic or ambivalent constructs in favor of univalent statement” in a quest for “dominant patterns, univalent metrics, monochromatic path diagrams, and unilineal logical derivations” (Levine in Smelser 1998, 5).

But Smelser ultimately recommends that we attend to ambivalence not only to distinguish it from the categories associated with rational choice models, but because he sees ambivalence as a “fundamental existential dilemma in the human condition” (Smelser 1998, 13). Smelser’s account is perhaps one of the few approaches to ambivalence that respects its psychodynamic contours, that dares to posit ambivalence at the heart of the human experience, and that still maintains its relevance to social scientific inquiry. If Smelser is correct that recognizing ambivalence forces us to re-think our assumptions about the human condition, then it may be reasonably hoped that recognizing ambivalence in light of Camus’ thought

will permit us to re-think our assumptions about the morality and politics of the absurd, which is, after all, a more modest project.

By turning our focus away from metaphysical speculation about absurdity and by briefly reviewing the concept of ambivalence in psychoanalytic and social scientific thought, I hope to have set the stage for the analogy between ambivalence and the absurd that I present in the following chapters. I argue that, for Camus, the absurd operates very much like ambivalence, representing not a good nor an evil, but a tenuous and conflictual 'position' in relation to ambivalent desires. The absurd, like ambivalence, demands integration and maturity rather than primitive defenses or facile resolutions. Indeed, the working-through of absurd experience, like the working-through of ambivalence, permits individuals to develop moral, mature, and creative responses in the face of conflict and contradiction.

Chapter 5: Absurdity and Ambivalence

While there have been a number of psychoanalytic studies of Camus' life and works, most have aimed to interpret either Camus, himself, or the rich images and themes in his fictional works (see Viggiani 1956; Fletcher 1970; Lazere 1973; Fitch 1982; Abecassis 1997; Rizzuto 1998). And although Camus had little interest in psychoanalysis, what Malraux referred to as the science devoted to "*un miserable petit tas de secrets*" (Blanchard 1997, 670), psychoanalytic interpretations of Camus' work have been far from fruitless. These interpretations have uncovered significant symbols, scenes, and conflicts that illuminate Camus' thought. After the recent publication of *The First Man*, for instance, a number of scholars were able to argue even more convincingly that Camus' search for his missing father, his relationship to his silent mother, and his basic struggles with identity and anonymity are of primary interest in many of his novels and stories (see Abecassis 1997). But while psychoanalytic and psycho-biographical works may hold promise for establishing a more complex understanding of the themes in Camus' life and his fictional work, they do not shed much light on the subtleties of the philosophy of the absurd, itself.

In Chapter 3, I discussed some of the reasons why Camus' absurd has been interpreted as a contrast between the human and the natural, between life and death, between knowledge and the unknowable. John Cruickshank finds that these basic contrasts run from Camus' early *Noces* through *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "*Le Mythe de Sisyphé* sharpens the dualism of *Noces* to such an extent that this dualism takes on all the discordancy of a paradox. Now it is clear that one can live less easily with a

paradox than with a dualism” (1960, 46). By distinguishing between dualism and paradox, Cruickshank alludes to one of the central dilemmas facing the absurd: the difficulty of living with it.

This difficulty, the “recognition of a paradox, together with persistent thinking about it, gives to *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* some sort of double tension so that the book opens on a note of anxious inquiry” (Cruickshank 1960, 46). What exactly is that double tension, that anxiety in Camus’ thought? As we will see, it is more than a philosophical reflection on humanity and nature, life and death. Perhaps it is even more than the metaphorical disappointments and silences described in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

In a tough but not entirely unfair appraisal of Camus, Leo Bersani argues that Camus’ absurd “presupposes a need for cosmic unities and ultimate meanings which Camus presents as an unarguable fact of human nature... And Camus sets out to examine whether life’s absurdity demands that we escape from life by either suicide or hope... But these unacceptable consequences are really premises without which the argument would never have gotten started in the first place... That is, there is no ‘confrontation’ between ‘l’appel humain’ and the world’s ‘irrational silence,’ but rather a single, emotionally prejudiced description of the world. The absurd man, Camus announces, doesn’t believe in the profound or hidden meanings of things. But of course — and it’s impossible to break out of the circle — there wouldn’t be any absurdity unless man thought it inconceivable that the world should be without profound and hidden meanings” (1970, 218-219).

While Bersani goes a bit too far in claiming that the absurd position is ‘circular’, his point that the absurd is founded upon a contradictory set of emotional premises is well-taken. This volume asks if these confused and conflicting emotional premises and prejudices, which have frustrated Bersani and many other critics, can help us to understand the ‘double tension’, the anxiety, and, ultimately, the dynamics of Camus’ absurd.

Although it is difficult not to notice the themes of duality, paradox, contradiction, and duplicity in Camus’ work, no study has attempted to interpret these themes in terms of the dynamics of ambivalence, or related such dynamics to the consequences of the absurd. In this chapter, I argue that, for Camus, the absurd is the tension between two powerful desires. Some of Camus’ most memorable passages are his descriptions of a deeply-felt desire for unity, for clarity, for wholeness. Sometimes, this desire is expressed in terms of a longing for transcendent meaning and values, or for the passion and intensity that absolute beliefs and principles would permit. At other times, it is expressed in naturalistic or romantic imagery, as a fusion with the world, an immersion in water, a merger with a landscape or climate.

On the other hand, Camus effectively conveys his revulsion for this desire for unity. He offers memorable denunciations of the consolations of certainty, God, eternal truths, and absolute values, repudiating overly-reconciled actions as a kind of rationalized crime. Camus often makes dramatic (sometimes melodramatic) refusals of unity and wholeness in favor of the realities of suffering, revolt, and exile. He disparages ‘escapes’, ‘leaps’, and anything that smacks of the superhuman on the grounds that it does violence to the self, to thought, and to individual experience.

I examine these two general categories, the desire for and the rejection of unity, as the constituent elements of an ambivalent absurd position. Camus' work describes the experience of the absurd as the experience of intense and ambivalent desires, and as the pressure to resolve or escape that ambivalence in order to decrease its attendant anxiety. Camus wrestles with the ambivalence he finds at the heart of human experience, but he does so in a highly figurative and often inconsistent language that has made his notion of absurdity difficult to see.

Understanding the absurd in the way I recommend dramatically changes its traditional interpretations as meaninglessness, evil, or the brutality of nature. The absurd is perhaps related to these notions, but, at best, they only represent *parts* of its ambivalent composition. If we must speak about the absurd in terms of meaning, evil, and nature, I propose that we learn to speak of the absurd as comprising *both* terms (good and evil, meaning and meaninglessness, nature and humanity) along with the various tensions between them. But for Camus, the most relevant ambivalence is between unity and individuality, wholeness and independence, selflessness and the self.

This chapter and the chapters that follow will argue that what Camus means when he claims, "there can be no question of... suppressing the absurd by denying one of the terms of its equation" (1955, 50), is that the absurd position is *neither* meaninglessness or meaning, neither evil or good, neither the rejection nor the affirmation of any absolute. Very much like the mature developmental processes by which ambivalence is tolerated and integrated rather than repressed, split, or denied, the absurd ethic Camus will advance (which I turn to in Chapters 7 and 8) demands a

mature integration of these ambivalences and a recognition of the temptations and dangers implied by their continuing tension.

The Desire for Unity

Camus is at his most passionate when he describes what may be called his desire for unity, for clarity, for wholeness. But, as with other areas of his thought, Camus describes this desire in a daunting variety of ways. He refers to it not only as the “desire for unity” (1955, 51), “the mind’s deepest desire” (17), but as a “wild longing for clarity” (21), an “insistence upon familiarity” (17), a “longing to solve” (51), an “appetite for the absolute” (17, 51), a “longing for happiness and reason” (28), a “nostalgia for unity” (17, 50), and an “impulse that endlessly pursues its form” (1956b, 262).

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus characterizes this desire most often as a desire to know, a desire for intellectual clarity. But in his early work and his short fiction, Camus seems to give voice to what can only be described as an erotic desire for a natural union. In yet other instances, particularly in *The Stranger*, characters like Meursault seem to desire an indifferent elementality in a way that reminds us of the notion of absolute indifference described by Camus’ teacher, Jean Grenier.

One thing that unites these various expressions of the desire for unity is that Camus presents them all as essentially human, irreducible, and undeniable. Camus persuades us of the presence of this desire, but he does not speculate about any deeper biological, psychological, or spiritual origins. Likewise, this section of the chapter does not attempt to reduce the desire for unity to any other drive or instinct. Rather, I examine these three basic areas of Camus’ thought on the desire for unity (clarity,

nature, and Grenier's elemental indifference) in an attempt to give shape and substance to the first term of the ambivalent conflict at the heart of the absurd.

Clarity and Unity. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus first presents us with a systematic exploration of what appears to be an intellectual appetite for explanation, for familiarity, and for clarity. "The mind's deepest desire," Camus writes, "even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man's unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity" (1955, 17).

Camus claims that our profound desire for unity is the primary psychological force shaping human life: "That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama" (1955, 17).

In ways that continue to inspire comparisons to Pascal, Camus persuades us that the knowledge of eternal or absolute principles would provide us with a kind of intellectual beatitude. "If thought discovered in the shimmering mirrors of phenomena eternal relations capable of summing them up and summing themselves up in a single principle, then would be seen an intellectual joy of which the myth of the blessed would be but a ridiculous imitation" (1955, 17). In fact, "all would be saved," Camus writes, "if one could only say just once: 'This is clear'" (1955, 27).

'All would be saved', even by such a singular and fleeting moment, because that longing for unity is so powerful that we imagine even an instant of fulfillment would somehow change everything. Thus, we are entertaining a kind of fantasy. If we could attain (or perhaps re-attain) perfect clarity, so the fantasy goes, we would be completely transformed. To experience a moment of perfect clarity is supposed to compensate the self for all of its feelings of emptiness, defeat, and disappointment. In

fact, the somewhat narcissistic goal here seems to be find our 'reflection' in the 'shimmering mirrors' of phenomena, where we might be able to see ourselves eternally, in eternal relations that would 'sum' us up in a single principle.

The desire for unity is a desire to live in "a world that can be explained, even with bad reasons" (1955, 6). That "familiar world" has obviously been lost when we experience the presentiments of absurdity, such as "the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, the uselessness of suffering" (1955, 6). With language that seems intended to evoke themes of enlightenment, Camus describes the experience of being "divested of illusions and lights" (1955, 6), lost in darkness, outside of the familiar, and disconnected from ourselves and others. In this murky and mystified condition, we see no past and no future, we are "deprived of the memory of a lost home" just as we are denied "the hope of a promised land" (1955, 6).

But in responding to this desperate situation, we see that the drive for intellectual clarity really expresses a deeper desire for unity. The real object of Camus' demand for explanations and reasons is to become one with the world. In one case, it is the fantasy of a world with human properties that permits a feeling of identity: "If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled" (Camus 1955, 17). In another case, this craving for identity requires a self-dehumanization, so as to become elemental and thus identical with the natural world: "If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world" (Camus 1955, 51, emphasis in original). Both of these visions

of identity suggest that the joy of clarity, to which Camus compared the myth of the blessed, may really be a joy of oneness, a joy of living in a world without difference, and perhaps, a joy of living without the demands of individuation.

In a slight variation, Camus' describes the longing for clarity in a way not entirely dissimilar to the critique of reason offered by Frankfurt theorists. "Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal," Camus claims. "The truism 'All thought is anthropomorphic' has no other meaning. Likewise, the mind that aims to understand reality can consider itself satisfied only by reducing it to terms of thought" (1955, 17). Here, Camus speaks explicitly about 'reducing' and deforming phenomena by 'stamping' them into images of himself, molding them to fit his intellectual categories. These manipulations allow the individual to master, to grasp, to comprehend what he encounters. Thus, the longing for clarity is presented not only as a longing for unity and non-difference, but as a desire for control and possession.

Whether one craves clarity, identity, or control, the desire for unity appears throughout Camus' work as both an intellectual demand and an emotional impulse. But the relation between intellect and emotion in Camus' work is almost hopelessly confused. As we have seen, it is possible for Camus to imagine the intellect as a kind of extension of the emotions, as the intellectual quest for clarity seemed to serve an emotional appetite for unity. Yet, there are also moments in Camus' account where the intellect seems to overwhelm and even ruin emotional experience. In an important qualification to his reflections on the desire for clarity, Camus claims that "so long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and

arranged in the unity of nostalgia” (1955, 18). Camus means that pre-reflective or naïve fantasies of unity may disappear when we subject them to examination and analysis. When the desire for unity is expressed as a “unity of nostalgia” (earlier, and somewhat confusingly, it was also a ‘nostalgia for unity’) that is disrupted by the mind’s activity, it is no longer an intellectual clarity but a nostalgic emotion that Camus identifies as a primary absurd desire. In this formulation, a blissful but unreasonable nostalgia is interrupted by the unwanted intrusions of the intellect which, for reasons which Camus does not explore, attempts to defeat, rather than to serve, nostalgic fantasies.

Perhaps, like many others before him, Camus simply saw the operation of the intellect as destructive of a natural or simple harmony between people and their environment. With a Rousseauian touch, Camus claims that “with [the mind’s] first move this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding. We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart” (1955, 18). Here again the world appears as a strange kind of mirror or prism, where everything is “*reflected* in the unity of nostalgia” until the mind “cracks” the mirror’s “familiar, calm surface” (1955, 18, emphasis added). The mirror or prism is strange because it reflects not just an individual, as he or she is, but that individual’s lost or fantasized unity.

But if the intellect first appeared to work in tandem with the desire for unity, and then appeared to ruin our pre-intellectual nostalgia for unity, Camus *also* figures the intellect as a sort of inept servant to the emotions, a faculty that tries to, but is ultimately unable to satisfy the impossible demands of the heart. This is perhaps

Camus' most balanced view, and one that helps us to find an imperfect but satisfactory understanding of the dynamics of the absurd desire for unity. Camus writes, "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" (1955, 27). Reason, in this formulation, is simply incapable of performing the task asked of it. The intellect confronts the limits of the rational and perhaps recognizes a basic difference between reality and fantasy. Nevertheless, as we will see, Camus argues that we are rarely content to humbly accept our impotence in this regard. Instead, we are tempted to find quick fixes for our extraordinary demand for unity or to defend ourselves against experiencing such unfulfillable desires.

By the time he writes *The Rebel*, Camus has not clarified the desire for unity, calling it variously an idea, a passion, and a demand for form, reconciliation, and finality. What is clear, however, is the fact that the desire for unity remains unsatisfied, which only serves to heighten absurd ambivalence and tension. Camus explains:

[Life] is only an impulse that endlessly pursues its form without ever finding it. Man, tortured by this, tries in vain to find the form that will impose certain limits between which he can be king. If only one single living thing had definite form, he would be reconciled! There is not one human being who, above a certain elementary level of consciousness, does not exhaust himself in trying to find formulas or attitudes that will give his existence the unity it lacks. Appearance and action, the dandy and the revolutionary, all demand unity in order to exist, and in order to exist on this earth. As in those moving and unhappy relationships which sometimes survive for a very long time because one of the partners is waiting to find the right word, action, gesture, or situation which will bring his adventure to an end on exactly the right note, so everyone proposes and creates for himself the final word. It is not sufficient to live, there must be a destiny that does not have to wait for death. It is therefore justifiable to say that man has an idea of a better world than this. But

better does not mean different, it means unified. This passion which lifts the mind above the commonplaces of a dispersed world, from which it nevertheless cannot free itself, is the passion for unity. It does not result in mediocre efforts to escape, however, but in the most obstinate demands. Religion or crime, every human endeavor in fact, finally obeys this unreasonable desire and claims to give life a form it does not have. (1956b, 262)

As we remark again on the exaggerated hope tied to form (“If only one single living thing had definite form, he would be reconciled!”), we should also note that Camus again compares the tension between the desire for unity and its apparent impossibility to a romantic relationship, expressed perhaps paradoxically in each partner’s search for an ideal *end*, a way to remove all tension, a quest for ‘the final word’. The complex and obstinate passion for unity that drives this relationship is expressed figuratively by Camus here, just as, in other works, he and his fictional characters seem to be engaged in an erotic struggle with nature.

Loving Mother Nature. For Camus, the desire for unity is often expressed with the use of natural and sexual imagery. A natural eroticism seems both to ground and to mediate the relations between Camus’ frustrated desire for unity and his repudiation of that desire. As we have briefly discussed elsewhere, in early works like *Noces*, Camus contrasts an intense and sexual desire for life with the inevitable conclusion that such desires are insatiable, either by their very nature, at the insistence of reason and the self, or simply because of human mortality. A powerful passage in “Nuptials at Tipasa” describes an erotic encounter with nature. Camus senses that “even here, I know I shall never come close enough to the world. I must be naked and dive into the sea, still scented with the perfumes of the earth, wash them off in the sea, and consummate with my flesh the embrace for which sun and sea, lips

to lips, have so long been sighing” (1968, 68). But blissful unions like these can not last, and Camus contrasts them sharply with the superfluity of intellectual pursuits he returns to after separation. In the brief moments of union, “it was neither I nor the world that counted,” he reflects, “but solely the harmony and silence that gave birth to the love between us” (1968, 72).

This unifying relationship with nature is at the heart of Camus’ love for physical existence and his abhorrence of death. When the wind picks up at Djemila, Camus loses himself in its all-consuming force: “Like a pebble polished by the tides, I was polished by the wind, worn through to the very soul. I was a portion of the great force on which I drifted, then much of it, then entirely it, confusing the throbbing of my own heart with the great sonorous beating of this omnipresent natural heart... And I have never felt so deeply at one and at the same time so detached from myself and so present in the world” (1968, 75). It is this presence in nature, a loss of self and a kind of merger with the environment that releases Camus from the noisome demands of the self, from “the quivering of wings inside me, life’s complaint, the weak rebellion of the mind” (1968, 75).

But after such moments unity, Camus is thrust back upon himself, tempted to contemplate his death and to react violently against it. He ponders: “You can be lying in bed one day and hear someone say: ‘You are strong and I owe it to you to be honest: I can tell you that you are going to die’; you’re there, with your whole life in your hands, fear in your bowels, looking the fool. What else matters: waves of blood come throbbing to my temples and I feel I could smash everything around me” (1968, 78).

John Cruickshank has described this basic emotional constellation of unity with nature and rage against separation and death as Camus' "tragic ambivalence" between "the richness of physical existence and the inevitability of death" (Cruickshank 1960, xi). But it is not precisely the contrast between life and death, as Zygmunt Bauman might claim, that makes us absurd. Bauman sees the ultimate incongruity of the human condition in the fact that we have "the freedom of a symbol-making and symbol-using subject," but, at the same time, a "fatal dependence on [the] natural body" (Bauman 1992, 1). Death, he argues, is the real "scandal of reason" because death is not up to reason, because death "loudly declares reason's lie" (1992, 1). Rather, for Camus, while the desire for unity is tinged with a disdain for reason (just as reason will help us to point out the defect and danger implicit in the desire for unity), the real issue is not between physically living and physically dying or immediate and symbolic experience *per se*, but between the ambivalent desires to lose and regain the self.

In Camus' later works as well, like the stories collected in *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus places his characters in erotic relationships with the natural world that express, almost graphically, the desire for unity. In *The Adulterous Woman*, for instance, Janine is seduced by the natural environment. She dreams of "erect, flexible palm trees" (1958b, 14), and eventually escapes the coldness of her husband, Marcel, by having what can only be described as a sexual affair with the landscape. In the scene of her 'adultery', Janine has stolen away from her sleeping husband to an old fort, pressed herself against the parapet, and reached out to the sky, when "with unbearable gentleness, the water of the night began to fill Janine, drowned the cold,

rose gradually from the hidden core of her being and overflowed in wave after wave, rising up even to her mouth full of moans. The next moment, the whole sky stretched out over her, fallen on her back on the cold earth” (Camus 1958b, 33). David Carroll and others have pointed out that Janine is being unfaithful to her husband and to the French, occidental, ‘self’ culture he represents (Carroll 1997, 532). But Janine’s passion is about more than politics; her love for the landscape is profound, unfulfillable, and, therefore, ultimately tragic. In the end, Janine returns to her room, to her unknowing husband, and weeps.

In *The Rebel*, Camus speaks of the Romantic artists’ desire for union with the natural world in similarly suggestive language. “Far from always wanting to forget [the world],” Camus writes, “they suffer, on the contrary, from not being able to possess it completely enough... Their actions escape them in the form of other actions, return in unexpected guises to judge them, and disappear like the water Tantalus longed to drink, into some still undiscovered orifice. To know the whereabouts of the orifice, to control the course of the river, to understand life, at last, as destiny — these are their true aspirations. But this vision which, in the realm of consciousness at least, will reconcile them with themselves, can only appear, if it ever does appear, at the fugitive moment that is death, in which everything is consummated” (1956b, 260-261).

The desire for unity expressed in Romantic art, which Camus will relate to the development of authentic absurd rebellion, is presented here almost as the desire to return to a natural or maternal womb through an ‘undiscovered orifice’ into which the ‘water’ of life seems to flow. Indeed, the desire for unity expressed here is a desire to

‘control the course of the river’ of life, which, once again, suggests the presence of less idyllic urges, urges to possess and control, within the desire for unity. Perhaps Camus even intuited the darker aspects of this desire when he confessed that it could only find complete fulfillment in “the fugitive moment that is death, in which everything is consummated.”

However we understand passages like these, it should be clear that critics who understand the absurd as nothing but ‘evil’, or who believe that Camus sees nature merely as a hostile or indifferent force, will find it quite impossible to understand the meaning of his philosophy of the absurd. Nature, here, is more of a love object than a brutal or unthinkable ‘is-ness’, as Hayden Carruth might say. Camus wrote that he was born “into a nature with which one feels a harmony, not a hostility” (Hall 1960, 29). And careful critics have noticed that, especially in Camus’ early work, “it is difficult to see any connection between this harmony, this synthesis, even this tragic sense of natural beauty (which in another sense heightens the absurdity of death) and any natural hostility as such” (Hall 1960, 29). If the absurd individual feels an antagonism with nature, therefore, Camus would argue that it is not precisely the hostility of nature, but one’s ambivalent and ultimately tragic desire for a unity sought in nature that generates the antagonism.

In fact, in his tremendously violent story, *The Renegade*, Camus makes it clear that whatever hostility might be found in nature is no match for the hostility we create in reaction to the discomforts of our ambivalent and unfulfilled desires. In this story, a renegade missionary travels to the “white, burning hell” (Camus 1958b, 42) of the Taghasian “savages” (39) in order to reveal to them ‘his Lord’ (38). The

Taghasians, however, who live in a “city of salt” (41) and worship at “the House of the Fetish” (45), have forged for themselves an impossibly hostile natural environment, “just to show that they could live where no one ever could, thirty days’ travel from any living thing, in this hollow in the middle of the desert, where the heat of day prevents any contact among creatures, separates them by a portcullis of invisible flames and of searing crystals, where without transition the cold of night congeals them individually in their rock-salt shells” (42).

In this natural hell, the renegade is subjected to outrageous tortures, humiliations, and mutilations. The story is one of his journey from confused missionary to enthusiastic worshipper of evil, which is not a terribly long one. Here as elsewhere, Camus intends to show that it is an excessive or unchecked desire for unity, a kind of unnatural and destructive excess, that leads to the excesses of evil. The renegade, after gruesome tortures that culminate in having his tongue sliced off, yields to the brutal Fetish and whole-heartedly approves “his maleficent order” (1958b, 53), reflected in the sterility and unnaturalness of their environs. The renegade priest explains:

A prisoner of his kingdom — the sterile city carved out of a mountain of salt, divorced from nature, deprived of those rare and fleeting flowerings of the desert, preserved from those strokes of chance or marks of affection such as an unexpected cloud or a brief violent downpour that are familiar even to the sun or the sands, the city of order in short, right angles, square rooms, rigid men — I freely became its tortured, hate-filled citizen, I repudiated the long history that had been taught me. I had been misled, solely the reign of malice was devoid of defects, I had been misled, truth is square, heavy, thick, it does not admit distinctions, good is an idle dream, an intention constantly postponed and pursued with exhausting effort, a limit never reached, its reign is impossible. (Camus 1958b, 53-54)

The renegade's vision of nature, like his embrace of evil, is, of course, the opposite of Camus'. The renegade gives way to the impossibly hostile climate, just as he gives way to the temptation of absolute malice for the sake of its clarity, for the sake of a potent unifying principle that resolves his ambivalence, his anxiety, and his unquenchable desire.

Donald Lazere has pointed out the Oedipal aspects of this story, which begins with the renegade's declaration that "one really ought to kill one's father" (Camus 1958b, 36), and ends with the symbolic castration of the removal of his tongue (Lazere 1973, 97-98). But the story is not about Oedipal or sexual conflicts *per se*, but about a person who is, from the start, unable to bear limitation, anxiety, and ambivalence. The renegade cannot tolerate the idea of returning to doubt, of wearing himself out "in fruitless efforts instead of hastening the realization of the only possible kingdom" (Camus 1958b, 57). The renegade is so revolted by the idea that there could be "still millions of men between evil and good, torn, bewildered" (1958b, 60), that he feels he must choose absolutely, and so he chooses evil.

Jean Grenier's Influence. The desire for unity has its own intellectual tradition, one too vast to be reviewed here. Camus was familiar with the tradition treating the *désir de dieu*, with Plato and Augustine (1961, 21-43), with Pascal's idea that people are "made for God" (1995, 8), and with Kierkegaard's harrowing struggles with absurdity and faith. But, as Jean Onimus notes, Camus' first real contact with philosophy and religion came under the tutelage of his teacher and friend, Jean Grenier (Onimus 1965, 53). Thus, it was through and against the unique

and lesser-known perspective of Grenier that Camus first met the thinkers and ideas he would treat throughout his works (see Garfitt 2007, 31-33).

Camus' *Preface* to Grenier's *Islands* claimed that the book "initiated [him and his contemporaries] in disenchantment," that through it, he had "discovered culture" (Grenier 2005, 8). But even more than culture, Grenier's thought had informed Camus about the contours and limits of the desire for unity, as it would inform his ambivalent vision of absurdity. Camus wrote that Grenier's work "without denying the sensible reality which was our realm, duplicated it with another reality which explained our youthful disquiet. We had lived only half-consciously the transports and instants of the Yes, which had inspired some of the most beautiful pages of *Islands*; Grenier at the same time reminded us of their imperishable taste and their transience" (Grenier 2005, 9). While Grenier's eventual conclusions about unity would be partly rejected by Camus, in this and the following chapter, we will see that Grenier's influence is unmistakable in shaping Camus' desire for unity.

What Camus calls the desire for unity is quite similar to what Jean Grenier called "*le goût de l'absolu*," the appetite for the absolute (see Garfitt 1983, 23). Like Camus' claim that the desire for unity is the primary psychological force in human life, the *Avertissement* of Grenier's *Absolu et choix* claims that "the idea of the absolute is the very foundation of all thought" (Grenier 1961, my translation). And yet, for both Grenier and Camus, the concept of unity or the absolute escapes any attempt to define, characterize, or qualify it. In his essay on India, Grenier argued that "the mind immediately adheres to the eternal; yet it soon discovers that it can only define itself in time, even that it is immersed in time by its very nature" (Garfitt

1983, 25, my translation). Thus, like Camus' brief unions with the sea or the wind, Grenier's intuition of the absolute is the foundation of all thought, and yet it is absolutely momentary.

As soon as the idea is formed, it vanishes, and it is ultimately the disappearance of the absolute that sparks philosophical and religious reflection. When "what was previously thought to be a presence is realized to be an absence, or at least to mask an absence," says Grenier, we experience the profound *inquietude* or *étonnement philosophique* which inaugurates our quest to retrieve what we have lost (Garfitt 1983, 21). Metaphysical thought seeks to reconcile and compensate for this loss; our disquiet, then, is not prompted by the feeling that the world appears to be bad, but "that it appears to be other" (Grenier 1961, 3, my translation).

The desire for unity, or as Grenier calls it, the appetite for the absolute, is derived from this "surprise when faced with an abyss" (Garfitt 1983, 28, my translation). "There is a *manque* or *vide* at the centre of conscious existence," Toby Garfitt explains, "which is implied even in its denial by some philosophers. Philosophical and religious systems undertake to substitute for that *vide* some form of *plein*, 'l'idée d'un Tout éternellement nécessaire ou d'une totalisation jamais finie'" (1983, 28). This *manque*, this lack or absence, is similar to what Camus would describe as the feeling of being lost or homeless, being "divested of illusions and lights" (1955, 6), or being exiled or estranged. And like Camus' desire for unity, the impulse to compensate for that lack is a fundamental spiritual, philosophical, and psychological impulse for Grenier.

Grenier admits that his discussion of the idea that “that the non-existence of the world is just as possible as its existence,” is only a repetition of the basic existential theme of the contingency of being (Garfitt 1983, 21, my translation). If that were all he added to Camus’ thought, it might not be worth reviewing. But, at the heart of Grenier’s account of the appetite for the absolute, we find an experience similar to Camus’ expression of the desire for unity, as well as an extreme attitude toward it that may inform Camus’ Meursault. As Camus introduces us to the absurd as “that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent” (1955, 12), for Grenier, our attraction to absolutes is based upon an ambivalent attraction to and revulsion at the void. In his short essay, “The Attraction of the Void,” Grenier describes the experience of engulfment, of being ‘swallowed up’ by the void, which strikes him as ambivalently seductive and terrifying.

Stretched out beneath the shade of a linden tree, gazing up at an almost cloudless sky, I saw the sky topple and sink into the void: it was my first impression of nothingness, all the more vivid in that it followed a rich and full existence. Since then I have sought out why the one moment could follow after the other, and, owing to a misapprehension common to all those who search with their intellect rather than with their body and soul, I thought it was a question of that which the philosophers call ‘the problem of evil.’ Yet, it was more profound and more grave. I had before me not so much a collapse as a gap; everything, absolutely everything, risked being swallowed up by this gaping hole... The illusory character of things was once again confirmed for me... by my ceaseless frequenting of the sea; a sea whose ebb and flow... disclosed in certain bays an expanse which the eye could only embrace with difficulty. What void! Rocks, mud, water... Lost, irremediably lost — and starless. These reveries had nothing bitter about them... It was an innate affliction in which I delighted. I did not yet have a name for this sense of the infinite, no more than I had a name for this sense of nothingness. An almost perfect indifference was its result, a serene apathy — the state of an awakened sleeper. (2005, 18-19)

Grenier feels that there are two radical ways to cope with that ambivalent void: the path of the sage who perfects an absolute indifference and the path of the hero who chooses himself and a personal and exceptional ethic. Both have an “*attitude singulière*,” which Garfitt argues is meant to be taken “in a mathematical sense” (1983, 23), which means that, like some of Camus’ formulations of the desire for unity, the singular attitude of both the indifferent sage and the absolute hero eliminate difference and contrast between the self and the world. In the case of the sage, the more interesting case for Grenier and Camus, the goal is to attain that “perfect indifference... a serene apathy — the state of an awakened sleeper” (Grenier 2005, 20). That indifference is found by regressing to a state of pure elementality, “to go from the state of being a man to being a brute, to go from the state of being an organism to being an element” (Grenier 1967, 92). We undertake a kind of living death, an activity a bit reminiscent of the work of Freud’s Thanatos which “transform[s] organic substances into inorganic” (Graubert and Miller 1957, 462).

Grenier characterizes this indifferent attitude as one which “frees us of everything, and first of all from ourselves” (Grenier 1967, 93). That is, by abandoning values, reason, and willful action, our *indifference* is precisely what releases the self from its difference from the world, thereby “mak[ing] all psychological constraints disappear” (Grenier 1967, 53). By abdicating will and choice in submission to necessity and nature, “the supreme and incomparable freedom which the sage has acquired does not assist him in acting or controlling, but rather toward [*sic*] giving himself free reign and letting himself be dominated by using *a will toward deprivation (dépossession)*” (Grenier 1967, 101, emphasis in original). This

dépossession is not exactly a ‘deprivation’; more precisely, it is a radical dispossession of the self, the will, and the values by which most modern, ‘occidental’ individuals discriminate, choose, and act.

For Grenier, our desire to recover the initial unity we intuited (perhaps we may call it a ‘nostalgia for unity’, like Camus) manifests itself in both an attraction to and a revulsion at a unity which is both the void and the absolute. We desire to become one with it, but we fear to be swallowed up by it, or we long to be swallowed up by it, but we also fear it. “Throughout the course of life,” Grenier claims, “man frequently evinces, and all the more as he exercises his intelligence, this feeling of anguish, a veritable vertigo, which leads him to fear being joined with Everything (*l’Unité*), and at the same time to wish for it” (Grenier 1961, 42, my translation). Both Grenier’s sage and Camus’ Meursault seem to find unity and non-difference by yielding to absolute indifference, thereby escaping the psychological constraints of the will, the conscience, the self, the demands of individuality and responsibility, and the painful awareness of limitation and mortality. In the following chapter, I hope to show that it is this expression of Meursault’s desire for unity, this will toward *dépossession*, that makes him taboo in a society that is ambivalent about the constraints and demands of individual autonomy and freedom. But before we can turn to *The Stranger*, it remains to explicate the second half of the ambivalence of the absurd: the desire for the self or the *principium individuationis*.

The Desire for the Self or the Principium Individuationis

While Camus convincingly describes the power and beauty of our desire for unity, he simultaneously argues that the fulfillment of this desire is both impossible and

repugnant. It is difficult to find an appropriate name for this desire that contrasts so sharply with the ‘desire for unity’. A kind of *principium individuationis*, one would like to call it the desire for ‘self-preservation’, but the connotations of that term in the sense of *physically surviving* are a bit too strong for Camus’ subtler concerns. Camus wishes to preserve the intellect, the memory, and a kind of personal relationship to these things that I have failed to characterize more cleverly than as a ‘desire for the self’, a desire to preserve individuality and experience accompanied by a rejection of the loss of self implied by the desire for unity.

Camus claims that the existential philosophies he reviews in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, without exception, “suggest escape” (1955, 32). They suggest escape from the very dilemma they set out to solve, by “deify[ing] what crushes them and find[ing] reason to hope in what impoverishes them” (1955, 32). But from what, exactly, do these philosophers seek escape and why, exactly, should they not? The answers to these questions form the content of the second half of the ambivalence of the absurd.

It is easy to miss the nuances of Camus’ absurd desires because of his catchy but overly simplistic formulations of them. Perhaps Camus’ most famous rejection of unity is his demand “to live solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, to bring in nothing that is not certain... to find out if it is possible to live *without appeal*” (1955, 53, emphasis in original). But this expression of the desire for the self does not sufficiently capture the complexity or ambivalence of the absurd.

Earlier, I discussed the changing role of reason in relation to the desire for unity. At times, it seemed that reason was the mechanism through which we might

clarify, merge with, or perhaps even possess the world. Now, Camus quickly changes course and emphasizes that reducing experience to rational thought leads to self-contradiction. In spite of our desire for unity, he writes, “we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve” (1955, 18).

Reason fails us in our attempts to unify experience. In fact, it begins to deny experience when it refuses to acknowledge that one of the few things of which we feel certain is our own, simple, unreasonable existence. “This heart within me I can feel,” Camus writes, “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. For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define it and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers... Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled” (1955, 19). Faced with this contradiction, this gap, the absurd individual is thrust back upon himself. He comes to realize that he will never find the clarity and unity he seeks, that he will never “apprehend the world” (1955, 20). Yet this is not an easy discovery for Camus; rather, it represents a devastating insult, a terrible defeat, for “there is no happiness if I cannot know” (1955, 21).

If we fail to find the reasonable, clear understanding we seek, Camus argues that this failure does *not* suggest that we should negate the desire for unity that prompted our quest. Instead, Camus claims that we must challenge the *content* of our nostalgia, but not its *presence*. We can “negate everything of that part of [us] that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need

for clarity and cohesion” (Camus 1955, 51). As discussed earlier, reflections like these have prompted many critics to compare Camus’ method to Descartes’. Camus seems to say that he can be certain only that he feels and experiences; beyond that, he can not know. And if he wishes to be true to what he can experience, then while he must refuse illusions, he must, at the same time, give a place to the irrational part of his experience that desperately longs for an unattainable unity. Camus then claims that the persistence of this desire, along with its negation, teach him that he is in an absurd condition, one in which he must recognize his desire as real, while admitting the impossibility of satisfying it.

Camus’ undefended assertions about matters of knowledge, doubt, certainty, and the reality of sensory and emotional experience have annoyed their share of philosophical critics. But, to be fair, Camus is not interested in speculating about the reliability or verifiability of senses, emotions, or perceptions. Nor is he, as some have thought, defending a Cartesian method or advancing a skeptical philosophy. Rather, Camus seems to be trying to describe, in unfortunately abstract and philosophical terms, an aspect of the ambivalence of the absurd. Camus is claiming that, in spite of himself, he is unwilling to discredit his intellectual experience. He feels unwilling to forget the limits, boundaries, and flaws in his fantastic desires. He is unwilling to escape his “*raison dérisoire*” (1955, 51), which, rather than “ridiculous reason,” might be better translated as ‘ridiculing reason’ or ‘derisive reason’ because it mocks our irrational and hopes and fantasies. This ridiculing reason stubbornly refuses to be carried away by fantasies of clarity, unity, or wholeness, setting the absurd person in opposition to himself. This condition in which one is opposed to oneself, torn

between desires, caught between feelings of integrity and estrangement, only feels to Camus like being set “in opposition to all creation” (1955, 51).

The reason so many critics have mistaken Camus’ absurd is that Camus, himself, often either pretends or mistakenly believes that his consideration of the absurd is guided by a commitment to the principles of logic and methodical reasoning. Camus pretends to dedicate himself to a rigorous “method” in both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* (1955, 11, 30). Throughout the opening essay of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for example, Camus proclaims that he will conduct his pursuit “without reckless passion, in the sole light of evidence” (1955, 9), maintaining the “lucidity imposed on [him] by the pursuit of a science” (1955, 21). He uses language like “evidence” (1955, 6), “logic” (1955, 9), and “data” (1955, 30-31), as if there were a scientific method at work in his speculations about the absurd.

But even casual readers should notice that Camus’ insistence upon logic and rationality is *not* based upon a sober commitment to objectivity or a disinterested analysis of his subject. There is *not*, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* or *The Rebel*, a reasoned or grounded defense of a skeptical method, of uncertainty or doubt, even of fidelity to experience. Rather, Camus presents us with appeals, evocations of desire, and persuasive metaphors and images. Contrasting sharply with the longing for absolutes, Camus describes his desire to return to “what I touch, what resists me” (1955, 51), to feel not the joy of unity but the boundaries and edges of the self. He longs not only to lose himself in the wind at Djemila, but to return to his body even with all of its limits and frailties. “The important thing,” to continue the bodily metaphor, “as Abbé Galiani said to Mme. d’Epinay, is not to be cured, but to live with one’s ailments”

(Camus 1955, 38). Whereas the philosopher and the mystic want to be cured of their ailments, to transcend their bodies, to be unified and ‘*singulière*’, Camus rejects these desires, the very same desires he elsewhere defends.

Camus opens *The Rebel* with a telling quotation from Holderlin’s *The Death of Empedocles*: “Openly I pledged myself to the grave and suffering land, and often in the consecrated night, I promised to love her faithfully until death, unafraid, with her heavy burden of fatality, and never to despise a single one of her enigmas. Thus did I join myself to her with a mortal cord” (1956b, 2). These metaphors of love, burden, and mortal bonds echo the essentially emotional motivations for Camus’ refusals of unity. For Camus, to yield to one’s desire absolutely, to lose the self, to ‘bow down’ to the occult or the transcendent are depicted as types of crimes, betrayals, even sacrifices of the self and others. In speaking of Kierkegaard, Camus asks how it is possible not to recognize in his works “an almost intentional mutilation of the soul” which allows him to derive hope from death (1955, 39). Perhaps more famously, Camus characterizes the capitulation to the desire for unity as “the sacrifice of the intellect” (1955, 37), and as “philosophical suicide” (1955, 28, 41). That is, for Camus, yielding to the desire for unity absolutely amounts to a metaphorical, but still disgraceful, killing of the self.

Philosophical suicide is the process by which “a thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation” (Camus 1955, 41). When Karl Jaspers’ “inability to understand becomes the existence that illuminates everything,” Camus detects “a leap” which offends him (1955, 33). Whether in philosophy or in mysticism, a willingness to leap to absolutes “transcends... the human scale;

therefore it must be superhuman” (1955, 40). And Camus insists that such superhuman excesses are not only dangerous, but are betrayals of the self, of physical life, and of the intellect. “All I can say,” Camus continues, “is that, in fact, that transcends my scale... I want to know whether I can live with what I know and with that alone. I am told again that here the intelligence must sacrifice its pride and the reason bow down. But... I merely want to remain in this middle path where the intelligence can remain clear” (1955, 40). Here again, Camus couches his indignation in rationalistic language, but its bitterness and anger are visible in his use of terms like ‘sacrifice’, ‘pride’, and ‘bow down’.

While Camus defines the rebel as “a man who is on the point of accepting or rejecting the sacred and determined on laying claim to a human situation in which all the answers are human — in other words, formulated in reasonable terms” (1956b, 21), what he is trying to express is a kind of outrage at the idea of impoverishing, sacrificing, or losing the self amidst the sacred. Not even as fulfilling as an erotic union with nature, Camus argues that such efforts to find ephemeral clarity “impoverish that reality whose inhumanity constitutes man’s majesty [and are] tantamount to impoverishing him himself. I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also debilitate me at the same time” (1955, 55). Camus thus refuses unity *not* on rational or skeptical grounds, but on behalf of an intense and opposing desire to preserve his own integrity and experience, which would be lost in unity, and which the clarity of the absolute could only ‘impoverish’ and ‘debilitate’. In a fascinating twist, Camus condemns not the rejection of the sacred but the desire for it as a sin, the “sin” of “wanting to know” (1955, 49). Indeed, “the absurd is sin

without God” (1955, 40), not because it is selfish and turns away from God or nature, but quite the opposite: because in desiring unity, we are tempted to turn away from ourselves and our own experience, which Camus finds sacred in a different sense.

The Three Refusals. Camus’ haphazard treatment of the rejection of unity in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is decidedly complex, but now we may work through its logic step by step. My intention in analyzing and re-presenting this complex process is not, however, to defend it as reasonable, but to show that the story that has been told about the absurd since Camus first told it, is, itself, a bit absurd. We have already noted that a basic desire for unity goes unfulfilled, according to Camus. In spite of fleeting moments of union and self-loss that Camus describes with lyrical intensity, the desired union is not sustainable as a permanent state. We are almost tempted to attribute this failure to a property of the world. Indeed, Camus often seems to imply as much; as if nature, itself, rejected us, threw us back upon ourselves, spat us out of the ocean and onto the shore. This is what we might call the first refusal: the absurd person is said to be unable to find unity; he feels that his longing for unity has been denied by the world.

Like Grenier’s individual, Camus’ absurd individual is stunned by this refusal, surprised and wounded in the face of a *manque* where he expected to find a *plein*. Thus, Camus’ individual looks to his intellect to compensate for the loss he feels with an intellectual clarity. But the intellect is unable to fulfill this demand. As Camus says, “reason is impotent when it hears this cry from the heart” (1955, 27). Reason simply can not find a way to deliver the sought-after unity by means of principles and theories. Instead, principles and theories that seek to explain everything lead us into

contradiction and self-defeat, into the confusion of the mind that “asserts total unity and proves by its very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve” (Camus 1955, 18). Camus explores other limits and paradoxes that the intellect runs up against in its quest for clarity, some of which he seems to mistake, in order to suggest the inability of reason to resolve the emotional pain involved in the unfulfilled desire for unity. This, then, is the second refusal: the mind’s inability to compensate for the pain and frustration caused by the first refusal.

But Camus’ elaborate plot thickens. Camus comes very close to contradicting himself by arguing, first, that reason is simply unable to discover a path to the unity we desire, and second, that reason *does* find a path to unity, but that the path is a short-cut, achieving a facile or insubstantial union. The mind, in Camus’ continuing saga, is not content to admit its impotence and leave the desire for unity unsatisfied. On the contrary, as we have seen above, there is no mind that does not “exhaust [itself] in trying to find formulas or attitudes that will give his existence the unity it lacks... It does not result in mediocre efforts to escape, however, but in the most obstinate demands. Religion or crime, every human endeavor in fact, finally obeys this unreasonable desire and claims to give life a form it does not have” (1956b, 262).

That is, even though the intellect once found itself powerless to do so, it now accommodates the desire for unity by *cheating*, by reducing the world to categories into which it does not perfectly fit, by idealizing its ignorance and worshipping that which is obscure, or by imposing form upon a world without form, doing violence to the world and the self. These immature and ignoble means of fulfilling our desire for unity are the subject of both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. Camus treats them

under various headings (existential leaps, intellectual suicides, revolutionary doctrines, absolute affirmations, and absolute negations of experience) but they all share a basic logic for Camus. If we recognize that these resolutions are false, empty, or easy, if we recognize them as ‘leaps’ of thought or even as brutal impositions of the mind upon experience, we are compelled to reject them. This, then, is the third refusal: continuing attempts at unity, which were necessitated by earlier refusals, are again rejected, and not without prejudice.

Earlier, I suggested that Camus came close to contradiction in defining the steps toward this third refusal. Now it should be apparent that there is no real contradiction, as reason is initially unable to solve the puzzle before it, but subsequently learns to cheat, often simply by declaring the unsolved puzzle to be solved. Throughout these three refusals, Camus’ absurd individual is rebuffed, first apparently by nature, then apparently by reason’s limits, then apparently by a fidelity to experience which reason’s cheating offends.

But there is *no* good reason to take such ludicrous figurative explanations literally. What could it mean to say that ‘nature casts us out’, that ‘reason balks at unity’, or that our ‘absurd method’ repudiates ‘escape’? These abstruse explanations begin to look like figurative expressions of our own refusals, projections of our own ambivalence onto natural and metaphysical forces which are beyond our control. A much more sensible and textually-sensitive explanation for these three refusals, then, would be the presence of equal and opposite desires that reject unity, that embrace the boundaries of the self and the body, that desire separateness, independence, and the preservation of individual experience.

When asked what possible grounds an absurd person could have for critiquing existential, religious, or revolutionary doctrines, Camus claims that the absurd person rejects 'leaps' because he recognizes that they substitute false and contrived categories for 'his truth'. But this invocation of 'truth', like earlier invocations of reason, doubt, and uncertainty, really serves to cover over an essentially emotional appeal. When Camus detects a leap, he rejects it not exactly because it offends his logic, but because, for him, it requires "forgetting just what I do not want to forget" (1955, 46). While less philosophically rigorous, that is, at least, a more understandable stance.

It is not clear whether Camus actually believed that his arguments about the refusals of unity were logically sound or whether he merely dressed them up as such for effect. It is even tempting to speculate that Camus' descriptions of these refusals may be so elusive because they had to mask a complex ambivalence that he either could not or would not fully articulate. What is clear is that Camus' efforts to frame the contrast between the desire for and the rejection of unity in philosophical language are often belied by the underlying emotional logic with which he thought we experienced and responded to those contrasts. We hear the painful tension of being between refusal and reunion, neither a sage nor a hero, neither absolutely unified nor absolutely separate. And while we are told that the absurd person is opposed by a world that refuses him, we continue to see him opposed only by himself, torn between contrary desires within, and engaged in a difficult resistance against himself that will form the cornerstone of absurd rebellion.

In Chapters 7, 8, and 9, I make detailed applications of this analogy between absurdity and ambivalence to moral and political questions like: What is the absurd person to do when faced with this conflicted condition? If he or she refuses to yield to either desire, then what course of action remains? But for now, we may briefly reflect upon Camus' reply.

The first, and after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me, consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. I have just defined it as a confrontation and an unceasing struggle. And carrying this absurd logic to its conclusion, I must admit that that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest). Everything that destroys, conjures away, or exorcises these requirements (and to begin with, consent which overthrows divorce) ruins the absurd and devaluates the attitude that may then be proposed. The absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to. (1955, 31)

Here, we notice not only the precise qualification of the *emotions* of absurdity (an absence of hope that is not despair and a rejection that is not renunciation), but that the ambivalence of the absurd entails an ambivalent attitude toward absurdity, itself. The absurd must be 'preserved' even though it crushes us. It must be 'struggled against', but never 'ruined'. It must 'have meaning', but must not be 'agreed to'. Elsewhere, Camus will tell us that the absurd rebel must be "faithful to the absurd commandments" (1955, 34), while, at the same time, "the absurd requires not to be consented to" (1955, 35). Eventually, the absurd rebel must undertake the "discipline the mind imposes upon itself, that will conjured up out of nothing, that face-to-face struggle" (1955, 55), which is a struggle against himself and against the temptations of yielding to his ambivalent desires. I argue that the absurd rebel's mental discipline, his struggle against himself, is analogous to the developmental ideal of mature

integration of ambivalence, and that the first step of absurd morality is being able to remain in what Camus calls “extreme tension” (1955, 55), which we may imagine as a kind of ‘absurd position’ with respect to the ambivalence of the absurd.

The ambivalent qualities of the absurd are readily apparent when we consider Camus’ preferred expression of the moral consequence of the absurd, *révolte* or rebellion, which I will only introduce here as it is also the subject of Chapters 7 and 8 of this volume. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus asks if we can survive absurdity, or if the experience is so painful that it must end in suicide. Of course, his answer is that we must never choose suicide, neither the physical nor the metaphorical kind, but must seek to remain in perpetual ambivalence. Rebellion, he says, is “a matter of living and thinking with those dislocations, of knowing whether one had to accept or refuse. There can be no question of masking the evidence, of suppressing the absurd by denying one of the terms of the equation. It is essential to know whether one can live with it or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die of it... The danger... lies in the subtle instant that precedes the leap. Being able to remain on that dizzying crest — that is integrity” (Camus 1955, 50).

Absurd rebellion, as we will see, is ambivalent rebellion, a complex, integrative activity that “expresses an aspiration to order” (Camus 1956b, 23), while at the same time, denying and refusing order by living “without appeal” (Camus 1955, 53). The absurd rebel “attacks a shattered world in order to demand unity from it” (1956b, 23-24), while simultaneously insisting that the world remain shattered by living “solely with what he knows” (1955, 53). I hope to show that rebellion is a mature and creative response to the ambivalence of the absurd, that it resists both

indifference and extremism, and that it seeks both unity and limits in an attempt to contain the destructive potential of the absurd. In the absurd context, we rebel when we recognize our ambivalence and act responsibly upon that recognition, when we neither crush it nor allow it to crush us, when as Germaine Brée put it, “our consciousness of [the absurd’s] existence is followed by the refusal to be obsessed and paralyzed by it” (Brée 1964, 210-211).

This chapter and the chapter that preceded it have been concerned with establishing a basic analogy between the concept of ambivalence and the absurd. Rather than over-specifying the absurd by attaching it to a singular psychological pattern or organization, I have merely tried to show that a broad conception of ambivalence can help us comprehend the meaning of Camus’ often ambiguous, often esoteric accounts of the absurd. I have focused primarily on *The Myth of Sisyphus* here, because this text, much more than any other, sets out to examine the meaning of the absurd itself. In Chapters 7 and 8, I turn to Camus’ *The Rebel*, the text which, more than any other, seeks to outline the moral and political consequences of the absurd.

But before turning to these questions, it is important to discuss the meaning of absurdity and ambivalence with respect to Camus’ most famous work, *The Stranger*. *The Stranger*, right or wrongly, is widely considered to be an absurd novel, perhaps *the* absurd novel *par excellence*. Its main character, Meursault, is widely considered to be absurd, and its themes are often connected with, and commonly confused with both existentialism and absurdity. I will argue that Meursault is *not* absurd or ambivalent in the sense that we have described, but, rather, that the absurdity of the

novel derives from the conflict between Meursault and the society that judges him. I argue that Meursault is *taboo* in his society (and, more broadly, in most of the societies in which *The Stranger* is read) because he violates the prescriptions of personhood set out in Kant's kingdom of ends. Recalling Freud's discussion of the relationship between taboo and ambivalence, I make the case that the absurdity of the novel lies in our reactions to Meursault as one who refuses the demands of modern autonomy and freedom.

Chapter 6: Absurdity and Ambivalence in *The Stranger*

The moral and customary prohibitions which we ourselves obey may have some essential relation to this primitive taboo the explanation of which may in the end throw light upon the dark origin of our own ‘categorical imperative’.

— Freud, *Totem and Taboo*

I ask you for this man’s head... and I do so with a heart at ease... Never as strongly as today have I felt this painful duty made easier, lighter, clearer by the certain knowledge of a sacred imperative and by the horror I feel when I look into a man’s face and all I see is a monster.

— Camus, *The Stranger*

Over the years, critical interest in Camus’ most famous literary character, Meursault, has overshadowed interest in the role of absurdity in *The Stranger*. While analyses of Camus’ most famous novel abound, surprisingly few interpretations have adequately addressed the relationship between it and the philosophy of the absurd.

The earliest interpretations of *The Stranger*, like Sartre’s “Explication” discussed in Chapter 2, asserted a direct relationship between the absurdity depicted in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the character of Meursault. Because of Meursault’s ‘pitiless clarity’, his refusals of social convention, his ‘lucid awareness’ of the absurd ‘facts’ of life, Sartre tells us that we may be assured that Meursault *is* absurd (1962, 112-113). Thus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* gives the theory of absurdity, while *The Stranger* gives the example. On this account, *The Myth of Sisyphus* may be used as a kind of reading guide for *The Stranger*, a supporting text that “teaches us how to accept our author’s novel” (Sartre 1962, 111). Sartre’s reading of *The Stranger* as a novel of absurdity, and Meursault as *homo absurdus*, while an unfortunate reading in many respects, still influences interpretations of *The Stranger* today.

Roger Quillot's impressive but slightly less influential study, *The Sea and Prisons*, sees Meursault as symbolic of the ambiguity and duplicity which, Quillot claims, run through nearly all of Camus' fictional works. Quillot claims that while Meursault is simple, indifferent, even primal, Meursault's experience is actually "consciously mutilated," that Meursault is "born to duplicity," for "between that smile that he tries to express and the grimace that his tin plate flashes back to him, there is a kind of rift; already, a fall from innocence" (1970, 81-82). Perhaps more restrained than Natalie Sarraute's interpretation of Meursault's character as the result of "a haughty choice, a desperate denial" (Sarraute in Quillot 1970, 81), Quillot nevertheless asks us to see in Meursault an odd complexity. "Let us go still further: were the gunshots aimed at the Arab or at Meursault himself? Was he [Meursault] not obscurely tired of the very unconsciousness in which he was exhausting his life? In his innocence, was he not calling down a misfortune that would overwhelm him and lead him to his final convergence? The chrysalis breaks its cocoon; the surfeited young obstinately seek the suffering that awakens them" (1970, 82).

But, as I hope to show, Quillot's interpretive *idées clefs* (duplicity and ambiguity) are not entirely warranted in the case of Meursault. In fact, in his description of Meursault as a "distorting mirror held up to us," as someone who shows us ourselves, "doubly betrayed but fascinated" (1970, 83), Quillot seems to blend Meursault with Clamence, the hero of Camus' later novel, *The Fall*.

The Fall, which I do not treat extensively in this work, is a complex and layered confession of a man struggling with duplicity, guilt, vanity, and vice (see Camus 1956; Quillot 1970, 233-258; Solomon 2004; Sprintzen 1988, 196-201;

Willhoite 1968, 83-92). The reader of *The Fall* is struck by its themes of doubleness, contradiction, and ambivalence almost from the first word. The novel begins with the description of an Amsterdam café owner who is likened to both a “worthy ape” and a “Cro-Magnon man lodged in the Tower of Babel” (Camus 1956, 3-4). It continues with an account of the sad citizens of Europe who have only two passions: ideas and fornication (1956, 6). And it finally introduces us to Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a “judge-penitent” with a *vox clamens* (Willhoite 1968, 83), whose “profession is double... like the human being” (1956, 10).

The story, as Clamence confesses it, began late one evening when Clamence noticed a young woman perched on a bridge over the Seine. Moments later, he heard the sound of her body hitting the water, but instead of jumping in to save her, he returned home, told no one, and, in an attempt to forget the experience, avoided reading the newspapers for a while. Two or three years later, Clamence is startled by the sound of eerie laughter as he crosses the Pont des Arts. Rushing home in a state of distress, he finds that his “reflection was smiling in the mirror, but it seemed to me that my smile was double” (1956, 40).

The awakening of Clamence’s repressed memory, the re-discovery of his hypocrisy, and the forced confrontation with his moral contradiction (all of which Quillot refers to somewhat confusingly as his ‘ambiguity’), set Clamence off on his increasingly self-conscious and arguably self-defeating quest to confront his own viciousness and pretense. And in Clamence’s complex confession, issues of duplicity, guilt, and ‘ambiguity’ are undoubtedly significant. Once a successful lawyer who fought for noble causes, Clamence now admits to his confessor that only vanity

motivated his virtue, that if he were a shop on a winding Amsterdam road, his shop sign would be “a double face, a charming Janus, and above it the motto of the house: ‘Don’t rely on it’” (1956, 47). Yet in spite of his pseudo-insight into his own duplicity, Clamence’s lengthy confession to his interlocutor and to the reader, of course, actually serves to relieve his anxiety and to inflict his guilt on others, an even deeper subterfuge of which Clamence is not unaware.

Yet, while *The Fall* is clearly a tale of duplicity, and while it may be tempting to read the themes of *The Fall* back into *The Stranger*, even a cursory reading of the two texts reveals that Clamence is not at all like Meursault. As I hope to show, Meursault is more singular than double, he is not morally self-contradictory or ‘ambiguous’ in Quillot’s sense, and he is not racked by guilt nor attempting to displace his guilt onto others. Indeed, as discussed earlier, “Meursault is not in the least disturbed by his subjectivity... he is more an object than a subject” (Lazere 1973, 154). Against Quillot’s interpretation, then, I find Meursault’s *lack* of duplicity and ambiguity to be central to his character, his crime, his punishment, and the broader relationship between *The Stranger* and the philosophy of the absurd.

Although Sartre’s and Quillot’s interpretations were influential, Camus was especially concerned to respond to critics like Wyndham Lewis, Pierre Lafue, and Aimé Patri, who saw Meursault as “‘a schizophrenic,’ or ‘a moron,’ or... an example of the mechanization and depersonalization of modern life” (Camus 1968, 336n). We might call such readings ‘diagnostic readings’ of *The Stranger* inasmuch as they seek to diagnose Meursault’s ‘condition’ with reference to psychological, medical, or even social or political categories. Diagnostic readings like these have remained

surprisingly common. Colin Wilson finds Meursault to be “basically a brainless idiot” (Scherr 2001, 150), while Dennis Fletcher and Arthur Scherr argue that Meursault had ‘low self-esteem’ and ‘thwarted ambition’ attributable to his unloving mother (Scherr 2001, 150). Even more dramatic psychiatric, medical, and psycho-social explanations for Meursault have found all sorts of things wrong with him, from alexithymia to scotophilia to post-traumatic stress disorder. I examine the motivation for these questionable literary diagnoses in the concluding section of this chapter.

In his *Preface to the American University Edition of The Stranger* (1968, 335-337), Camus tried to correct these critics, but, as might be expected, he did so only by complicating the story even further. Because of its interest, I quote his short *Preface* in full:

I summarized *The Stranger* a long time ago, with a remark I admit was highly paradoxical: ‘In our society any man who does not weep at his mother’s funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death.’ I only meant that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game. In this respect, he is foreign to the society in which he lives; he wanders, on the fringe, in the suburbs of private, solitary, sensual life. And this is why some readers have been tempted to look upon him as a piece of social wreckage. A much more accurate idea of the character, or, at least one much closer to the author’s intentions, will emerge if one asks just how Meursault doesn’t play the game. The reply is a simple one; he refuses to lie. To lie is not only to say what isn’t true. It is also and above all, to say more than is true, and, as far as the human heart is concerned, to express more than one feels. This is what we all do, every day, to simplify life. He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings, and immediately society feels threatened. He is asked, for example, to say that he regrets his crime, in the approved manner. He replies that what he feels is annoyance rather than real regret. And this shade of meaning condemns him.

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

One would therefore not be much mistaken to read *The Stranger* as the story of a man who, without any heroics, agrees to die for the truth. I also

happened to say, again paradoxically, that I had tried to draw in my character the only Christ we deserve. It will be understood, after my explanations, that I said this with no blasphemous intent, and only with the slightly ironic affection an artist has the right to feel for the characters he has created.

But Camus' explication is one-sided and perhaps even disingenuous. It advances Meursault's heroic qualities while ignoring his flaws, his inhumanity, and all that he seems to lack. More importantly, it ignores the absurdity and ambivalence generated by the novel's psychological and moral tensions, which we must address, as they must be addressed in any comprehensive interpretation.

Perhaps because of the confusion created by Camus and his early critics, some recent scholars have abandoned any attempt to find a relationship between *The Stranger* and the absurd. Peter Petrakis claims, for instance, that "*The Stranger* is not primarily an examination of the absurd; rather, it is an exploration of the effects of exile on judgment" (2003, 23). But removing absurdity from *The Stranger* is an extreme and unsatisfying solution because Meursault's striking indifference, his obvious contrast with his society, and Camus' ambivalent treatment of him, all lead us to believe that Meursault has *something* to do with the absurd, even if we are uncertain of what.

This chapter argues that assertions of a direct relationship and assertions of a non-relationship between *The Stranger* and the absurd are equally wrong-headed. I take the somewhat unusual tack of arguing that Meursault is *not* an absurd character, at least not in any strict sense, although a salient absurdity of the novel may be found in encountering and relating to Meursault, in encounters and relations undertaken

both by the reader of the book and by the fictional court that also ‘reads’, interprets, judges, and condemns him in the novel’s second part.

I argue that if Meursault does not ‘play the game’, it is not just any game of conformity or convention that he refuses, but, rather, the much more fundamental game of modern moral freedom. Meursault’s refusal to play this game makes him a taboo offender in liberal societies still influenced by the ideals and principles of Kant’s kingdom of ends. By provoking an ambivalence about freedom and autonomy in those who encounter him, we might even say that Meursault threatens *us* with absurdity by activating the ambivalences and anxieties described in Chapters 4 and 5.

The Kingdom of Ends-in-Themselves

This chapter argues that Meursault may be considered taboo because he trespasses on the sacred and profane territories of moral life demarcated by the ideals of freedom, will, and autonomy in Kant’s kingdom of ends. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly describe that ‘kingdom’ whose basic laws Meursault offends. The kingdom of ends is Kant’s famous ideal moral universe, the “systematic union of different rational beings through common laws” (Kant 1981, 39), where all rational subjects treat each other only as ends-in-themselves and never as means-to-an-end. Of course, the fictional French-Algerian society that Meursault offends is not *actually* a Kantian kingdom of ends; indeed, no society, real or fictional, could be. But many liberal and democratic societies, even the caricatured colonial society depicted in *The Stranger*, are founded upon the ideals of the kingdom of ends insofar as our laws, norms, and values are inherited from Enlightenment and Contractarian traditions.

The foremost demand of the kingdom of ends is that its citizens must be free. “Morality consists in the relation of all action to that legislation whereby alone a kingdom of ends is possible. This legislation must be found in every rational being and must be able to arise from his will” (Kant 1981, 40). A citizen’s ability to legislate his will depends upon a peculiar kind of freedom, the freedom to give himself a law which he then ‘freely’ obeys. It is a kind of self-legislation that Kant equates with freedom when he asks rhetorically: “What else, then, can freedom of the will be but autonomy, i.e., the property that the will has of being a law to itself?” (1981, 49). And the only law that the will can reasonably give to itself is the well-known categorical imperative: “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature” (Kant 1981, 30). Thus, freedom, understood as self-legislation and autonomy, forms the founding principle, the *raison d’état*, as it were, of the kingdom of ends.

The foundation of the kingdom of ends, that without which the kingdom would fall, is the presupposition of the freedom of all subjects. “Since morality must be derived solely from the property of freedom, one must show that freedom is also the property of the will of all rational beings” (Kant 1981, 50). But showing that freedom is, *in fact*, a property of the will is impossible for Kant, and, indeed, for modern philosophy. Kant admits that although “we have finally traced the determinate concept of morality back to the idea of freedom... we could *not* prove freedom to be something actual in ourselves and in human nature. We saw merely that we must presuppose it if we want to think of a being as rational and as endowed

with consciousness of its causality as regards actions, i.e., as endowed with a will” (1981, 51, emphasis added).

The presupposition of freedom, therefore, begs questions to which there may be no answers. Kant admits: “We could give no satisfactory answer if asked the following questions: why must the universal validity of our maxim taken as a law be a condition restricting our actions?; upon what do we base the worth that we assign to this way of acting — a worth that is supposed to be so great that there can be no higher interest?” (1981, 51). These are serious questions about the foundations of moral and social life, questions about the good of being good, for which Kant finds only the most precarious answers.

“Freedom is a mere idea,” Kant explains, “whose objective reality can in no way be shown in accordance with laws of nature and consequently not in any possible experience. Therefore, the idea of freedom can never admit of comprehension or even of insight, because it cannot by any analogy have an example falling under it. It holds only as a necessary presupposition of reason in a being who believes himself conscious of a will, i.e., of a faculty distinct from mere desire” (1981, 59). Somewhat ironically, the presupposition of freedom becomes an item of faith in the Kantian system, a necessary assumption in which we must believe, in spite of a lack of comprehension or evidence.

In his *System of Logic*, John Stuart Mill offers an account of the theory of free will that may surprise those who know him as the father of liberal freedom. “The metaphysical theory of free-will, as held by philosophers,” Mill writes, “was invented because the supposed alternative of admitting human actions to be necessary was

deemed inconsistent with everyone's instinctive consciousness, as well as humiliating to the pride, and even degrading to the moral nature, of man" (1925, vi, 2). Mill means that our dignity as moral individuals, along with the rationale for liberal norms and values, all depend upon the happy assumption that we are, in an abstract and ideal sense, free.

Without the moral vision the presupposition of freedom sustains, it is difficult to imagine how liberal political and legal norms could retain their legitimacy. "In a causally determined system the notions of free choice and moral responsibility, in their usual senses, vanish, or at least lack application, and the notion of action would have to be reconsidered" (Berlin 1969, 35). That is, without presuming the freedom of the will, the moral and political capacities of the liberal subject would disappear and "the use or abuse of the human being's power of choice with respect to the moral law could not be imputed to him, nor could the good or evil in him be called 'moral'" (Guyer 2003, 79).

Presupposing the freedom of the will also entitles us to think of ourselves as privileged with respect to nature and necessity, as possessing faculties that are "distinct from mere desire" (Kant 1981, 59). By obeying his own law, the Kantian individual becomes "free as regards all laws of nature and he obeys only those laws which he gives to himself" (Kant 1981, 41). Thus, he is spared the indignity of having to admit that he obeys, depends upon, or is subordinate to someone or something beyond or below his better self. The "mere idea" of freedom, as it operates through the logic of moral legislation, permits the Kantian subject to think of himself as a

moral sovereign and, therefore, as above all the “mere things of nature” (Kant 1981, 43).

As that which defines our moral status, our self-concept, and our independence from the forces of nature and desire, freedom becomes the metaphorical boundary that demarcates the moral and intellectual ‘territory’ of the kingdom of ends from the outer territories of sense, impulse, and necessity. This demarcation is observable in most modern theorists of freedom. For Kant, freedom is the principal difference between ends and means, intelligence and sense, humanity and animality. Even Rousseau would agree that “renouncing one’s liberty is renouncing one’s dignity as a man, the rights of humanity and even its duties” (1987, 144). For J.S. Mill, to lack freedom is to become inhuman: “He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him” is not completely human, for he “has no need of any other faculty than the *ape-like* one of imitation” (1975, 56, emphasis added). More recently, Isaiah Berlin expresses in plain language how freedom marks the basic difference between persons and things, subjects and objects, free creatures and slaves. “I wish to be a subject, not an object,” Berlin writes, “to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from the outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer — deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them” (1969, 131).

Even as contemporary theorists of freedom like Berlin shy away from essentializing characterizations such as “freedom is the essence of man” (1969, 60), many share with him the conviction that “the need to choose, to sacrifice some ultimate values to others, turns out to be a permanent characteristic of the human predicament” (Berlin 1969, 50-51). Whether thought to be characteristic of humanity itself or only of the human predicament, freedom and autonomy (and therefore moral choice) are the prices of membership in the world of modern subjects. Indeed, for Kant and for many modern philosophers, a moral law is conceivable only “because the idea of freedom makes me a member of an intelligible world” (Kant 1981, 55).

Kant’s moral and political philosophy may be considered an attempt to reconcile the twin demands of freedom hinted at above: (1) the need to be protected from interference or incursions from the *outside*, from others, and from nature, and (2) the need to be able to will, to choose, and to determine oneself by overcoming obstacles, vices, or weaknesses on the *inside*. As freedom marks the territory of the intellectual world while also uniting the subject with himself, the concept of freedom appears to have developed in way that curiously resembles the concept of sovereignty, as a response to a dual threat, and as that which both unites sovereign and subject and defends them from the outside (see Hinsley 1966; Merriam 1972; Walker 1993). The twin goals of self-actualization and freedom from interference, which survive in discussions of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ liberty, yield, for Kant, the moral equation of freedom and autonomy. Kant argued that the will must always have an end, for “in the absence of all reference to an end no determination of the will can take place in human beings at all” (Guyer 2003, 74). That is, since *something*

inevitably drives the will, only *self*-determination can offer it both autonomy and independence.

We might say that the Kantian subject presupposes his freedom in order to defend himself against anxieties about domination and dependence from both within and without. Paul Guyer explains that, for Kant, “the avoidance of domination by one’s inclinations and the avoidance of domination by other persons are not two independent goals after all. Allowing oneself to be dominated by the inclinations of others depends upon allowing oneself to be dominated by one’s own inclination to be dominated by others” (2003, 75). Both the inner and outer enemies of freedom attack via our inclinations, our inclinations both to dominate and to be dominated. For the Kantian subject, then, “the only way out” of this troubling world “would be to subordinate the satisfaction of his inclinations to an impartial principle” (Guyer 2003, 75).

The only way to be free from all domination (or to imagine that one is free from all domination) is to presuppose the freedom of the will and to act according to the principles it recommends as if they were natural laws. “We can belong [to the kingdom of ends] as members,” says Kant, “only if we carefully conduct ourselves according to the maxims of freedom *as if* they were laws of nature” (1981, 61, emphasis added). Instead of being dependent and dominated, the Kantian subject presupposes his freedom and then obeys *it*, preserving the dignity of his will and his sense of autonomy and control.

While the categorical imperative is distinct from the general will, the sleight of hand involved in this freedom is apparent in Rousseau’s phrase: “In giving himself

to all, each person gives himself to no one” (1987, 148). Since Rousseau’s subjects must inevitably submit to something or someone, either the state or other associates, either the general will or particular wills, they find freedom only insofar as they submit (individually) to themselves (collectively). And while Kant will idealize the moral law perhaps even more than Rousseau, it is the basic equation of self-rule, independence, and freedom that permits both Rousseau and Kant to say: “A free will and a will subject to moral laws are one and the same” (Kant 1981, 49).

In the kingdom of ends, willing according to the principle of a categorical imperative seems to be the only escape from being dominated, chosen for, or acted upon. And the categorical imperative is conceivable *if and only if* we can presuppose the freedom of the will and sustain the illusion of that freedom. Thus, the precarious presupposition of freedom is a kind of core belief on which rests the dignity, morality, and humanity of subjects in the kingdom of ends.

Meursault’s Taboo

If the presupposition of the freedom of the will serves as the primary line of defense against domination and indignity, then Meursault’s challenge to this presupposition of freedom may be understood as a threat to all that freedom protects. In Chapter 4, I described Freud’s argument that basic ambivalences are at the heart of taboo prohibitions, that “taboo has grown out of the soil of an ambivalent emotional attitude” (1938, 855). It was Freud’s thesis that taboo prohibitions, like neurotic symptoms, reflected deep-seated ambivalences about the restrictions associated with collective life. As taboos reveal powerful but partly repressed emotional ambivalences, the opposite of taboo is not the ideal or the virtuous, but the common

or the ordinary. “The converse of taboo in Polynesia,” says Freud, “is ‘noa’ and allied forms which mean ‘general’ or ‘common’” (1938, 822). Indeed, strangers and outsiders have long been associated with taboo because they represent what is unique, exceptional, and beyond the grasp of the group (see Dillon 1999). This understanding of taboo as strange and exceptional, rather than merely bad or vicious, will permit us to see that the more significant moral conflict represented in *The Stranger* is not between innocence and guilt, or good and evil, but between inside and outside, between the accepted and the unacceptable, even between the conscious and the repressed.

Freud claimed that taboo prohibitions reflected profound ambivalences in the group, powerful but frightening desires that conflicted with severe renunciations. As discussed earlier, Freud thought these ambivalences remained in individuals and in the group, even if they were driven into the unconscious. “The persistence of taboo,” Freud wrote, “teaches... that the original pleasure to do the forbidden still continues.” Individuals therefore “assume an ambivalent attitude toward their taboo prohibitions; in their unconscious they would like to do nothing better than to transgress them but they are also afraid to do it; they are afraid just because they would like to transgress, and the fear is stronger than the pleasure. But in every individual... the desire for it is unconscious, just as in the neurotic” (1938, 831).

The vehemence with which taboos are punished, for Freud, reflects not just a criminal sanction, but a defense against the ambivalence inspired by the taboo person or act. Coming into contact with taboo involves a risk of unleashing repressed and socially-destructive desires, a “propensity to arouse the ambivalence of man and to

tempt him to violate the prohibition” (Freud 1938, 832). The real danger of the taboo person, then, lies in “the possibility of imitation, as a result of which society would soon be dissolved. If the others did not punish the violation they would perforce become aware that they want to imitate the evil doer” (1938, 833).

For Freud, taboo offenders are punished because they are, in a sense, carriers of a psychological contagion of ambivalent and threatening possibilities. “They are the seat of tremendous power which is transmissible by contact, and may be liberated with destructive effect if the organisms which provoke its discharge are too weak to resist it” (Freud 1938, 823-824). It is something of this frightening contagion of taboo that Meursault’s prosecutor alludes to when he argues that “the emptiness of a man’s heart becomes, as we find it has in this man, an abyss threatening to swallow up society” (Camus 1988, 101).

One of the more fascinating aspects of *The Stranger* is that Meursault is not condemned simply because he violates the law. In addition to committing a murder, which is almost an afterthought in his trial, Meursault offends something else within his, and our, prevailing moral, social, or political orthodoxy. I will try to show that Meursault’s crime and his violations of social norms (norms related to death, mourning, marital engagement, and renunciations) are uniquely exacerbated by his apparent refusal to be a free subject. We may understand this claim if we imagine a hypothetical Meursault who commits the same crime and violates the same norms, but who presents himself as a free, Kantian subject, a Meursault who chooses, determines his will, reflects upon his actions, and can explain himself clearly. Were it even possible to imagine a Kantian Meursault, such a figure could hardly resemble

Camus' Meursault, who presents such a puzzle to his fictional court and to decades of readers of *The Stranger*. In addition to his senseless crime and his odd behavior, Meursault's taboo unfreedom may be seen in at least three different aspects of the novel.

First, Meursault seems unable or unwilling to offer any reasoned account of his choices, his actions, or his preferences. He refuses to explain himself. By not couching his behavior in the language of freedom, the language of choice and will, Meursault does nothing to refute our impression that he is a radical exception to the presupposition of freedom in the kingdom of ends. In this sense, it is true that Meursault is condemned for having no explanations.

The two acts that appear to contribute the most to Meursault's condemnation are his alleged "insensitivity the day of Maman's funeral" (Camus 1988, 64), and his admitted act of murder. But it is a significant irony of the novel that Meursault is not really condemned for either, but for being unable to justify or explain them in socially acceptable ways. Meursault clearly has opportunities to save himself, to offer an explanation for his actions that might reduce his sentence or even get him acquitted (Camus 1988, 64-68, 103). These opportunities suggest that Meursault does not die for his criminal act but for his apparent refusal to freely choose that criminal act. This is one way to understand Camus' remark in the *Preface* cited above that Meursault agrees "to die for the truth," that "he refuses to lie," and that "he does not play the game" (Camus 1968, 252).

The second mark of Meursault's lack of freedom is his seemingly vast indifference. Evaluating choices and differentiating between alternatives are

prerequisites to the Kantian processes of determining the ends of the will and acting freely and autonomously. On the contrary, Meursault refuses to recognize any differences between his actions and their alternatives. He claims that “one life was as good as another” (Camus 1988, 41), that marriage “didn’t really matter” (41), that “to stay or go [on the fateful beach], it amounted to the same thing” (57), and that “you could either shoot or not shoot” a person (56). Speaking of his mother, Meursault admits only that he loved her “the same as anyone” (67), and that “at one time or another all normal people have wished their loved ones were dead” (65). When asked if he regrets his crime, Meursault replies that rather than sorry he feels annoyed (*ennui*) (70). In the end, facing death, Meursault proclaims that “nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why” (121), and that “since we’re all going to die, it’s obvious that when and how don’t matter” (114). By not distinguishing between his actions, their alternatives, and their consequences, Meursault seems to refuse the most basic components of moral freedom in the Kantian sense.

The third way in which Meursault seems unfree is in his submission to his own physical inclinations and impulses, as well as the inclinations and impulses of others. In fact, Meursault even admits at one point that his “physical needs” regularly get in the way of his thoughts and feelings (Camus 1988, 65). Meursault often yields to his inclination to sleep and because of his sleepiness, he half-stumbles through the most significant events of the novel, like his mother’s funeral (17-18). At his mother’s vigil, Meursault accepts conversation, coffee, and cigarettes from the funeral director (8), which, although seemingly a trivial matter, later serves as damning evidence in his prosecution (90-91). For no discernible reason other than to

eat sausage and drink wine, Meursault acts as accomplice in Raymond's illicit and violent sexual affair with a woman related to Meursault's eventual murder victim (32, 37). And, of course, the day after his mother's funeral, Meursault swims, attends a comedic film, and sleeps with Marie, a young woman from his office (19-21). The fact that Meursault yields to these physical impulses at times and in situations where a more autonomous, Kantian subject might have exercised greater 'will-power' plays a significant role in Meursault's trial and sentencing (94).

At the most crucial moments of his life, Meursault's will appears to be determined by anything but itself. The heat of the sun, his constant sleepiness, an inexplicable urge to return to the beach, a headache, and a pressing physical discomfort are the only discernible antecedents to his perplexing act of murder. "The trigger gave," Meursault explains, "and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started" (Camus 1988, 59). More of an account of the physical impulses that drove Meursault than an explanation of a free act, Meursault's crime seems utterly will-less, undetermined, and unfree. Equally perplexing are the four additional shots, the "*quatre coups brefs que je frappais sur la porte de malheur*" (Camus 1942, 90), that Meursault fires into the dead body of his victim. These shots are unintentional in a strict sense, seemingly beyond his control, and they awaken him to his unhappiness as if he had *heard* them before realizing that it was he who was doing the firing.

By not accounting for his actions, by not discerning differences between alternatives, by not determining his will, and by yielding to impulse and passivity, Meursault appears to be unfree in the sense defined by Kant's kingdom of ends. In

light of this unfreedom, Meursault is condemned not only for the murder of the unnamed *Arabe*, but also for the death of his mother. Through the 'contagion' of taboo, Meursault's crime is translated into a metaphorical matricide when he is accused by the prosecutor of being "morally guilty of killing his mother" (Camus 1988, 101-102). To the defense attorney's question, "Come on now, is my client on trial for burying his mother or for killing a man?," the prosecutor replies, "between these two sets of facts there existed a profound, fundamental, and tragic relationship. 'Indeed... I accuse this man of burying his mother with a crime in his heart!'" (Camus 1988, 96).

Meursault's crime is transformed not only into matricide but into parricide, the two ultimate, and ultimately taboo, crimes. The prosecutor proclaims that Meursault's "callousness inspired in him a horror nearly greater than that which he felt at the crime of parricide" (Camus 1988, 101). And according to him, "a man who is morally guilty of killing his mother severs himself from society in the same way as the man who raises a murderous hand against the father who begat him. In any case, one man paved the way for the deeds of the other, in a sense foreshadowed and even legitimized them" (Camus 1988, 102).

Meursault's actions seem to spread, to shape-shift, to slide from one murder to the next. Meursault becomes guilty not only of his crime but of *other people's* crimes. The prosecutor concludes his case on just such a note: "I am convinced, gentlemen," he added, raising his voice, 'that you will not think it too bold of me to suggest to you that the man who is seated in the dock is *also guilty* of the murder to be tried in this

court tomorrow. He must be punished accordingly” (Camus 1988, 102, emphasis added).

Although guilty of a single murder, Meursault comes to symbolize murderousness itself. The prosecutor finds Meursault to be inhuman, claiming that he has peered into Meursault’s soul and “found nothing” (Camus 1988, 101). According to the prosecutor, “the truth was that [Meursault] didn’t have a soul and that nothing human, not one of the moral principles that govern men’s hearts, was within [his] reach” (101). It is Meursault’s taboo, and not his crime, that seems responsible for transforming him from a criminal into a soulless monster.

The taboo qualities of Meursault’s attitudes and actions, even more than his criminal act or his ‘insensitivity’ to sensitive issues, challenge the presupposition of freedom that is the foundation of the modern moral vision. Like any grave taboo, that challenge appears to provoke an ambivalence that permits the prosecutor and the jury to condemn Meursault to death with clear consciences. In petitioning the jury for a capital sentence, the prosecutor offers a telling remark. “I ask you for this man’s head,” he explains, “and I do so with a heart at ease. For if in the course of what has been a long career I have had occasion to call for the death penalty, never as strongly as today have I felt this painful duty made easier, lighter, clearer by the certain knowledge of *a sacred imperative* and by the horror I feel when I look into a man’s face and all I see is a monster” (Camus 1988, 102, emphasis added).

That sacred imperative appears to be a complex combination of the categorical imperative and a taboo imperative, one that insists, in this case, that the unfree person either be killed or be ‘forced to free’, a distinction I discuss in more

detail below. Understanding Meursault to be taboo in the kingdom of ends, therefore, suggests a repressed ambivalence about the freedom and autonomy he challenges. Meursault seems to threaten to make us absurd, in that he threatens to make us aware of the precariousness of the presupposition of our freedom by appearing as an exception to it. We would like to deny that our freedom is precarious, even to deny that freedom is a presupposition, because admitting as much risks uncovering our ambivalence about passivity, dependence, and domination which the presupposition of freedom covers up. Put more simply, Meursault's taboo punishment appears to be derived from a repressed wish to renounce our freedom and autonomy in imitation of Meursault.

Absurdities and Ambivalences of Modern Freedom

So far, I have argued that what is really 'absurd' about *The Stranger* is not Meursault's idiosyncratic personality, but the ambivalent emotions that he ignites in the fictional society that tries him and in the readers of the novel who judge and interpret him. Absurdity in *The Stranger*, then, is not a property of a single character, but is evident in the interactions between the characters of the novel, within the dynamics of the novel as a whole, and among the interpretations of its readers and critics who often find their own ways to defend against the ambivalence Meursault provokes. Drawing this relationship between absurdity and ambivalence in *The Stranger* should permit us to use the novel to reflect upon the moral, psychological, and political implications of ambivalence about freedom and our reactions to it, themes to which Camus' later work on the absurd (and the following chapters of this volume) will return.

There are a number of reasons why individuals might be ambivalent about freedom; I can only review a few in the remaining pages of this chapter. Whatever the reason, if individuals are at all ambivalent about freedom, it is important to recognize that such an ambivalence may well be *taboo* in ‘freedom-loving cultures’, especially in the United States, the ‘land of freedom’ that has idealized and identified itself with freedom throughout its history. Indeed, if “no idea is more fundamental to Americans’ sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation than freedom” (Foner 1998, xiii), then understanding *The Stranger* in the way I have proposed may reveal not only the challenges of interpreting the novel in America, but the defenses against ambivalence about freedom that might otherwise remain hidden due to the central role freedom has played in shaping American (as well as European, modern, and liberal) identities.

Marcuse’s description of the relationship between Kantian freedom, autonomy, and subjectivity is a useful place to begin. According to Marcuse, the modern, idealist subject “is rational only insofar as it is entirely self-sufficient. All that is ‘other’ is alien and external to this subject and as such primarily suspect... Self-sufficiency and independence of all that is other and alien are the sole guarantee of the subject’s freedom. What is not dependent on any other person or thing, what possesses itself, is free... Relating to the other in such a way that the subject really reaches and is united with it (or him) counts as loss and dependence” (Marcuse 1989, 60-61).

Marcuse is arguing that the modern presuppositions of freedom and reason insist upon self-sufficiency as a protection against dependence, limitation, and loss.

By internalizing freedom and equating it with independence, the modern, idealist subject is able to feel free from the contingencies and hazards (but perhaps also the blessings) of the social and natural worlds. The individual presupposes his own subjective and internal freedom, therefore, as a kind of defense against what would be an eternal and impossible struggle to win absolute freedom in reality. And while this faith in freedom grants the illusion of freedom from the established order, according to Marcuse, it ultimately reinforces that order by presupposing its necessity. "Reason and freedom become tasks that the individual is to fulfill within himself," Marcuse writes, "and he can do so regardless of external conditions. Freedom does not contradict necessity, but, to the contrary, necessarily presupposes it. Only he is free who recognizes the necessary as necessary, thereby overcoming its mere necessity and elevating it to the sphere of reason... Idealist rationalism canceled the given antithesis of freedom and necessity so that freedom can never trespass upon necessity. Rather, it modestly sets up house within necessity. Hegel once said that this suspension of necessity 'transfigures necessity into freedom'" (1989, 60).

If modern societies insist that their citizens show outward signs or "semblances" of their internalized freedom (Marcuse 1989, 60), then Marcuse might argue that they do so not with the benevolent intent of ensuring that all of their citizens are equally liberated, but because the social order in some sense depends upon free subjects who are willing to translate political necessities into ideologies of freedom. Foucault's vision of the complex interdependence between freedom and self-formation, political practice and self-practice, government and self-government helps to explain this claim. For Foucault, "power... comes to operate on and through

the conduct of the governed... Governmental power assumes a 'free subject,'... one whose subjection is consistent with forms of choice... The distinctive feature of any liberal mode of government is that it seeks to prevent the collapse of types of rule into mere domination by invoking the capacities and powers of the self-governing individual, while at the same time undertaking to foster, shape, and use those same capacities and powers" (Dean 1994, 162-163). Thus, an individual like Meursault who refuses free self-government seems to threaten those related processes of government that rely on the capacities of free subjects. Meursault not only presents an exception to the rule of 'free' methods of subjectivity and subjection, but he disrupts the harmony imagined between free and necessary conduct, threatening to uncover the contingency, dependence, and domination that the presupposition of freedom denies.

To make matters somewhat more complex, the illusory harmony provided by the presupposition of freedom is, itself, charged with ambivalence. It may be comfortable insofar as the presupposition of freedom promises protection from dreaded feelings of dependence and domination, but the comfort it offers comes at a psychic cost. That is, the task of the modern, free individual is elaborate and difficult. Marcuse described the freedom of modernity as "the freedom of interminable, arduous labor" (1989, 61). Of course, the labor Marcuse refers to here is not just labor in the economic sense, but the difficult emotional and intellectual work required for the constant creation and re-creation of the self, for the "constitution of the world for the ego," and for the production and re-production of self and reality "in recalcitrant material" (1989, 61).

Foucault's *What is Enlightenment?* echoes some of the ambivalence involved in the "attitude of modernity" toward freedom, which Foucault describes as a result of the "difficult interplay between the truth of what is real and the exercise of freedom" (1984, 39). Modern freedom, in Foucault's sense, compels persons to produce themselves in a particular and difficult way which is not entirely liberating nor entirely constraining. "To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration... This modernity does not liberate man in his own being; it compels him to face the task of producing himself" (1984, 39).

In *Escape from Freedom* and elsewhere, Erich Fromm described the psychological pressures of this difficult task in relation to the rise of Nazism and totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Fromm's work points to an ambivalence about freedom that derives from the "ambiguity of freedom" (1994, 23), which consists of the helplessness and alienation caused by freedom, on one hand, and the gift of human culture on the other (1994, 31-32). This "ambiguous gift" of freedom is difficult to bear (1994, 32), especially in the modern world where individuals are often overwhelmed by "feeling[s] of isolation and powerlessness" (1994, 118). Thus, Fromm claimed that individuals may seek to "get rid of the burden of freedom" (1994, 151), through authoritarianism, destructiveness, or conformity.

While Fromm tended to characterize modern freedom as a kind of 'aloneness', this chapter has tried to emphasize the way that the presupposition of freedom may serve as a shared convention, a *rite de passage* into the kingdom of ends, and, in some sense, a unifying principle of the modern group. While modern freedom may

isolate and alienate the self in some respects, Camus' novel points out that an ideal of freedom unites Meursault's society against him, as it enforces its demands for freedom on the wills of all its subjects. If there is duplicity in *The Stranger*, it lies in the self-deception and hypocrisy of Meursault's judges who evince, in Fromm's words, "man's capacity for distorting the reality of his own experience to conform to socially established norms" (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 106-107), as they mistake, warp, and demonize Meursault in order to defend themselves against the threat he poses.

Like Fromm, Kant invokes the familiar story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden as a metaphor for ambivalence about freedom. In his *Speculative Beginning of Human History*, Kant claims that "this step," from the garden to humanity's exile, "is at the same time connected with man's release from nature's womb, a change that is, indeed, honorable, but also full of danger, since she drove him out of the safe and secure state of childhood" (1983, 53). The memory of the blissful garden haunts Kant's man, who dreamed of "trifl[ing] away his existence in peaceful inactivity and permanent peace" (1983, 53). But, standing in the way of such fantasies, freedom and reason "restlessly and irresistibly drove... him to undertake with patience the toil that he hates, to chase after the frippery that he despises, and to forget death itself, which fills him with horror — all for the sake of those trivialities whose loss he dreads still more (1983, 53).

It is remarkable that Kant expresses the ambivalences of reason and freedom in such powerful terms, for we are much more accustomed to the Kant who disparagingly equates unreason and unfreedom with foolish childishness. The

opening line of his famous essay, “What is Enlightenment?,” is a case in point: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity” (1983, 41). If we combine these accounts, we may imagine that part of the ambivalence of freedom resides in a desire to return to this state of immaturity, to a condition of being chosen for instead of choosing, a condition of dependence rather than independence. If the sacrifice involved in becoming a free subject is something akin to the sacrifices and renunciations of enlightenment or adult human development, then Meursault’s undeveloped self, his childishness, and his often-invoked “animality” (Dobrovsky in Brée 1962, 74), may be taboo precisely because they activate a repressed desire to return to the ease and security afforded by “the shackles of permanent immaturity” (Kant 1983, 41).

We have already discussed the influence of Jean Grenier upon his pupil’s conception of the desire for unity and the ambivalence of the absurd. Meursault seems to exercise a Kantian unfreedom not unlike that of Grenier’s sage, a “sovereign moral indifference” that “makes no distinctions between beings,” “abolishes values,” and refuses “to make use of any part of [his] liberty” (Grenier 1967, 52-54). Like Grenier’s sage, Meursault refuses the most basic tenets of freedom, subjectivity, and responsibility. And like Grenier’s sage, Meursault submits his will to his inclinations and the inclinations of others, permitting himself to be dominated by his physical impulses, by other wills, by necessity, and by nature. As opposed to the Kantian demand that the free individual reason, will, and act in full possession of his faculties, Meursault’s “supreme and incomparable freedom... does not assist him in acting or controlling, but rather toward [*sic*] giving himself free reign and letting himself be

dominated by using a will toward *dépossession*” (Grenier 1967, 101). What is partly enviable about Meursault and Grenier’s sage is their indifference to the demands of freedom, a paradoxical freedom-from-freedom that “frees us of everything, and first of all from ourselves” (Grenier 1967, 93). By abandoning freedom, will, and reason, Meursault’s curious unfreedom holds an ambivalent attraction because it offers the possibility of making “all psychological constraints disappear” (Grenier 1967, 53).

In *Rethinking Freedom*, C. Fred Alford has identified among his interview subjects a split-consciousness about freedom, for which he offers a borderline cultural diagnosis, one which also reflects the ambivalence about freedom and autonomy this chapter has sought to explore. Alford’s informants define freedom as power and money, on one hand, but as abandon, passivity, and loss of self-control, on the other (2005, 24-25). His subjects are ambivalent about freedom in that most do not speak highly of the ‘symbols’ of freedom like those found in the Bill of Rights, and many are unable to unite the disparate conceptions of freedom they offer.

Alford’s informants seem to desire both abandon and omnipotence, which they express in complex and alternating equations of freedom with intoxication, power, money, relaxation, and death. While part of their difficulty in navigating freedom seems to have to do with a kind of symbolic impairment, a difficulty in making use of the symbols that moderate the polarities of freedom, they also give voice to an ancient ambivalence about freedom: the “hidden desire of Western civilization to abandon the Promethean struggle for mastery, built as it is on a vain attempt to assuage the wounded will” (2005, 78). Thus, while departing slightly from Alford’s conclusions, we may suggest that part of the borderline conception of

freedom is attributable to an ambivalent desire to be free and unfree, to possess the self absolutely and to escape the burdens that freedom levies upon the self.

Critical Absurdities

Whether we imagine the source of ambivalence about freedom to be the desire for sage-like indifference, a fear of freedom, a weariness of the demands of freedom upon the self, or just a recognition of the precariousness of its defense against domination and dependence, it should be clear that these emotions all play important roles in the fundamental ambivalence with which I have analogized the absurd: the desire for unity and the desire for the self. We may now summarize the complex relationship between the absurd and *The Stranger*. Meursault's behavior is taboo because it threatens to make us absurd, but by inciting repression and retribution from those whom he provokes, it is not so much Meursault as his judges and interpreters who reveal the primary dangers in contending with the absurd: the tendencies to defend, to scapegoat, and to inflict aspects of our absurdity upon others. What may be surprising is that this repressive and retributive reaction is apparent *not only* within the plot of the novel, but among the critics and scholars who, in their own ways, have felt compelled to 'punish' Meursault.

Leo Bersani is right that we must think of Meursault's trial as "a novelistic competition between the prosecuting and the defense attorneys" where "each of the lawyers tries his hand at spinning a yarn about Meursault's 'soul'" (1970, 220). But these novelizing tendencies are apparent not only in the fictional court that tries Meursault, but in the efforts undertaken by readers, scholars, and critics of *The Stranger* to classify and diagnose Meursault. Most of these classificatory and

diagnostic efforts, like the efforts made by the prosecutor, judge, and jury that try Meursault, attempt to force Meursault to be free, revealing even among the most thoughtful critics the presence of an ambivalence about Meursault's taboo and a defensive and even hostile reaction to it.

Readers and critics from a variety of fields have approached Meursault as pathological, ill, or flawed, as someone whose behavior is "the result of a lack" (Tisson-Braun 1988, 49). René Girard's famous early interpretation saw Meursault as a childish "derelict" who committed murder and misbehaved mainly to get attention from others. "The only way to illuminate the esthetic structure of *L'Étranger*," Girard claims, "is to resort to the social phenomenon called 'juvenile delinquency'" (1964, 531). According to Girard, Meursault, like the juvenile delinquent, "wants to be punished, in order to express his grief without confessing its real cause, even to himself. In the last sentence, Meursault practically acknowledges that the sole and only guillotine threatening him is the indifference of *les autres*" (1964, 531, emphasis in original). Girard is, of course, referring to the final words of the novel in which Meursault proclaims that when he walks to his death, all he requires "for everything to be consummated" and "to feel less alone" is "a large crowd of spectators... that greet [him] with cries of hate" (Camus 1988, 123).

In his interpretation of Meursault as a delinquent, Girard intuits (but does not make quite enough of) the contradiction and ambivalence in *The Stranger*. "We must not speak of the novel's unity," Girard claims, "but of its consistent duality and of its radical ambiguity. How could the novel be one when its creative process is truly 'divided against itself'? Every page of the work reflects the contradiction and the

division inherent in the murder; every denial of communication is really an effort to communicate; every gesture of indifference or hostility is an appeal in disguise” (Girard 1964, 530). And yet, even though he recognizes the ambiguity of the novel, Girard and other critics have focused too much attention on Meursault’s character, neglecting to understand Meursault’s relationship to his society and to his readers.

Meursault’s sociopathic behavior has been attributed to an astounding variety of diagnosable illness, most more psychiatrically-precise than ‘delinquency’. Meursault has been diagnosed with affectlessness (Nathanson 1997; Stone 1996), alexithymia (Poser 2002), “chronic covert self-destructive aggressiveness” (Leites 1947), the “Meursault phenomenon” of psychoimmunization (Anthony 1987), impeded curiosity (Goldberg 2002), post-traumatic stress (Krystal 1978), sadomasochistic object-indifference (Makari, 1988), “oral scopophilic and sadomasochistic ecstasy bordering on panic” (Leites in Longstaffe 1990, 57-58), and other questionable conditions (see Costes 1973; Duff 1977; Duncan 2002). These clinical diagnoses of Meursault appear in a surprisingly wide variety of fields, from literary criticism to clinical psychology, philosophy, criminal law, and child development.

But without turning their attention to the grounds upon which such judgments are made, diagnoses of Meursault are deflections of his challenge to the presupposition of freedom, effectively protecting the presupposition of freedom from any threat he poses. Even those who seek to save Meursault from the degradations of literary-psychiatric diagnosis end up returning to questionable interpretive tactics. Moya Longstaffe, for instance, eschews explanations of Meursault as psychologically

unfit, only to exclaim that “what critics see as indifference or lack of awareness... is a wary rationality, a defense against the pain of loss and an endeavor to rationalize the irrational” (1990, 58). While rejecting a clinical diagnosis, Longstaffe imputes to Meursault an unwarranted rationality and a complex, defensive psychic process, even calling it “the vital key to his personality” (1990, 58).

I have said that Meursault’s treatment by the court that tries him and by scholars who interpret him reflect an attempt to force him to be free, to borrow the paradoxical phrase from Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. The social contract, Rousseau tells us, “tacitly entails the commitment — which alone can give force to the others — that whoever refuses to obey the general will will be forced to do so by the entire body. This means merely that he will be *forced to be free*. For this is the sort of condition that, by giving each citizen to the homeland, guarantees him against all personal dependence” (1987, 150, emphasis added). Just as the unfree individual in Rousseau’s social contract threatens the polity through his vulnerability to personal dependence and his propensity to dominate and be dominated, admitting that Meursault is not free opens the door to ambivalence and anxiety about dependence, domination, and the agonies of self-making that the presupposition of freedom denies.

To ‘force Meursault to be free’, then, is to interpret Meursault’s lack of freedom as an illness, an insanity, or even a reflection of a social or cultural alienation. By doing so, the presupposition of freedom, ostensibly shared by all ‘sane’ and ‘healthy’ subjects, remains unchallenged. Even the presupposition of Meursault’s particular freedom remains intact, insofar as his difference is accounted for as a disastrous but explicable, classifiable deviance from his baseline, a baseline perhaps

established in those student days to which Meursault obliquely refers (see Camus 1988, 41). It is to imply that Meursault would be free, if his freedom had not been eroded by disease or despair. To force Meursault to be free is, therefore, to approach him with uncritical reliance upon the categories of modern psychology, philosophy, and social science which, themselves, presuppose the freedom of the subject.

In the psychic social contract of the kingdom of ends, and, indeed, in our contemporary intellectual culture, living individuals and fictional characters alike may be forced to be free in this sense, for the alternative is to admit the possibilities of dependence, domination, and self-loss as well as ambivalent desires *for* the same. That such a possibility has been largely ignored in interpretations of Meursault, one of the best-known and most thoroughly-studied characters in all of modern literature, suggests that the ideology of the kingdom of ends still holds a powerful influence even in an circumspectly critical era.

In the remainder of this volume, I discuss Camus' moral condemnation not only of indifferent positions like Meursault's, but of equally dangerous defensive reactions to absurdity and ambivalence like the processes involved in taboo punishment described here. The following chapter begins the process of re-evaluating the morality and politics of the absurd by outlining Camus' theory of rebellion in order to clarify the grounds for the moral distinction he draws between immature, univalent responses and mature, creative responses to absurdity.

Chapter 7: Revolt, Rebellion, and Revolution

What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion.

— Camus, *The Rebel*

The final three chapters of this dissertation argue that drawing an analogy between absurdity and ambivalence not only clarifies the *meaning* of the absurd, but also offers us a more cogent understanding of the moral and political *consequences* of absurdity. This chapter examines Camus' notions of revolt, rebellion, and revolution as they are presented in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. Chapter 8 applies the concept of ambivalence to the moral relationship between absurdity and rebellion and argues that we should understand absurd rebellion as the achievement of an 'absurd position', as a mature response to ambivalence, as resistance against defensive reactions, and as the maintenance of the grounds for creative and moral action. The concluding chapter of this volume discusses the political implications of these moral reflections and presents two political puzzles, Camus' praise of Kaliayev and the Russian assassins of 1905 and Camus' controversial position on the Algerian War, as miniature case-studies through which we may test, critique, and perhaps even re-define the political philosophy of the absurd.

The Road to Révolte

Camus was not shy about discussing morality. One may even say that moral philosophy was his true intellectual home, the place to which his thought regularly returned. In nearly all of his works, both those that treated the absurd explicitly and

those that did not, Camus sought to investigate the moral challenges, the moral paradoxes, and the moral implications of absurdity. Cruickshank put it nicely: “Valery once wrote that Sisyphus at least got something — well-developed muscles — out of his absurd task, but Camus wants much more than this. He wants to discover whether some kind of spiritual muscularity can be obtained, and if so, to what positive use it may be put” (1960, 57).

And yet, Camus struggled to define the relationship between absurdity and morality throughout his career. Avi Sagi remarks that both a play like *Caligula* and a polemic like his *Letters to a German Friend*, “convey [Camus’] frustration with the conclusions deriving from the absurd” (2002, 107). As early as 1939, Camus had written that “to ascertain the fact of absurdity can only be a beginning, not an end” (Cruickshank 1960, 92). Certainly at that time, it was not clear whether that ‘beginning’ would inaugurate virtue or vice. In 1951, Camus claimed that by analyzing the sentiment of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he was “seeking to make that ‘clean sweep’ which precedes constructive effort” (Cruickshank 1960, 92), suggesting that his later works, and those more explicitly devoted to moral and social issues, would be built on the ruins of the former. Confirming this suggestion, in the opening pages of *The Rebel*, Camus declared that the absurd had “wiped the slate clean,” had lead us “down a blind alley” (1956b, 10), and could now only be considered “an experience to be lived through, a point of departure” (1956b, 8).

While Camus’ attention to the moral consequences of absurdity is apparent in almost all of his works, his understanding of those consequences appears to change with time. There seem to be significant moral differences, for instance, between

Camus' treatment of the indifferent Meursault, the four absurd heroic types outlined in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the figure of Sisyphus himself, Dr. Rieux, Tarrou, and the lesser heroes of *The Plague*, Kaliyev and the Russian assassins of 1905, the amorphous hero of *The Rebel*, Daru of "The Guest," D'Arrast of "The Growing Stone," and Jean-Baptiste Clamence in *The Fall*, just to name a few. And there seem to be significant differences between each of these characters and Camus' formal and abstract characterizations of the morality of the absurd. But I will argue that a basic moral orientation to the absurd unites all of these figures; that is, if we are able to see it, and see them, properly.

The basic moral dilemma facing Camus' characters is that absurdity, by its very nature, seems unable to proffer moral values. Unlike an all-encompassing doctrine, the absurd seems poorly suited to respond clearly or consistently to moral, political, or social dilemmas. "What rule," Camus asks rhetorically in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "could emanate from that unreasonable order? The only truth that might seem instructive... is not formal: it comes to life and it unfolds in men. The absurd mind cannot so much expect ethical rules at the end of its reasoning as, rather, illustrations and the breath (*souffle*) of human lives" (1955, 68). As Camus begins *The Rebel*, he re-emphasizes the fact that "the absurd, considered as a rule of life, is... contradictory." And he asks, again rhetorically, "What is astonishing about the fact that [the absurd] does not provide us with values which will enable us to decide whether murder is legitimate or not?" (1956b, 9).

Camus has already argued in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that easy resolutions of the absurd must be rejected. "In the universe of Husserl the world becomes clear and that

longing for familiarity that man's heart harbors becomes useless. In Kierkegaard's apocalypse that desire for clarity must be given up if it wants to be satisfied...

Kierkegaard suppresses my nostalgia and Husserl gathers together that universe. That is not what I was expecting" (1955, 49). Instead, the absurd person, who is certainly tempted by these easy solutions "in which all the past contradictions have become merely polemical exercises," must refuse them because "this is not the way he experienced them. Their truth must be preserved, which consists in not being satisfied" (1955, 49). As discussed in Chapter 5, these easy resolutions of the absurd are refused not exactly because they conflict with truth but because they conflict with an ambivalent desire for the self.

But if we really want to examine absurd morality, even this explanation will not suffice. An interpretation of Camus' absurd as ambivalent conflict could never tell us which desire we *ought* to heed; instead, it would merely beg the question of *why* we should be faithful to experience or faithful to desire, absurd, ambivalent, or otherwise. Cruickshank rightly deems Camus' entire line of argument on this point "unsatisfactory," arguing that his reasoning is weak and self-defeating and that "logic is outraged" by Camus' confusion of premises and conclusions (Cruickshank 1960, 68). Indeed, if he is not careful, Camus may be fairly accused of trying "to derive from the absurd values which the absurd, by definition, cannot recognize" (Cruickshank 1960, 69).

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argued that the absurd suggested an ethic of quantity. "If I convince myself that this life has no other aspect than that of the absurd," Camus wrote, "if I feel that its whole equilibrium depends on that perpetual

opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles, if I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living” (1955, 60-61). This moral position strikes many readers as questionable, and Camus even senses that such an ethic could be deplorably self-indulgent, even nihilistic, unless it is more carefully defined. He knows that “the most living: in the broadest sense... means nothing,” that “the notion of quantity has not been sufficiently explored. For it can account for a large share of human experience” (1955, 61).

Camus wishes to qualify the ethic of quantity, then, by associating it with insight, fullness of experience, and awareness. “A man’s rule of conduct and his scale of values have no meaning except through the quantity and variety of experiences he has been in a position to accumulate” (1955, 61). In this odd but important qualification, the quantity and variety of experience are indices of its meaning and moral value. That is, Camus is not arguing that the quantity of experience *is* a value, but that values have value to the extent that they are informed by a certain quantity and variety of experience. “I see, then, that the individual character of a common code of ethics lies not so much in the ideal importance of its basic principles as in the norm of an experience that it is possible to measure” (1955, 61). Here, ‘quantity’ somehow becomes ‘quality’ and Camus strives to find value in the accumulation of experience by suggesting in a footnote that the accumulation of one billion ions differs “not only in quantity but in quality” from a single ion (1955, 62n).

Even if we suspend our disbelief in these questionable qualifications, Camus’ quantitative ethic would appear to lead the absurd person into a position where he

renounces values only to make it his duty to accumulate experiences, to “break all records,” or to “win his own code of ethics” (1955, 62). Yet Camus cautions against this approach, for in it he finds not only a base competitiveness, but a philosophy that would not fail to do “as so many of those men I was speaking about earlier [the existentialist philosophers] — choose the form of life that brings us the most possible of that human matter, thereby introducing a scale of values that... one claims to reject” (1955, 62). This ethic of quantity, then, leads to either egotism or contradiction.

So Camus tries once again to qualify his ethic. “It is up to us,” he claims, “to be conscious of [experiences]. Being aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum” (1955, 62-63). Now it seems to be a conscious awareness of experience that counts. But even ‘awareness’ is the wrong term for Camus, as we quickly learn that the ideal is actually a “feeling, a feeling on this earth” (1955, 63). Camus explains: “The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man. But the word ‘ideal’ rings false in this connection. It is not even his vocation, but merely the third consequence of his reasoning. Having started from an anguished awareness of the inhuman, the meditation on the absurd returns at the end of its itinerary to the very heart of the passionate flames of human revolt” (1955, 63-64). Somehow, and it is not at all clear how, the ethic of quantity, with its likelihood to devolve into egotism or contradiction, has transformed into awareness, into feeling, and finally into revolt.

We are forced to say, without malice, that in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus’ explanation of revolt is incomprehensible. Camus claims that after having appreciated

the absurd, “life will be lived all the better because it has no meaning” (1955, 53). Here, Camus means to suggest that there is no call for suicide, which, after all, was the topic of his essay. Rather, Camus argues that recognizing the absurd offers a kind of value that its denials did not. “Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully,” Camus maintains, and “no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness” (1955, 53). In order to embrace our absurd fate, apparently it is necessary to keep before our minds the absurdity of existence.

But no one would ever want to do such a thing, Camus tells us, because the experience of absurdity is so unpleasant. Therefore, and without justification, Camus argues that, in spite of its unpleasantness, and in spite of the fact that we do not particularly want to preserve our absurd and ambivalent feelings, we must nevertheless constantly maintain our experience of the absurd. What the absurd person must avoid, Camus insists, is “negating one of the terms of the opposition on [*sic*] which he lives” because doing so “amounts to escaping it” (1955, 53). This recognition of the absurd, the admission of the unpleasant tensions associated with it, and the rather groundless directive not to escape the unpleasant experience of it all elliptically define Camus’ notion of revolt.

Camus argues that “to abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience” (1955, 53-54), equating the maintenance of absurd experience with conscious revolt. But it is strange to argue that revolt is a consequence of absurdity and, at the same time, that it is the very experience of absurdity. Perhaps it is even more strange to equate revolt

with a kind of maintenance of the absurd 'problem' which struggles not to be abolished or eluded. If Camus is serious about the idea of revolt, it appears to be a revolt against abolishing the absurd that he is calling for, and not a revolt against the absurd at all. In this light, absurd revolt is really a kind of counter-revolt, and in that sense, might even be considered more conservative than rebellious.

We have already discussed Camus' famous comparison of the absurd and Orpheus' wife, Eurydice. Camus told us: "Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt" (1955, 54). But here we can see just how convoluted Camus' logic and language can be. In what sense is ceaselessly contemplating something a revolt? This statement can only make sense if we understand Camus' revolt to be a revolt against the cessation of contemplation of the absurd, or even against the cessation of love for it. Even if these reflections were less abstruse, Camus' rapid and changing explanations of revolt would only make the concept more elusive. He writes: "Revolt is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second. Just as danger provided man the unique opportunity of seizing awareness, so metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole of experience. It is that constant presence of man in his own eyes. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it" (1955, 54). At this point, Camus' revolt becomes incomprehensible.

The Is and Ought of the Absurd

In response to the confusion surrounding the meaning of absurd revolt, many scholars have attempted to re-define the absurd as a 'fact' or a 'datum' from which a moral value might be deduced. The argument runs something like this: 'If the absurd is a fact of existence, then any sincere person is obliged to admit it, respect it, and uphold it, and by upholding absurd facts, additional formal values may be discovered.' But such an approach is difficult to defend for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it relies on an assertion of a quasi-positivistic stance on truth and value that clashes with the spirit of Camus' absurd *oeuvre*. Furthermore, there are no empirical grounds upon which one might claim absurdity to be a 'fact', according to any usual understanding of that term.

If absurdity is not exactly a 'fact' but, rather, a 'datum' of human experience, then it is not clear what, if any, content such a datum would hold or what, if any, truth-value such a datum could oblige us to 'uphold'. To make matters worse, scholars who take this approach are forced to argue that the logical consequence of the 'fact' or 'datum' of the absurd is that one must accept it only to rebel against it. But this conclusion makes little sense on its face, and makes even less sense when we are told that the reason we must rebel against the absurd is precisely because we must seek to 'uphold' or 'preserve' the datum of the absurd as 'true'.

In his otherwise exciting book, Avi Sagi makes two arguments on these points which are quite difficult to reconcile. First, he claims that when faced with the 'data' of the absurd, "the meaning of the authentic decision is to embrace the absurd," because "the decision to endorse the absurd reflects the immanent disposition toward

clarity, as well as the readiness to express this disposition at all times. Paradoxically, the decision to endorse the absurd implies a harmony between the individual and her/his basic given data” (2002, 78). This is essentially the position I have described above. But three chapters later, Sagi writes that “the problem that Camus identified is: How to remain within the revolt without falling into the absurd? In other words, Camus acknowledges in *The Rebel* that the absurd is evil and injustice, and rebellion is a response that refuses to return to the absurd itself” (2002, 111). In the first instance, the absurd is clearly presented as data that one embraces in accordance with one’s supposed ‘immanent disposition toward clarity’ and the implied ‘harmony between the individual and her/his data’. But in the latter, the absurd is defined as ‘evil and injustice’ against which one must rebel.

This particular confusion is common in the literature on Camus, the absurd, and revolt, and is likely responsible for the general misunderstanding that surrounds both the thinker and these concepts. In an attempt to answer what they see as Camus’ *is-to-ought* problem, philosophical interpretations like Sagi’s have only begged more questions: Why would an ‘immanent disposition toward clarity’ compel us to recognize the absurd when the absurd, it seems, defies clarity? How can we embrace the absurd as truth, but also fight it as evil? And what possible grounds are there for interpreting absurd morality with reference to what appears to be the ethical analogue of a correspondence theory of reality, the correspondence between ‘the individual and her/his... data’?

These questions find only more convoluted answers as critics, in their struggle to decipher the relationship between absurdity and revolt, strain to find tacit ethical

principles in Camus' philosophy, principles like 'lucidity', 'authenticity', 'honesty', and 'integrity' (see Duff and Marshall 1982; Golomb 1994; Sagi 1994, 2002). John Cruickshank argues that Camus' theory of revolt is built upon the absurd wager, Camus' inversion of the Pascalian wager, and the twin values of "lucidity" and "innocence," making revolt "the first practical consequence of the wager" (Cruickshank 1960, 70). By Cruickshank's account, Camus' revolt operates according to values which are somehow exempt from the category of those values which may be wagered. Cruickshank tries to explain this odd argument:

To claim experience of the absurd... means that there is a value judgment, a value, involved when this claim is made. To speak of the absurd at all is to have rebelled, in the sense of having said 'no', to some state of affairs. This means, then, that to speak of the absurd is ultimately to affirm, within the individual who has spoken this way, the presence of something against which the absurd is an offence. To say 'no' is to impose limits, and within these limits, we must conclude, values of some kind are still preserved despite the apparent destruction of all values by comprehensive nihilism. At this early stage the nature of such values may appear obscure, but their existence is no longer in doubt. (1960, xvi)

But considering Camus' efforts to discredit mysterious, transcendent values in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it hardly seems fair to assert the presence of transcendent values which then inform the absurd method of questioning other values. If lucidity, innocence, integrity, honesty, or authenticity are values that we put aside, as it were, during the process of absurd wagering, why are these particular values exempt? It is really no more justifiable than making an *is-to-ought* leap to argue, as Sagi argues, that we must conceive of the absurd as "a normative negation, predicated on the assumption that we negate *within* a set of values" (Sagi 2002, 109, emphasis added).

The line of thinking that seeks to resolve Camus' *is-to-ought* problem tells us that we must suppose that values like lucidity simply pre-exist for Camus and that such pre-existing values inform the morality of all of his work, that "Camus can still only claim that evasion of lucidity is a sin by using some moral standard lying entirely outside the world of the absurd" (Cruickshank 1960, 68). Of course, if it were possible to establish values 'outside the world of the absurd', then the absurd would present so few problems that we could practically put *it* aside in our discussion of morality. This interpretation, then, is tantamount to avoiding the entire absurd dilemma by asserting that *a priori* values like lucidity (or innocence, integrity, authenticity, or justice) are not bothered by absurdity. Such an assertion merely sidesteps the core of the absurd dilemma, not least because it makes absurdity, itself, irrelevant to absurd morality.

Instead, what Camus contended, albeit paradoxically, was that the act of rebellion both affirmed values that do not exist and created those values in its act of rebelling. In the following chapter, I will argue that the only coherent way to understand this idea is to see absurd rebellion as a mature integration of ambivalence and a balance of rational and irrational action that makes further moral and creative activity possible. While this idea still requires some elaboration, it excludes the possibility that the philosophy of the absurd simply advances a set of non-problematic, *a priori* moral values which can be kept apart from or outside of the notions of absurdity and revolt.

A related unfortunate solution to the problem of absurd morality, one that both Camus and his critics have defended, is that human beings, precisely because of their

absurdity, possess inherent meaning and value. As discussed earlier, this argument is presented succinctly in Camus' *Fourth Letter to a German Friend*: "I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one" (Camus 1960, 28). While appealing, this logically ridiculous argument has been taken by some critics as the foundation for a humanistic absurd ethic.

What is worse, this argument has led critics to fundamentally mistake the absurd, equating absurdity with meaninglessness and equating revolt with an insistence on meaning. However, not only does such an equation over-simplify Camus' vision of absurdity, but it ignores an ambivalence about meaning which is part of the ambivalence of the absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* and elsewhere, Camus argues that the notion of moral purpose, while attractive for its clarity, is also destructive of the individual experience valued in the opposing polarity of the absurd. "To the extent to which I hope," Camus writes, "to which I worry about a truth that might be individual to me, about a way of being or creating, to the extent to which I arrange my life and prove thereby that I accept its having a meaning, I create for myself barriers between which I confine my life. I do like so many bureaucrats of the mind and heart who only fill me with disgust and whose only vice... is to take man's freedom seriously" (1955, 58).

The desperate reasoning that asserts human meaning on the grounds that we desperately long for meaning follows the same steps for which Camus criticized Kierkegaard in his despair over the possibility of eternal nothingness. Kierkegaard, says Camus, decides that there must be salvation because the alternative is so utterly

unpleasant. And Camus' riposte to this argument is crisp: "This cry is not likely to stop the absurd man. Seeking what is true is not seeking what is desirable" (1955, 41). The argument that human beings have meaning because they wish they had meaning does not advance a logical claim but, rather, repeats an emotional plea, one that is not useful in formal ethics, but which may be useful if we wish to understand the appreciable moral differences between different reactions to the ambivalence of the absurd. To do so, the remainder of this chapter reviews the fundamental moral distinctions between revolt and revolution as Camus describes them in *The Rebel*.

Revolt and Rebellion in The Rebel

Apart from its obvious social commentary on revolutionary doctrines, *The Rebel* is Camus' most elaborate attempt to answer the lingering questions and problems suggested by revolt and, therefore, to address the moral and political implications of the absurd. Herbert Hochberg, who elsewhere passes devastating judgments about Camus philosophical efforts, reads *The Rebel* as Camus' attempt to distill a moral stance from his depiction of the absurd, to show "how a value, and hence an ethic, arises from the absurdist position... to reconcile the possible conflicts that may arise due to his holding life and freedom to be basic values" (Hochberg 1965, 96).

Similarly, James Woelfel suggests that we read *The Rebel* as Camus' "corrective, serving to refocus the philosophical discourse" on the absurd, perhaps in light of the failure of *The Myth of Sisyphus* to provide answers to many important questions (Sagi 2002, 108).

Camus' favored term, *révolte*, has been translated into English most often as it was in Bower's widely-read translation, as 'rebellion', probably to achieve a parity

between ‘rebellion’ and ‘the rebel’. ‘Rebellion’ is quite close, but is perhaps not as precise as the English term ‘revolt’, which might often be a suitable alternative. The title of the work in question, *L’Homme révolté*, means ‘man in revolt’, while also connoting ‘revolted man’, suggesting not just action but refusal, and refusal with a subtle hint of revulsion or disgust. Throughout *The Rebel*, ‘rebellion’ is contrasted with ‘revolution’, the latter being absolute and total, while the former, in its original form at least, is measured, self-conscious, and scrupulous.

But both ‘revolt’ and ‘rebellion’ are, unfortunately, inadequate terms to describe the complex position that absurd morality ultimately defends. This matter involves something much more than terminology and translation. As Cruickshank points out, “we have in *L’Homme révolté* a multiple use of the term ‘révolte’ which causes confusion as did a similar use of the term ‘absurd’ in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*” (1960, 118). What is more, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and often in *The Rebel*, the type of action that Camus describes does not accord with any usual meanings of the terms ‘revolt’ or ‘rebellion’. This terminological mismatch is best seen in Camus’ repeated explanations of the imperative of absurd revolt: “to remain on that dizzying crest” (1955, 50), “to remain in this middle path where the intelligence can remain clear” (1955, 40), and to “tread a vertiginous ridge by refusing all the suggested ways of escape” (Cruickshank, 1960, 62). Camus names this type of action *révolte*, but it is difficult to see why it should not more appropriately be named ‘enduring’, ‘refusing’, ‘resisting’, or even ‘remaining’, for it is ultimately the ability to endure the ambivalence of the absurd and to refuse and resist temptations of defense that define the real moral action of the absurd.

“Let us insist again on the method,” Camus writes. “It is a matter of persisting. At a certain point on his path the absurd man is tempted... He is asked to leap” (1955, 52-53). But the absurd person persists, resists the temptation to leap, and struggles to maintain his balance. Even as Camus passes from an examination of suicidal logic in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to a study of homicidal logic in *The Rebel*, the moral activity of the absurd person remains the same: an “obstinate resistance” (Camus 1956b, 15), a “scandalized resistance” (Cruickshank 1960, 60, 94), and a “will to resist” (Carroll 2007, 54). In fact, in his letter to Roland Barthes on *The Plague*, Camus wrote not of ‘revolt’ or ‘rebellion’, but described his novel in the language of resistance: “*The Plague* can apply to any resistance against any tyranny” (Camus 1968, 340).

Unless carefully considered, the language of ‘rebellion’ may obfuscate the moral and political philosophy of the absurd. As Camus, himself, points out, “rebellion, after all, can only be imagined in terms of opposition to someone” (1956b, 28), but the absurd person is also called to oppose himself, even to oppose his own unconscious temptations and desires. In contrast to the masthead of the journal *Combat* (“From Resistance to Revolution”), in *The Rebel* and his later writings, Camus wishes to take us in precisely the opposite direction: from revolution to resistance. Of course, for Camus, and in this volume, ‘resistance’ must maintain its political and moral meaning and not its psychoanalytic connotation of resistance to analysis, insight, or progress. In the chapters that follow, I often refer to aspects of absurd rebellion in the language of ‘refusal’, ‘tolerance’, ‘maintenance’, and ‘resistance’ because these terms help to more accurately describe the complex activity

at the heart of absurd rebellion. While some may think that disputing the connotations of ‘rebellion’ or adding shades of meaning to this now well-established term takes liberties with Camus’s work, I would argue, on the contrary, that remaining faithful to an unfortunate term at the expense of the accuracy of the concept would be the less thoughtful path.

Apart from any confusions associated with the term, there is a surprising lack of conceptual clarity about rebellion in *The Rebel*. The first invocation of rebellion defines it as a kind of ‘evidence’: “The first and only evidence that is supplied me within the terms of the absurdist experience, is rebellion” (Camus 1956b, 10). With this inauspicious beginning, Camus will describe rebellion as both a cause and a consequence of absurdity throughout the entire text of *The Rebel*, announcing both a call for and a caution against rebellion, inasmuch as rebellion may lead to the same excesses it opposes. There is some reason for this confusion, for Camus admits that “the absurd is itself, contradiction. It is contradictory in its content because, in wanting to uphold life, it excludes all value judgments, when to live is, in itself, a value judgment. To breathe is to judge. Perhaps it is untrue to say that life is a perpetual choice. But it is true that it is impossible to imagine a life deprived of all choice. From that simplified point of view, the absurdist position, translated into action, is inconceivable” (1956b, 8).

Camus confesses that the contradictions of absurd thought seem to prevent the definition of a clear moral stance, even in extreme cases. Given the absurd reasoning, we can only “return to the untenable position from which we were trying to escape. In actual fact, this form of reasoning assures us at the same time that we can kill and that

we can not kill. It abandons us in this contradiction with no grounds either for preventing or for justifying murder, menacing and menaced, swept along with a whole generation intoxicated by nihilism, and yet lost in loneliness, with weapons in our hands and a lump in our throats” (1956b, 8). The absurd person may have sought refuge from false ideologies in the absurd method, but he now finds himself utterly lost, unsure whether to approve of or condemn murder.

Nevertheless, while absurd morality can not offer formal values, Camus finds the absurd *experience* to be somewhat less limited. It was, after all, “legitimate to take absurdist sensibility into account, to make a diagnosis of a malady to be found in ourselves and in others,” in spite of the fact that “it is nevertheless impossible to see in this sensibility, and in the nihilism it presupposes, anything but a point of departure, a criticism brought to life” (1956b, 9-10). That is, if we take the absurd as a doctrine or a set of propositions, a view which I have attempted to criticize throughout this work, we run headlong into either self-contradiction or nihilism. We mistake ourselves and the absurd “from the moment that we claim to remain firmly in the absurdist position and ignore *the real nature of the absurd*, which is that it is an experience to be lived through, a point of departure, the equivalent, in existence, of Descartes’s methodical doubt” (1956b, 8, emphasis added). Although “the absurd leads us down a blind alley... it can, by returning upon itself, open up a new field of investigation” (1956b, 10). Camus is, of course, not insisting that we define the absurd *as* methodical doubt. Quite to the contrary, only by understanding the absurd as an experience of ambivalence, as a kind of ‘intellectual malady’ with dangerous

consequences and about which we must be vigilant, will we be able to comprehend the moral consequences of the absurd.

In *The Rebel*, Camus no longer argues simply that the awareness of absurdity leads to the moral conclusion of rebellion, as he did in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He does claim that absurd awareness leads to absurd rebellion, but he also defends a corollary proposition: that rebellion leads to an awareness, a fuller awareness of the absurd. “With rebellion, awareness is born” (1956b, 15), and this awareness, “no matter how confused it may be, develops from every act of rebellion: the sudden, dazzling perception that there is something in man with which he can identify himself, even if only for a moment” (1956b, 14). Thus, rebellion seems to serve as both the foundation and the consequence of the absurd. “The basis of these values is rebellion itself. Man’s solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and rebellion, in its turn, can only find its justification in this solidarity... In order to exist, man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limit it discovers in itself — a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist. Rebellious thought, therefore, cannot dispense with memory: it is a perpetual state of tension” (1956b, 21-22). Whether it is sensible to claim that rebellion is a beginning but also an end is a question that has troubled many of Camus’ readers. The tortured logic of rebellion, the source of its values, and the vaguely defined awareness of solidarity it both depends upon and yields, are only comprehensible if we take the long road and begin with the final words of the passage quoted above: rebellion is ‘a perpetual state of tension’.

The Rebel abounds with explanations of rebellions gone wrong, rebellions turned revolutionary, and rebellions turned nihilistic. But the image of the authentic,

absurd rebel is difficult to locate amidst Camus' criticisms. In the end, one feels that the only consistent guideline for true moral rebellion is the perpetual state of tension Camus describes, a tension generated by refusing and resisting the excesses apparent in all of the examples of rebellions gone wrong. But, at the risk of stretching the analogy too far, just as Freud and Klein devoted less time to describing 'healthy' psychological development than to detailing its detours and deviations, Camus is most interested in outlining what we might think of as the psychopathology of rebellion, in the hope that the exceptions will help define the ideal.

Metaphysical Rebellion and the Origins of the Absurd Ideal

Metaphysical rebellion is first presented as rebellion against the human condition and "against the whole of creation. It is metaphysical because it contests the ends of man and of creation" (Camus 1956b, 23). We are immediately confused by the example with which Camus begins. It is not of a person rebelling against the human condition but of a slave rebelling against his condition of enslavement. From this example we must draw our first conclusions about the metaphysical rebel: that "he affirms that there is something in him that will not tolerate the manner in which the master treats him," that he "repudiates" his master "as a master," and that he demands that "a common value, recognized by all as existing in each one... should be clearly recognized in himself because he knows that, without this principle, crime and disorder would reign throughout the world" (1956b, 23).

Camus' metaphysical rebel, who is also a slave, appears to rebel on the grounds of unity, a unity we have already discussed in the context of absurd ambivalence. He "attacks a shattered world in order to demand unity from it...

Metaphysical rebellion is a claim, motivated by the concept of a complete unity, against the suffering of life and death and a protest against the human condition both for its incompleteness, thanks to death, and its wastefulness, thanks to evil” (Camus 1956b, 23-24). The rebel, in his earliest complete formulation, seems to be a principled protestor, acting on behalf of a vague indignation, defying the condition in which he finds himself, and denouncing his masters, earthly or transcendent, for the outrage of his condition. But even this abstract and lyrical expression of the content of metaphysical rebellion, as we will see, does not do justice to the complexities of the concept.

We are quickly introduced to one such complexity: a deeply ambivalent relationship to the master who oppresses. Camus is aware that “if the metaphysical rebel ranges himself against a power whose existence he simultaneously affirms, he only admits the existence of this power at the very instant that he calls it into question... Then he involves this superior being in the same humiliating adventure as mankind’s, its ineffectual power being the equivalent of our ineffectual condition. He subjects it to our power of refusal, bends it to the unbending part of human nature, forcibly integrates it into an existence that we render absurd, and finally drags it from its refuge outside time and involves it in history, very far from the eternal stability that it can find only in the unanimous submission of all men” (1956b, 24-25).

While the rebel defies his master (and it is not always clear what kind of master and what kind of oppression Camus is talking about), the rebel is strangely dependent upon him in order to oppose him. As discussed above, Camus knew that “rebellion, after all, can only be imagined in terms of opposition to someone. The

only thing that gives meaning to human protest is the idea of a personal god who has created, and is therefore responsible for, everything” (1956b, 28). The rebel, therefore, seeks not merely to deny the existence of a master, but rather, to affirm his existence only to remove him from his station and to subject him to the rebel’s will. The rebel can not be an atheist, as Camus points out. On the contrary, he is obliged to affirm the existence of a master precisely to defy him. If he rebels against God, the rebel seeks something more complex than the denial of God: he seeks to bring God down to earth to be tried, judged, and perhaps even punished in a way vaguely reminiscent of the metaphorical trials of God in the French Enlightenment.

The Hellenistic philosophers, Epicurus and Lucretius, are absurd rebels, according to Camus, but they are of a different order than the classical Greeks because the former banish the gods from their ‘citadels’ (1956b, 28). Camus’ inclusion of these two figures in the history of rebellion seems to contradict the very definition of rebellion we just heard, for Epicurus and Lucretius have little interest in tearing gods down from their throne or forcing them to confront the reality of human existence; rather, they simply wish to ignore the gods. Of course, Epicurus’ ‘citadel’ is not fortified not with pleasures and delights, as is often thought, but with only the most meager rations to ensure the absence of pain and fear and, we might imagine, the turmoil of clashes and conflicts with deities. Quite confusingly, Camus claims that Lucretius turns Epicurus into a revolutionary who, instead of being overly meek and “defensive” in his rebellion (1956b, 30), goes too far and seeks to usurp the gods’ thrones. “The Greek heroes could aspire to become gods, but simultaneously with the

gods who already existed,” Camus explains, “Lucretius’ hero [Epicurus], on the other hand, embarks on a revolution” (1956b, 31).

Against all rebelliousness, Camus argues that religions, and particularly Christianity, have disarmed rebels by making suffering appear necessary and by justifying the means with the ends. Camus follows Nietzsche in figuring Christianity as a kind of counter-revolutionary force against metaphysical rebellion, one that defuses the explosiveness of rebellion by offering up a God who suffers, dies, and experiences evil (1956b, 32). In response, for the last two millennia “all the efforts of the freethinkers are bent on making Christ an innocent, or a simpleton, so as to annex Him to the world of man” in order to posit and then rebel against the jealous God of Abraham (1956b, 34-35).

But in Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, rebellion is no longer “directed only against a cruel and capricious divinity” (Camus 1956b, 33). Formerly it was “the God of the Old Testament who [was] primarily responsible for mobilizing the forces of rebellion” (1956b, 32), but, according to Camus, Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche dramatically expanded the aim and scope of rebellion by demanding “an accounting from the God of love Himself” (1956b, 33). Here, we see not only the close reliance of Camus’ absurd morality on the thought of Nietzsche, but also a trace of the ambivalence implied by the activity of metaphysical rebellion, for it is a God of love against whom one strikes and from whom one demands an accounting.

Such is our introduction to the history of metaphysical rebellion, which Camus continues to trace throughout the works of Sade, the Romantics, Stirner, French poets like Lautremont and Rimbaud, and surrealists like Breton. But all of

these figures fail, to one degree or another, to limit their rebellion; instead, they are tempted by excess. We are not wrong to feel a tension between Camus' praise of metaphysical rebels and his criticism of their excessiveness. It is particularly difficult not to react negatively to Camus' implicit comparison between figures like Epicurus and the Marquis de Sade. We even wonder how Sade, the ultimately excessive advocate of evil, can be classed as a rebel at all. Furthermore, we are tempted to ask if the excessiveness that Camus laments in most of his rebels might not be in the very nature of a metaphysical rebellion that takes as its target nothing less than God and all creation. Indeed, Camus claims that metaphysical rebellion "is always directed at everything in creation which is dissonant, opaque, or promises the solution of continuity" (1956b, 100-101). To read this is to be struck not only by how immense an enemy the rebel sets for himself, but also by how complex, even plural, Camus' rebellion must be. How else could one rebel against everything that is dissonant, opaque, *and* continuous? And how strange it is that the rebel, who makes "a perpetual demand for unity" (1956b, 101), must also rebel against everything that promises 'continuity'.

While motivated by a desire for unity, the poor rebel seems to be fighting too many battles at once. "The rejection of death, the desire for immortality and for clarity, are the mainsprings of all these extravagances, whether sublime or puerile... The rebel does not ask for life but for reasons for living. He rejects the consequences implied by death... To fight against death amounts to claiming that life has a meaning, to fighting for order and for unity" (1956b, 101). It seems that the rebel fights against dissonance, opacity, continuity, hope, death, and meaninglessness. If

we add to these the enemies set out in the original definition of rebellion, the rebel fights against God and masters, his servile status, the incompleteness of life, its wastefulness, the human condition, and all of creation.

To make matters even more complex, the rebel fights these many battles because he is scandalized by the unjustified injustice of the world. Oddly enough, it is “*not* the suffering of a child... but the fact that the suffering is not justified” that motivates Camus’ absurd revolt (1956b, 101, emphasis added). Thus, Camus’ rebel “is seeking, without knowing it, a moral philosophy or a religion” (1956b, 101). But if the rebel seeks a moral philosophy or religion, he does so by rejecting moral absolutes and God, along with any justifications for injustice that moral absolutes or God might provide. The only reasonable way to make sense of these matters is to interpret absurd revolt as an integrative response to the ambivalent desires for unity and for disunity that motivate it, an interpretation which I pursue in this chapter and whose consequences I explore in the next. To develop this interpretation, it is necessary to turn to Camus’ treatment of rebellions gone wrong, his explanation of how, when, and why rebellions become excessive, revolutionary, and criminal.

When Good Rebellions Go Bad: Revolution

“The rebel defies more than he denies,” says Camus. But the rebel’s strange enmity for his master is “animated by the desire to conquer,” leading the rebel down a dangerous path toward destruction. “The slave,” Camus tells us, “begins by demanding justice and ends by wanting to wear a crown” (1956b, 25). Camus knows that it is easy for good rebellions to go bad, even that rebels are not entirely to blame for this overreaching; in fact, he presents revolutionary excess as a natural tendency

and a logical consequence of rebellion. “Each time that [rebellion] deifies its rejection or absolute negation of what exists it destroys. Each time it blindly accepts what exists and gives voice to absolute assent, it destroys again... One can be a nihilist in two ways, in both by having an intemperate recourse to absolutes... But they are identical, consumed with desire for the true life, frustrated by their desire for existence and therefore preferring generalized injustice to mutilated justice” (Camus 1956b, 101-102).

Revolution is “the logical consequence of metaphysical rebellion” because once justifications of divine right and sacred authority are thrown into doubt, rebels tend to replace them with equally absolute alternatives (1956b, 105). “If God is denied, the King must die” because the new law, which “wants to be total and to rule absolutely,” commands it in the name of the new justice (1956b, 114). By a similar reasoning, for Camus, the history of modern revolution really begins with Rousseau because his ‘new gospel’ of the social contract establishes the absolute sovereignty of the people, introducing an absolutist logic into history and politics that has colored all rebellions and revolutions since. Camus claims that after the absolutism of the social contract, theories of sovereignty, the state, the general will, and other forms of political power would have to be considered absolute, infallible, and inviolable (1956b, 114-121). It is natural, but not therefore justifiable, that the rebel slave seeks to “dominate in his turn. His insurrection against his condition becomes an unlimited campaign against the heavens for the purpose of bringing back a captive king who will first be dethroned and finally condemned to death. Human rebellion ends in metaphysical revolution... When the throne of God is overturned, the rebel realizes

that it is now his own responsibility to create the justice, order, and unity that he sought in vain within his own condition, and in this way to justify the fall of God. Then begins the desperate effort to create, at the price of crime and murder if necessary, the dominion of man. This will not come about without terrible consequences, of which we are so far only aware of a few” (1956b, 25).

Rebellion goes wrong, therefore, if it succumbs to the extreme tendencies which are very much at the center of its activity. These tendencies are internal to the logic of both rebellion and revolution and are only *managed* differently by the self-limiting rebels who somehow stop short of posing ‘all or nothing’ justifications for their actions. This self-limiting step is one that Camus consistently identifies with ‘true’ rebellion and with the maintenance of an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual tension that we may equate with an ambivalent, absurd position. Camus explains:

Those who rejected, for the sake of the world they had just created, all other principles but desire and power, have rushed to suicide or madness and have proclaimed the apocalypse. As for the rest, who wanted to create their own principles, they have chosen pomp and ceremony, the world of appearances, or banality, or again murder and destruction. 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 conversion, it is the desperate appeal for order that rings through this insane universe. Their conclusions have only proved disastrous or destructive to freedom from the moment they laid aside *the burden of rebellion, fled the tension it implies*, and chose the comfort of tyranny or of servitude. (1956b, 100, emphasis added)

The rebel begins by seeking to defy the forces that excuse injustice, but, if he ends badly, it is because in so doing he abandons the difficult integration of tensions that motivated his revolt, yielding to the temptation to idealize his own force and his own excuses in their place. Camus’ rebel “only wanted to conquer his own existence and to maintain it in the face of God. But he forgets his origins and, by the law of

spiritual imperialism, he sets out in search of world conquest by way of an infinitely multiplied series of murders” (1956b, 103). He did not set out to destroy his enemies, but something about the activity of rebelling leads him to lose his balance and to justify doing so on the grounds of his superior vision of justice. Although these reflections are not really much more than common diagnoses of the excesses of the French Revolution combined with Camus’ twist on the master/slave dialectic, they contain telling resonances with the psychology of ambivalence. It is hoped that we can extract from his commentary something that helps us discern the exact differences between rebellion and revolution and, therefore, something that will reveal the moral and political consequences of the absurd.

Revolution, for Camus, is not yet real, only conceptual. “There has not yet been a revolution in the course of history,” he writes, somewhat surprisingly, because “if there had ever been one real revolution, there would be no more history” (1956b, 106-107). Rebellion, on the other hand, is not primarily conceptual because rebellion is conceptually incoherent. While revolution, for Camus, is an overthrow of authority followed by the institution of an absolute regime, a regime assured of its own authority and justice, “rebellion is, by nature, limited in scope. It is no more than an incoherent pronouncement” (1956b, 106).

Revolution finds strength in “the realm of ideas” because it insists upon coherence and makes unequivocal and absolute demands. It is “an attempt to shape actions to ideas, to fit the world into a theoretic frame” (Camus 1956b, 106). Rebellion, on the other hand, is inconsistent, remaining only “an obscure protest which involves neither methods nor reasons” (1956b, 106). While this

characterization of rebellion meets with some difficulty because of Camus' earlier description of the rebel's demand for clarity and unity, we can help this argument to make sense if we imagine that the demands for clarity and unity made by the rebel are only *part* of his more complex ambivalent activity, while the revolutionary resolves his ambivalence and yields to his extreme position absolutely. That is, like the contradiction implied in the rebel's affirmation and defiance of his oppressor, the rebel takes a logically incoherent but psychologically mature stance that both insists upon unity and rejects it. In fact, this incoherence and ambivalence will serve to check the extreme tendencies of rebellion by which the rebel might have otherwise been led to revolutionary excess.

According to Camus, Hegel's "Napoleonic" philosophy is largely responsible for revolutionary excess because his thought incarnates "truth, reason, and progress... in the progress of the world" (1956b, 134). According to Camus, Hegel translates values into historically achievable ends rather than using them as guides for historical means, making "the rule of action... action itself," and reducing all moral calculations to the law of efficacy (1956b, 134). Contemporary revolutionaries have purchased from Hegel "the weapons with which they definitively destroyed the formal principles of virtue. All that they have preserved is the vision of a history without any kind of transcendence, dedicated to perpetual strife and to the struggle of wills bent on seizing power" (1956b, 135). The result of this unchecked will to power is, of course, that historical progress may become the rule and final justification for any crime.

Whether Camus accurately represents Hegel here (and many have argued that he does not) is beside the point of this chapter. What is worth noting is that Camus is engaged in a complex struggle with what he sees to be the tragic emotional logic in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, starting with the notion that "consciousness of the self is... of necessity, desire" (1956b, 138), a fight for recognition which both demands and denies the difference of the other. As I will discuss more extensively in the next chapter, the desire for absolute recognition becomes self-defeating and destructive at the moment when it denies or controls the independent existence of the other on whom it depends. In fact, Camus finds the tragedy of Hegelian logic to be "*absurd*, since, in the event of one consciousness being destroyed, the victorious consciousness is not recognized as such" (1956b, 139, emphasis added).

It is not merely coincidental that Camus refers to the "ambiguity" of Hegel's thought at least four times in this section while using the word "absurd" twice to describe Hegelian dialectics (1956b, 141-145). Although Camus clearly condemns the influence of Hegelian philosophy, there is a resemblance between Camus' review of Hegel and the nearly dialectical ambivalences present in Camus' own depiction of absurd revolt. What distinguishes them, at least in Camus' eyes, is that Hegel's followers resolve the dialectical tensions while Camus' rebel would not. For this reason, Camus often compares revolution to a mere transposition of absolute authority. "The dialectical miracle," Camus argues, "the transformation of quantity into quality, is explained here: it is the decision to call total servitude freedom... Historical thought was to deliver man from subjection to a divinity; but this liberation demanded of him the most absolute subjection to historical evolution. Then 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” (1956b, 234). These reflections may have extra poignancy given the discussion about the ambivalences of freedom in the preceding chapter.

Camus’ argument is simply that when values are subordinated to history, then history itself appears as the only value and power becomes the only ethic. As Chigalev says: “Beginning with the premise of unlimited freedom, I arrive at unlimited despotism” (Camus 1956b, 175). In Hegel’s logic and the logic of his followers (Camus often means to target Marx), Camus argues that history becomes a ‘horizontal’ transcendent, merely replacing but not fundamentally changing the absolutism of the ‘vertically’ transcendent thought that preceded it. “Totality is, in effect, nothing other than the ancient dream of unity common to both believers and rebels, but projected horizontally onto the earth deprived of God” (Camus 1956b, 233).

Camus claims that the key to understanding revolutionary excess, therefore, is its tendency to justify evil, whether on the grounds of an after-life or a future life. While Camus’ rebel supposedly refuses servility, crime, and excess on the grounds of his self-contradictory and ambivalent position, the revolutionary justifies these evils in light of a historical end which outweighs them. These qualities of revolutionary thought (its ideality, its resolution of internal tension, its tendency to justify crime in

the name of a ‘horizontally’ transcendent future) all define the moment when rebellion has been “diverted from the path of truth” (Camus 1956b, 148).

The Hegelian emphasis on history and objectivity, whose impact Camus connects directly to the evils of Dachau and Karaganda, derive from the fact that it has sought to destroy parts of the ambivalence of the absurd. “Hegel, and then the Hegelians have tried... to destroy, more and more thoroughly, all idea of transcendence and any nostalgia for transcendence... The conqueror is always right; that is one of the lessons which can be learned from the most important German philosophical system of the nineteenth century” (Camus 1956b, 136-137). By denying ‘vertical transcendence’ while focusing all aspirations on human history and progress, in Camus’ eyes, Hegel and his followers seek to make themselves into something like Grenier’s absolute heroes, revolutionaries with *attitudes singulières* whose only rules of action are their own.

The point at which the ambivalence of absurd rebellion gives way to the resolution of revolution, then, is the point when the rebel’s ‘extreme tension’ is eluded by a split, an idealization, or a devaluation. In that moment, we demand reconciliation, action, and even the unanimous approval of history, betraying the original ambivalence of absurd rebellion. According to the revolution, Camus charges, “man is nothing... if he does not obtain from history, willingly or by force, unanimous approval. At this exact point the limit is exceeded, rebellion is first betrayed and then logically assassinated, for it has never affirmed, in its purest form, anything but the existence of a limit and the divided existence that we represent: it is not, originally, the total negation of all existence. Quite the contrary, it says yes and

no simultaneously... When rebellion, in rage or intoxication, adopts the attitude of 'all or nothing' and the negation of all existence and all human nature, it is at this point that it denies itself." (Camus 1956b, 250-251)

At this 'exact point', the rebel is tempted to resort to a radical and primitive solution. He risks falling out of his 'absurd position' into an 'all or nothing' stance in which his tensions, constraints, and anxieties are resolved with the help of a split. In the following chapter, I argue that the best way to understand the moral and political differences between the extreme stance of the revolutionary and the measured stance of the rebel is to compare them with the differences between immature, regressive, or pathological reactions to ambivalence and mature, integrative, and creative responses.

Chapter 8: A Grounding for an Absurd Morality

Man does not show his greatness by being at one extremity, but rather by touching both at once.

— Pascal, Epigraph to Camus' *Letters to a German Friend*

In any case, if he is not always able not to kill, either directly or indirectly, [the rebel] can put his conviction and passion to work at diminishing the chances of murder around him. His only virtue will lie in never yielding to the impulse to allow himself to be engulfed in the shadows that surround him and in obstinately dragging the chains of evil, which with he is bound, toward the light of good.

— Camus, *The Rebel*

Nearly all attempts to define the absurd philosophically and to derive from it precise moral values, including Camus' own, have met with failure. On the other hand, most readers find Camus' lyrical accounts of the emotions and experiences of the absurd to be persuasive and appealing. If John Cruickshank is right that Camus is just more convincing "when speaking to us as a moralist than when speaking to us as a logician" (1960, 64), this work argues that the disparity between the emotional persuasiveness and the logical perplexity of the philosophy of the absurd presents us with an opportunity and not only a failure. We may take advantage of that opportunity neither by condemning Camus' thought as illogical nor by attempting to defend its logic with reference to hidden ethical principles, but by interpreting the absurd and its moral and political consequences in their emotional context.

As discussed earlier, Camus imagines absurdity to be a kind of mental illness, '*un mal de l'esprit*', an intellectual or spiritual sickness. The cause, the nature, and the consequence of this figurative illness form the subject of the absurd investigation. But if an ambivalence between the desire for unity and the desire for the self lies at the root of the absurd sickness, then does the morality of the absurd ask us to remain

sick? In a sense, it does. As we saw in Chapter 5, “the important thing,” for Camus, “is not to be cured, but to live with one’s ailments” (1955, 38). But, if we want to be a bit more precise, the ambivalence of the absurd is no more a sickness than the ambivalence described by Bleuler, Freud, or Klein in Chapter 4. While the ambivalence of the absurd may be experienced as a kind of illness, and may lead to greater pathologies if not managed properly, ambivalence is not precisely the illness or the cure, although it lies at the root of both sickness and health.

How, then, are we to manage this ambivalence at the heart of the absurd? How should we respond to its discomforts, its dynamics, its pressures? If it is possible to ‘integrate’ the ambivalence of the absurd without resolving it, repressing aspects of it, or splitting it in two, then how is that delicate integration achieved? This chapter argues that the moral philosophy of the absurd is an attempt to contend with these very questions. The absurd may be understood as the painful expression of an ambivalence for which we must *not* seek extreme, primitive, defensive, or destructive cures, cures that would be, as the saying goes, worse than the disease. Understanding the absurd in this way permits us to discern moral differences between responses to the absurd. Although the philosophy of the absurd can not proffer formal moral values, it can provide a framework by which different responses to the challenges and tensions associated with ambivalence and absurdity may be shown to lead to morally and politically distinct outcomes.

Absurd Borderlands

What distinguishes absurd rebellion from revolutionary excess is the maintenance of the ambivalent tensions at the heart of the absurd. As discussed in Chapter 7, Camus’

goal in *The Rebel* was to define a method by which we might restrict the extreme movement of rebellion, to maintain its original tensions and avoid what Camus sees as its tragic but natural tendency to over-reach. When the rebel turns revolutionary, he supplants the authority he has just destroyed with his own, replacing the limits he originally defended with new claims to limitlessness. He is able to justify his excess in the name of the new religion of the revolution and with the help of a clear division of the world into all and nothing. But we should remember that these extreme consequences “only occur to the extent that the rebel forgets his original purpose, tires of *the tremendous tension created by refusing to give a positive or negative answer*, and finally abandons himself to complete negation or total submission” (Camus 1956b, 25, emphasis added).

Instead, what Camus is advocating is a kind of rebellion that includes an active resistance *against itself*, against its own tendencies toward negation and submission, absolutism and nihilism. In contrast to the abandon, excess, and absolutism of revolution, the absurd rebel endures his ambivalence, integrates his powerful and opposing desires without resolving them, and “limits himself as a matter of principle, to refusing to be humiliated without asking that others should be” (Camus 1956b, 18). This chapter explores in more detail *how* the rebel comes to endure, integrate, and limit his rebellion thus.

The key to understanding the measure and limitation of absurd rebellion lies in our interpretation of the absurd as ambivalent, because it is only with reference to his ambivalence that the rebel resists the divisive and extreme pressures of the absurd. Against the natural tendency of rebellion to exceed its own purpose, to go too far, the

rebel tries to limit his rage and aggression, but he *also* refuses to over-limit or renounce them for fear doing so will lead him to resignation, compliance, or conformity. Only the maintenance of a ‘tremendous tension’ between limitation and over-limitation, between over-aggressiveness and meekness will allow the rebel to avoid becoming complicit in the crimes to which his original rebellion was opposed.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus used topographic metaphors to describe the absurd position. “At that last crossroad where thought hesitates, many men have arrived and even some of the humblest... The real effort is to stay there, rather, in so far as that is possible, and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions” (1955, 10). These ‘distant regions’ are often referred to by Camus as a “desert” of the mind and heart (1955, 22), or a “deadly” climate (1955, 29). And yet their locations are not exactly distant, as Camus suggests. Rather, they are betwixt and between. Their barrenness, to explore the metaphor, seems to derive not precisely from their remoteness from a single place, but from the fact that they are between two homelands, belonging perhaps to neither, along a kind of deserted and sparsely inhabited border. If the rebel is an exile, as Camus often argues, he is a double-exile, forced from one home but prevented from entering the neighboring land as well. In this chapter, I argue that the work of the absurd rebel is to transform that deserted borderland into a ground for creative and moral action.

Throughout *The Rebel*, Camus locates his rebel on the difficult brink between two worlds, the sacred and the human. “The rebel is a man who is on the point of accepting or rejecting the sacred and determined in laying claim to a human situation in which all the answers are human” (1956b, 21). Both affirmation and negation of

the sacred will lead the rebel down a dangerous path toward absolutism. Thus, the rebel who measures himself must choose neither. Instead, he suffers “a new form of anguish and a new happiness” (1956b, 70), always tensed by the in-betweenness and ambivalence that strains him. Maintaining that ambivalence is “an exhausting struggle” (1956b, 70), not least because it represents an exile from the simple clarity and security of either absolute.

Camus often mixes metaphors and strays from single images, but he always returns to the absurd with characterizations of its tension, its in-betweenness, its brinks and clefts, all of which express its powerful ambivalence in much the same way that tension, in-betweenness, and frightful clefts were visible themes in the psychoanalytic accounts of ambivalence discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Of course, as discussed earlier, one of the most profound dangers of living along the edges and borderlands of absurdity, “lies in the subtle instant that precedes the leap,” a leap that would, to complete our metaphor, take the rebel back home (1955, 50).

Absurd Responses

In response to the discomfort of this double exile, Camus argues that we face a variety of choices. We can react to our position in a number of morally and politically distinct ways. Avi Sagi has outlined what he sees as four potential reactions or responses to the absurd, an enumeration which is, unfortunately, incomplete. The first is what Sagi calls the “dichotomical response,” an expression, he claims, of “radically incompatible reactions, for which no justification exists” (2002, 109). Sagi is referring to the contradiction between absurdity and moral action implied by Camus’ statement that “awareness of the absurd makes murder seem a matter of indifference”

because “if we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance” (Camus 1956b, 5). By his “dichotomical response,” Sagi means yielding to the feeling that nothing has any meaning, which gives us “clearance for murder” (2002, 109).

Sagi’s second response, which is difficult to distinguish from the first, is “indifference and passivity in the face of evil, which means ‘accepting the murder of others’” (2002, 109). Perhaps the only difference here is that one accepts murder but does not actively participate in it. Of course, this distinction between active and passive murder, direct and indirect murder is one that Camus finds specious. The intimate relationship between direct and indirect participation in evil, as we will see more clearly in Chapter 9, forms a central part of Camus’ absurd moral and political philosophy. Sagi’s third reaction, which follows closely upon the second, is “making ‘the cult of efficiency’ the supreme value” (2002, 110), which we have discussed in the previous chapter in terms of Hegelianism and modern revolution. And the fourth response, according to Sagi’s schema, is “rebellng against evil” (2002, 110).

While it is admirable to attempt to enumerate and classify all the possible responses to absurdity, Sagi’s categorization does not effectively capture or clearly distinguish between all the choices we face. A truly precise list would be difficult to produce, if only because there are no clear limits on the number of responses and there are no clear demarcations between one response and another. Indeed, it is part of Camus’ argument in *The Rebel* that one response to the absurd leads naturally into another, that absolutism and nihilism are inextricably linked, and that metaphysical

rebellion logically devolves into historical revolution as limited refusals become absolute affirmations or negations. Nevertheless, I think we may improve upon Sagi's list.

To do so, it is helpful to note the similarities between reactions to the absurd and a brief outline of classic defenses against ambivalence.

People defend against experiencing [ambivalence] in many ways. Those mechanisms of defense Freud mentioned include: reversing one side of the ambivalent feeling, usually by turning the negative side into a positive ('love thine enemy'); repressing one side and rigidifying the other side into a reaction-formation, for example, in the idealization of a parent; displacing or substituting a remote object or symbol for the real object; projecting, for example, resolving one's own ambivalent feelings toward a loved one who has died by blaming evil spirits; splitting or transferring the positive side of the ambivalence into an unqualified love of one person or object, and the negative side into an unqualified hatred of another. (Smelser 1998, 6)

These defenses against ambivalence mirror the responses to absurdity that Camus treats in *The Rebel*. In Camus' outline of the history of metaphysical rebellion in literature and philosophy, he highlights two extremes, absolute affirmation and absolute negation, which represent the two most basic reactions to the absurd and the two simplest ways to defend against its ambivalence. Absolute negation is passive nihilism and the tendency toward metaphysical revolution that includes the famous 'everything is permitted' that characterizes the terrible freedom of Ivan Karamazov. Absolute affirmation is separated from absolute negation only by a fine line. Absolute affirmation is to affirm all that is, as it is, as an absolute value, after eliminating all other values, ideals, universal principles, and eternal concepts (Camus 1956b, 67). With absolute affirmation, one risks defying fate and naturalizing evil.

Both of these reactions to the ambivalence of the absurd are destructive, and both may be invoked to legitimize murder. Absolute affirmation may be compared to a kind of repression, in which one suppresses the ‘negative’ side of absurd ambivalence while consciously clinging to the other. The absolutely affirmative response denies all consciousness of injustice and evil that would stand in the way of its total approval. Or rather, it denies that injustice is really unjust, which means that it also manages to suppress any standards, values, or even nostalgia for values that might speak against its idealization of reality and its affirmation of evil. The absolutely negative response may be thought of as an opposite kind of repression or as a reversal and reaction-formation in which one’s despair that ‘nothing has any meaning’ is translated into the hollow freedom afforded by the idea that ‘everything is permitted’. In either case, to repress, reverse, or “destroy one of [the absurd’s] terms is to destroy the whole” (1955, 30).

A third reaction to ambivalence not explicitly listed in Smelser’s enumeration but treated by Camus in both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* is resignation. Camus wishes to resist the condition “in which I can have peace only by refusing to know and to live” (1955, 20), a response which simply accepts ambivalence and seeks to be resigned to it, settling for hypocrisy, conformity, and complacency. Faced with ambivalence and absurdity, this response is tempting, as our choices in the absurd climate seem to be “ordered in such a way as to bring into being that poisoned peace produced by thoughtlessness, lack of heart, or fatal renunciations” (1955, 20).

These resigned and complacent responses are just as much responses to ambivalence, and destructions of it, as absolute affirmation and absolute negation.

“Opposites are closer to each other than heterogeneous characteristics. Hate and love are infinitely closer to each other than to indifference,” says Bleuler (1950, 375), explaining in the language of ambivalence what is now something of a cliché. Resignation or indifference, in this context, must be understood as an attempt to resolve ambivalence by neutralizing its force and diminishing its impact. In fact, we ought to interpret Camus’ claim that “the absurd man is the contrary of the reconciled man” (1955, 59n), to mean that reconciliation eventually destroys the ambivalence at the heart of absurdity.

I have not spoken about Meursault’s indifference or about yielding either to the desire for unity or the desire for the self as possible responses to absurdity. That is because, if Camus is right, it would be extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to yield absolutely to one or the other desire, to successfully become Meursault or Grenier’s indifferent sage. As much as we may wish to be less conflicted, to experience unity or absolute individuality non-problematically, Camus would argue that we can not. Instead, we find ways to escape the exigencies of ambivalence and absurdity by taking the paths of absolute affirmation, absolute negation, resignation, and radical splitting, which, because of their defensive nature, multiply the dangerous potential of the basic ambivalence that informs them, an ambivalence which can never be completely eliminated. The most dangerous of these paths, and the defensive reaction to absurdity to which Camus gives the most attention, is the split.

Splitting Into All or Nothing

In *The Rebel*, Camus is less concerned with complacency than with excessive vehemence. If he had written *The Rebel* today, one wonders if this prioritization of

radicalism over apathy would have been different. But even if so, Camus is deeply concerned that the rebel avoid the temptation to split because he finds it to be the most destructive response to absurdity. The rebel is tempted, according to Camus, to exceed the initial phase of limited and ambivalent rebellion by insisting on something more. “The act of rebellion carries him far beyond the point he had reached by simply refusing... The part of himself that he wanted to be respected he proceeds to place above everything else and proclaims it preferable to everything, even to life itself. It becomes for him the supreme good. Having up to now been willing to compromise, the slave suddenly adopts... an attitude of All or Nothing” (1956b, 14-15).

The ‘All or nothing’ split which Camus identifies in various places in the history and logic of rebellion is an appealing but pernicious reaction to absurdity (see 1956b, 157). It is appealing because of its simplicity and clarity: the simplest way to address ambivalence is to split its ‘terms’ and to identify wholly with one ‘term’ while rejecting the other. Camus explains: “The rebel himself wants to be ‘all’ — to identify himself completely with this good of which he has suddenly become aware and by which he wants to be personally recognized and acknowledged — or ‘nothing’; in other words, to be completely destroyed by the force that dominates him. As a last resort, he is willing to accept the final defeat, which is death, rather than be deprived of the personal sacrament that he would call, for example, freedom” (1956b, 15).

The rebel is tempted to identify himself with the ‘all’ or the ‘good’ or, at least, to be utterly destroyed by the ‘nothing’ or the ‘bad’ force that dominates him. This posture involves the rebel in processes of radical idealization and devaluation as well

as a kind of projective identification, where his identity depends upon his identification with an absolute good he has projected onto his revolutionary ideal. Like the earliest defenses of the paranoid-schizoid position in Klein's model, a certain amount of splitting likely permits the rebel to begin his fight, but, if it is not eventually abandoned, it leads him to justify crime and to sacrifice life (his and others') according to the absolute values provided by the 'all or nothing' calculus and the unquestionable good of his 'personal sacraments'.

While, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it seemed that the instant preceding the 'leap' was the instant fraught with the greatest danger, in *The Rebel*, the moment preceding the split is the crucial moment in which the rebel risks becoming the same as, or worse than, his enemy. Like Hamlet, in this moment the rebel risks becoming the criminal whose evil he seeks to avenge. And like Hamlet, the more that the rebel is able to recognize his difficult predicament, the greater will be his anxiety, for it is partly his escalating fear of losing the ability to distinguish good from evil that makes increasingly severe splits appealing; the originally well-intentioned rebel is soon tempted to embrace murder or death before compromise.

At the point that the rebel abandons the project of maintaining his absurd position, a position not entirely unlike Melanie Klein's depressive position, in which he carefully manages ambivalence, resists the temptations of extremes, and recognizes the inevitability of his involvement with evil, the rebel transforms his ambivalence into a split vision of reality supported by the extremes of idealization and devaluation. The passage from absurd and ambivalent rebellion to absolute revolution, therefore, is marked by the abandonment of ambivalence in favor of one

of the most immature and severe reactions against it. Although the splitting reaction appears to be more regressive than others, all defensive reactions, including repression, reversal, and resignation must be resisted according to the morality of the absurd because almost any suppression of absurdity permits the rebel to justify evil, to exaggerate or idealize his mission, and to deny the good or sacred qualities in others.

In one extreme scenario, the rebel splits the world into categories and is willing to sacrifice everyone, including himself, for his ideal of the good. In another extreme scenario, the rebel resigns himself to apathy, complacency, or compliance, in which he no longer resists or rebels against any injustice. The absurd moral actor, therefore, must resist not only first-order injustices, but these reactions to them. Maurice Friedman's example of the Modern Job sheds light on the higher-order rebellion implied by absurd moral action.

If the modern Promethean is marked by the either-or which holds that man must destroy the reality that faces him in order to recover his alienated freedom, the Modern Job is marked by the 'both-and' which faithfully affirms what confronts him as the 'given' of his own existence and at the same time does not submit to it but opposes and contends with it. The choice of the Modern Promethean is between submission and rebellion, and that of the Modern Job between this very either-or, in which submission and rebellion are the two sides of the same coin, and that other rebellion which holds the tension between the affirmation of oneself and the faithful confrontation of what faces one. (Friedman in Willhoite 1968, 62)

This excellent distinction between the *either-or* and the *both-and* illuminates absurd moral action as rebellion that also rebels against itself, as complex and reflexive rebellion that seeks not only to defy the other that oppresses, but that knows that both the good and the bad, both the self and the other must be preserved in order

for values to be created and sustained. Absurd rebellion, as I have argued, is a higher-order or reflexive rebellion waged with the help of experience and maturity. This is the link between the rebel's moral activity and what appeared to be Camus' hollow 'ethic of quantity' in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. As we will recall, conscious experience did not define values, for Camus, but informed them, allowing the rebel to use his experience as a resource by which to eventually confront and contend with the pressures of ambivalence and absurdity. Here, the rebel's ambivalence becomes his path to learning how to manage his ambivalence, a means by which he grows into his absurdity; his "problematic becomes a ground, the paradox of the person a stance, exile and rebellion a way" (Friedman in Willhoite 1968, 63). But it remains to clarify what the rebel makes of this ground and how he maintains his difficult way.

Ambivalence and the Limitation of Rebellion

As we have just discussed, the psychological and moral significance of ambivalence derives from both its inherent tensions and the possible reactions to which it gives rise, reactions which can either advance or restrain moral development. Just as the absurd method Camus pursued in *The Myth of Sisyphus* required vigilance, the morality of the absurd is a vigilance and a refusal to deny, to split, or to give up the ambivalence of the absurd. "In order to keep it alive, the absurd cannot be settled" (Camus 1955, 54). This absurd morality, then, is a matter of psychological endurance, "a matter of persisting" (Camus 1955, 52).

In his *First Letter to a German Friend*, Camus wrote in less abstract terms about the moral stance he attributed to the French resistance: "I know you think that heroism is alien to us. You are wrong. It's just that we profess heroism and we

distrust it at the same time” (1960, 7). In the *Second Letter*, Camus condemned his German friend for having lost just this ambivalence, for being “nothing but a single impulse” (1960, 18). Camus argued that the particular heroism of the French victims and resistance fighters derived from the fact that before seeking even to defend their country, they had to struggle with their scruples, “they had to conquer themselves first” (1960, 6). Because they sought a way forward without sacrificing part of their ambivalence over war and murder, because of their “scruples paid for with blood” (1960, 8), Camus claims that the French will have clean hands in the end, that they will have “a great victory won against injustice and against ourselves” (1960, 9).

Absurd moral action springs from ambivalence and must, in turn, recognize and renew this ambivalence in the face of the constant temptation to resolve or split it. Absurd rebellion entails a psychological resistance against the self, against the temptation to justify evil, to conform, or to otherwise de-limit the possibilities of action. In the case of the question of suicide treated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that the essential thing is “to die unreconciled and not of one’s own free will. Suicide is a repudiation. The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself” (1955, 55). Absolutes, reconciliations, and intellectual or physical suicides all relieve the individual of the burdens of absurdity, burdens which also constitute “man’s majesty” (1955, 55). The rebel’s burden is a constant insecurity, uncertainty, ambivalence, and even self-contradiction about his actions and his values. Thus, when Camus writes that “the absurd does not liberate, it binds” (1955, 67), he means that the absurd binds us to ambivalence and that ambivalence limits the possibilities of action.

Absurd rebellion and resistance is not resistance to analysis or insight, as the term is used in psychoanalytic contexts, but almost the opposite, a resistance to defensive reactions that would resolve or deny ambivalence, preventing analysis, insight, or change. The moral position Camus recommends, then, involves holding or containing absurdity in much the same way that a tolerance of “the back and forth movement between the poles of ambivalence opens the way to resolution of ambivalence by ‘living through’ possibilities to reach a point of being able to make satisfactory choices which themselves may involve future ambivalence, further exploration, evaluation, and change. Acceptance of this dialectical process is a type of *resolution* that does not involve the elimination or avoidance of mixed feelings, nor does it prematurely foreclose options presented by experiencing the world ambivalently” (Harrist 2006, 111, emphasis in original). The ability to tolerate ambivalence, like the ability to tolerate absurdity, leaves open the possibility for future ambivalent, exploratory, and changing responses to complex moral situations. Apart from the confusion created by using the term ‘dialectical’, Harrist’s common-sense description of living-through ambivalence highlights a simple but practical moral consequence of absurd rebellion.

Perhaps Camus had a hard time developing and articulating the moral consequences of his position because he was fighting so stridently against Hegelianism and Marxism which advanced their own ‘dialectical’ theories using similar language and similarly ambivalent treatments of classes and historical developments (see Camus 1956b, 197-198). But, with the help of the analogy of ambivalence, we can see the differences between Camus’ thought and the

revolutionary thought he critiques. First, the ambivalence of the absurd does not 'resolve' itself in higher and higher stages or modes of life, spirit, or action. Although tolerating the ambivalence of the absurd may permit continued ambivalent responses by the individual, there is neither inevitability nor transcendence in Camus' model, not even much gradual or historical progress. That is, the 'absurd position' is never settled, never set in stone. Rather, one is always presented opportunities to progress or regress to an absolute, revolutionary, or split position. Camus' real critique of Hegelianism and Marxism is that because of their revolutionary promises, people willingly sacrifice themselves and others for a fantasy of progress: "In the perspective of the Marxist prophesy, nothing matters" except the future" (1956b, 207). The fantasized golden age that "justifies everything" promises to end ambivalence and absurdity (1956b, 208). The revolutionary does not 'live through' ambivalence; he seeks to transcend it.

On the contrary, for Camus, no genuine rebellion can take place without returning to its absurd origins. Without its ambivalent tension, all protest becomes univocal, hollow, and eventually nihilistic. "This survey of revolt during two centuries leads Camus to the conclusion that it has become lethal to life and liberty by failing to maintain *the tension inherent in all metaphysical protest*. While the tension remained, moral values could exist, but once the tension was dropped death, violence, and moral nihilism were inevitable" (Cruickshank 1960, 102, emphasis added). Perhaps like ambivalence in its psychoanalytic context, absurdity for Camus is a sort of crucible in which mature and creative moral choices and actions are forged.

Without absurdity, any values or actions proposed would lack reference to the real challenges and complexities of living with ourselves and others.

Thus, the moral theory of absurdity proposes that we return to ambivalence in order to re-discover the limits of possible moral action. In a rather straight-forward sense, it is the rebel's ambivalence about the ideas of de-limited values and actions, about absolute negation or absolute affirmation, or about total freedom or total power, that prevent him from becoming a revolutionary. Essentially, he preserves his own "contradiction, perhaps the most subtle of all spiritual forces" (1955, 65), in order to prevent less subtle and more destructive spiritual forces from taking over.

Rebellion, then, may be understood as a kind of insistence upon limits, as an attempt to affirm boundaries by preserving the ambivalence in his absurd position. The rebel asserts a boundary when he claims, "Up to this point yes, beyond it no." In fact, Camus says, "his no affirms the existence of a borderline" (1956b, 13). The rebel does not exactly protest against his human condition, as Camus would have us believe; rather, he insists upon its basic integrity by resisting facile defenses that deny or destroy its limits. What he protests against is the regressive and destructive temptation to eliminate or abolish those limits. But he does not over-limit his rebellion either, as he might if he were consumed or paralyzed by ambivalence or excessively afraid of his own contradictions. Rather, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 9, the rebel insists upon limits even as he (paradoxically) forces himself to transgress them in their name.

Yet this transgression is not adolescent or ill-considered. As with ambivalence, the tensions of absurdity not only help the rebel defend basic

boundaries and limits, but contribute to a more mature assessment of self and a more mature recognition of others. Discussing the phenomenon of maternal ambivalence, Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer reminds us of how “‘achieving ambivalence’ (i.e. the experience of ambivalence and management of the attendant anxiety) bears the potential of self-knowledge and a more complete assessment of the other, which can promote both concern and responsibility and the necessary drawing of boundaries... Ambivalence (achieved)... does not obliterate opposed feelings but makes passion circulate, forces reflection and firms boundaries” (2001, 5). In the same way, the ambivalence of the rebel permits him to assess himself and others more completely, to tolerate the possibility of good and evil in himself and another, and to insist upon the boundaries that, ideally, protect the basic integrity of both.

As we have noted above, Camus’ absurd rebel seems to guide his action by insisting upon a limit. The rebel feels that his opponent is “‘exaggerating,’ that he is exerting his authority beyond a limit where he begins to infringe on the rights of others. Thus the movement of rebellion is founded simultaneously on the categorical rejection of an intrusion that is considered intolerable and on the confused conviction of an absolute right... It is in this way that the rebel slave says yes and no simultaneously. He affirms that there are limits and also that he suspects —and wishes to preserve— the existence of certain things on this side of the borderline” (Camus 1956b, 13).

This ‘confused’ stance of the rebel, the insistence upon a limit and the simultaneous breaking of that limit in defense of it, mirrors a kind of mature relationship to ambivalence which resists the temptation to revert to paranoid-

schizoid or borderline defenses. The rebel strives to preserve and affirm the 'good' things on one side of the borderline, but he also knows that he must not split the good from the bad, for that splitting is the exact process which he identifies in the 'exaggerated' action of his enemy.

This interpretation of the relationship between ambivalence and self-limitation explains why Camus finds the suppression of ambivalence to be responsible for the worst 'exaggerations' of absolutist ideology, violence, and terror. When ambivalence is suppressed, the moral grounding that sustains limits is destroyed. And the consequences of this loss of moral grounding are not merely theoretical. Camus finds the loss of ambivalence to be responsible for the most horrific crimes of Nazi soldiers. The extraordinarily cruel and methodical obsessiveness with which the Nazis exterminated their victims represents, for Camus, a kind of historical manifestation of a primitive defense against ambivalence. For instance:

The destruction of Lidice demonstrates clearly that the systematic and scientific aspect of the Nazi movement really hides an irrational drive that can only be interpreted as a drive of despair and arrogance... It illustrates the ravages of that irrational form of reason which is the only value that can be found in the whole story. Not only were all the houses burned to the ground, the hundred and seventy-four men of the village shot, the two hundred and three women deported, and the three hundred children transferred elsewhere to be educated in the religion of the Fuhrer, but special teams spent months at work leveling the terrain with dynamite, destroying the very stones, filling in the village pond, and finally diverting the course of the river... To make assurance doubly sure, the cemetery was emptied of its dead, who might have been a perpetual reminder that once something existed in this place. (1956b, 185)

La Mesure and Moderation

Because revolutionary thought has led to such horrifying excesses, Camus advances a claim that the source of real absurd rebellion is "thought that recognizes limits"

(1956b, 294). Relative values, relative truths, and “approximative thought,” says Camus, are the heart of absurd morality and they stand in opposition to every absolute (1956b, 295). But we become confused when we read that Camus’ treatment of rebellion and revolution is meant to demonstrate the “necessity for moderation,” or that his “law of moderation equally well extends to all the contradictions of rebellious thought” (1956b, 295). As Thomas Warren has convincingly argued, a pervasive translation error may have severely marred Camus’ moral message.

In light of Camus’ insistence upon limits and measure in his discussion of rebellion and revolution in *The Rebel*, there is little justification for translating his ‘*la mesure*’ so frequently as ‘moderation’. Rather, the spirit of the work and the contexts in which the term appears most often recommend that *la mesure* be understood with reference to Camus’ “ideal of the classical sense of proportion,” as Donald Lazere puts it (1973, 230). Warren suggests that the closest philosophical root for Camus’ *la mesure* is actually the Greek *sophrosyne*, and that it should be translated into English as either ‘measure’ or ‘measuredness’ (1992, 124-125). The difference between ‘measure’ and ‘moderation’ is apparent in both philosophical and dictionary definitions. In French, “*la mesure est objective; c’est quelque chose qu’on prend en dehors de soi pour se régler. Modération et modestie annoncent un esprit de douceur et d’humilité... Mais mesure désigne quelque chose d’extérieur, d’emprunté, qu’on a ou qu’on n’a pas*” (Lafaye in Warren 1992, 127). Josef Pieper argues that, speaking philosophically, “the current concept of moderation is dangerously close to (mere) fear of any exuberance,’ a concept signifying ‘too exclusively restriction, curtailment,

curbing, bridling, repression — all in contradiction to the classic prototype of the fourth cardinal virtue (*temperantia* or *sophrosyne*)” (Warren 1992, 128).

It is true that Bower’s choice of ‘moderation’ often makes little sense given the contexts in which *la mesure* appears. For instance, the famous line, “Rebellion in itself is *la mesure* and it demands, defends, and re-creates it throughout history and its eternal disturbances” (Camus 1956b, 301), makes little sense when *la mesure* is translated as ‘moderation’. In what sense has rebellion historically defended and re-created moderation? Is it sensible to say, further down the page, that moderation is “a perpetual conflict, continually created and mastered by the intelligence” (1956b, 301)? ‘Moderation’, here, seems too banal, too facile for the kind of complex activity that Camus intends. Is it not strange to claim that “to rebel... supposes an interminable tension and the agonized serenity of which Rene Char also speaks. But the true life is present in the heart of this dichotomy. Life is this dichotomy itself, the mind soaring over volcanoes of light, the madness of justice, the extenuating intransigence of moderation” (1956b, 302-303). It is not ‘the extenuating intransigence of moderation’, which makes very little sense, but the extreme tension implied by keeping the measure of absurdity and ambivalence that is at the heart of Camus’ moral vision.

Warren rightly points out that Camus’ ancient Greek heroes are mythical, tragic, even occasionally Platonic. And surely it seems odd to suggest that the chief virtues of Prometheus, Sisyphus, Oedipus, or even Plato’s philosophical hero emerging from the cave are those of moderation (Warren 1992, 127). In fact, Camus’ figurative language is rarely that of the ‘blending’ or ‘dilution’ that we might

associate with moderation. Rather, his language often evokes the test, the measure, or the scale. “Rebellion, cut off from its origins and cynically travestied, oscillates, on all levels, between sacrifice and murder” (1956b, 280). “In history, as in psychology, rebellion is an irregular pendulum, which swings in an erratic arc because it is looking for its most perfect and profound rhythm” (1956b, 294). And “on the very day when the Caesarian revolution triumphed over the syndicalist and libertarian spirit, revolutionary thought lost, in itself, a counterpoise of which it cannot, without decaying, deprive itself. This counterpoise, this spirit which takes the measure of life, is the same that animates the long tradition that can be called *pensée solaire*, in which, since the time of the Greeks, nature has always been weighed against evolution [*sic*]” (1956b, 298-299). These images are not of moderation but of a complex balancing, measure, and limitation that reminds us of the distinction between the extreme tension of ambivalence and the carelessness of indifference.

I think it is fair to suggest that this basic misunderstanding of *la mesure* has significantly contributed to the misunderstanding of the morality and politics of the absurd. The morality of rebellion is certainly not born of a calm and gentle spirit, of mild or prudent behavior. Indeed, an ethic of moderation too closely resembles that of both the bourgeois conformist and, as Warren points out, the nihilist dilettante whom Camus rebukes in *The Rebel*. Both of these figures “quite naturally might adopt a policy such as ‘moderation in all things,’ or some other doctrine that would not commit beyond the safety of mild, modest, average, or superficial performances” (Warren 1992, 130).

Plagues Within and Without

To understand the meaning of *la mesure*, limits, and rebellion in Camus' moral thought, it is helpful to consider Camus' most moralistic novel, *The Plague*, which treats a number of different responses to a deadly illness terrorizing the town of Oran. It is obvious that Camus intends this plague to serve as a metaphor for the Nazi terror, although he wrote to Roland Barthes that it could serve as a metaphor for any terror at any time. John Krapp has argued that *The Plague*, while it presents a strong moral voice through the character of Dr. Rieux, ultimately contains ethical ambiguities, a "vital moral dialogue among competing ethical positions," in which "no single ethical position is permitted to dominate the others" (Davis 2007, 1008). But it is by considering some of the complexities of these competing moral visions that we may advance our exploration of the moral theory of the absurd.

Competing with Dr. Rieux's lucid resistance against the plague (which is, after all, not an entirely problematic commitment considering Rieux's profession as a medical doctor), there are positions of happiness-seeking represented by Rambert, reconciliation with faith represented by Paneloux, nihilism and criminality represented by Cottard, and moral grandiosity or seeking 'sainthood without God', represented by Tarrou. None of these characters strikes us as a typical 'rebel', unless we imagine working in sanitation units as 'rebellion' against a disease. Rather, most of these characters 'resist' the plague by serving in the struggle against it in one way or another. They diagnose patients, work in sanitation units, keep the books, and in other ways resist the encroachments of the plague upon their fellow citizens. They

also resist, in different ways and to varying degrees, the temptations of license, criminality, despair, and indifference that the plague seems to offer.

Perhaps oddly, Joseph Grand is named as the hero of the story, an “insignificant and obscure hero who had to his credit only a little goodness of heart and a seemingly absurd ideal” (Camus 1948, 137). Grand, an aging clerk who resists the plague in what ways he can and who aspires to complete a novel whose first sentence he repeatedly re-writes and effaces, is “the true embodiment of the courage that inspired the sanitary groups” because he resists the plague and its temptations “without a moment’s hesitation and with the large-heartedness that was a second nature with him” (1948, 134).

What Camus *seems* to argue through his choice of narrator and hero, is that a non-problematic, natural resistance against terrors like the plague is the correct moral stance. When Rieux thanks Grand for his help, Grand reacts with surprise: “Why, that’s not difficult! Plague is here and we’ve got to make a stand, that’s obvious. Ah, I only wish everything were as simple!” (1948, 134). That simplicity is, itself, quite confusing in the context of Camus’ novel and his otherwise complex moral thought, for, if anything is clear, it is that moral calculations are not simple for Camus, that they require an extraordinary degree of tolerance for tension, ambivalence, and contradiction, for weighing and balancing possibilities and limits. But, then again, why should resistance against a plague be complex? Grand’s easy and obvious reaction is completely appropriate given the circumstances. These reflections then beg the question *why* Camus would choose a plague as his metaphor for terror if resistance to a plague is so simple while, as he would argue in *The Rebel*, the

intricacies of rebellion against human terror, tyranny, and oppression require a much more complex and subtle understanding. As noted earlier, this question has bothered many of Camus' readers and critics.

As a way to approach this question, we may read the following speech, delivered by neither Rieux nor Grand but by Tarrou. Tarrou has begun by describing the sentence of a man condemned to death by firing squad. Tarrou once mounted a fight against the death penalty, but has now come to realize that he is complicit in murder in a thousand subtle and indirect ways, a realization that vexes him.

For many years I've been ashamed, mortally ashamed, of having been, even with the best intentions, even at many removes, a murderer in my turn. As time went on I merely learned that even those who were better than the rest could not keep themselves nowadays from killing or letting others kill, because such is the logic by which they live; and that we can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody. Yes, I have been ashamed ever since; I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace... That... is why this epidemic has taught me nothing new, except that I must fight it at your side... Each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it. And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. What's natural is the microbe. All the rest — health, integrity, purity (if you like) — is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it needs tremendous will-power, a never ending tension of the mind, to avoid such lapses. Yes, Rieux, it's a wearying business, being plague-stricken. But it's still more wearying to refuse to be it. (Camus 1948, 252-253)

I have quoted this passage at length because it is arguably the most significant meditation on the morality and psychology of absurdity in the novel. Tarrou's belief in a kind of universal, collective guilt (just like his quest to be a secular saint) is a bit too extreme to be in full accord with Camus' perspective, and yet Tarrou's admission of his involvement with evil, his conclusions of personal responsibility, vigilance, and

the maintenance of mental tension, his refusal to “join forces with the pestilences,” his rejection of the judgment that leads to “rational murder,” his insistence upon “plain, clear-cut language,” his decision “to take, in every predicament, the victim’s side, so as to reduce the damage done,” and his vague intuition of a “third category” of moral action that somehow integrates the contradictions of rebellion, limits, and absurdity are all very much in line with Camus’ moral positions (1948, 253-254).

Tarrou recognizes the profound interdependence between himself and others. He recognizes the ease with which people can and do harm one another, and he sees in himself the same evil which he finds present in the world. One is almost tempted to say that Tarrou finds himself in a position of depressive guilt. Yet, Tarrou’s half-ironic quest for perfection, perhaps a response to his guilt (1948, 255), appears to be a somewhat foolish quest for personal purity that Dr. Rieux, the more obvious hero of the tale, does not share. However, near the end of the story, after Tarrou’s death, Rieux comments that Tarrou “had lived a life riddled with contradictions and had never known hope’s solace” (1948, 292), suggesting perhaps that Tarrou had never completely yielded to his fantasy of self-perfection, garnering him a bit of absurd dignity thereby.

Rieux, on the other hand, is perhaps the most stoic plague combatant and the story’s narrator, a role which he half-heartedly conceals until the end of the novel. Germaine Brée comments that “unlike Rieux, Tarrou cannot come to terms with the reality of man’s metaphysical condition nor accept man’s participation in its cruel rites. [Tarrou] is touched more deeply perhaps than Rieux at the very source of life, in his sensitivity” (1964, 123). Rieux’s methodical, practical, and even clinical approach

to the plague is lauded by some as the ideal response to evil, and yet it is impossible to ignore the way in which Rieux's actions slowly cut away at his sensitivity and humanity. Either his role as a medical leader in the fight against the plague or his role as the narrator of the story forces him to suppress his emotions. Perhaps it is both.

Rieux, in the third person, tells of his role:

This chronicle is drawing to an end, and this seems to be the moment for Dr. Bernard Rieux to confess that he is the narrator. But before describing the closing scenes, he would wish anyhow to justify his undertaking and to set it down that he expressly made a point of adopting the tone of an impartial observer... Summoned to give evidence regarding what was a sort of crime, he has exercised the restraint that behooves a conscientious witness. All the same, following the dictates of his heart, he has deliberately taken the victims' side and tried to share with his fellow citizens the only certitudes they had in common — love, exile, and suffering... To be an honest witness, it was for him to confine himself mainly to what people did or said and what could be gleaned from documents. Regarding his personal troubles and his long suspense, his duty was to hold his peace. (Camus 1948, 301-302)

This final apology is not entirely convincing. Rieux appears to be such a hard-working combatant and such a dutiful narrator that his emotion and creativity are stifled. Brée feels that “Rieux survives but is dehumanized — he knows that the plague will always be with him,” for he has seen his wife leave him for a sanatorium (even before the plague becomes a force) and thus, “Rieux has allowed one dimension of life to slip from his hands, that is, the personal, total love that links two human beings” (1964, 122). Although Rieux reacts strongly to the death of a child, his separation from his wife he almost accepts as a necessary sacrifice in his combat against the plague.

In the end, it appears that Rieux's role as doctor and his role as narrator become one and the same. Rieux knows that he has no cure for the plague and that his

job is primarily to watch, to diagnose, and to draw the necessary conclusions. Having 'the definitive word', having to "speak for all" (Camus 1948, 302), having *all* the words composes a significant part of the oppression of the plague upon Rieux. It is the toll charged for his work, demanding the eventual sacrifice of his wife, as well as Rieux's happiness and sensitivity. His role as 'diagnoser' is echoed in his function as narrator and even in his name. To pronounce the name, Dr. Rieux, in French, one unavoidably pronounces the French word for eyes, *yeux*. In fact, because the 'r' is repeated, it is almost as if the doctor's name were Doctor *Yeux*, Doctor Eyes.

In keeping with his moniker, Dr. Rieux permits himself no illusions, and yet, his clear-sightedness comes at a cost which even he occasionally describes. For instance, he admits that "his exhaustion was a blessing in disguise" because, without it, the "all-pervading odor of death might have made him sentimental" (1948, 193).

On seeing his friend, Dr. Castel, exhausted and asleep in his chair, Rieux feels a lump in his throat:

His sensibility was getting out of hand. Kept under all the time, it had grown hard and brittle and seemed to snap completely now and then, leaving him the prey of his emotions. No resource [*sic*] was left him but to tighten the stranglehold on his feelings and harden his heart protectively. For he knew this was the only way of carrying on. In any case, he had few illusions left, and fatigue was robbing him of even these remaining few. He knew that, over a period whose end he could not glimpse, his task was no longer to cure but to diagnose. To detect, to see, to describe, to register, and then condemn — that was his present function. Sometimes a woman would clutch his sleeve, crying shrilly: 'Doctor, you'll save him, won't you?' But he wasn't there for saving life; he was there to order a sick man's evacuation. How futile was the hatred he saw on faces then! 'You haven't a heart!' a woman told him on one occasion. She was wrong; he had one. It saw him through his twenty-hour day, when he hourly watched men dying who were meant to love. It enabled him to start anew each morning. He had just enough heart left for that, as things were now. How could that heart have sufficed for saving life? No, it wasn't medical aid that he dispensed in those crowded days — only information. (Camus 1948, 192-193)

In his *Notebooks*, Camus compared the minor character of the man who spits on cats from his balcony with Tarrou, while comparing Rieux to the asthmatic man who spends his days counting beans. The two may have even been intended to be mirrors, “crude replicas” of Rieux and Tarrou (Brée 1964, 123). The first, the man with the cats, “needs to establish a relation with a living being; the second reduces life to the most elementary and indifferent automatism” (Brée 1964 123). But in the end, like the bean counter, Rieux gets the last word because, in some strange way, part of himself is removed from these emotional needs, and this removal permits him to function, to fight, and to perhaps not to balk at the unsavory aspects of his combat. Rieux explains: “When a man has only four hours sleep, he isn’t sentimental. He sees things as they are; this is to say, he sees them in the garish light of justice — hideous, witless justice. And those others, the men and women under sentence to [*sic*] death, shared his bleak enlightenment. Before the plague he was welcomed as a savior... Now, on the contrary, he came accompanied by soldiers, and they had to hammer on the door with rifle-butts before the family would open it” (Camus 1948, 193).

Now Rieux is a part of a partly oppressive solution to the oppressions of the plague. As he is well aware, he must send infected citizens to die in stadiums that resemble concentration camps. He must sacrifice some for the good of others. His job and his role is to cleanse, to disinfect, to separate and segregate. Like Tarrou might have said in his speech quoted above, Camus wrote in his *Notebooks* that “there is not a single thing one does (one really does) for a human being that does not negate another human being. And when one cannot make up one’s mind to negating human

beings, this law sterilizes forever. In the final analysis, loving a human being amounts to killing all others” (1978, 199).

The moral dilemma of involvement with evil in the combat against evil turns out to be the most complex moral issue between Tarrou and Rieux: whether one should strive to keep one’s hands clean or whether such a quest for purity amounts to a kind of escape from moral realities. In light of this complex dilemma, we may see the way that Rieux is forced to constrain his love for particular human beings precisely in order to pursue his resistance on behalf of all the others. In a sense, he chooses between loving one and helping all (or most). But faced with such a choice, as we already know from Camus’ other writings, there is no ideal solution.

Rieux does his work honorably and tirelessly, it is true, and he does it because it is his duty, which is admirable. But Rieux seems to have lost some of his creativity, some of his illusions, even some of the ambivalence that Camus argues is vital to life, art, and morally valuable action. To raise this point is certainly not to condemn Rieux. Rather, Camus seems to want to show that plagues, like other terrors, demand terrible sacrifices, that there may be *no way* to combat them while keeping every aspect of our creativity and morality intact. This particular theme is not even precisely Camus’: it may be said to be a central theme of both classical tragedy and absurd literature and drama.

But while Camus’ style in *The Plague* is heavy-handed, his moral message may actually be rather subtle. Camus is *not* suggesting that Rieux, or any character, could be morally perfect, even if it were not for the plague. While Rieux’s moral voice is clearly the strongest in the novel, he is both heroic and flawed, as are all of

the novel's characters. The absurd, if it is present in *The Plague*, is present between the characters and perhaps even between the characters and the reader, where we are forced to recognize the imperfection of *all* responses to the plague, a recognition which prevents us from taking refuge in defenses and splits that deny our involvement in evil. This interpretation of the role of the absurd in *The Plague* explains Camus' choice to make the subject a disease more satisfactorily than Camus' own explanation for that choice, which was that the symbol of disease had broad applicability. If we can not avoid being involved in evil even when resisting a non-problematic, natural evil like a plague, then how much stronger, how much more careful, how much more mature must we be in reacting to the infinitely more complex moral dilemmas involved in fighting human evil.

We are warned in *The Rebel* that "absolute justice is achieved by the suppression of all contradiction: therefore it destroys freedom" (Camus 1956b, 287-288). The same reasoning that holds justice and freedom in contradictory tension applies equally to the conflicts between violence and non-violence, collaboration and resistance, murder and silence. "The contradiction of rebellion, then, is reflected in an apparently insoluble contradiction, of which the two counterparts in politics are on the one hand the opposition between violence and non-violence, and on the other hand between justice and freedom" (1956b, 286). In either case, Camus knows that absolutes are destructive while in-betweens necessitate involvement in crime and culpability. "Absolute non-violence is the negative basis of slavery and its acts of violence; systematic violence positively destroys the living community and the existence we receive from it" (1956b, 291).

Camus is aware that it is necessary to act, to resist plagues and terrors (see 1956b, 289), but the absurd rebel must act with regard to a moral rule that he finds dubious while, at the same time, transgressing the very limits he defends. This message is echoed in *The Plague* through the polyphony of moral perspectives, through the toll that trying to maintain his difficult ‘absurd position’ exacts upon Rieux, and even through the monologue of Tarrou, who, while not without his share of flaws, is the one character who is able to vocalize some of the agony and contradiction at the heart of the absurd.

Colin Davis has argued that *The Plague* is about the clearing away of contradiction, debris, and “residue,” as he calls it. This process of cleaning and clearing begins with the first rat that is found “out of place” (Davis 2007, 1012). Davis finds the novel to be a pronouncement in favor of ‘tidying up’ the world, of correcting the messiness of creation; and he seeks evidence of this motif of cleanliness not only in the story’s explicit treatment of sanitation and health issues, but in the moments of communion in which, he thinks, Camus’ characters create “a world cleansed of otherness” (2007, 1012). Davis argues that Rieux rejects ‘residue’ in his narration, because he “presides over a neatly tidied text” (Davis 2007, 1015), because Rieux insists that Rambert tell only the whole truth about the conditions in the Arab quarter, and because Rieux merges with Tarrou when the two men find reprieve from the plague by “swimming side by side, with the same zest, in the same rhythm” (Camus 1948, 257).

But Davis’ account does not do justice to the complexity of the text or of Camus’ other works, for while these urges toward cleanliness, sameness, and order

clearly exist in *The Plague*, it seems almost impossible not to notice that they stand in ambivalent relation to the countervailing forces of difference, individuality, and liberty. And Davis' bizarre conclusion, that "Camus's notion of art as the correction of reality fails to appreciate that something of value may be lost when the world is made unified and coherent" (2007, 1019), could not be more inaccurate. Somehow, this interpretation has mistaken Camus for someone else, neglecting the ambivalence in the text and in the philosophy of the absurd. Rather, as I have attempted to show throughout this volume, the desire for unity and coherence represents only half of the ambivalence of the absurd. In the character of Rieux, it is true, a particular response predominates, and yet, it is clear in the text that his stance entails certain undesirable consequences. While Rieux's eyes see all and while his voice tells all, the reader is prevented from whole-heartedly embracing Rieux's outlook, forcing the reader to re-engage the moral polylogue between all of the other characters. In this way, Rieux's slight flaws actually reveal Camus' intention to sound all of the competing voices in the novel in all of their polyphony, tension, and ambivalence.

While Davis would disagree with the conclusion I draw here, he has collected a useful list of the novel's antinomies and ambivalences, which he presents, oddly, as examples "not so much of antinomies in the strict sense as instances of how the text's clarities appear less clear" (2007, 1015). But the following 'less clear clarities' *are* the very antinomies and ambivalences at the heart of *The Plague*'s complex moral polylogue:

- (i) It is important to stand up for the truth / sometimes no one can be sure what the truth is.
- (ii) Some things are known for certain / the state of our knowledge is uncertain.

- (iii) People should speak clearly and call things by their name / human language is ambiguous and inadequate to the task of self-expression.
- (iv) Some responses to the plague are preferable to others / no one has a secure basis on which to condemn other people's decisions and beliefs.
- (v) There are no heroes / some people are more heroic than others.
- (vi) On balance there is more to admire in people than to despise / on balance people are selfish and ignorant and have short memories.
- (vii) Everyone should join in the struggle to defeat the plague / the plague cannot be defeated. (Davis 2007, 1015)

Each of these antinomies may be supported by excerpts of dialogue spoken by different characters at different points throughout the novel. This illuminating (although not exhaustive) compilation condenses many of the contradictory views expressed by various characters in the text. Each of these voices struggles with itself and with others, but none finds absolute resolution. Thus, what some critics have claimed to be a weakness of the novel, we may now see as one of its strongest moral messages: "The novel struggles against itself, wanting to clarify and to disambiguate, to call things by their proper name, but also stumbling at every stage, finding strangeness and ambiguity seeping into its fabric" (Davis 2007, 1019). When taken as a whole, the novel's refusal to clarify, unify, and resolve its moral questions reflects the higher-order morality that checks idealism and ideology, that limits and measures its own possible actions, and that seeks to preserve an ambivalent 'absurd position'.

While Davis and others understand the contrasting forces in *The Plague* to be cleanliness and messiness, these are not likely the most significant ambivalences in the text, and they are certainly not the most important motifs in Camus' work. On the contrary, the characters of *The Plague* are quite plainly concerned with what to do about basic moral and political problems. What are the moral limits of rebellion against a terror or injustice? Should we strive for an impossible innocence or will that

tempt us to engage less fully? If we accept wrong-doing, how can we differentiate ourselves from our enemies? These questions resound throughout the text and the very impossibility of coming to a simple answer to them is perhaps the most significant message of the novel. The moral hero of *The Plague*, therefore, is not any of the characters taken individually, but rather *all* of the characters when taken together, when their competing voices are ‘integrated’, as it were, into a complex whole.

Camus even hints at how we might conceive of this ‘integrative’ process by making Rieux face one of the more subtle challenges of combating evils like the plague: the threat that evil poses to his personhood and his creativity. Like Winnicott, whom I briefly discuss in the next section of this chapter, Camus is aware that “of individuals dominated at home, or spending their lives in concentration camps or under lifelong persecution because of a cruel political regime... it is only a few of the victims who remain creative” (Winnicott 1971, 68). Given the lack of ‘ideal’ solutions to the plague, given the pressures of the ambivalent dynamics of the absurd, and given the difficulty of limiting one’s actions against unlimited evil, the morality of the absurd will depend upon the rebel’s creativity, but this very creativity is threatened by the forces he struggles against.

Rebellion and Creativity

In “The Artist and his Time,” Camus wrote: “I shall certainly not choose the moment when we are beginning to leave nihilism behind to stupidly deny the values of creation in favor of the values of humanity, or vice versa. In my mind neither one is ever separated from the other and I measure the greatness of an artist (Molière,

Tolstoy, Melville) by the balance he managed to maintain between the two. Today, under the pressure of events, we are obliged to transport that tension into our lives... We must simultaneously serve suffering and beauty. The long patience, the strength, the secret cunning such service calls for are the virtues that establish the very renascence we need” (1955, 211-212). In fact, Camus regularly linked absurd rebellion to creativity and the creative process. Like rebellion, for Camus, “art is the activity that exalts and denies simultaneously... Artistic creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world” (1956b, 253).

But while Camus’ thought on rebellion and his ideas about artistic creation have been scrutinized independently, the moral link between them has not been sufficiently appreciated. As I hope to show in this section of this chapter, absurd rebellion must creatively manage its ambivalence, affirm and transgress its own limits, and resist defensive reactions and destructive tendencies in order to preserve creative possibility. Like creative art, absurd moral action both depends upon a creative resourcefulness and, in its expression, preserves the boundaries that make further creativity possible.

At first glance, it might appear that our absurd rebel lacks the unity or coherence required to form genuine intentions or actions. We might imagine that without a clear self-concept, identity, or ideal, Camus’ ambivalent self lives without “a basic place to operate from” (Winnicott 1986, 39), without that degree of security and cogency necessary for creative thought and action. But the ambivalent position that Camus defends as the cornerstone of rebellion actually accords well with norms of self-development in contemporary self psychology and object-relations theory.

Camus knows that artistic, moral, and personal creativity arise not in relation to some imagined, absolute unity of the self but in relation to the maturity, strength, and flexibility with which ambivalences and tensions are managed. The “source of rebellion,” Camus explains, is “where refusal and acceptance, the unique and the universal, the individual and history balance each other in a condition of acute tension” (1956b, 273). The rebel’s management of these ambivalences permits him to be creative, in the fullest sense, to achieve a greater integration of opposites, and to develop a more mature relationship with others and the world. By diagnosing contemporary ideologies as defensive reactions to ambivalence, Camus is trying to argue for an absurd morality that is active rather than re-active, creative rather than defensive or compulsive.

The goal of both the rebel and the revolutionary is change. Both are inspired by a desire for unity, a fantasy of merging or fusing with an ideal that defines part of the ambivalence of the absurd, as discussed in Chapter 5. But there is a difference between the rebel’s and the revolutionary’s method, a difference that is attributable to something more subtle than the rebel’s self-limitation. Put differently, the rebel’s self-limitation derives partly from his ambivalence but partly from his recognition of the need to preserve the grounds for creative and moral action. This ground for creativity and morality informs the idea of the limit, and becomes a part of the good for which the rebel struggles. In order to understand this rather complicated argument, we have to briefly discuss the logic of change.

In order to attain the goal of change, a certain amount of control over objects and others is required. Perhaps we may not always want to call it ‘control’; instead,

we might say that it is necessary to be able to affect or impact others or the world. Even in the simple case where a rebel seeks to make a small change, or a change only to himself, others will have to recognize and react to these changes in ways that confirm that a change has happened. However, for this reason, the individual who seeks change leads himself down a dangerous path, at the extreme end of which lies a self-defeating insistence on absolute control and domination, an insistence which paradoxically denies the externality of the world on which his activity depends.

Just as Camus will argue that the Hegelian consciousness denies the subjectivity of other consciousnesses in its desperate quest for recognition (1956b, 138-139), so Camus' rebel always risks destroying the very force against which he defines his rebellion. The rebel is in a difficult position because he seeks to defy the domination of a master, but he has trouble doing so without destroying him in his turn. In an article which is neither about Camus nor the absurd, David Levine has very nicely articulated this contradiction intrinsic to the drive for change and its relationship to destruction and control:

Control over objects, if complete, destroys their quality of being objects because it destroys their quality of being external to the self. Once the object is destroyed in this way, however, it can no longer afford the individual the sought-after recognition that provides the avenue to securing the manic state by making the self-ideal an objective — that is, external reality. There is, in other words, a contradiction embedded in the goal of fusion. It demands an externality within which the reality of an internal (ideal) can be established, and yet, it seeks to accomplish the goal of making real (therefore establishing in reality) what is subjective by destroying the externality of the world. (1999, 233-234)

If this contradiction makes *total* change and *total* unity with an ideal self-defeating, then the revolutionary must modify his aims. To avoid self-defeat, he finds

he must “maintain the object in a state that is and is not external. This is accomplished, to borrow Hegel’s formulation, by preserving the object in a state of bondage to the self. The objective of change, then, is not to absorb the object into the self but to enslave the object” (Levine 1999, 234). In this situation, a kind of sadistic and repetitive conquest becomes “the sustainable alternative to fusion” (Levine 1999, 235).

We must note the discomfiting similarities between this position of enslavement and at least one way of understanding Camus’ absurd rebel, who seeks not to kill his master but merely to defy and degrade him. In a sense, Camus’ rebel preserves the existence of his master in order to constantly rebel against him, to “enslave the object rather than be enslaved by it” (Levine 1999, 234). The rebel “involves this superior being in the same humiliating adventure as mankind’s... subjects it to our power of refusal, bends it to the unbending part of human nature, forcibly integrates it into an existence that we render absurd, and finally drags it from its refuge outside time and involves it in history” (Camus 1956b, 24-25). The rebel’s attack on his enemy, with its apparent goal of humiliation and its imagery of dragging the enemy (although, unlike Hektor, still alive) around the city walls, permits us to see the resemblance between the manic and controlling aspect of change and the regressive and destructive potential of absurd rebellion.

Cruickshank notices something of this similarity but uses it to compare Camus’ rebellious stance to Kierkegaard’s almost humorous characterization of demoniac despair. Demoniac despair, according to Kierkegaard, revolts “against the whole of existence... thinks it has hold of a proof against it, against its goodness... It

is (to describe it figuratively) as if an author were to make a slip of the pen, and that this clerical error became conscious of being such... it is then as if this clerical error would revolt against the author, out of hatred for him were to forbid him to correct it, and were to say, 'No I will not be erased, I will stand as a witness against thee, that thou art a very poor writer'" (Kierkegaard in Cruickshank 1960, 69). It is true that Camus' metaphysical rebel revolts 'against all creation' (theoretically including his own), and seeks to "keep intact the abuses from which he suffers so as to be able to continue his rebellion against them" (Cruickshank 1960, 103n). But while it is amusing to think of the petulant rebellion implied by Kierkegaard's despair, Camus' stance implicates the rebel in potentially more destructive and controlling relationships with real enemies and others against whom he rebels.

But before we condemn Camus rebellion as hopelessly pathological, we should recall that Camus most often seeks to point out the *dangers* of rebellion, to note how easily it loses its dignity and purpose. Camus is, indeed, well aware that our powerful desire for unity is inseparable from our more destructive desires to possess, control, or even sterilize the world. Camus recognizes that the fantasy of fusion at the heart of revolutionary change is an impossible dream that risks destroying both the self and the objects in its way. And yet, Camus candidly places this desire and its contradiction at the heart of rebellion, as both its animating and potentially annihilating force. Camus writes:

No human being, even the most passionately loved and passionately loving, is ever in our possession. On the pitiless earth where lovers are often separated in death and are always born divided, the total possession of another human being and absolute communion throughout an entire lifetime are impossible dreams. The desire for possession is insatiable, to such a point that it can survive even love itself. To love, therefore is to sterilize the person one

loves... In the final analysis, every man devoured by the overpowering desire to endure and possess wishes that those whom he has loved were either sterile or dead. *This is real rebellion*. Those who have not insisted, at least once, on the absolute virginity of human beings and of the world, who have not trembled with longing and impotence at the fact that it is impossible, and have then not been destroyed by trying to love halfheartedly, perpetually forced back upon their longing for the absolute, can not understand the realities of rebellion and its ravaging desire for destruction. (1956b, 261-262, emphasis added)

Camus' candor about the deadly destructiveness of rebellion really accentuates its extreme ambivalence, for rebellion, here, is not based on sober moderation, but on a ravenous and radical desire for the extreme unity of death. Nevertheless, we know that rebellion is not only this, that this extraordinary statement of its power is balanced by something equally powerful that restrains it.

Camus' warnings about the destructive potential of rebellion permit us to appreciate the extraordinary emotional force that generates the precarious ambivalence of the absurd, an ambivalence which grounds absurd moral creativity. It is not exactly in order to degrade, enslave, or repeatedly attack the enemy that Camus' rebel insists on the limitations of rebellion or 'the sustainable alternative to fusion'; rather, the rebel seeks to defeat the enemy in order that the rebel (and others) may again act in less-defensive, less-than-totally-destructive, more creative ways. Perhaps a subtle difference, it is not in a state of *bondage* but in a state of *boundaries* that the ideal absurd rebel would seek to place his opponents. Total change or fusion would destroy the subjectivity of the other on which the rebel's activity depends, and bondage would merely implicate the rebel in a continuing, sadistic, and degrading relationship with his enemy. Rather, what the rebel really seeks is for the enemy to be

sufficiently bound so that the rebel (and others) can act creatively, not defensively, desperately, or reactively.

One of the easiest ways to remark this particular emphasis in Camus' thought on rebellion is to notice that he attacks totalitarian solutions and absolutist or nihilistic defenses because they destroy our creative capacities.

The tragedy of this [Communist] revolution is the tragedy of nihilism — it confounds itself with the drama of contemporary intelligence, which, while claiming to be universal, is only responsible for a series of mutilations to men's minds. Totality is not a unity. The state of siege, even when it is extended to the very boundaries of the earth, is not reconciliation. The claim to a universal city is supported in this revolution only by rejecting two thirds of the world and the magnificent heritage of the centuries, and by denying, to the advantage of history, both nature and beauty and by depriving man of the power of passion, doubt, happiness, and imaginative invention — in a word, of his greatness. (1956b, 240)

Here, the revolutionary solution not only 'mutilates men's minds' but rejects 'two thirds of the world' along with all that grounds creative thought and action: 'the heritage of the centuries', nature, beauty, passion, doubt, and the imagination. By rejecting these capacities and resources, revolution finds itself in the contradiction of total change that leads to the end of creativity and morality.

Camus is quite aware, therefore, of the limit at which change spells the end of change, at which control spells the loss of control. These limits are the limits of rebellion, the limits that permit continued creative and moral interaction. In fact, one of the only ways to make sense of Camus' convoluted concept of rebellion as that which (a) creates the absurd, (b) results from the absurd, and (c) defines the values by which absurd rebellion operates, is in the light of this comparison with creative and destructive limits. As Jessica Benjamin says, "When I act upon the other it is vital

that he be affected, so that I know that I exist — but not completely destroyed so that I know he also exists” (Benjamin in Levine 1999, 237). If we can rebel in such a way that the other is affected but not destroyed by our actions, then our actions form “part of the assertion that there is indeed an object and not only a subject. This puts in place the necessary setting for creativity because it establishes the subject in an objective world... Only in our acting against the world do we develop the internal attitude toward it that fits the creative stance” (Levine 1999, 237).

If the absurd moral actor rebels, he must rebel creatively, not only destructively, and his actions must not destroy the grounds for the creative stance he adopts, grounds which include the requirement that his enemy be able to act creatively as well. His attack must be limited and measured according to the grounds necessary for his own, and for others’ creative action. The work of D.W. Winnicott is helpful in understanding the meaning of this mutual, morally creative stance. For both Winnicott and Camus, creative action requires a kind of “reaching out” which is opposed to defensive activity. It is impossible to be creative if one’s actions are merely reactions against painful stimuli or withdrawals from a painful world (see Winnicott 1971, 55; Winnicott 1986, 39; Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 196). While Winnicott tends to contrast creativity with compliance, it is equally impossible to be creative if one has developed a broader pattern of defense, seeking refuge in split visions of the world, fantasies of absolute power or omnipotence, or severe repressions of ambivalent aspects of experience.

Like Camus, Winnicott finds creativity in the balance between the acceptance of reality (the Reality Principle) and the assertion of a degree of personal impulse, in

a balance between illusion and disillusionment (1986, 46-47; 1971, 65-85). For Camus, art and rebellion “can neither totally consent to reality nor turn aside from it completely” (Camus 1956b, 269). As Camus would agree with Winnicott (and Freud, and Klein) that tolerating and integrating ambivalence implies a degree of individual maturity (see Winnicott 1971, 70), Camus would also agree that any notion of absolute or solitary creativity leads us into a moral and philosophical contradiction. It is not the goal of the rebel to be creative for creativity’s sake, or to be creative alone, and Camus’ is not in any sense an aesthetic morality. Winnicott would agree that “in our sanity, we only create what we find. Even in the arts we cannot be creative into the blue unless we are having a solo experience in a mental hospital or in the asylum of our own autism” (1986, 53). Mature creativity, therefore, requires that we tolerate and even maintain the tensions between reality and fantasy, between creation and destruction, and between assertion and respect for others and objects. Part of the demand of one person’s creativity is that others be able to be creative as well.

The two poles in Winnicott’s conception of the self are the state of illusory omnipotence and the harsh objectivity of the Reality Principle. These two poles in many ways mirror the two poles of the ambivalence of the absurd. One is mere “solipsistic subjectivity,” a world of ‘subjective objects’ over which one has total control; the other is purely “objective perception,” the “world of separate and independent others” (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 195). And what Camus advances as a mediation (but not a ‘moderation’) between these two extremes is not entirely dissimilar to Winnicott’s concept of transitional objects, which rely on the tension between “primary creativity and objective perception based on reality-testing”

(Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 195). Like transitional objects, absurd rebellions make use of illusions and symbols while resisting the temptations of absolute objective reality, on one hand, and absolute solipsistic subjectivity or fantasy on the other. And like the absurd borderlands described above, the intermediary or “potential space” of transitional phenomena between the self and the environment, between the me and the not-me (Winnicott 1971, 100), holds powerful emotions and intense ambivalences. But it is also an interactive and creative ‘space’ where culture and play happen. For Camus, we might say that the morality of the absurd insists that this potential space remain open, even, if necessary, by violating that space in order to preserve it in the name of making continued creative and moral action (and interaction) possible.

“Creativity exists at an intermediate point between the attitude that considers the world purely an extension of the subject and the attitude that sees it as an external fact having no subjective qualities at all... At this intermediate point, we will find what I am calling the capacity for freedom or the free person,” says Levine (1999, 240). Camus tells us something similar, that the rebel and the artist create and define values “on the borderland between reality and reverie” (1956b, 264), and that “great art, style, and the true aspect of rebellion lie somewhere between these two heresies” of formalism (or idealism) and realism (1956b, 272). Perhaps more clearly, Camus explains that “the procedure of beauty, which is to contest reality while endowing it with unity, is also the procedure of rebellion” (Camus 1956b, 276), which we may now understand in terms of Winnicott’s claim that “mature adults bring vitality to that

which is ancient, old and orthodox by re-creating it after destroying it” (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, 189).

For this interpretation of absurd moral action to make sense, we must not conceive of creativity merely as the impulse to relive or recreate, in phantasy, the happiness of lost internal worlds (see Segal 1964, 79). Neither can we think of creativity (and most of us do not) as merely the capacity to adapt to reality. Instead, creative activity must learn to subjectively ‘create’ reality while recognizing the boundaries that make that subjective creation possible. This process involves both creation and destruction, for both Winnicott and Camus, not only because it is necessary to destroy some illusions to make room for others, but because “development for the individual includes achieving the standpoint from which there exists an objective world outside his or her self... The attack on the world we associate with the term destruction simultaneously seeks to overcome this externality, without which we cannot survive, and acknowledge it, because destruction is only meaningful against the opposition of an external world. We can, then, say that destruction acknowledges reality and thus creates reality (as a subjective matter, that is, it creates reality for the subject)” (Levine 1999, 237). This creative and destructive stance has often been overlooked by Camus’ critics who see in his thought either an adolescent rebellion against reality in the name of an illusion of unity or a negative brand of existentialism that seeks to destroy *all* illusion in order to embrace reality. It should be clear that either interpretation of Camus is far too simplistic.

Rather, if we are able to interpret his works as I have suggested, Camus’ absurd morality strives to address the dangers of both idealism and realism, and of

both fundamentalism and pragmatism. If all illusions are destroyed and only the real exists, then there is nothing that can inform our dealings with the real and we find ourselves back in a lawless struggle for conquest. While absurd rebellion destroys in the name of reality, it also rejects reality in the name of fantasy. “In every rebellion,” Camus writes, “is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it, and the construction of a substitute universe. Rebellion, from this point of view, is a fabricator of universes” (1956b, 255). Absurd rebellion, like art, creates “an imaginary world” whose essence lies in a “perpetual alteration” of experience that aims “primarily, at unity and thereby expresses a metaphysical need” (Camus 1956b, 264). When Camus advances a rebellious “style” of living, he means a “creative effort [to] reconstruct the world, and always with the same slight distortion that is the mark of both art and protest” (1956b, 271). His ‘style’, in this sense, is the rebel’s repeated attempts to create and destroy within and in the name of that potential space that allows his actions to affect (but not destroy) others and that allows others’ actions to affect (but not destroy) him. This process, which could be offered as a basic definition of the creative stance, is fundamental to Camus’ understanding of the morality of the absurd.

Camus even advocates the ‘creation’ of an illusion of human nature to help maintain these creative boundaries and to inform the limits of political action. Camus’ rebel rejects illusions and absolutes, it is true, but he does so not just negatively, but on the grounds of what he takes to be *more mature illusions* of his own creation. “If... rebellion could found a philosophy it would be a philosophy of limits, of calculated ignorance, and of risk. He who does not know everything cannot kill

everything. The rebel, far from making an absolute of history, rejects and disputes it, in the name of a concept that he has of his own nature” (Camus 1956b, 289). Indeed, Camus will frame the entirety of human history as a battle waged over this creative illusion of human nature. “The fate of the world,” Camus claims, “is being played out between the forces of rebellion and those of the Caesarian revolution. The triumphant revolution must prove by means of its police, its trials, and its excommunications that there is no such thing as human nature. Humiliated rebellion, by its contradictions, its sufferings, its continuous defeats, and its inexhaustible pride, must give its content of hope and suffering to this nature” (1956b, 250). For Camus, even though the idea of human nature relies on fantasy, it is the limits and possibilities implied by the assertion of human nature, the boundaries or the rules of the game that a human nature suggests, that permits authentic moral action.

This notion of ‘creating’ a human nature according to which and for the sake of which one must rebel makes it clear that the ethical and political maturity Camus is calling for is not a formal principle but a position or stance that resembles artistic and personal creativity. The difference between absurd rebellion and destructive revolution, then, may be understood as the difference between creativity and control. “There is a difference between the effort to remake the world and the effort to live creatively in it. This is the distinction between... two types of change... For one, the object of change is the complete and more or less instantaneous transformation of reality... For the other, the goal of change is a specific improvement in human capacities” (Levine 1999, 240).

If part of what distinguishes creative rebellion from revolutionary excess is the measure and modesty of the rebel's aims, we may also say, at the risk of being melodramatic, that it is also a question of love. "Rebellion," Camus claims, "cannot exist without a strange form of love" (1956b, 304), because without love, without an emotional connection, communion, or identification, the rebel cannot limit his aggression, tolerate ambivalence, or create within the potential space that bounds absurd moral activity. While it may be a diffuse love, the "insane generosity" of rebellion "proves... that it is the very movement of life and that it cannot be denied without renouncing life. Its purest outburst, on each occasion, gives birth to existence. Thus it is love and fecundity or it is nothing at all" (1956b, 304). In the end, it is the creative and even loving potential of rebellion that must combat what Camus sees as the terrible secret of our time, a simple but deadly secret: "that it no longer loves life... That is why they wanted to efface joy from the world and to postpone it until a much later date" (1956b, 305).

Bad Faith, Good Revolt

In Chapter 2, I introduced the notion that Camus' paradoxical rebellion resembled Sartrean bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), but perhaps not necessarily in a damning way. Now, after exploring the linkages between creativity and absurd morality, I would like to conclude this chapter by revisiting that suggestion to see if it can further clarify the unique moral position implied by the absurd.

For Sartre, the person in bad faith is in a complex psychological situation. Indeed, Sartre is often criticized for his equivocal stance on the question of the deliberateness of bad faith. Do individuals place themselves in bad faith

intentionally? Or can bad faith occur, as it were, by accident? According to Sartre, the person in bad faith “must know in his capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from him in his capacity as the one deceived... He must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it more carefully” (Sartre in Sherman 1995, 66-67). That is, the individual in bad faith must deceive himself. Knowing the truth, he somehow hides it from himself.

Oddly enough, this situation is not entirely dissimilar to ethical stance Camus ultimately defends. But this comparison need not be taken as a criticism. Camus’ individual remains ambivalent, unresolved. He recognizes that there is no justification for creating illusions like human nature, for maintaining his difficult stance, for transgressing the values that he, himself defends, indeed for acting morally or immorally at all, but he does these things anyway, without forgetting, of course, that he must never become complacent or reconciled with all of his terrible contradictions.

While Camus situates his rebel in an absurd and ambivalent emotional position, Sartre derives bad faith from “the double property of the human being, who is at once a facticity and a transcendence” (Sartre in Sherman 1995, 61). But these accounts actually share a certain logic, for just as Camus’ absurd rebel seeks not to deny or destroy either term of his ambivalence, the person in bad faith “does not wish either to coordinate them [facticity and transcendence] or to surmount them in a synthesis. Bad faith seeks to affirm their identity while preserving their differences. It must affirm facticity as being transcendence and transcendence as being facticity, in such a way that at the instant when a person apprehends one, he can find himself abruptly faced with the other” (Sartre in Sherman 1995, 61). Sartre’s pejorative

depiction of bad faith here captures almost exactly the complex psychology of absurd rebellion. In an ambivalent gloss on Sartrean bad faith, perhaps we may find room for the moral, rebellious creativity of Camus' absurd.

Because it is grounded in ambivalence, the morality of the absurd challenges not just Sartre's, but most rationalistic moral formulas. Absurd and ambivalent rebellion certainly poses a radical challenge (although not Meursault's challenge) to Kant's ideal of the autonomy of the will. Contrary to Kant, the absurd moral position insists upon maintaining a certain *heteronomy* of the will. The rebel's ambivalence, self-contradiction, and reliance on illusion (all clear signs of heteronomy), are not moral flaws but the crux of the moral action of the absurd. Contrary to Kant's ideal, the absurd person seeks *never* to ground his actions in a single, final, or categorical principle, just as the moral imperative of the absurd explicitly rejects the idea that any action could be or should be established as 'a universal law'. Instead, absurd morality insists upon the recognition of a kind of contingency, dependency, culpability, and heteronomy of the self without ever refusing the possibility of (temporarily) creating value and meaning.

Camus would have to argue, therefore, not only with Kant but with Lawrence Kohlberg over the proposition that universal, generalizable moral reasoning is the highest stage of moral development (see Kohlberg 1973). The moral philosophy of the absurd argues that any universal ideal of justice is, itself, inherently unjust insofar as it legitimizes the 'remainders' of suffering when it performs its abstract moral computations. Instead, absurd morality entails the claim that the highest stage of moral development is *above* even universal reason. Absent the religious connotations,

it is similar to Kierkegaard's claim that the personal suspends the ethical, for absurd moral action derives from that crucible of ambivalence and creativity which exceeds mere reliance on laws or principles. If that ambivalence and that creative capacity are reasoned away, even for the sake of a moral principle, then Camus would say that the foundation for genuine moral action and interaction is lost.

While the absurd is not able to provide formal moral rules, the logic of the interpretation I have offered should permit us to analyze absurdity, ambivalence, and rebellion as forces which, if contained and integrated properly, permit moral values to exist. The complex rebellious action that derives from the absurd represents a step, a development *beyond* rationalistic morality, for Camus. It does not exactly define a new morality, but it 'opens the way to morality' in a manner that is unique in both ancient and modern moral and political philosophy. Absurd rebellion, Camus tells us, "opened the way to a morality which, far from obeying abstract principles, discovers them only in the heat of battle and in the incessant movement of contradiction. Nothing justifies the assertion that these principles have existed eternally; it is of no use to declare that they will exist one day. But they do exist, in the very period in which we exist" (1956b, 283).

Camus' absurd rebellion, therefore, is a statement about what is needed for individuals to create moral solutions to intractable moral problems; it is also a statement about how to live with the tensions and ambivalences created by those problems without resorting to facile solutions and primitive defenses. By beginning to think of moral action as creative action, and not as action that follows rules or fits into pre-determined categories, the morality of the absurd is a kind of re-constitution of

the grounds for morality. Now, to see if this absurd moral grounding can shed light on specific political problems, the final chapter of this volume tests it against two politically troublesome cases: Camus' defense of the 'fastidious' Russian assassins of 1905 and Camus' stance on the Algerian War (1954-1962).

Chapter 9: Political Philosophical Conclusions

Thus the rebel can never find peace. He knows what is good and, despite himself, does evil.

— Camus, *The Rebel*

Camus believed that absurdity was relevant to political life, but, as in other aspects of his thought, the relationship between the philosophy and the politics of the absurd has become rather obscure. Some critics have tried to clarify this obscurity by splitting the two aspects of Camus' thought apart; others have focused exclusively on one while neglecting the other. Perhaps even more common (and more problematic for our understanding of absurd politics) has been the tendency noted in earlier chapters to equate absurdity with 'evil' and to conclude that the absurd must simply 'be fought' in all of its aspects, natural, political, and otherwise.

I have attempted to show that the absurd can not be equated with 'evil', but must be understood as a kind of ambivalence which, nevertheless, may be partly 'evil' and from which, to be sure, 'evil' responses may spring. As Camus' absurd is neither purely evil, nor purely political, it is quite distinct from Malraux's. Malraux believed that "man's position is absurd, but his position is clearly the work of civilization. Change his civilization and it is possible that the Absurd will become less real" (Hall 1960, 30). Camus had no such hope. No change in civilization, even utopian change, could (or should) make the absurd any less real. In fact, the moment the absurd becomes unreal is the moment we lose the balance needed to act creatively and morally. And yet, the fact that the absurd is ineradicable for Camus does not imply that it lacks political implication.

One of the more persuasive political philosophical readings of the absurd has come from Maurice Friedman, John Cruickshank, Fred Willhoite, Jr., and others who have noted that the political possibilities offered by the absurd are not entirely dissimilar to Martin Buber's concept of dialogue between subjects, between *I* and *Thou*, which implies an ethic of "openness, directness, mutuality, and presence" (Friedman in Willhoite 1968, 64). Camus argued that "in order to exist, man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limit it discovers in itself — a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist" (1956b, 22). This meeting of minds somehow occasioned by rebellion seems to allow people to engage in civic dialogue, perhaps even to form a political community. Indeed, in drawing a distinction between dialogue and directive, Camus employs a language that seems suited to comparisons with Buber.

Every ambiguity, every misunderstanding, leads to death; clear language and simple words are the only salvation from this death. The climax of every tragedy lies in the deafness of its heroes. Plato is right and not Moses and Nietzsche. Dialogue on the level of mankind is less costly than the gospel preached by totalitarian regimes in the form of a monologue dictated from the top of a lonely mountain. On the stage as in reality, the monologue precedes death. Every rebel, solely by the movement that sets him in opposition to the oppressor, therefore pleads for life, undertakes to struggle against servitude, falsehood, and terror, and affirms, in a flash, that these three afflictions are the cause of silence between men, that they obscure them from one another and prevent them from rediscovering themselves in the only value that can save them from nihilism — the long complicity of men at grips with their destiny. (1956b, 283-284)

Communication, therefore, has been thought to be one of the central moral goods of Camus' political vision. Injustice, Camus tells us, "kills the small part of existence that can be realized in this earth through the mutual understanding of men... The mutual understanding and communication discovered by rebellion can

survive only in the free exchange of conversation” (1956b, 283). As rebellion depends upon others just as much as it defies them, it insists upon a community in which communication and dialogue are possible. “What balances the absurd is the community of men fighting against it. And if we choose to serve that community, we choose to serve the dialogue carried to the absurd against any policy of falsehood or of silence. That’s the way one is free with others” (Camus 1978, 126).

Camus’ way of being ‘free with others’ appears, then, to be based upon a communicative ethic and a loosely value-pluralistic outlook. Camus defines liberty as “the ability to defend what I do not think, even in a regime or a world that I approve. It is the ability to admit that the adversary is right” (1978, 105). This definition of liberty implies not only a basic level of tolerance and a political infrastructure that supports dialogue, but, as I will emphasize below, a capacity to identify with and even adopt perspectives that are not one’s own. Similarly, Camus defines the democrat as the person “who admits that his opponent may be right... [and who] therefore allows him to express his views and agrees to think about them” (Camus in Cruickshank 1960, 132). In this statement as well, we find not only an advocacy of tolerance and dialogue but an appeal to a more complete interaction with others, implied by the requirement that the democrat not merely permit his opponent to speak but agree to ‘think about’ his views. We may imagine that the mature and creative absurd position this volume has discussed also encourages a less-fractured relationship with others and a greater “confirmation of meaning” between opponents (Buber in Willhoite 1968, 68), making something like a Buberian “genuine encounter” possible (Willhoite 1968, 67).

But if it is clear that, for Camus, limits are superior to excess, dialogue is superior to directive, and communication is superior to deafness, to be frank, these conclusions are not terribly interesting. They strike us as banal, and perhaps not even worth all of the trouble required to arrive at them. It is a complicated argument to make, but Camus' critics and, to some extent, Camus, himself, seem to have understated the political implications of the absurd. While apparently advocating tolerance and dialogue, an absurd politics *should* be able to advocate radical reflections on moral and political boundaries, the creation of new, strategic moral identifications and communions, and bold political stances on the grounds of the ambivalence of the absurd. I try out a few of these stronger and, hopefully, more interesting political conclusions, after seeking to understand Camus' political stance with respect to two specific political cases: (1) Camus' curious praise of the Kaliyev and Russian assassins of 1905 and (2) Camus' controversial stance on the Algerian War (1954-1962). In an attempt to avoid easy answers, I have deliberately chosen to examine Camus' most difficult and least palatable political positions. It is important to note, however, that in both of these cases, I seek neither to defend Camus' positions nor to independently re-assess the historical situations in question; only to interpret, critique, and perhaps expand upon Camus' stances in light of the analyses of the philosophy of the absurd undertaken so far.

Kaliyev and the 'Just' Assassins

In *The Rebel*, Camus heaps praise upon Kaliyev and the assassins of the Combat Organization of the Socialist Revolutionary Party as "exemplary" (1956b, 151), while Camus' five-act play, *Les justes*, in many ways celebrates this cast of characters that

conspires to assassinate the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich. Camus classifies these assassins, these delicate murderers (*meurtriers délicats*) as terrorists, but, in his mind, at least two things distinguish them from terrorists who would come before or after.

The first, and, one must admit, the *less* significant distinction for Camus is that these terrorists are not capricious killers. They take great care not to harm innocent people and only to attack their precise targets. In *Les justes*, Kaliayev returns from his mission to bomb the carriage of the Grand Duke utterly dejected, “his face streaming with tears” (1958, 252), because he was unable to carry out his mission as planned. It was not because of cowardice, of course, that Kaliayev balked, but because the Grand Duke’s niece and nephew (and the Grand Duchess) were riding in the carriage along with him. Apart from Stepan, who represents the hardened, extreme revolutionary Camus wished to warn against, the group agrees with Kaliayev’s decision.

The second, and *more* important quality shared by the assassins, in Camus’ mind, is that they are deeply ambivalent about their plan and the paradoxical necessity and immorality of their chosen course of action. Here, we encounter a certain sentimentality. Kaliayev, in *Les justes*, touchingly describes his joy in awaiting the carriage and his subsequent surprise when he saw the innocent children with their “grave, intent look” (1958, 253), a look which he can not face. As the group discusses the situation, they soon find themselves reflecting on the meaning of love and innocence, happiness and despair. Kaliayev and Dora, for instance, have a lengthy and rather melodramatic conversation.

Kaliayev: I shall go beyond hatred.

Dora: Beyond? There's nothing beyond.

Kaliayev: Yes. There is love.

Dora: Love? No, that's not what is needed.

[...]

Kaliayev: But we love our fellow men.

Dora: Yes, we love them — in our fashion. With a vast love that has nothing to shore it up; that brings only sadness...

Kaliayev: But surely that's precisely what love means — sacrificing everything without expecting anything in return?

Dora: Perhaps. Yes, I know that love, an absolute, ideal love, a pure and solitary joy — and I feel it burning in my heart. Yet there are times when I wonder if love isn't something else; something more than a lonely voice, a monologue, and if there isn't sometimes a response... Can you see what I mean?

Kaliayev: Yes, Dora, I can; it's what is called love — in the simple human sense.

Dora: Yes, darling you've guessed what I mean — but does that kind of love mean anything to you, really? Do you love justice with that kind of love? And how about *me*, Yanek? Do you love me — as a lover?

Kaliayev: No one will ever love you as I love you.

Dora: I know. But wouldn't it be better to love — like an ordinary person?

Kaliayev: I'm not an ordinary person. Such as I am, I love you. (Camus 1958, 269-270)

And Kaliayev's and Dora's conversation about the meaning of love continues. Thus, while we may occasionally blush, Camus makes it clear that what he finds exceptional about these individuals is their profound emotional complexity. It is the fact that they discuss love in the context of their duty as killers, that they contemplate self-sacrifice out of a sense of justice, that they search not for simple answers to make their choices easier but for emotional truths, no matter how painful and complex, to help them comprehend what they can and must do. Put simply, they "[make] attempts on the lives of others only after the most scrupulous examination of conscience" (Camus 1956b, 168).

Rather than neglecting the uniquely problematic circumstances they face or viewing them through the lens of an ideology which might either justify their crimes or excuse complacency, the assassins accept the consequences of the solution they devise. These individuals “of the highest principles” are “the last, in the history of rebellion, to refuse no part of their condition or their drama” (Camus 1956b, 167). That is why Camus finds that “these fastidious assassins lived out the rebel destiny in its most contradictory form” (1956b, 169). Kaliyev explains to Dora that he had “thought it was quite easy to kill, provided one has courage and is buoyed up by an ideal. But now I’ve lost my wings. I have realized that hatred brings no happiness. I can see the vileness in myself, and in the others, too. Murderous instincts, cowardice, injustice. I’ve got to kill — there are no two ways about it. But I shall see it through to the end” (Camus 1958, 269). Kaliyev and the others are able to admit their own complicity in evil, even to face up to the consequence of this complicity, and this implies that they have not forsaken their ambivalence, that they have sought to manage the contradictions that threaten to destroy them.

Camus’ assassins are therefore something very close to ideal absurd rebels, “disillusioned with love, united against the crimes of their masters, but alone in their despair, and face to face with their contradictions, which they could resolve only in the double sacrifice of their innocence and their life” (1956b, 164). Yet, as with his characters in *The Plague*, Camus does not mean to show that their actions are morally perfect, only that their posture or position evinces a more integrated and more mature moral activity than the defensive, evasive, or otherwise regressive positions by which they could have resolved some of their tension. Camus, it is true, romanticizes their

emotional struggles, making them into agonies of tragic proportions. But Camus sees their situation as one of just such tragic proportions. The lives of the assassins, like the lives of tragic heroes, are morally flawed, but by the force of their absurdity, ambivalence, maturity, and creativity, they manage to act immorally while sustaining the possibility of moral value.

For Camus, if the assassins had convinced themselves that no killing was ever justified, they would have done too little. If they had justified their actions on the grounds of an ‘all or nothing’ ideology, they would have done too much. But because the assassins are able to tolerate the ambivalence and contradiction of their moral/immoral choices, they are able to avoid both over-destructiveness and meekness, finding a seemingly impossible ‘third’ moral choice where, according to the extant categories, none existed. Camus writes:

It is possible to believe that they too, while recognizing the inevitability of violence, nevertheless admitted to themselves that it is unjustifiable. Necessary and inexcusable — that is how murder appeared to them. Mediocre minds, confronted with this terrible problem, can take refuge by ignoring one of the terms of the dilemma. They are content, in the name of formal principles, to find all direct violence inexcusable and then to sanction that diffuse form of violence which takes place on the scale of world history. Or they will console themselves, in the name of history, with the thought that violence is necessary, and will add murder to murder, to the point of making of history nothing but a continuous violation of everything in man which protests against injustice. This defines the two aspects of contemporary nihilism, the bourgeois and the revolutionary. (1956b, 169)

Instead of adopting these facile positions, Camus claims that the assassins “create the values they lack” (1956b, 165), precisely because they do *not* invoke values as justifications for their actions, nor do they assert the absence of values as a ground for absolute license. The lasting moral statement made by the assassins, then,

is of their own absurdity and of the paradoxical necessity and inexcusability of their choices. By discovering a way to act in spite of, through, or within this contradiction, the actions of the assassins paradoxically create “a human value that stands halfway between innocence and guilt, between reason and irrationality, between history and eternity” (Camus 1956b, 171), which resembles the moral, creative, and ‘potential’ value discussed in the previous chapter.

But this value they create to fit their uniquely complex moral dilemma is one in which they do evil, knowing that it is evil, and then demand a personal sacrifice for it. “Kaliyev doubted to the end, but this doubt did not prevent him from acting; it is for this reason that he is the purest form of rebellion. He who accepts death, to pay for a life with a life, no matter what his negations may be, affirms, by doing so, a value that surpasses him in his aspect of an individual in the historical sense” (Camus 1956b, 173). By demanding self-sacrifice for their crimes, by insisting upon such severe self-punishment and still having the strength to act, Camus claims that “the men of 1905, tortured by contradictions, really did *give birth*, by their very negation and death, to a value that will henceforth be imperative, which they brought to light in the belief that they were only announcing its advent. They ostensibly placed, above themselves and their executioners, that supreme and painful good which we have already found at the origins of rebellion. Let us stop and consider this value, at the moment when the spirit of rebellion encounters, for the last time in our history, the spirit of compassion” (1956b, 166, emphasis added).

That ‘supreme and painful good’ of compassion, creativity, and humanity requires the assassins to sacrifice themselves for the sake of a principle which they

are nevertheless obliged to violate. The assassins, therefore, ‘create’ values because they do not deny this contradiction in their action, because they consciously recognize the evil in which they are complicit, and because they enforce an equitable penalty for that evil. “A life is paid for by another life, and from these two sacrifices springs the promise of a value. Kaliayev, Vionarovsky, and the others believe in the equal value of human lives. Therefore they do not value any idea above human life, though they kill for the sake of ideas. To be precise, they live on the plane of their idea. They justify it, finally, by incarnating it to the point of death” (Camus 1956b, 170).

Camus uses the story of the assassins to pronounce on murder and his pronouncement is simple: murder is “the limit that can be reached but once, after which one must die. The rebel has only one way of reconciling himself with his act of murder if he allows himself to be led into performing it: to accept his own death and sacrifice. He kills and dies so that it shall be clear that murder is impossible” (1956b, 282). In a short (1946) article, “To Save Lives,” Camus offered a theoretical frame for this position: “People like myself want not a world where murder no longer exists... but one where murder is no longer legitimized. Here we are indeed utopian — and contradictorily so... In a more relative utopia, we could demand that murder be no longer legitimized” (1991, 120-121). The fastidious assassins, in Camus’ mind, give us an example of ‘relatively’ utopian action because, while they commit murder, they refuse both nihilistic and utopian thought, demanding instead, by their own self-sacrificial actions, that murder never be legitimized.

But it must be said that Camus’ defense of the 1905 assassins is more than a little troubling. It does not seem altogether reasonable to suggest, as Camus has, that a

suicide ‘negates’ a crime, or that “to die... cancels out both the guilt and the crime itself” (1956b, 171). In fact, Camus’ seems to be a self-centered moral calculus, one that oddly forgets its victims even as it exacts self-punishment for killing them, and one which, as George Kateb and others have pointed out, easily devolves into “a defense of a bloody doctrine” in which “the stain of blood can be erased only with more blood” (Willhoite 1968, 157). It is even somewhat repugnant to discuss assassination and self-sacrifice as ‘creative’ acts (as, admittedly, I have). While absolute non-violence may condemn one to passivity and timidity in the face of evil, we are nevertheless surprised that Camus, the man who famously declared that he had “always denounced terrorism” (Apter 1997, 499), has mounted what appears to be a moral defense of targeted suicide-bombing.

Camus seems to be claiming that, as long as the suicide-assassin is emotionally bothered and as long as he refuses to see himself as innocent or omnipotent, then his deadly violence may be praiseworthy. We wonder how this rationale squares with Camus’ condemnation of institutionalized terrorism, the reign of “the new aristocracy and the grand inquisitors... [who] excuse their cruelty, like the Satan of the romantics, by claiming that it is hard for them to bear... A new and somewhat hideous race of martyrs is now born. Their martyrdom consists in consenting to inflict suffering on others; they become the slaves of their own domination” (1956b, 175-176). Do the self-sacrificing assassins not resemble these new martyrs? Does Camus not defend them on the grounds that their crimes are difficult for them to bear? To be fair to Camus, it is true that the fastidious assassins limit their targets and refuse to take innocent life. But the very definition of

‘innocence’ ought to be at the heart of the agony suffered by these supposedly delicate and scrupulous murderers. Perhaps the more important distinction between State terrorists and fastidious assassins is that the latter, while their behavior may not always evince it, refuse to be reconciled with murder, demanding their own death as an expression of their guilt. Camus would argue that even if both appear to be martyrs who excuse their cruelty by claiming that it is hard for them to bear, the fastidious assassins never permit themselves to become resigned to the violence which they nevertheless find inevitable.

We must consider, then, to what extent the presence of ambivalence and psychological conflict can serve as a foundation for a theory of moral or political action. Is there not a risk in such a theory that an *internal* moral process might be mistaken as accounting for the *real* destructive action taking place between the assassin and his victim? That is, Camus’ justification for declaring the fastidious assassins to be morally superior to other terrorists is primarily based upon their internal contradiction, their agony, and their demand for the ultimate self-punishment. This moral defense would seem to run the same risks as rebellious art: it may seek to repair and restore objects in fantasy when they ought to be repaired in reality, permitting the assassins to justify the real destruction they cause on the grounds of an *internal* price paid (see Alford 1989, 104-124). While, ultimately, Camus’ argument is that self-scrutiny and self-punishment creates a value not only in the minds of the assassins but for the members of their Organization and for the larger society that witnesses their acts, Camus’ defense of the assassins, both for their (internal and

emotional) suffering and for their (real and physical) self-sacrifice, is troubling because it seems to blur the lines between concern for the self and concern for others.

Martha Crenshaw's study of the causes of terrorism forces us to ask further troubling questions about Camus' apparent defense of the assassins. In her assessment of common causes and dynamics of terrorism, Crenshaw is not the first to observe that "shared guilt and anxiety increase the group's interdependence and mutual commitment and may also make the followers more dependent on leaders and on the common ideology as sources of moral authority. Guilt may also lead terrorists to seek punishment and danger rather than avoid it" (Crenshaw 1981, 395). Camus certainly recognized that the dynamics of the Organization may have helped push the assassins toward a deeper commitment to each other and toward self-sacrifice. He claims, in fact, that "the bond that united them replaced every other attachment in their minds," that "bound only to one another," the group chose for itself the role of executioner and chose to live "in the same paradox, combining in themselves respect for human life in general and contempt for their own lives — to the point of nostalgia for the supreme sacrifice" (1956b, 167-168). Camus even admits that Dora Brilliant felt that terrorism was "primarily embellished by the sacrifice it demanded" and that Kaliyev "passionately desired to make the sacrifice" (1956b, 168).

If the bonds of collective guilt and shared suicidal fantasies motivated the ostensibly moral and creative code of the assassins, don't these motivations affect the moral worth of their actions? "In other cases of terrorism," Crenshaw writes, "individuals much more pragmatic than Kaliyev, admittedly a religious mystic, seemed to welcome capture because it brought release from the strains of

underground existence and a sense of content and fulfillment. For example, Meridor, a member of the Irgun High Command, felt ‘high spirits’ and ‘satisfaction’ when arrested by the British police... In fact, until his arrest he had felt ‘morally uncomfortable,’ whereas afterwards he felt ‘exalted’” (1981, 395). If many terrorists, and not just the 1905 assassins, have desired self-sacrifice, for reasons of fidelity to a code of the group, or out of desire to absolve themselves of guilt and anxiety, or due to a simpler desire to be released from the strains of underground living, we must ask if that changes the moral persuasiveness of Camus’ arguments.

But while we may (nay, we must) take offense at the actions of the 1905 assassins, I believe it is possible to respond to these questions and criticisms on behalf of the moral and political theory of the absurd. For Camus, the precise source of the assassins’ desire for self-sacrifice is *not* the determining factor of their moral worth. Although their scrupulousness is key to their virtue, Camus would argue that we need not be so naïve as to believe that all ambivalence, all scruples, and all moral activity derives from a pristine moral psychology. Why should we condemn the assassins for feeling intolerable guilt or fear when faced with the prospect of murder? Might not these emotions underline their basic humanity and even their basic moral identification with their victims? While the assassins commit murder in a cause of resistance, their emotions and their actions proclaim the impossibility of murder, the unjustifiability of evil, the limits of their cause, the humanity of their victims, and the need to make reparations even for crimes undertaken soberly in the name of a greater good. That is, for Camus, the moral good created by the assassins is their paradoxical statement that participating in evil is unjustifiable even though participating in evil is

inevitable. Camus would say that this statement preserves more of the ambivalent, creative, moral ground than their targeted violence destroys.

Camus' Algeria

In Stockholm in 1957, Camus famously said: "I have always denounced terrorism. I must also denounce a terrorism which is exercised blindly, in the streets of Algiers for example, and which one day could strike my mother or my family. I believe in justice, but I shall defend my mother before justice" (Apter 1997, 499). This statement expresses, in a casual way, some of the more complex tensions informing Camus' response to the Algerian war against French colonial rule, a response that has since become the most controversial topic concerning Camus' life and career.

In his repudiation of the French administration in Algeria, and in his equally adamant condemnation of the FLN's violent tactics, we see another side of Camus' politics, one that is as interesting (and perhaps as troublesome) as his apparent advocacy of suicide-assassination discussed above. In the case of Algeria, Camus' response, unlike the more expressive assassins of *Les justes*, consisted of a kind of silence. It was not that Camus did not speak and write at length about the conflict, but he refused to lend his voice to either side of what had become an increasingly polarized battle in which both parties seemed willing to justify elaborate excesses. In this situation, he said, "when speech can lead to the remorseless disposal of other people's lives, silence is not a negative attitude" (Judt 1998, 119). For his silence, which was more like a long speech to which no one was listening, Camus was roundly rebuked. But Camus was not 'withdrawn' from the conflict, as his critics

maintained; right or wrong, he felt he was called to advance a more measured, more complex, and perhaps more creative solution to the problems Algeria faced.

In his (1958) Preface to *Actuelles III*, a collection of his Algerian reports, Camus defined his stance as a kind of double-refusal. “As they stand,” he wrote, “these texts sum up the position of a man who, faced very young with the misery of Algeria, in vain multiplied his warnings and, long aware of his country’s responsibilities, cannot approve a policy of preservation or oppression in Algeria. But I have long been alert to Algerian realities and cannot approve, either, a policy of surrender that would abandon the Arab people to an even greater misery, tear the French in Algeria from their century-old roots, and favor, to no one’s advantage, the new imperialism now threatening the liberty of France and of the West” (1960, 111).

Camus thus refused the positions of both the Left and the Right. He argued against Algerian independence on the grounds of the instability, poverty, and new imperialism he thought it would bring. But he also sought to bring to light the deplorable conditions of Algerians under French rule throughout his career, beginning in 1939 with a well-known series of investigative articles in *Alger Républicain*, *Misère de la Kabylie*. He denounced terrorism, but he also thoroughly criticized the repressive methods of the French against Algerians. He contrasted the FLN with the 1905 assassins saying that the terrorism of the FLN had assumed such a violent and indiscriminate form that “no revolutionary movement has ever accepted it, and the Russian terrorists of 1905, for instance, would have died (they proved this statement) rather than stoop to it” (1960, 115). But he also reproached the use of torture and the “methods of collective repression” by the French administration by making an even

more extraordinary comparison: “the fact is there, clear and hideous as the truth: we are doing in these cases what we reproached the Germans for doing” (Camus in Carroll 1997, 525).

Amidst these mutual condemnations, one theme seemed to recur in his thought: “The question is not how to die separately but rather how to live together” (Camus 1960, 117). For Camus, it was not only violence that killed both French and ‘Arab’ Algerians. Camus felt that even the politics of independence and reconquest represented ‘deaths’ for both parties. “If you want France alone to reign in Algeria over eight million mutes,” Camus protested, “she will die. If you want Algeria to separate from France, both of them will perish in the same way. If, on the other hand, French and Arabs resolve their differences in Algeria, the future will have a meaning for the French, the Arabs, and the whole world” (1960, 118). Camus feared that Algerian independence would not only require the exile of more than one million French Algerians, but would leave the country in a state of disrepair, in his words, in the hands of “an empire of Islam which would bring the Arab peoples only increased poverty and suffering” (1960, 124). Thus, Camus felt that he could not advocate any course of action except reconciliation for the ‘two peoples of Algeria’ and he could not support any official policy except that of the briefly-tenured Pierre Mendès-France (see Camus 1960, 119; Bronner 1996, 95-96).

Camus was therefore not unaware that “the time of colonialism is over” and that all that remained was “to know this and to draw conclusions from it” (1960, 120), but, for him, redressing the injustices of colonialism by punishing the French living in Algeria was a particularly obscene form of scapegoating. For Camus, the perpetrators

and beneficiaries of the French colonial system were not those living in the colonies, but the metropolitan French. Like many French Algerians, Camus contended, his own family had fought and died in wars for France, had labored for the true *colons* whom he despised, and, “being poor and free of hatred, [had] never exploited or oppressed anyone” (1960, 119). Camus believed that, given time, French Algerians would admit the necessity of making sacrifices for the creation of “a juster and freer order” (1960, 119), and that Algeria would reconcile itself to a less radical solution.

Thus, on behalf not only of the oppressed Algerian population, but of the French population in Algeria, Camus defended his stance in perfectly clear terms. “Recognizing the end of colonialism,” he claimed, “my solution excludes dreams of reconquest or of maintaining the *status quo*; really mere reactions of weakness and humiliation, such dreams only prepare for the definitive divorce and the double misfortune of France and Algeria. But my solution also excludes the dream of uprooting the French in Algeria, who, if they haven’t the right to oppress anyone, do have the right not to be oppressed and to be their own masters in the land of their birth. There are other ways of re-establishing the necessary justice than substituting one injustice for another” (1960, 124, emphasis in original).

But Camus’ solution of a long-term republican association between France and Algeria, of an “Algeria made up of federated settlements and linked to France” (Camus 1960, 124), was widely criticized for suffering from colonial naivety. In spite of statements like the one cited above, Camus was accused of defending the *status quo*. Perhaps his position was so interpreted because the sentiment at the time was that “there was no longer any third option,” only the two choices of French

reconquest or Algerian independence (Judt 1998, 120). By continuing to insist upon a ‘third option’ of civil truce and reconciliation even unto his final public “intervention” into the crisis (Judt 1998, 120), Camus was thought by his contemporaries to be either unwilling or unable to rise above the mindset of a liberal, “well-intentioned colonizer” (Judt 1998, 119).

Since then, critics like Conor Cruise O’Brien and Edward Said (1993) have indicted Camus for what they see as his gross mishandling of the racial and colonial issues of Algeria. O’Brien criticized Camus for his fantastical vision of an Algeria to which he belonged, one in which all Algerians shared a common culture (O’Brien 1970, 10-11). He rebuked Camus for justifying a continued colonial presence and for being unable to imagine an Algeria in which he, and other *pieds noirs*, did not exist. O’Brien and other critics have suggested that Camus’ inability to see the need for Algerian independence was reflected even in his novels and stories, in his frequent depiction of Arabs who are little more than “stick figures holding up the scenery, or scopic effects, tracking European inquisitors with malevolent diffidence” (Apter 1997, 503), and in what O’Brien argues amounts to Camus’ “artistic final solution of the problem of the Arabs of Oran” in *The Plague* (1970, 56).

O’Brien argues that Camus drew the wrong conclusions about Algeria because he suffered from a colonial ‘hallucination’ of a shared cultural heritage. Emily Apter has more recently argued that Camus’ “idealized proto-Braudelian fantasy of ‘Mediterranean man,’ a Euro-African subject whose cultural attachments allow him to forget the Realpolitik of colonial power imbalance, shatters in the context of the Algerian War, when hybridity is re-nationalized; rendered schizoid as

opposed to culturally composite” (1997, 508). David Carroll somewhat more kindly describes Camus’ vision of a French-Arab Algerian identity as one of “an original sharing and being-together before separation, difference, and conflict, a kind of Ur-cultural being-in-common that is so deeply grounded in each — in the ground of their being and in the ground itself — that it cannot be destroyed” (Carroll 1997, 529).

Leaving culture and ‘Ur-culture’ aside, Camus felt that Algeria was a ‘native’ soil for its French inhabitants who had been born there, and some of whose parents and grandparents had been born there. And while it is true that Camus occasionally defended his position with reference to a mysterious ‘Mediterranean culture’, shared by North Africans and Europeans (see Apter 1997, 510-511), his preferred (and preferable) defense of an inclusive Algerian community was founded not on a fantasy of shared culture but of a less abstruse historical and civil bond.

In his *Letter to an Algerian Militant*, Camus writes to his friend Aziz Kessous that, like Algerians, the French in Algeria are also “attached to the soil of Algeria by roots that are too old and too vigorous for us to think of tearing them up” (1960, 127). Camus wrote of an almost patriotic community that he thought all Algerians shared. “You and I, who are so much alike — having the same background, sharing the same hope, having felt like brothers for so long now, united in our love for our country — know that we are not enemies and that we could live happily together on this soil that belongs to us. For it is ours, and I can no more imagine it without you and your brothers than you can probably separate it from me and those who resemble me” (1960, 127). While surely some fantasies are dangerous and excessive, and while it is difficult today to apologize for Camus’ opposition to Algerian independence, Camus’

particular fantasy about an Algerian community was relatively restrained. It was to a reformed (although admittedly fantastical) “Franco-Arab community of Algeria” that Camus’ thought on Algeria most often returned (Camus 1960, 129).

O’Brien, Said, and Camus’ many other critics are, therefore, quite correct in claiming that Camus could not imagine an Algeria without him in it. Camus seems to have opposed the colonial administration while failing to admit the possibility that his solution would merely rename and extend the French-Algerian colonial relationship. O’Brien argues that Camus should have seen that he was on the wrong side of this issue, especially because so much of Camus’ work confesses to the feeling of being “a stranger on the African shore, and surrounded by people who are strangers in that France of which they are legally supposed to be a part” (Carroll 1997, 521). But Camus thought of himself neither as a *colon*, nor as French. A stranger in Algeria, but perhaps even more estranged in France, Camus felt that he and those like him belonged to neither side and both sides at the same time. Algerians under French rule were, of course, estranged in addition to being oppressed. But Camus seems to have felt that peaceful co-existence across racial and national lines was possible in part because a kinship between *pieds noirs* and Algerians had been created by the colonial situation, itself, along with its mutually alienating forces. That ‘community of strangers’ formed of all Algerians was being tested, to be sure, but Camus claimed that it was more substantial than whatever colonial relationship was supposed to exist between French Algerians and the Parisian *métropole* and that it was much less likely to disintegrate than an independent Algeria (which is, sadly, the kind of thing other well-intentioned colonizers tended to say).

It is tempting to speculate that, in Camus' mind, the Algerian crisis may have been replaying, in brutal and real terms, the kind of absurd contradictions and ambivalences he had written about throughout his career. When we read Camus' objections to the proposed exile of over one million French Algerians, it is difficult not to hear his more abstract opposition to the removal of one of the 'terms' of the absurd equation in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Likewise, in Camus' disapproval of the ideas of French reconquest or endless war, one hears the traces of his rejection of absolutist and nihilistic responses to the absurd outlined in *The Rebel*. At the same time, Camus seems to have felt that the opposition between French Algerians and 'Arab' Algerians was largely artificial, that the battle was ideological rather than practical, and that no sacrifice of life should be justified for the sake of an abstract independence which he feared would only harm everyone involved.

If Camus' work and his life often met uncomfortably in the case of Algeria, his stance on Algerian question stands in particularly curious relation to the decision of Daru, the *piéd noir* of Camus' short story, "*L'Hôte*," which means both "The Guest" and "The Host." In an unofficial "wartime" without any declaration of war (Camus 1958b, 91), Daru is recruited against his wishes to hold and then hand over an Algerian criminal to the French police. But Daru, unwilling to determine the fate of his 'guest', takes his prisoner into the desert and allows him to choose his own direction, to turn himself in or to flee.

The prisoner chooses to turn himself in to the police, but it is clear that Daru's decision (or his indecision) would have been condemned by his French compatriots, just as Daru's life would be threatened by the Algerian men who would blame him

for condemning their brother to death. Daru's deferral of his choice to his prisoner, which seems to result from his sensitivity and his profound "ambivalence" (Kritzman 1997, 573), is the only solution he feels he can adopt given his status as both a 'native' Algerian and a *pied noir*. Daru resorts to a less partisan (although not completely non-partisan) solution in an attempt to avoid the conflict of which both he and his guest are at the center. But his decision seems only to defer and to perpetuate the antagonistic condition in which he, the French, and the Algerian populations find themselves. Indeed, his act of "neutrality," of trying to avoid taking a side, is ultimately revealed to be useless, futile, even "empty and politically meaningless" (Carroll 1997, 537).

Daru's act is therefore neither ideal nor entirely damnable. It is an ineffectual act, it appears to avoid personal responsibility, and it may even fail to take full account of the historical violence that lies behind the French presence in Algeria, but it is also an attempt to find a 'third way', an alternative resolution to the conflict that better respects the limits of both men's positions. The moral of the story is, obviously, that attempts at subtle moral actions are futile when two peoples are at war. Unfortunately, however, Camus' stance on Algeria seems too often to echo the paternalism in the interactions between the educated, professional French 'host' and the mute, criminal Arab prisoner who, even under his own power, willingly submits himself to the French authorities.

Camus's position on the Algerian War, therefore, reveals a side of absurd politics that both resembles and differs from the moral defense of Kaliayev and *les justes*. While Camus' quixotic stance on Algeria was 'creative', to say the least, it

appears to deny the role played by the *pieds noirs* in the system of colonial injustice, a denial that surprises us when coming from the defender of Kaliyev and the creator of Tarrou, whose primary virtues are rooted in their vigilant awareness of the evils they inevitably commit. Why didn't Camus recognize that the 'sacrifice' that had to be made for Algeria was a French departure and Algerian independence? While Camus may have known that his position on Algeria was, like Kaliyev's, both necessary *and* inexcusable, why did he not act more like Kaliyev and willingly sacrifice his claim to the land of Algeria to rectify an obvious injustice?

Although it is impossible to offer certain answers to these questions with respect to Camus, we may rephrase them and pose them to absurd political theory in general. Can a political philosophy cogently defend both a continued French presence in Algeria *and* a resistance against oppression and imperialism like the one Kaliyev and the Combat Organization mounted? Can a political philosophy advocate evils of commission, on one hand, *and* evils of omission, on the other? Can a political philosophy that seems to forgive widespread and longstanding historical injustices in Algeria while demanding ultimate self-sacrifices for a single criminal act in Russia be of any use, or is it, in its ambivalence and self-contradiction, merely doubly confused and doubly destructive?

Conclusion

I have found both of these cases to be troubling. It seems that the morality of the absurd, as Camus understands it and as we have understood him, advocates political assassination and tacitly approves of colonialism, or at least a kind of neocolonialism, so long as these evils are deemed 'necessary' and so long as one recognizes them as

such. This advocacy is difficult to swallow, not least because it calls up unfortunate means-ends moral calculations which tend to beg more questions than they answer and which, in extreme cases, may be used to justify almost any evil. Surely, the absurd person should hate to find himself deciding who is innocent and who is guilty, which oppressions are acceptable and which are not, which murders are necessary and which are not. But perhaps Camus' point is that there is simply no way to avoid making these decisions, that, indeed, we make them every day without having the strength to admit it. According to this absurd moral vision, it is *pretending* that there is a morality free from evil that is the real danger, because that kind of pretending collapses the moral, potential space which it is the absurdist's duty to sustain. By accepting his or her unavoidable involvement in evil and by seeking to make reparations for it, at least the absurdist preserves the possibility of continued creative and moral action.

The moral and political philosophy of the absurd, on this account, seems to recommend, as a first step, that we recognize the impossibility of *not* doing evil, and that we confront the defensive processes that permit us to pretend that indirect violence is the same thing as innocence. Obviously, these reflections suggest that one of the first recommendations of an absurd political theory would be to dramatically increase the complexity of moral and political discourse, in the hope of recognizing the complex and distant implications of even seemingly harmless behavior. Recognizing that the mere enjoyment of the benefits of unjust or immoral practices implicates us in evil might be a first step toward an absurd political conversation.

If one takes this line of thought a bit further, it implies that we ought to be engaged in an endless process of appraising justifiable and unjustifiable wrong-doing, although the moral philosophy of the absurd does not seem to provide any real guideline for conducting these endless appraisals. But even this criticism of the lack of a guideline has its limits, for, according to an absurd morality, all systematic definitions of moral wrong-doing or right-doing are suspect because they legitimize those ‘remainders’ of injustice and violence not accounted for in their computations. An absurd model for assessing the morality of actions would have to be continuously updated and informed by repeated estimations of: (a) the severity and extremity of the circumstance in which one struggles, while compensating for the distance between the agent and the victims, (b) the degree of genuine moral conflict experienced in contemplating and undertaking any violent or destructive action, and (c) the willingness to sacrifice one’s freedom and even one’s life, not precisely for the cause, but in compensation for violating the boundaries and limits one paradoxically seeks to defend.

Obviously, this rather haphazard sketch of an absurd moral and political calculus could never hold up to *philosophical* scrutiny, and, in fact, on an emotional level it is unsettling as well. I imagine that many of us feel unwilling to associate ourselves with violence, terrorism, or assassination plots, and I can not say with certainty that I would hold a different view even if I were not so comfortably protected from the violence, oppression, and degradation against which these actions might be directed. Nevertheless, it is possible that, as a start, the morality and politics of the absurd asks that we revisit our resistance to wrong-doing, that we investigate

the real causes and consequences of that resistance in order to determine if it is principled or conformist, defensive (a defense against the extreme anxiety that can be generated by contemplating evil) or constitutive of a creative moral stance.

As we might expect, the morality and politics of the absurd asks us to reflect upon and manage our reactions to ambivalence, but perhaps that includes reflecting upon our resistance to wrong-doing as well as our resistance to recognizing (and making reparations for) the wrong-doing we do, either directly or indirectly. That is, if we accept inevitable culpability, then the absurd call for maturity and creativity appears in a different light. Certainly, it seems more difficult than we may have thought, and perhaps it even seems more admirable, for it is difficult to be mature and creative if one is burdened by one's own guilt and responsibility. Yet, and perhaps this is the key, the moral and political philosophy of the absurd asks us to turn that difficulty and those burdens *toward* others, toward the formation of moral identifications, interactions, and communions across that 'space' that allows us to interact morally, creatively, and reparatively with those whom we inevitably harm.

Early in this chapter, I hinted that Camus and his critics may have *over-stated* the value of dialogue in the political philosophy of the absurd. Against the mainstream of critical interpretations of the absurd, dialogue and communication strike me as only tangentially related to absurd politics and as ultimately ephemeral grounds for absurd political action. We must admit that genuine dialogue is rare, and, in an absurd climate, it is likely to be even rarer. Genuine dialogue relies on norms of parity and equality, but this reliance makes it difficult for dialogue, itself, to address vast inequalities and imbalances in power between speakers. And absurd theorists

should be among the first to recognize that the ideal of pure, genuine, equal communication is largely mythical, perhaps as mythical as the ideal of pure, genuine, equal subjects whose shadows lurk behind many communicative-ethical programs. Even if something approximating genuine dialogue were to be attained, one suspects that its most profound effects would be attributable not to any resolutions reached in dialogue *per se*, but to the basic changes in identification with others that result from profound interpersonal interactions. That is, at the heart of the ideal of dialogue, the absurd moralist will seek out the more basic, more emotionally-potent force of moral identification.

In speaking about moral identification, I mean to suggest a mature form of identification that, like most identifications, is ambivalent, but that reflects upon its limits and respects the basic integrity of self and others in accordance with the grounding for absurd morality described in Chapter 8. In addition to staking out that limited, creative, moral ground, we may now add that the ambivalence of the absurd, itself, becomes a key ingredient in moral and political identification. That is, in the absurd, as in ambivalence, “we have an essential ingredient in the ability to empathize, to feel what another person feels... And pressing one step farther, the ability to feel others’ points of view seems to be a fundamental element in moral consciousness; for without it we would experience others only as objects... It is, arguably, because we can feel conflicting points of view that there is such a thing as a moral dilemma” (Koch 1987, 279).

We may apply this notion of moral identification to Fred Willhoite’s argument that a good example of absurd rebellion would be the American civil rights

movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Willhoite contends that this movement proceeded from “spontaneous protests against subhuman treatment, implicitly in the name of a common human nature and to protect an essential human dignity with which the protestors identified themselves” (Willhoite 1968, 75). But in his defense of this example, which is interesting and provocative, Willhoite glosses over the most important connection between it and absurd morality. He mentions only as an afterthought that the “freedom movement” was “impelled not by rational calculations of self-interest but simply by ‘identification of one’s destiny with that of others’” (1968, 76). Willhoite, like Camus himself, attempts to extrapolate the moral and political significance of “dialogical communion” by over-emphasizing ‘dialogue’ and under-emphasizing ‘communion’ (1968, 67). Instead, like some of the most significant and lasting successes of the civil rights movement, an absurd politics depends upon the establishment of stronger ‘communions’, stronger basic identifications between individuals and groups formerly split apart, and upon the renewed moral and political possibilities such identifications offer.

Camus explicitly argued against this interpretation of the political morality of the absurd, but I believe it is possible to resolve his objections to it. Camus wrote:

Then we note that rebellion does not arise only... among the oppressed, but that it can also be caused by the mere spectacle of oppression of which someone else is the victim. In such cases there is a feeling of identification with another individual. And it must be pointed out that this is not a question of psychological identification — a mere subterfuge by which the individual imagines that it is he himself who has been offended. On the contrary, it can often happen that we cannot bear to see offenses done to others which we ourselves have accepted without rebelling... Nor is it a question of a community of interests. Injustices done to men whom we consider enemies can, actually, be profoundly repugnant to us. There is only identification of one’s destiny with that of others and a choice of sides... When he rebels, a

man identifies himself with other men, and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical. (1956b, 16-17)

Camus' argument here is that psychological identification is mere fantasy, almost hysteria, while absurd rebellion involves the more lucid choice of sharing a destiny. In some ways, this follows Freud's assessment of identification as the earliest way of relating to objects and as a regressive replacement for object-ties in individuals and groups (see Freud 1959, 46-50). But Camus' rejection of psychological identification (along with his use of the term 'metaphysical') only obscures the point. To feel, to imagine, to intuit an identification with another is likely to be both a political and an imaginary (or fantastical) process, and there is no reason to condemn *all* identifications as 'mere subterfuge'. This pejorative phrase might be more usefully applied to those identifications that are especially primitive, regressive, narcissistic, projective, or otherwise immature.

Rather than calling one process of identification 'psychological' and the other 'an identification of destiny', a more useful distinction may be made between immature identifications that arise defensively and largely unconsciously and mature identifications that work against these defensive and unconscious processes. In the former, splitting, scapegoating, group narcissism, even callous indifference to the fate of others predominate, while, in the latter, identifications retain (and require) a bit more conscious access, more profound reflexivity and reflection, and more mature and creative relationships between better-integrated selves and others. Clearly, this distinction is imprecise and artificial, as moral and political identifications likely occur at varying levels of maturity and immaturity, fantasy and integrity, and between

varying symbolic, imaginative, and emotional registers (see Sedinger 2002). Yet, the question that the politics of the absurd ought to take up is not only how injustices have been perpetuated by immature responses to the ambivalence of the absurd, but how we can forge new, strategic communions and more deliberate moral and political identifications that could combat such injustices.

One missed opportunity for such an identification has been among citizens of the United States and Iraq. Although difficult if not impossible to prove, there seems to be room for greater empathy and identification between US citizens, Iraqi citizens, and even resistance and terror groups who often injure and kill both Iraqis and Americans. The lack of substantial identification between US and Iraqi citizens is complex, of course, but it is facilitated in surprisingly straight-forward ways, such as in the absence of any official count (the absence of a system of 'identification') of Iraqi injuries or deaths (Burnham et al. 2006).

American citizens may face challenges in identifying with Iraqi citizens and victims of the conflict, for identification raises the issue of culpability, to which our defenses may be strong. To push the politics of absurdity one step further, US citizens must even face the more difficult prospect of identifying with individuals in resistance and terror organizations operating in Iraq, in spite of the deep distress of empathizing with sworn enemies dedicated to killing American soldiers. While such a notion seems far-fetched, it should be mentioned that in order to identify with others in a mature sense, it is not necessary to approve a doctrine or a method. It is only necessary to recognize the bonds of culpability and humanity that unite even enemies;

in Camus' words, 'to admit that the opponent may be right' and 'to agree to think about his views', no matter how repugnant they may seem.

A greater identification with Iraqi citizens accompanied by a greater recognition of the extraordinary evils committed by the United States in that country would go along way toward creating a political and emotional relationship between the citizens of the two countries which could inform the efforts of the US resistance to the war, help Americans recognize the *limits* of what US policy can accomplish in Iraq, both militarily and politically, and re-open a space for creative political action undertaken by Iraqis. A genuine absurd politics would recommend a strategic identification with Iraqi citizens, whose possibilities for action and interaction with both allies and enemies must be dramatically expanded.

The absurd moral processes of reflection, resistance to defense, admission of culpability, and mature identification may be applied to any number of political and social ills where they could check the divisions and denials that legitimize injustice. For instance, one can not help but think that the truly bizarre attitude of Americans toward the incarcerated might be ameliorated by a greater moral identification between 'free' citizens and prisoners. In a country that has broken all records of incarceration, imprisoning one in every one hundred adults, one in thirty-six Hispanic adults, and one in fifteen black adults (Warren 2008), perhaps it is not surprising that irony, primitive jokes, and uncomfortable silences dominate popular treatments of this subject. While more and more films and television shows depict the inhumanity of prison life, talk show hosts and comedians continue to make jokes out of the widespread and institutionalized rape and battery of US prisoners (see Mariner 2001).

Taken as a sort of natural and even humorous occurrence, these outrages are legitimized in a popular culture that denies any involvement with incarcerated individuals while, at the same time, perversely seeking out, glamorizing, and even reveling in the brutality of prison life.

Of course, part of the idea of imprisonment is that it forcibly removes individuals from society, encouraging the psychological and cultural split between ‘free’ citizens and prisoners that legitimizes inhumane treatment (see Foucault 1975, 272). If it were possible to forge more substantial identifications between ‘free’ citizens and prisoners, to encourage greater (non-exploitative) public involvement in prison affairs, and to better articulate some of the underlying causes and correlates of crime and punishment, it would likely improve the present climate in which otherwise decent Americans accept and even advocate rape and violence in prison on the grounds of indifference, retribution, or revenge. A morality and politics of the absurd would encourage us to confront our split perception of a country of ‘free’ citizens and criminals and to reflect upon how our defenses against involvement and against the imagination of evil may tempt us to defend evil.

Finally (and one could apply these themes to political issues *ad infinitum*), while the debate over illegal immigration seems to serve ideological purposes more than to address genuine social or political ills at present, it is an unfortunate example of the scapegoating process that stronger and more strategic identifications could combat. The idea, for instance, that candidates for the Republican Presidential nomination, Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney, could have been engaged in a debate over who was more *guilty* of offering “sanctuary,” what we might otherwise think of

as a great merciful good, illustrates the vitriol and vehemence against the ‘illegal’ or undocumented immigrant, at least in conservative circles (Haberman 2007).

There *has* been a call for greater identification between US citizens, legal immigrants, and illegal immigrants, one in which the premises of illegal immigration are called into doubt. The rallying cry of this movement, and the title of various books, blogs, and immigrant rights organizations, has been: ‘No one is illegal’. But I much prefer, and I think an absurd political actor would prefer, Todd McGowan’s subtly different approach to identification expressed in the slogan: ‘No One Is *Legal*’ (2008, 60, emphasis added). This formulation expresses a solidarity with the would-be scapegoat while offering the distinct advantage of throwing into doubt the imagined innocence and security of legal citizenship which give this particular form of scapegoating much of its force. Indeed, identifications like this not only create continuities and connections between disparately powerful groups, connections that frustrate the splits and defenses that otherwise legitimize injustices; they also insist that we recognize the contingencies and contradictions inherent in liberal society, in the ‘free’ subject and the ‘legal’ citizen. While these conclusions are obviously quite preliminary, we may suggest that reflecting upon our shared guilt and responsibility even for distant inequalities and injustices, forging strategic identifications that cut across the more facile identifications of nation, class, race, or status, and sustaining the space needed for continued creative and moral action and interaction are all activities that are at the heart of absurd morality and politics.

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