

Living in the Tensions: Camus, Qohelet, and the Confrontation with the Absurd

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the School of Communication
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

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15 April 2011

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This thesis is dedicated to my best friend, Alicia Valere.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to:

my professors and fellow classmates—for inspiring me to be a pursuer of God and His Truth;

Dr. Mark Schmidt, Dr. Karen Prior, and Dr. Alan Fuhr—for your guidance and wisdom;

my siblings—Ashley, Dallas, and Tahlia—for your friendship;

my father and mother—for raising me in a God-fearing home;

Alicia, my love—for the encouragement and distractions;

Jesus Christ, author of my life—for redemption.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the spiritual dimensions of Albert Camus's "cycle of the absurd"—*The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Stranger*, and *Caligula*—by paralleling Camus's absurd vision of life to the various themes of the ancient text of Hebrew-wisdom literature, *Ecclesiastes*. Both Camus and Qohelet (the main speaker of *Ecclesiastes*) describe the absurdity of human existence that arises from the limitations of human reason, the futility of human action, and the certainty of death. Although Camus (an atheist) and Qohelet (a theist) begin with different assumptions regarding the existence of God—the very Being who potentially gives meaning and clarity to his creation—their similar discoveries and conclusions reveal an unlikely compatibility between theistic and atheistic attitudes towards the human predicament. While Camus and Qohelet recognize that the world disappoints and cannot be explained by human reasoning, and is therefore absurd, they each conclude that uncertainty, mortality, and human limitations may prompt a certain liberation and solace that allow them to move beyond the absurd and affirm their existence. This curious parallel between the ancient Hebraic wisdom of *Ecclesiastes* and Camus's modern existential attitudes in the "cycle of the absurd" uncovers a common claim in both the atheistic and theistic understanding of the human situation. These texts show that a profound awareness of the absurd may compel the individual to live authentically and passionately despite the seeming unreasonableness of his or her life.

Introduction

Connecting Camus and Qohelet

Nobel Prize laureate Albert Camus begins one of the most influential works of the twentieth century, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, with these striking statements:

There is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.¹

It is clear from these opening lines that Camus is interested in the most fundamental questions: the value of human existence and the meaning-of-life itself. He later stresses that “the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions,”² and before any sensitive human being determines *how* to live, he must decide whether he *should* live in the first place; he must determine whether or not living is “worth the trouble.”³

In raising these questions, Camus addresses one of the central predicaments of modern man: the absurd. “The absurd,” he writes, “is born of this confrontation between the human need [for meaning] and the unreasonable silence of the world.”⁴ Man longs for sagacity, but he “stands face to face with the irrational;”⁵ he desires reason, but “[t]his world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said...what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”⁶ The absurd is not found in the mere existence of man or in the mere absence of God, but in the *coexistence* of these two factors, in the tension between two polarized realities: the reality

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 1960), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

that man demands that the world make sense, and the reality that the world is irrational. The absurd, essentially, is the final product of an unmet expectation, a lost possibility, an unfulfilled desire—man demands that there be meaning in life. He demands clarity and purpose in this world, but the universe is silent and indifferent to his demands. As a result, this feeling of absurdity makes man an “alien” and “stranger” to himself, to his fellow men, and to the world.⁷ Essentially, man becomes fully aware of both his condition and fate as he confronts the absurd: he is born (without his permission) into a world (of which he does not approve) without inherent meaning or purpose (though he desires them) and is condemned to struggle through an ephemeral existence of anxiety and suffering that guarantees only a grave. Man realizes that he is neither home nor homebound, but *homeless* in both life and death, forever lost in a universe of no inherent meaning or truth. Human existence, Camus concludes, is nothing more than a meaningless and momentary “field of being.”⁸

It is both this consciousness of and confrontation with the absurd that compel Camus to determine whether or not life is worth living at all. The tension and discrepancy between desire and reality, that hopeless longing and expectation for an irrational world to be rational, lead Camus to face the problem of suicide: “Does the absurd dictate death?”⁹ he asks. Should man continue living in an inherently meaningless universe? “This problem,” Camus rightly declares, “must be given priority over others, outside all methods of thought and all exercises of the disinterested mind.”¹⁰ His conclusion: “The answer, underlying and appearing through the paradoxes which cover it, is this: even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Anchor, 1990), 220.

⁹ Camus, *Myth*, 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

legitimate.”¹¹ Camus responds to the problem of suicide with an affirmation of life, and he presents this affirmation with a description of his ideal man—the absurd man. He portrays the absurd man in three modes: the mythical Sisyphus, the fictional Meursault, and the historical Caligula. Through these characters, he argues that despite the evils, uncertainties, and absurdities of a godless universe, man can still accept and live in a world without ultimate purpose. Camus claims that suicide is dishonest and a cowardly rejection of human freedom; it is confession and surrender, and if a man kills himself, he can no longer honestly confront the absurd, and thus he is overcome by fate itself.¹² Likewise, to evade the truth of the absurd through a “leap of faith” toward God, what Camus calls “philosophical suicide,” is to embrace a false hope; to assert any kind of transcendence or eternal value is a weak and superficial means of escape.¹³ The truth of the absurd, Camus asserts, must remain; philosophical authenticity requires one to confront the absurd in “constant awareness”¹⁴ and to exist passionately within that moment before the leap; “to remain on that dizzying crest—that is integrity and the rest is subterfuge.”¹⁵ The absurd man may become “the master of his days” by embracing the struggle of his life and choosing to authentically and passionately live, for “the struggle itself is enough to fill a man’s heart.”¹⁶

In light of the above statements, there is no doubt that a profound disbelief in God is at the foundation of Camusian thought. According to James Wood, “Camus feels the meaninglessness of life because he cannot believe in God, or in transcendent design, and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, v.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

because he sees clearly that everything he does is menaced by death.”¹⁷ Camus viewed religion, the belief in God, and the hope of an afterlife as deceptive and comforting solutions through which “man is freed of the weight of his own life.”¹⁸ As a result, Camus would devote much of his literary work to critiquing religion, specifically the claims of Christianity. He attacked theistic existentialists like Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Chekov for their “leaps of faith.” His absurd heroes of *The Stranger* and *The Plague* are unapologetic atheists who both reject Christianity and judge its values and doctrines as useless and contradictory. In *The Rebel*, one of his later works, Camus suggests that it is the very absence of God that makes life both incoherent and meaningless: “Up to now man derived his coherence from his Creator. But from the moment that he consecrates his rupture with Him, he finds himself delivered over to the fleeting moment, the passing days, and to wasted sensibility.”¹⁹ Moreover, his qualification—“even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate”—suggests that he recognizes an assumed correlation between religious belief and the meaning of life.²⁰ Camus biographer David Sherman notes that atheism plays a central role in the concept of the absurd because the absurd itself is “the product of the death of God,”²¹ a discovery which arises in “the shadow of the dead God.”²² Rodger Poole describes Camus as a “militant atheist” who believed that the actuality of absurdity is “that everything existed without God.”²³

In contrast to the implications of Camus’s atheistic framework, believers in the God

¹⁷ James Wood, “The Sickness Unto Life,” *The New Republic* (8 November 1999), 89.

¹⁸ Camus, *Myth*, 89.

¹⁹ Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bonar (New York: Vintage, 1960), 51.

²⁰ Camus, *Myth*, 51.

²¹ David Sherman, *Camus* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 25.

²² Camus, *Myth*, 51.

²³ Roger Poole, “Twentieth Century Receptions,” *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: UP of Cambridge, 1998), 56.

of the Old and New Testaments, the God that Camus most bluntly rejects, hold that God is the “ultimate foundation, the ultimate meaning and justification,” without whom there is no meaning in life.²⁴ Mark Linville asserts what he believes to be a clear distinction between the implications of atheism and theism as they relate to the absurd:

The absurd serves in Camus’ writings as the springboard for asking what he regards as the most fundamental philosophical question, the question of suicide. Of course, the whole point of existentialism is to attempt to conjure meaning where none otherwise exists. The theist, on the other hand, finds no such ‘confrontation’ or ‘tension’ at all, and this is because human persons find themselves in a world that is, at bottom, personal in nature.²⁵

As this passage suggests, a traditional postulation in theistic intellectual circles is that the atheist, like Camus, confronts an absurd world filled of tensions and contradictions *because* God *does not* exist, while the theist²⁶ experiences joy, purpose, and meaning in life *because* God *does* exist. The equation simply becomes: “If God, then meaning; no God, no meaning.” These conceptions reflect, in part, the general conclusion of several theologians and religious thinkers concerning Camus’s philosophy of the absurd. They assert that the implications of Camus’s atheism render the universe impersonal and meaningless with a complete loss of hope and ultimate values; however, despite his initial premise, Camus concludes with an affirmation of life, a confirmation of the value of personal existence, and a summons to the individual to live a life of dignity and authenticity.

The trend in many philosophical circles has been to dismiss Camusian thought as a purely atheistic conception rooted in bad reasoning, contradictions, and logical fallacies.

²⁴ Sherman, 51.

²⁵ Mark Linville, “The Moral Argument,” *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, Ed. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 445.

²⁶ Hereafter I will use interchangeably the titles “theist,” “religious individual,” “religious man,” and “spiritual man” when referring to the individual who acknowledges the existence of a creator God, and thus an immaterial or metaphysical realm.

Most theistic thinkers describe Camus as a secular humanist who neither felt comfortable with his beliefs nor could successfully live them out to their logical conclusions. One theologian emphasizes the “inadequacy” of Camus’s “existential philosophy”²⁷; another explains that “Camus has been rightly criticized for inconsistently holding both to the absurdity of life and the ethics of human love and brotherhood. The two are logically incompatible.”²⁸ Terry Eagleton points out a kind of circular reasoning in Camusian thought when he writes that Camus’s “tragic defiance...when confronted with a supposedly meaningless world, is really a part of the problem to which it is a response.”²⁹ Francis Schaeffer argues that Camus contradicts himself because he “never gave up ‘hope,’ centered in random personal happiness, though it went against the logic of his position [...] he never gave up the search for morals, though the world seemed to be without meaning.”³⁰ For instance, Camus once argued 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.”³¹ One critic argues that this notion “may be aesthetically pleasing but is logically outrageous.”³² John Cruickshank judges these kind of illogical tendencies as “a failure to separate clear thinking from an emotional attitude.”³³ Other critics accuse Camus of making a similar “leap of faith”

²⁷ James W. Sire, *A Little Primer on Humble Apologetics*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2006), 89.

²⁸ William Lane Craig, “The Absurdity of Life Without God,” *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E.D. Klemke (New York and Oxford: UP of Oxford, 2000), 79.

²⁹ Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford: U of Oxford P, 2007), 58.

³⁰ Francis Schaeffer, *Trilogy: The God Who is There, Escape from Reason, He is There and He is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 134.

³¹ Camus, *Resistance, rebellion, and death*. Trans. J. O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 1960), 28.

³² Michael Hamilton Bowker, *Albert Camus and the Political Philosophy of the Absurd*. Diss. University of Maryland, 2008 (College Park: U of Maryland, 2008), 79.

³³ John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the literature of revolt* (New York: UP of Oxford, 1960), 47.

that he attacks the theistic existentialists for making: “Camus has leaped from the factual premise that the juxtaposition of man and the universe is absurd, to the evaluative conclusion that this state ought to be preserved...For this transition we have no justification. Without such justification, Camus has not, in the least way, made his point. He has simply begged the question.”³⁴ David Simpson points out a similar discrepancy:

[...] there may be deep logical inconsistencies within Camus’ philosophy, and some critics (notably Sartre) have suggested that these inconsistencies cannot be surmounted except through some sort of Kierkegaardian leap of faith on Camus’ part—in this case a leap leading to a belief not in God, but in man.³⁵

Another scholar argues that Camus’ philosophy is ultimately “self-refuting,” because he asserts a valueless world while the very discovery of absurdity depends upon the existence of value statements.³⁶ R.A. Duff and S.E. Marshall argue that values such as honesty and integrity are “unquestionably presumed” in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Based on the initial premise of the absurd, they say there is no room for values in the Sisyphean world. Camus, therefore, must unjustifiably presume that values *should* exist in the Sisyphean world because the very lack of values is the very cause of the absurd. For example, it is *honesty* from which the idea of the absurd is born, a clear awareness and understanding of the nature of the world and the inadequacies and limitations of human reason. It is also this honesty that prohibits one to evade the absurd by philosophical suicide or a false hope in an eternal reality.³⁷

Assessing the entire linear progress of Camusian thought, Clyde L. Manschreck contends that Camus “lost the struggle” between his own presuppositions and conclusions, and he

³⁴ Herbert Hochburg, “Albert Camus and the Ethics of Absurdity,” *Ethics* 75 (1965), 92.

³⁵ David Simpson, “Albert Camus,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (21 March 2005), n. pag.

³⁶ Charles Grisworld, “*The Myth of Sisyphus*: A Reconsideration,” *Philosophy in Context* 8 (1978), 25.

³⁷ Duff, R.A. and S.E. Marshall, “Camus and Rebellion: From Solipsism to Morality,” *Philosophical Investigations* 5 (1984), 122.

ultimately failed to “go beyond nihilism to a positive affirmation of life.”³⁸

While the above criticisms do point out some of the contradictions within the philosophy of the absurd, as well as provide insightful distinctions between the implications of theistic and atheistic thought, these arguments misrepresent Camusian thought and, perhaps more importantly, disparage some essential insights into human nature and the profound, though subtle, spiritual dimensions of the philosophy of the absurd. To dismantle Camus with the tools of logic and formal philosophy is like trying to tune a piano with a thermometer; the tools are irrelevant. In a Camusian world—an irrational one—logic and human reason itself are limited and cannot make complete sense of reality. Camus rejects the very rationale his critics use against him, thus he is not concerned with whether or not his conclusions are the logical consequences of his presuppositions.³⁹ He is not concerned with prescribing but describing; he is a recorder of human experiences, not a system builder. He is merely exploring the question that faces all men: “do they wish to embrace what has been revealed as the basic mode of human life, or do they wish to reject it by committing physical

³⁸ Clyde L. Manschreck, “Nihilism in the Twentieth Century: A View from Here,” *Church History* 45.1 (March 1976), 92.

³⁹ It is important to note that *Myth* is not a formal, philosophical argument, but is first and foremost an artistic expression. In a brief introduction (that reads more like a disclaimer) of the essay, Camus disarms his critical reader, admitting that his work is merely a description and is not to be judged according to the rules of a philosophic treatise. Moreover, Camus does not attempt to prove the absurd or offer an apologetic piece for atheism. Instead, he knowingly presupposes the absurd and that life is meaningless in a godless universe. In the preface to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he writes: “But it is useful to note...that the absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered in this essay as a starting-point. In this sense it may be said that there is something provisional in my commentary: one cannot prejudge the position it entails. There will be found here merely the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady. 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” (2). Moreover, one critic rightly reminds us that “we should not mark Camus as if he were sitting a metaphysical exam, but judge his essay as a work of art. That is to say, we should judge it by the dignity of its argumentation, not by the rigor of its proofs; by the beauty of its effort, not by the conclusiveness of its attainment” (Wood 89).

or metaphysical suicide?”⁴⁰ He is not bothered by contradictions—in fact, that is exactly his point: the world and man *are* a contradiction, and the absurd man consciously lives in his “paradoxes.”⁴¹ Instead, Camus is concerned with the way he feels, what he experiences, and how the world appears to him. He does not wish to establish a set of duties or logical responses to the absurd, nor does he seek ethical justifications for choosing the absurd. He is rather arguing that the absurd is actuality, not ideality, and that human beings desire meaning and clarity yet experience absurdity. But according to Camus, in order for man to authentically exist and understand the basic structure of human existence, he must honestly confront the absurd, not be disillusioned by it. In their effort to dismantle Camus’s system, the above critics have only disparaged one of its central characteristics: its *humanness*. The reader must see Camus, above all else, as a *human artist* describing the world as he sees it, as it feels to him; we must approach the philosophy of the absurd as a honest and artistic piece of human expression.

In response to the above critiques, I propose two different, yet related, approaches toward Camus and the philosophy of the absurd: 1) despite Camus’s atheistic disposition, there is something deeply and profoundly spiritual, even religious, about the philosophy of the absurd; and 2), within this spiritual dimension of Camusian thought we may discover that a serious and conscious confrontation with the absurd is an essential stage of the human experience, and, perhaps most importantly, an essential part of the spiritual journey toward authentic existence; the absurd creates a tension necessary to the maturation and authenticity of the religious person.

⁴⁰ Abraham Sagi, “Is the Absurd the Problem or the Solution? ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ Reconsidered,” *Philosophy Today* 38:3 (Fall 1994), 279.

⁴¹ Camus, *Myth*, v.

In the twentieth-century, Camus captures the conflicts that have for thousands of years formed the story of man wrestling with his maker, a man turned toward the heavens and demanding justice and meaning. In Camus we see a man honestly struggling to both humanize the world and ensoul his own soullessness; he is a man fighting to cope with the alienation and absurdity of his life by embracing all that he has left—his mortality. These themes evoke a certain spiritual resonance within human nature—for his expressions are first and foremost both *honest* and *human*.

Camus reminds the theist that there is a place in the intellectual life that must transcend reason and address how things *appear* to people and how they are *felt*. He reminds us that both the theist and the atheist live in a world in which evil, chaos, and death are the brute facts of reality—a world that the theist claims was created by a benevolent God. Thus, the absurd and the meaning-of-life question do not escape the religious man, for he too is a man-in-the-world, and he too must face the predicaments that surround him.

Camus's search for meaning, his desire for clarity within a chaotic world, and his honest dealings with doubt and death are essentially religious in nature; though he ultimately finds his answers apart from God, he certainly expresses a deep understanding of the "human need"⁴² for meaning.

Harold Bloom once remarked that "Christianity is massively irrelevant...to all of Camus' works."⁴³ This thesis, in part, will challenge the validity of this statement by exploring the parallels between Camus's absurd vision of life and the ancient text of Hebrew-wisdom literature, *Ecclesiastes*.⁴⁴ This work can help unlock the spiritual themes in Camus's

⁴² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴³ Harold Bloom, Introduction, *Albert Camus' The Stranger* (New York: Infobase, 2001), 2.

⁴⁴ *Ecclesiastes* is certainly not an explicitly "Christian" text. The book was written prior to

work and give an understanding of the philosophy of the absurd within a theistic framework. As Richard Akeroyd notes, there is a “striking similarity between the thoughts of Sisyphus about the absurdity of life and the words of Solomon concerning vanity in Ecclesiastes. Both conclude that, from man’s standpoint at least, life is a closed cycle with no evident purpose [...]; but both also agree that there is contentment to be found in living.”⁴⁵ Cruickshank sees in Camus’s absurd “a contemporary manifestation of a skepticism as old at least as the Book of Ecclesiastes.”⁴⁶ Employing Akeroyd and Cruickshank’s parallels, *Ecclesiastes* can illuminate Camus’s philosophy of the absurd and its relation to theistic thought. Further, *Ecclesiastes* is one of the most helpful works in illuminating the spiritual dimensions of Camusian thought for three reasons.⁴⁷

First, like Camus’s “duality of influences” and the paradoxical nature of his writings,⁴⁸ *Ecclesiastes* seems to concurrently express two opposing *Weltanschauungs*—

the appearance of Christ and the spread of Christian teaching. Further, the book was initially canonized in Old Testament scripture, a collection of Jewish-Hebrew writings, before the formation of the New Testament. However, Christianity recognizes continuity between the Old and New Testaments as two covenants inspired by God. In other words, we can consider *Ecclesiastes* a “Christian” text because the New Testament is an extension or continuation of the Old Testament. As Philip Browning Helsel points out, “The book of Ecclesiastes has long been an anomaly in the canon of the Bible, both the Hebrew and Christian sacred scriptures” (206). I must also mention that this thesis will not address specifically the relevance of Christianity to Camus’s works, but the relevance of his absurd philosophy to a more broadly theistic *Weltanschauung*.

⁴⁵ Richard H. Akeroyd, *The Spiritual Quest of Albert Camus* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Portals, 1976), 25.

⁴⁶ John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of revolt* (New York: Oxford UP, 1960), 44.

⁴⁷ Though I am employing *Ecclesiastes* as a guiding text in order to show the spiritual dimensions of Camusian thought, I must note that this thesis is not an in-depth exegesis of *Ecclesiastes*, but a literary analysis of Camus’s “cycle of the absurd.” There is simply not enough time and space to provide the attention that such a complex text as *Ecclesiastes* deserves. I will, instead, highlight and focus on some of its central themes and messages.

⁴⁸ Chapter One will explain these points in further detail.

religious and secular. Qohelet⁴⁹ (the main speaker of *Ecclesiastes*) conveys both theistic and atheistic perspectives as he confronts life's evils. As a result, Qohelet's conclusions are, like Camus's conclusions thousands of years later, paradoxical because they convey both the celebration and lamentation of life. Although its theological framework asserts the existence of God, the book "reflects a human, rather than a divine, point of view."⁵⁰ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart convincingly argue that the perspective of *Ecclesiastes* "is the secular, fatalistic wisdom that a practical atheism produces. When one relegates God to a position way out there away from us, irrelevant to our daily lives, then Ecclesiastes is the result."⁵¹ The editors of *New Scofield Reference Bible* make a similar statement concerning the author's "human" yet theistic point of view: "The philosophy it [*Ecclesiastes*] sets forth, which makes no claim to revelation but which inspiration records for our instruction, represents the world-view of one of the wisest of men, who knew that there is a holy God and that He will bring everything into judgment."⁵² The editors' predecessor C. I. Scofield also recognizes that the book is a blend of divinely inspired teachings and the musings of a fallen man:

It is not at all the will of God which is developed, but that of man 'under the sun' forming his own code. It is, therefore, as idle to quote such passages as

⁴⁹ There is much controversy over the exact authorship of *Ecclesiastes*. Many scholars attribute Solomonic authorship while others argue for either an unknown writer before or after Solomon simply known as Qohelet. Due to the ambiguity of and general disagreements on authorship, scholars and commentators often use the Hebrew *qohelet* as used in the original text, which literally means "public speaker," "gatherer" or "debater," but translates as "preacher" or "teacher" in most English translations. For the purpose of this thesis, exact authorship or an in-depth biographical study is not a primary concern, thus I will use "Qohelet."

⁵⁰ Ray Stedman, "Ecclesiastes: The Inspired Book of Error," *Discovery Publishing* (1 Mar 1996), *Blue Letter Bible*, Web. 25 March 2011.

⁵¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 214.

⁵² *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 696.

2:24, 3:22, etc., as expressions of the divine will as it would be to apply Job 2:4, 5 or Genesis 3:4. The constant repetition of such expressions as ‘I perceived,’ ‘I said in my heart,’ ‘then I saw,’ etc., sufficiently indicate that here the Holy Spirit is showing us the workings of man’s own wisdom and his reaction in weariness and disgust.⁵³

Secondly, *Ecclesiastes* is, not unlike Camus’s short-lived literary career and philosophic developments, an incomplete evaluation of human life. Qohelet does not finally solve the puzzles of life; he does not give us any truly satisfying answer to the meaning-of-life question. Though he concludes that man must “[f]ear God and keep his commandments,”⁵⁴ these last words do not finally resolve the tensions of the absurd or dissolve the daunting unknowns of the universe. By the closing passage of the book, human life still remains absurd; the days of man “under the sun” are still “vanity”⁵⁵ or “striving after wind.” Roland E. Murphy points out that “Qohelet did not have a finished *Weltanschauung* [‘world view’],”⁵⁶ and thus he leaves life’s most baffling questions unanswered. Michial Farmer bluntly points out that Qohelet “doesn’t come back in the final few verses and say that he’s discovered a meaning for his life. All things remain vanity at the end of the book.”⁵⁷ Hence Qohelet’s own admission that “man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, ‘I know,’ he cannot discover.”⁵⁸ His unresolved conclusion, in part, echoes the restless nature of man’s excessive curiosity juxtaposed to his incessant ignorance.

⁵³ *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1959), 2:302.

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

⁵⁵ 12.8.

⁵⁶ Roland E. Murphy, “The Pensées of Coheleth,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 17 (1955), 306; see also Robert H. Pfeiffer, “The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 53 (March–December 1934), 108.

⁵⁷ Michial Farmer, “A Primer on Religious Existentialism: Hellenism and Hebraism.” *Christian Humanist* (29 June 2010), n. pag.

⁵⁸ 8.17.

Thomas Tyler offers an insightful analysis of how Qohelet's unsolved mysteries and contradictions act as a mirror to the paradoxes of human reality: "One might fancy that the author of Ecclesiastes intended that the contrarities of this book should in some sort reflect and image forth the chequered web of man's earthly condition, hopes alternating with fears, joys succeeded by sorrows, life contrasting with death."⁵⁹ Further, Qohelet does not treat the absurd confrontation as the final word, but as an integral part of human experience; he is concerned with formulating a life-affirming response to such troubling realizations.

Like Qohelet, Camus's work is incomplete. His views toward the absurd were constantly reforming, and thus no portion of his work fully or accurately captures the "evolution of his thought."⁶⁰ In 1958, just two years before his death, he told an interviewer, "I continue to be convinced that my work hasn't even been begun."⁶¹ Unfortunately, he died before he could completely solve the mysteries that bewildered him; he remarked just before he died that he was just beginning to truly develop and solidify his thoughts, and that his "work lies ahead."⁶² Like Qohelet, his purpose is never to discover or defend an ultimate meaning for life—for this is a problem that cannot be solved. In fact, he viewed absurdity only as a "starting point"⁶³ and argued that "[i]t is not the discovery of the absurd that is interesting, but the consequence and rules that are drawn from it."⁶⁴ Thus, he proposes a way in which man can embrace life despite its lack of meaning.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Qohelet's book is, like Camus's early writings,

⁵⁹ Thomas Tyler, *Ecclesiastes* (London: D. Nutt, 1899), 54.

⁶⁰ Sherman, 81.

⁶¹ Sam Morris, "Angst and Affirmation in Modern Culture," *Philosophy Now* (Sept/Oct 2009), 15.

⁶² Jean-Paul Sartre, "Tribute to Albert Camus." *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. Germaine Bree. Trans. Justin O'Brien (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 174.

⁶³ Camus, *Myth*, 2.

⁶⁴ Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 41.

profoundly preoccupied with the notion of the absurd. Philip Browning Helsel points out that “[i]f there is one unifying theme to the work [Ecclesiastes], it is the repeated mention of ‘absurdity.’”⁶⁵ And as John Foley notes, the absurd is the “first principle” of Camus’s early works, and is the central dilemma to which the scope of his work thereafter attempts to respond.⁶⁶ Because each man’s work focuses intensely on the absurdity of life, it is appropriate to place their texts next to each other in order to uncover the implications of the absurd—particularly the spiritual dimensions of their conclusions.

Perhaps the strongest link between Camus and Qohelet’s vision of life is the connotations of their central motif—Camus’s “absurd” and Qohelet’s reoccurring Hebrew *hebel* (often translated as “meaningless” or “vanity” in most English translations). Interestingly, in his notable study on *Ecclesiastes* entitled *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, Michael V. Fox translates Qohelet’s Hebrew *hebel* as synonymous with Camus’s conception of “absurd.” Fox writes, “The best translation-equivalent for *hebel* in Qohelet’s usage 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*.”⁶⁷ Numerous scholars disagree on the exact meaning of *hebel* partially because Qohelet connotes various descriptions of the human condition in different contexts. I. Provan points out that the term literally means “breath” or “vapor” in order to describe life as “the merest of breaths” or to conclude that “everything is a breath.”⁶⁸ But, as Alison Lo notes, Qohelet uses the word

⁶⁵ Philip Browning Helsel, “Warren Zevon’s *The Wind* and Ecclesiastes: Searching for Meaning at the Threshold of Death,” *Journal of Religion & Health* 46.2. (June 2007), 207.

⁶⁶ John Foley, *Albert Camus: From Absurd to Revolt* (Montreal: UP of McGill-Queen, 2008), 2.

⁶⁷ Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1989), 31.

⁶⁸ I. Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 2001), 52.

“metaphorically,” and the heart of his message lies in the connotations of *hebel*, not just its denotation. Lo explains that “different translations reflect different understandings of the metaphor, which include ‘vanity,’ ‘futility,’ ‘ephemerality,’ ‘incomprehensibility,’ ‘absurdity.’”⁶⁹ Despite the numerous renderings of Qohelet’s motif, the term “absurd” seems to best capture most of the various connotations of *hebel*; this single word encompasses all the other metaphors and unifies the text. In “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” Fox explains that “[u]nderstanding *hebel* in the sense of ‘absurd’ . . . brings out the book’s [*Ecclesiastes*] unity in a way that a less generally applicable translation, such as ‘vain,’ ‘insignificant,’ or ‘fleeting,’ does not.”⁷⁰ Fox defines both *hebel* and “absurd” as “a disparity between two phenomena that are supposed to be joined by a link of harmony or causality but are actually disjunct or even conflicting.”⁷¹ The phrase “supposed to be” in this definition suggests that the absurd is the result of an unmet expectation; life is absurd because life is not as it is “supposed to be.” Both the absurd man and Qohelet realize this unmet expectation in human reality. Benjamin Lyle Berger also argues that there are “affinities” between Qohelet’s *hebel* and Camus’s “absurd,” and that both terms express “the inchoate nature of the universe, and the irrationality of existence.”⁷² Fox explains that the discrepancy Qohelet feels between expectation and reality “under the sun” is the same feeling of absurdity Camus describes in the “cycle of the absurd”⁷³—the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the novel *The*

⁶⁹ Alison Lo, “Death in Qohelet,” *The Journal of the Ancient Near East Society* 31 (March 2009), 85.

⁷⁰ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105. 3 (September 1986), 412.

⁷¹ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 31.

⁷² Benjamin Lyle Berger, “Qohelet and the Exigencies of the Absurd,” *Biblical Interpretation* 9. 2 (2001), 164.

⁷³ The “cycle of the absurd” is a title Camus used in his diaries when referring to three early works which dealt primarily with the concept of the absurd. In some places he called them

Stranger, and the play *Caligula*, all published in 1942. It is from the parallel between the Hebrew *hebel* and the modern “absurd” that we can begin to recognize the spiritual intimations of Camusian thought.

Interestingly, both Camus and Qohelet express an absurd vision of life in two distinctive contexts; Qohelet’s book emerges from an ancient Middle Eastern culture rooted in the belief in God, whereas Camus’s writings emerge from the modern, atheistic framework of the Western world. Though it may seem arbitrary or anachronistic to link these two works of ancient and modern periods, Qohelet’s book addresses several existential dilemmas that modern man seriously confronts centuries later. As N. Karl Haden points out, “Although the historical context [of *Ecclesiastes*] is different [than the modern era], the problems of alienation as faced by Qoheleth are universally human and timeless.”⁷⁴ The themes and tones of *Ecclesiastes*, written in approximately 935 B.C.E.,⁷⁵ nearly three millennia before Camus’s modern world, certainly sound curiously modern. Qohelet wrestles with human predicaments that would later define Western man in the twentieth century: alienation, anxiety, doubt. One historian notes that “the Book of Ecclesiastes predates by over two thousand years the emergence of the ‘modern mind.’”⁷⁶ Another scholar also describes Qohelet as sounding “incredibly modern. He express[es] the uncertainty and anxiety of our

“the triptych of absurdity” (Azar). One critic notes that Camus intended for these three works to be “read together because they make up the cycle of the absurd” (McCarthy 72).

⁷⁴ Haden, N. Karl, “Qoheleth and the Problem of Alienation,” *Christian Scholars Review* 17 (1987), 55.

⁷⁵ Many scholars disagree on the exact date of the authorship. Some scholars argue for a date as late as 935 B.C.E. while others argue for a date as early as 175 to 150 B.C.E. I personally take the view of an early ninth century B.C.E. date. But, like the authorship, the exact date of the text is not a primary concern for the purpose of this study.

⁷⁶ Donald A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*. (New York: SUNYP, 1988), 119.

own age.”⁷⁷ Further, Qohelet, like the modern Camus, recognizes three main sources of the absurd: the limitations of human reason, the futility of human action, and the certainty of death. All of these sources originate from what we might condense as the single and ultimate source of absurdity: alienation. Alienation—a “deep sense of estrangement and detachment,”⁷⁸ and a divorce born of man setting himself “against the world”⁷⁹—is the central threat of mankind, for it is both a cause and product of the absurd. Both Camus and Qohelet express a similar angst born of their alienation, that they cannot find meaning, and it is precisely this divorce between their existence and the world that justifies a connection between the implications of *hebel* to absurdity. Fox explains that human alienation links these two different minds: “The connotations with which Camus imbues the concept of the absurd, particularly in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, are highly congruent with those Qohelet gives to the concept of *hebel*: alienation from the world, a distancing of the ‘I’ from the event with which it seems to be bound, along with frustration of the longing for coherence and a stale taste of repeated and meaningless events, even resentment at the ‘gods.’”⁸⁰ Qohelet confronts his alienation as he examines his life “under the sun;” Camus expresses a similar sense of alienation in the “cycle of the absurd.”

Qohelet and Camus, separated by nearly three millennia, capture an essential aspect of the human condition—the deep longing for meaning, clarity, and purpose in this life; they honestly confront human predicaments not as members of ideologies or religious sects but as *human beings*; they are living-in-the-world, observing and experiencing the same reality and

⁷⁷ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmam, 1998), xiii.

⁷⁸ Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, 6.

⁷⁹ David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 28.

⁸⁰ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 32.

struggles. Although they begin with different assumptions regarding the existence of God—the very Being who potentially gives meaning and clarity to his creation—their similar conclusions reveal an unlikely compatibility between atheistic and theistic attitudes towards the human predicament. While Camus and Qohelet recognize that the world cannot be totally explained by human reasoning, and is therefore absurd, they each conclude that their uncertainty and human finitude may prompt a certain liberation and solace that allow them to move beyond the absurd and affirm their existence. These parallels between the modern existential attitudes of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Stranger*, and *Caligula*, and the ancient Hebraic wisdom of *Ecclesiastes* uncover a common claim in both the atheistic and theistic understanding of the human condition. These texts show that the *awareness* of the absurd and the conscious choice to *live in its tensions* may compel man to live authentically and passionately despite the seeming unreasonableness of his life.

The chapters that follow will examine these parallels between Camus and Qohelet as they confront the absurd. Qohelet concludes that albeit God exists, he seems distant, and thus human reality “under the sun” feels empty, futile, and meaningless; he concludes that “all is *hebel*.” But his life-affirming response to these conclusions shed light on Camus’s response to the absurdity of human existence. Camus writes, “Thus I derive from the absurd three consequences which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the sheer activity of consciousness, I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death.”⁸¹ Chapter One will examine *The Myth of Sisyphus* and compare the absurd man and Qohelet’s attitudes and reactions to the limitations of human reason. Sisyphus and Qohelet discover that the constant and conscious awareness of the absurd and the inadequacies of human reason do not

⁸¹ Camus, *Myth*, 88.

imprison or limit them, but rather liberate them from the burden of knowing. Chapter Two will focus on *The Stranger* and compare Meursault and Qohelet's description of the futility and meaninglessness of human action. This study will not only show similar frustrations that Meursault and Qohelet experience as they recognize the futility of their daily, mundane tasks, but also how they discover the value in their individual freedom. Chapter Three will discuss a central theme in *Caligula* and *Ecclesiastes*, the third source of the absurd: the inevitability of death. Cherea and Qohelet view death as not only absurd, but also enlightening and liberating. In realizing his mortality, man draws his attention to his life in the "here and now," and he is motivated and free to live this life to its fullest. These similarities will show that the problem of the absurd does not simply disappear when God "enters the picture;" in fact, the human predicament becomes, to some extent, more complicated. But this complication is a necessary, at least for Qohelet, tension within the human experience; it is an essential confrontation necessary for the journey toward authentic existence. Ultimately, through Camus and Qohelet, we can better understand how a confrontation with the absurd is an essential part of what it means to be human.

Chapter One

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

On November 7, 1913, Albert Camus was born into a world of poverty and sunlight. As the youngest member of a lower class family living near the beautiful sun-drenched beaches of Algeria, two conflicting realities defined his world: his tyrannical, sickly, and poverty-stricken home life stood against the freedom, beauty, and richness of the Mediterranean Sea. As a boy he enjoyed the outdoors and physical activities such as swimming and hiking. But his love for nature clashed against the cruelties society afforded him. The loss of his father to the First World War was only the beginning of a tragic childhood; he grew up in a small, three-bedroom apartment in Belcourt, a working class neighborhood gripped in racial tension; his widowed mother was illiterate and partly deaf; his uncle was mute; he was raised mostly by his strict grandmother slowly dying of cancer; and he contracted tuberculosis at age seventeen.

These harsh circumstances exposed young Camus to the absurdities and injustices that define much of the human experience, and they quickly formed a man who would incessantly wrestle with the reality that a beautiful world could be home to so much cruelty. Like the paradoxical circumstances into which he was born—the cold reality of human suffering amidst the warm beauty of the Algerian shores—Camus himself became a paradox. Evident through his various (nearly contradictory) influences, the opposing ideas, diverse thinkers, and the unpredictable events surrounding his life, he eventually formed a paradoxical response to the absurd: though he faced the nihilism of his day and asserted the absurdity and meaninglessness of life, he affirmed human dignity and passionate living. Despite his personal experiences with suffering, poverty, and racial tension, he did not

succumb to pessimism or despair, but instead expressed an ironically optimistic and life-affirming attitude toward an ultimately meaningless existence.

While the tragic events of Camus's childhood profoundly affected him, his educational years shaped him more so. His high school teacher Louis Germain was one of the first to recognize his potential as a student and scholar. Germain helped him earn a scholarship to a prestigious high school near Algiers that his family could not have otherwise afforded. After such a difficult upbringing, his future suddenly looked promising; here was his chance to rise above his poverty. However, in 1930, after contracting tuberculosis, a disease that he would fight for the rest of his life, Camus was forced to leave school and move in with his aunt and uncle, Gustave and Antoinette Acault, in order to avoid infecting his brother, with whom he had to share a bed in a cramped apartment. Once again, hope and promise only led to disappointment.

But what was on one hand an ingredient for utter forlornness (tuberculosis), provided a positive effect on the other. His forced stay with the Acaults, a well-off and intellectual couple, proved to be a providential step in his life of scholarship. The Acaults further exposed him to literature, philosophy, politics, and, perhaps most importantly, optimism. As one historian notes, the Acaults tried to instill in him the belief that "life contained possibilities that transcended the hard-scrabble existence that he had known, which had produced in him a fatalistic indifference that he never completely left behind."⁸² While Camus's childhood formed a pattern of hope turned to despair, his aunt and uncle believed that these disappointments would compel him to resist and revolt against his fate. His unfortunate childhood of poverty and sickness, as well as the racial discrimination he faced

⁸² Sherman, 11.

in Belcourt, inspired in him hopeful and optimistic concerns for humanity. Stephen Eric Bronner points out the significance of these childhood experiences and their positive effects:

His childhood taught him a singular understanding of misery, which made his empathy with the disempowered genuine. The racially mixed character of Belcourt, with its Jews and Europeans and Muslims, also provided Camus with a cosmopolitan outlook and inspired a hatred of intolerance, especially of the arrogance and racism of the French toward the Arabs.⁸³

We might conclude that Camus's humanitarian concerns were born out of his own exposure to injustice and racial conflict; his personal encounter with discrimination and the brutalities of war evoked dissatisfaction of the human situation. The influence of his uncle and aunt was, to a certain degree, the beginnings of his strange and complex disposition, his paradoxical response to the absurdity of life.

After staying with the Acaults, Camus finally returned to high school where he met Jean Grenier, an author and philosophy teacher who introduced him to both religious and secular thinkers, such as Augustine, Nietzsche, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Gide. Although a majority of his contemporary French writers and thinkers found their influence from German philosophers, such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Jaspers, Camus's interest also leaned toward the ancient Greeks. Interestingly, Camus eventually took his philosophical cues from both theistic and atheistic philosophers, namely Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Nietzsche became his "philosophical hero"⁸⁴ and one of his "spiritual parents."⁸⁵ While Nietzschean influences are certainly evident in the *Übermensch*-like protagonists of *Caligula*, *The Stranger*, and *The Plague*, Kierkegaardian influences, though Camus did not share his religious beliefs, can be

⁸³ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Albert Camus: The Thinker, The Artist, The Man* (Franklin Watts, 1996), n. pag.

⁸⁴ Sherman, 11.

⁸⁵ Louis R. Rossi, "Albert Camus: The Plague of Absurdity," *The Kenyon Review* 20.3 (Summer 1958), 407.

seen in his explanation of guilty despair in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus admired both Augustine and Kierkegaard despite their theistic views, and he recognized them as “intellectual kinsmen and writers with whom he shared a common passion for controversy, literary flourish, self-scrutiny, and self-dramatization.”⁸⁶

Camus went on to the University of Algiers, and in 1936 he completed his studies with a dissertation on Greek philosophy (Neoplatonism) and Christian metaphysics. The project required a thorough study of both pagan philosophy and the teachings of the New Testament. Out of this task, he tried to solidify his antagonistic views of Christianity. However, he continued to wrestle with the dissatisfaction he felt with his own naturalistic framework. Though he doubted God’s existence, he seemed more troubled by his silence than his absence. While he rejected the claims of Christianity and held fast to his humanistic and atheistic convictions, his dissertation “had a depressing effect upon him,” and his contact with the hopeful teachings of Christ “did not obliterate his spiritual sense that a certain note struck in Christianity different from and outstripped all others in substance.”⁸⁷

Throughout his years of study he found himself indifferent to most systems and ideologies. His life was marked by a continuous ambivalent disposition. Though he joined the Communist Party, he felt “indifferent” about its doctrines, viewing Communism “a little more than a secular religion.”⁸⁸ While he was partly drawn to the Communist Party due to its support for the working classes, he was also involved with an anti-fascist assemblage called the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement.⁸⁹ Similarly, his dissertation on Plotinus and Augustine, comparing ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity, forced him to carefully study these

⁸⁶ Simpson, n. pag.

⁸⁷ Akeroyd, 18.

⁸⁸ Sherman, 12.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

two opposing viewpoints. His inability to fully resolve this ambivalent curiosity in Augustinian and Christian thought carried over into his literary work. Simpson explains that the

theme of guilt and innocence in Camus' writings relates closely to another recurrent tension in his thought: the opposition of Christian and pagan ideas and influences. At heart a nature-worshipper, and by instinct a skeptic and non-believer, Camus nevertheless retained a lifelong interest and respect for Christian philosophy and literature.⁹⁰

Interestingly, Camus's interactions with theistic philosophies stirred in him continual unrest toward faith and doubt. Lorene M. Birden notes that in Camus's work one often sees "a complex attitude toward faith,"⁹¹ particularly because the author himself felt, to some extent, an uneasiness toward his own disbelief. Camus says in his *Carnets*, "I do not believe in God and I am not an atheist."⁹² His exposure to both religious and pagan thought is what Simpson calls a "duality of influence"—a deep connection to the "Augustinian sense of original sin (universal guilt) and rampant moral evil" against his own "personal ideal of pagan primitivism (universal innocence) and his conviction that the natural world and our life in it have intrinsic beauty and value."⁹³ This "duality of influence" gave birth to deep spiritual anxiety and socio-ethic dilemmas: Camus faced two serious questions: "Can an absurd world have intrinsic value? Is authentic pessimism compatible with the view that there is an essential dignity to human life?"⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Simpson, n. pag.

⁹¹ Lorene M. Birden, "Caligula-Christ: Preliminary Study of a Parallel," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 34.1 (Winter 2010), 61.

⁹² Camus, *Carnets vol. III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 128.

⁹³ Simpson n. pag.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

The very concept of the absurd and its sense of “divorce” and “confrontation”⁹⁵ seems to manifest itself in the very events, circumstances, and experiences of Camus’s life. Like the absurd itself, the totality of his life was composed of “contradictions between two sets of principles not amenable to reconciliation through reason.”⁹⁶ He found the world different from what he thought it ought to be. The paradoxes he witnessed in the world—both the comforts and cruelties of life—carried over into his thought and work. Gilbert G. Hardy explains that Camus’s views are “far from being unambiguous...beneath the surface of an exuberant affirmation of life, is also a philosophy of pessimism, alienation, and the denial of God.”⁹⁷ His life was a constant confrontation between what he expected and what he experienced, what he knew and what he did not (or could not) know. His encounter with the absurd created in him despair and hope, conflict and contentment, and a sense that life is meaningless yet worth living. Though he witnessed corruption in his personal life (his immediate family and motherland), he fought for moral reformation for the society of men. Though he viewed human existence as ultimately meaningless, he fought for the value and dignity of human life through his political and humanitarian activism. Though a “militant atheist,”⁹⁸ Camus expressed the longings and demands of a biblical man wrestling with his maker. Bronner also notes the dualistic nature of Camus’s work—the theistic intimations of an atheistic framework: “He ultimately combined the idea of the absence of God with the concept of a natural longing for salvation and meaning that only God can provide. This paradoxical situation would define the ‘absurd’ character of existence and inform all of

⁹⁵ Camus, *Myth*, 30.

⁹⁶ Sherman, 23.

⁹⁷ Gilbert G. Hardy, “Happiness beyond the Absurd: the Existentialist Quest of Camus,” *Philosophy Today* 23:4 (Winter 1979), 367.

⁹⁸ Poole, 56.

Camus future writing.”⁹⁹ Akeroyd explains that while Camus immersed himself in the very scriptures he rejected, he was “profoundly marked by metaphysical unrest;” though he was “[s]eemingly untouched by Christianity as he studied it,” he was “[n]evertheless, at the same time, inwardly searching.”¹⁰⁰

As evident through this brief biographical sketch, Camus was a conflicted man. He wrestled with the tensions of his will and the real world. According to Akeroyd, the paradoxes and tensions of Camus’s life evoke the image of a man on a “spiritual quest,” a pilgrimage in which “the relationship between two facets is perceived. The love of life and the disgust for it. The despair of life which leads to the love of it.”¹⁰¹ The events and influences of his life placed him between several opposing forces: atheism and theism, piety and paganism, anti-Fascism and Communism, both a loathing and love for life, the poverty and gloom of his home life against the sunlight and beauty of the beach—a paradoxical existence he captures as a central theme of *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Camus completed the final draft of *Myth* in 1940.¹⁰² The essay emerged out of European culture in conflict with itself, a world of steel and science, a period in which faith in reason and progress was crushed by the devastations of war. The two world wars certainly contributed to the absurd climate that defined most of the twentieth century, and Camus certainly was affected by their brutalities: his father was killed in the First World War; he himself joined the French Resistance against the Nazis in 1941; he became a journalist and editor of *Combat*, an underground newspaper of the French Resistance. His generation discovered that the foundations of the modern world were beginning to crumble.

⁹⁹ Bronner, n. pag.

¹⁰⁰ Akeroyd, 17.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰² The essay would not be published until 1942.

Developments in mathematics and physics, such as Heisenberg's Principle of Indeterminacy (absolute measurements are impossible), Bohr's Principle of Complementarity (some objects have multiple properties that appear to be contradictory), Skolem's theorem (the number system cannot be categorically formalized), and Gödel's theorem (mathematics contain insoluble problems) put once-trusted systems into question. These developments marked a dramatic shift within the philosophical views on absolute, determinate knowledge. Modern man had based his knowledge of reality on the tools of human reasoning, logic, and science. However, in the gradual collapse of these systems, objective reality became illusory; universal truths became cultural constructs; traditional values were questioned; fixed meanings began to be deconstructed. A once-structured world had fallen to chaos. Living in its ruins, Camus deduced that life is meaningless in an irrational universe. As one historian notes, Camus lived in "the time when people's world of thought and feelings were reshaped," and the modern world—along with its assumptions and values—was transitioning into a world of disillusionment; the world witnessed "deeply and vividly" the effects of World War II, and its aftermath led Camus and many others to "revolt and question the true nature of life, meaning of life."¹⁰³ Doubt and despair became the defining moods. What man once viewed as transcendent reason, definite knowledge, and systematic laws of logic gradually showed themselves as weak and finite systems. Whereas science once proved man's governing power over nature, these system breakdowns exposed the limitations of reason and forced man to face his finiteness; humbled by the limits of his knowledge, modern man truly realized his mortality. *Myth* captures this shift of man's view of himself.

¹⁰³ Hilmi Uçan, "Absurd philosophy in the novel *Aylak Adam* by Yusuf Atılgan and in the novel *The Stranger* by Albert Camus: alienation, doubt, loneliness, giving the subject the prime place and search for identity," *International Journal of Turcologia* 2.4 (Autumn 2007), 67.

For Camus, the fate of Sisyphus, the mythological Greek king perpetually condemned by the gods to push a giant rock up a mountain only to watch it roll back down again, illustrates the absurdity of human life. Sisyphus repeats the same task day and night. He makes no progress and his work serves no purpose. His punishment and endless task is a metaphor of the human predicament; just as his existence on the mountain has no transcendent meaning or purpose, neither does all human existence. Life is simply an endless struggle toward nothing. But the main point of the essay is not simply that life is meaningless activity, but that this world is strange to us, that our day-to-day reality does not meet our expectations; it is not intelligible and purposeful.¹⁰⁴ Sisyphus is not at home in the underworld; it is alien, irrational, and incomprehensible to him, like the language, culture, and social norms of a foreign land. Though he knows “the whole extent of his wretched condition,”¹⁰⁵ he does not know the meaning behind his work. Anything beyond his human condition, his flesh and blood existence, is unknown to him—the transcendent is but a mystery. The absurdity of his endless, daily pushing is born of his cognitive finitude. Camus asks,

What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me—that is what I understand. And these two certainties—my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to rational and reasonable principle—I also know that I cannot reconcile them.¹⁰⁶

Another passage describes the aftermath of a world devoid of meaning and reliable reason, specifically the feelings one experiences the moment the world feels strange to him and he

¹⁰⁴ According to Russell Blackford, “The central idea of ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ is not pointless repetition [...] but that the universe is alien to human expectations and purposes” (55).

¹⁰⁵ Camus, *Myth*, 121.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

feels a stranger in it:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions of light [enlightenment], man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.¹⁰⁷

Using Sisyphus as his absurd hero, Camus suggests that one of the main sources of the absurdity of life is the limitations of human reason and knowledge, and, more specifically, the *expectation* for human reason to provide clarity and cohesion, to make sense of the world and human experiences. Jean-Paul Sartre remarked that the essay's lack of "formal proofs...is a proof in itself of the futility of abstract reasoning."¹⁰⁸ Sartre agrees that Camus acutely points out that our limited knowledge prohibits us from grasping the ultimate meaning of things, if there is any meaning to be grasped at all, and our inadequate minds disable us from logically reconciling the beauty of the world with its evils and injustices. Thus Camus bluntly concludes that "reason is vain and there is nothing beyond reason."¹⁰⁹ The limits and vanity of reason, in turn, render human existence absurd. As a result of this realization, Camus admits that "[t]he world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand, is but a vast irrational."¹¹⁰

But it is not that the world is irrational that constitutes the absurd. It is rather the unmet expectation for the world to *be* rational. Camus expresses this desire for intelligibility with phrases such as "longing for clarity,"¹¹¹ "longing for happiness and for reason,"¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁸ Sartre, Jean-Paul, "An Explication of *The Stranger*," *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: The Stranger*, Ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 2001), 7.

¹⁰⁹ Camus, *Myth*, 55.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 21.

“desire for unity,” “longing to solve,” and “need for clarity and cohesion.”¹¹³ Man demands meaning and purpose, but the world remains silent, leaving him “face to face with the irrational.”¹¹⁴ Though man may understand the physical world through observation and scientific methods, the sciences do not explain to him the relationship between the universe and human existence. As one critic fittingly puts it, “The universe provides us with no guidance.”¹¹⁵

Reason does not resolve the anxiety, alienation, and absurdity man feels. In fact, reason surreptitiously conceals the absurd, hiding the foundational truth of human reality. As a result, the feeling of absurdity itself becomes “elusive;”¹¹⁶ this feeling distorts meaning, turns lucidity into ambiguity, mocks the seriousness in which we take our lives, and alienates man from himself and his desires, from his fellow men, and from the world. Camus later expresses the disappointment he feels when this longing is not satisfied: “I want everything to be explained to me or nothing. And the reason is impotent when it hears this cry from the heart. The mind aroused by this insistence seeks and finds nothing but contradictions and nonsense. What I fail to understand is nonsense.”¹¹⁷ One passage in particular addresses this tension and discrepancy between the desire for coherency and the inadequacy of human reason to provide it:

What I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject—this is what counts. I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion. I can refute everything in the world around me that offends or enraptures me, except this chaos, this sovereign chance, and this

¹¹² Ibid., 28.

¹¹³ Ibid., 51.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 28.

¹¹⁵ Russell Blackford, “Sisyphus and the Meaning of Life,” *Quadrant* (October 2003), 56.

¹¹⁶ Camus, *Myth*, 11.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 27.

divine equivalence with springs from anarchy. I do not know if this world has a meaning which transcends it. But I do know that, if such a meaning exists, I do not know it and that it is impossible for me just now to know it.¹¹⁸

Here, Camus emphasizes his “longing to solve” juxtaposed to the state in which it is “impossible” to know the meaning of things. He asserts that both his uncertainty and unintelligibility not only divorce him from the world, but also exclude him from any ultimate meaning or purpose in life: “Everything,” he finally concludes, “contributes to the spreading of confusion.”¹¹⁹

In Camus’s epistemology, humans can only know two things: “This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction.”¹²⁰ Camus is certain that he exists in a physical world; but what he is more certain of is his *uncertainty* of all other things. Here, Camus suggests that the tools of rational thought cannot provide him a complete epistemology, and thus his inability to fully grasp and understand human reality creates a gap between his existence and its meaning, and, in effect, renders the whole of human experience as absurd. He realizes that he lacks the knowledge on which the meaning of his existence is contingent. The one foundational truth he does accept is that there is no ultimate truth on which to define his being.

Throughout the essay, Camus expresses a distrust in his mind’s attempt to construct a system that may explain all human experiences. Interestingly, he does not, as he accuses the general public of doing, ignore or delude himself of his condition. Instead, he honestly acknowledges its constraints. Moreover, this awareness does not necessarily discourage him

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 38.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 19.

to the extent that he completely discards the utility of his mind and senses. His distrust of rational thought is neither an absolute rejection of human reason nor an absolute abandonment of a search for knowledge and truth; it is simply the need to search by different and more holistic means.¹²¹ Whereas the rationalist puts his complete trust in observation and logical proofs in attempt to discover and establish certainties about the universe, the absurdist honestly recognizes the flaws of his cognitive faculties and claims that this inadequacy contradicts the expectation and desire for clarity that reason itself gives to us. Reason presents to us and in us a deep longing to fully grasp and gain a knowledge of ourselves and others. Reason, however, cannot keep the promises it seems to make. In “The Challenge of the Absurd,” Ramakrishna Puligandla and Leena Kaisa Puhakka describe the purpose of reason, and, in effect, point out the gap that flawed human reason creates between ourselves and the world:

Reason [...] makes man desire to know himself, the world, and whatever he considers the transcendent. The feeling and experience of absurdity arises out of the inadequacy of the ways of knowing [...]. Thus, despite his yearning for knowledge which is both infinite and infallible, man's knowledge is finite, bound by the unknown, and even within its own limited realm plagued with uncertainty. Man is overcome by the sense of absurdity when, approaching the limits of his knowledge, he is unable to transcend them.¹²²

As this passage implies, the most alarming fact of the human situation is that reason itself, the very property that should illuminate the unknown is precisely that which constitutes the absurd. The moment man employs his reason in order to reconcile the absurd, he is once

¹²¹ Camus is in good company on this view. He writes in *Myth*, “From Jaspers to Heidegger, from Kierkegaard to Chestov, from the phenomenologists to Scheler, on the logical plane and on the moral plane, a whole family of minds related by their nostalgia but opposed by their methods or their aims, have persisted in blocking the royal road of reason and in recovering the direct paths of truth” (23). This distrust in “pure reason” is one view that unites the diverse thinkers of existentialism.

¹²² Ramakrishna Puligandla and Leena Kaisa Puhakka, “The Challenge of the Absurd,” *Journal of Thought* 5 (1970), 101.

again exposed to its own limitations and absurdity is only heightened, for “beginning to think is beginning to be undermined.”¹²³

It is important to note once again that neither man nor the world is absurd in and of themselves. There must exist an additional element in order for confrontation and conflict to arise. The contradiction of the absurd initially appears inside the mind, in the expectations and predictions of reality created by the cognitive faculties. Michael V. Fox points this out when he explains that the “quality of absurdity does not inhere in a being, act, or event in and of itself (though these may be called ‘absurd’), but rather in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations.”¹²⁴ The very expectation for meaning, order, and purpose in the world creates a discrepancy between the logical predictions and formulas within our reasoning selves and our physical confrontation with suffering, injustice, the emptiness of daily life, and the dread or fear of death. These human experiences are presented to the human mind as contradictions; they are not of the reality we predict or desire.

Thus it is neither the evils of the world nor man himself that are absurd, but rather the inability of the human mind to reconcile the complexities and contradictions in a world of which man does not approve. Our knowledge and wisdom, reason and logic may create a veneer of order and meaning, but this veneer lacks a foundation. We may only speculate and scratch the surface of things. Thus, the brute fact that man exists in a world he cannot understand makes him a cripple and alien in the universe, for though he knows he exists, he and his reason are ultimately useless within the world he inhabits.

This definition of the absurd leads to the theological intimations of Camusian

¹²³ Camus, *Myth*, 4.

¹²⁴ Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 409.

thought. As mentioned in the introduction, the foundation of the philosophy of the absurd is atheism; the meaninglessness of life results from the silence of a godless universe. *Myth* is, of course, no exception here. Wood notes that *Myth* is “a tract aimed at evacuating God, and a promise to live by the rigor of that evacuation.”¹²⁵ Despite Camus’s strong atheistic voice, Wood likens Camus to theistic writers such as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky who also “seek a world with meaning.”¹²⁶ Camus is similar to these theists “because of his sense that the world is ‘unreasonable,’ is thirsty for meaning. He has none of the rationalist’s calm at the idea of an entirely rational universe, and none of the agnostic’s serenity that it does not matter that the universe is meaningless. It matters very much to Camus.”¹²⁷ Similarly, and perhaps more profoundly, Camus’s conception of the absurd parallels the elusive musings of the disgruntled theist in *Ecclesiastes*. The limitations of human knowledge and reason is a definitive theme in Qohelet’s writings. Fox translates Camus’s “absurdity” as equivalent to Qohelet’s *hebel* (vanity or meaninglessness), and the feelings of absurdity arise precisely out of the limitations of human reason. Both Camus’s “absurdity” and Qohelet’s *hebel* are “an affront to reason,” for it is our reason that presents to us anticipations for clarity and coherency, to expect “order in the world about us.”¹²⁸ Camus and Qohelet describe human reality as absurd, and this assertion is not only a result of their inadequate reason, but because the nature of reality itself becomes something which stands at odds with their cognitive faculties: “...to call something ‘absurd,’” Fox adds, “is to claim a certain understanding of its nature: it is contrary to reason.”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Wood, 89.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 89.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 89.

¹²⁸ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” 409.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 413.

On a separate but similar note, Northrop Frye makes the important point that Qohelet uses *hebel* metaphorically, not literally. Frye explains that the literal Hebrew meaning of *hebel* is “kernel of fog, mist, vapor, or breath.”¹³⁰ Frye links this metaphor of “fog” to a sense of confusion, and he concludes that Qohelet sees life as a mystery that man cannot solve or a maze he cannot find a way through.¹³¹ While Qohelet describes life as a mist or vapor, he actually means that all things are “full of emptiness,”¹³² including the logical formulas of the mind, the laws and systems of reason, and the very benefits and purposes of knowledge. While these tools can describe the surface of reality, they do not explain the substance of it. Even more ironic is that the only “way out” of this maze is wisdom and knowledge. This is exactly what makes life absurd for Qohelet and Camus: the very solution to the riddle of life—the very hope that man might make sense of the world through wisdom, reason, and knowledge—is in itself essentially futile. Human reason and knowledge do not, as Camus and Qohelet discover, finally help man grasp the fullness of reality and the meaning of life.

But some of these points need qualification. As stated above, Camus realizes that human reason is not *completely* futile. Our reasoning is, of course, useful, for it is reason itself that initially discovers the absurd. What is absurd to Camus is that he has the ability to reason, and thereby realize the absurd, yet this reason cannot fully clarify or interpret the absurd it presents to him; he claims that “[r]eason may describe nature but cannot explain it.”¹³³ To be sure, Camus is not an irrationalist, but situates himself in a sort of “middle path” where he can acknowledge both the power and limits of reason.

¹³⁰ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: the Bible and Literature* (Toronto: APC, 1982), 123.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 123.

¹³³ Hazel E. Barnes, *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibility* (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1959), 166.

There is no logical certainty here. There is no experimental probability either... I want to know whether I can live with what I know and with that alone... But if I recognize the limits of reason, I do not therefore negate it, recognizing its relative powers. I merely want to remain in this middle path where the intelligence can remain clear.¹³⁴

Essentially, Camus and Qohelet are not completely renouncing the pursuit, utility, value, or even existence of human knowledge and reason, but are instead “interested in pointing to the *inadequacy* of reason.”¹³⁵ It is not that reason *does not* exist that is absurd, but that reason *does* exist, yet does not keep its promises. That reason can only give man partial understanding produces in Camus and Qohelet a sense of incompetence, crippling him in a complex universe and dissatisfying to the demands of the human heart.

Like Camus, Qohelet is a skeptic of human reason, particularly humanity’s ability to completely reconcile the paradoxes of human experiences, and to understand the mysteries of the universe. Though he acknowledges the existence of God, Qohelet also seriously questions the advantage of seeking wisdom in an ultimately mysterious world. Interestingly, for Qohelet, it is the very existence of God and his unknowable ways which create the tensions of *hebel*. In 8.16-17, Qohelet addresses both his inability to grasp the “business” of earth and the futility of seeking knowledge and clarity:

When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one’s eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

He makes a similar statement in 3.10-12: “...he [God] has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that *he cannot find out what God has done* from the beginning to the end.” Qohelet not only expresses his frustration with the fact that the knowledge and wisdom he has acquired—

¹³⁴ Camus, *Myth*, 27.

¹³⁵ Barnes, 166.

what he has seen, observed, and experienced in his life—cannot solve his problems, but also the fact that this is precisely the way God has designed human reality: “And I applied in my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”¹³⁶ It is not just the nature of the world and human existence that is absurd to Qohelet, but the very acts of God himself. Fox notes that Qohelet also describes “God’s will” as “not merely mysterious and inscrutable; it is manifestly *a violation of reason*.”¹³⁷ For Qohelet, “[l]ife with its difficulties and vicissitudes as a result of the Fall¹³⁸ is a puzzle that finite man cannot figure out and it frustrates [him] in his search for meaning and purpose. In his attempt to master life, Qohelet eventually realizes with defeated expectations that he cannot understand God’s scheme of things.”¹³⁹ J.L. Crenshaw makes a similar observation:

In *Ecclesiastes*, the heavens remain silent...[t]his leaves the future hidden, utterly mysterious. Mesopotamian wisdom sought to predict events by observing signs. Qohelet declares such efforts are futile. Even the monotonous cycles of nature defy prediction—that they will repeat is sure, but when and how remain obscure...Since Qohelet has been unable to understand reality, he concludes that none can do so. Dismissing the cumulative knowledge of generations, he declares all creation absurd and vexatious.¹⁴⁰

It seems that the future and God’s mysterious will is not meant for human beings to know.

Near the end of the book, Qohelet tells us, “Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity

¹³⁶ 1.13-15.

¹³⁷ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” 425, emphasis mine.

¹³⁸ We might interpret Camus’s “absurd world” as the equivalent of Qohelet’s “fallen world.” I will discuss this more in length in Chapter Two.

¹³⁹ Robert McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” *DBSJ* 1 (Spring 1996), 92.

¹⁴⁰ J. L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 24.

of God who makes all things.”¹⁴¹ Qohelet realizes that man is unable to understand the purposes and plans of God, the “big picture” and full nature of things, and this fact is an “affront to his reason,” his human desires and expectations. The reality he experiences goes *against* the very reason he uses to build expectations of that reality.

Qohelet also addresses the limits of human reason through a series of rhetorical questions. The Hebrew phrase *mi yodea*, translated as the rhetorical question “who knows?”, occurs five times throughout the book, expressing a skeptical view of human knowledge.¹⁴² In 2.19 Qohelet points out man’s unknowable fate and future when he asks, “And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?” In 3.21 he asks, “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” In 8.7 he states, “For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?” In 6.12 he connects this epistemological skepticism with *hebel* through his use of the word “shadow”: “For who knows what is good for a man during *his* lifetime, *during* the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?” The word “shadow” here reminds one of the shifting, passing light of each day, and metaphorically emphasizes the “frailty of human beings,” “brevity of human life,” and “ephemerality.”¹⁴³ If man is but a shadow or transient existence “under the sun,” then his life does not give him the sufficient time he needs in order to know the meaning of life and how he should live. This is the same realization Camus expresses when he speaks of the

¹⁴¹ 11.5.

¹⁴² Three of these rhetorical questions are included above. The other two are: “...who knows how to conduct himself before the living?” (6.8); “And who knows the interpretation of a thing?” (8.1).

¹⁴³ Longman, 138.

uncertainty of his future in light of his *certainty* that “there is no afterlife.”¹⁴⁴ Camus too concludes that his only certainty is the lack of meaning in his life. From the unknown he concludes that “nothing is clear, all is chaos, that all man has is his lucidity and his definite knowledge of the walls surrounding him.”¹⁴⁵ Qohelet and Camus are *certain* of the “walls surrounding [them];” what they *do know* is that they *do not know* the mysteries beyond their existence. Yet despite their uncertainty, they both express a similar longing to discover what lies “behind the universe” and on the “other side of the curtain,” all the while realizing that the mind of man is crippled and cannot find these things. Here lies the tension between the desires of their nature and the nature of reality. They are trapped; they long to know but are incapable.

For Camus, the absence of any ultimate or knowable truth which can guide and give meaning to his life contradicts the assurance he has of his own existence. He confesses, “Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled...there are truths, but no truth.”¹⁴⁶ He has no justification for the seriousness in which he takes his life. He finds himself born without foundation or purpose. He is provided an empty life with no substance to fill it. Similarly, Qohelet discovers a gap between his existence and the knowledge that may direct this existence. One scholar explains that Qohelet “denies that it is possible to know what is *good* in life” and “rejects the possibility of knowing the absolute good over against the relative good.”¹⁴⁷ This uncertainty is a problem for two reasons. First, how can man *be* good unless he *knows* what is good? Secondly, even if he were to have the knowledge of goodness, how would he know that this

¹⁴⁴ Camus, *Myth*, 58.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴⁷ Longman, 178.

is what he *should* pursue? That man feels directionless in a world he cannot already fully comprehend is a twofold absurdity. Interestingly, Qohelet suggests that *more* knowledge and certainty would only increase his experience of the absurd and thus create in him more alienation and angst. He says in 1.18, “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.” Camus expresses a similar attitude when he admits that “all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine.”¹⁴⁸ No man understands the home he inhabits, and scientific explanations “end up in a hypothesis.”¹⁴⁹ Subsequently, as man becomes more knowledgeable he experiences more alienation and mental agony.

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

Qohelet states:

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

Qohelet’s search for meaning is utterly pointless because his fate is the same as the fool’s. In a similar vein, he is dumbfounded “that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens

¹⁴⁸ Camus, *Myth*, 19

¹⁴⁹ Hardy, 371.

according to the deeds of the righteous.”¹⁵⁰ Here is the ever-problematic question, “why do bad things happen to good people?” This reversal of consequence and expectation is a complete irrationality, an absolute contradiction to rational expectations. The absurdity of existence for Qoheleth comes partly from the fact that we impose our rational expectations on God, a God who wills human experiences to play out differently than what reason leads us to expect.

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

In his classic set of critical essays, *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold defines Hebraism and Hellenism as two major forces that have shaped Western culture. Throughout the history of Western man, these two traditions have been the most fundamental paradigms

¹⁵⁰ 8.17.

through which one attempts to overcome the barriers, limitations, and finitude of his condition. They are, explains Arnold, essentially “spiritual disciplines” through which man seeks authentic existence and harmony with himself, whose final aim is “man’s perfection or salvation.”¹⁵¹ Though these traditions move toward a common end, their means and values differ greatly. The Hellenist discovers authentic existence specifically through abstraction, reason, and knowledge.¹⁵² He praises understanding, the act of “knowing” (specifically knowing the grounds, meaning, and purpose for right acting) and “clear intelligence.”¹⁵³ The Hebraic tradition, on the other hand, seeks to avoid abstractions and focuses instead on a concrete way of living. It consists of an “energy driving at practice,” a “paramount sense of the obligation of duty, self-control, and work, this earnestness in going manfully with the best light we have, as one force.”¹⁵⁴ For the Hebrew, authentic existence arises out of the “exercise of will,” in his passionate, practical, and productive living.¹⁵⁵

It is precisely in this distinction between the man of *passion* and the man of *reason* that the modern Camus parallels the ancient Qohelet. In *Irrational Man*, Barrett argues that modern existential thought finds its roots in the Hebraic tradition. He traces the origins and developments of existentialism by examining the central distinction between Hellenism and Hebraism: the difference between *knowing* and *doing*. Barrett notes that the Hebraic man is “concerned with practice, the Greek with knowledge. Right conduct is the ultimate concern

¹⁵¹ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, Ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, UK: UP of Cambridge. 2002), 127.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁵⁵ Stefan Collini, Introduction, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, Ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, UK: UP of Cambridge. 2002), xx.

of the Hebrew, right thinking that of the Greek.”¹⁵⁶ The biblical Hebraic man, figures such as Abraham, Job, the psalmists, and Qohelet, does not rely on human reason in order to discover the meaning and essence of life—that which transcends the human world. Instead, the Hebrew realizes the inadequacy of his reason and his inability to know fully the ways of God. He chooses to exist in that inadequacy, to accept his limitations and lack of knowledge. “The Hebrew,” Barrett explains, “proceeds not by way of reason but by the confrontation of the whole man ... in the fullness and violence of his passion with the unknowable and overwhelming God.”¹⁵⁷ The key word here that helps us connect the modern Camus to the ancient Hebrew writer is “confrontation.” Through a confrontation with their limited condition and the absurd, Camus and Qohelet experience a true moment of enlightenment, a honest interaction with reality. Thus, it is through this *confrontation*—the *struggle* of life itself—that man may know who he is in the world. What once darkened the mind of man enlightens him. Qohelet’s authentic confrontation with reality is echoed centuries later in Camus’s modern world. Robert Royal convincingly argues in “The Other Camus,” that the “radical confrontation with the absurd was an absolute necessity in the 20th century, but only as a first step toward a fuller vision of human meaning and value.”¹⁵⁸

Arnold and Barrett’s description of the Hebraic tradition explains Qohelet’s ironic reaction to the vanity of his life and Camus’s life-affirming response to the absurd. Each thinker seeks salvation from his alienation. Camus seeks a means to evade suicide and find the strength to live a meaningless life. Qohelet longs for a sense of value in his daily toil and seeks answers for the contradictions and injustices he witnesses. Once they have realized

¹⁵⁶ Barrett, 70.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 73.

¹⁵⁸ Robert Royal, “The Other Camus.” *The Wilson Quarterly* 19.4 (Autumn 1995), 56.

their limitations and that life works against their reason, they must seek a legitimate means to exist. They must choose a mode of being-in-the-world. For the Hebrew, his emphasis on right practice and passionate living is born of his inadequate thinking. He cannot see things as they really are through reason; he overcomes alienation rather through the blood and bones of his physical life, through anger, confusion, and fear, and through his fervent bond with the Being whom he can never entirely, intellectually know. This kind of knowledge a man has only through living, not reasoning, and even in the end he cannot always say what exactly it is that he knows.¹⁵⁹

These notions of the Hebraic man also translate into Camus's attitude toward the modern predicament. He ultimately rejects the Hellenistic path of knowing as a way of being-in-the-world, and thus becomes a man of *action*, a man of *doing*. He once remarked: "I am not a philosopher, because I don't believe in reason enough to believe in a system. What interests me is knowing how we must behave."¹⁶⁰ Although much of Western philosophy has been an attempt to "make everything clear," Camus considers it "logically impossible to construct an absolute and exclusive view of reality."¹⁶¹ However, this logical impossibility does not lead to a nihilistic denial of reality or a philosophy of despair, but rather a positive freedom that allows man to recognize and embrace a realistic view of life, a view that necessitates action and participation in order to authenticate human existence. Though he realizes the limits of the mind, Camus concludes that man should not limit his body and negate life through passivity; he understands that although he does not find meaning and

¹⁵⁹ Barrett, 79.

¹⁶⁰ Oliver Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 408.

¹⁶¹ Trundle, Robert C. *Beyond Absurdity: The Philosophy of Albert Camus* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 75.

clarity, “[t]he mind, when it reaches its limits, must make a judgment and choose its conclusions.”¹⁶² Action consequentially follows as limitation gives man occasion to exert his will, to eject himself from the stagnant domain of reflective abstraction. Instead he creates a concrete world in which he may live and move and breathe. Camus finds that the constant and conscious awareness that he cannot grasp the fullness of reality does not imprison him, but liberates him from the burden of knowing.

All of this implies that though Camus and Qohelet begin with the absurd or *hebel* as an all-encompassing fact of human reality, they do not end there. Camus once criticized anyone for “thinking that life is tragic because it is wretched,” and instead argued that the “realization that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself but only a beginning...It is not the discovery which is interesting...but the consequences and rules for actions which can be drawn from it.”¹⁶³ Camus is not so much concerned with what causes absurdity as he is with its effects; he focuses on how man should respond to it. He recognizes that his absurd condition “awakens consciousness and provokes what follows.”¹⁶⁴ He admits that the very certainty of his uncertainty unlocks the truth of his condition, that the “inability to understand becomes the existence that illuminates everything.”¹⁶⁵ Shandon L. Guthrie also points out that “[i]t’s our awareness of this predicament that results in the absurdity of life. But Camus’ story does not end there. He does want to emphasize that our awareness of this vicious cycle in itself prompts victory: ‘Being aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum.’”¹⁶⁶ Although Sisyphus does not know the

¹⁶² Camus, *Myth*, 27.

¹⁶³ qtd. in Foley 6

¹⁶⁴ Camus, *Myth*, 11.

¹⁶⁵ Barrett, 73.

¹⁶⁶ Shandon L. Guthrie, “Atheism, Christianity, and the Meaning of Life.” Regis University,

meaning of his “futile and hopeless labor,”¹⁶⁷ he does know “the whole extent of his wretched condition,” and in this knowledge he is victorious.¹⁶⁸ He does not find his *reason* for living in the dim *reasoning* of his mind. Rather, in his awareness of the absurd and the limits of human reason, he becomes interested in what he *can* know. He knows that he exists and that the world exists. He knows he can act and live with passion.

Similarly, Qohelet grapples with a fallen world in which things “crooked cannot be made straight.”¹⁶⁹ But he does not accept this fact and turn toward despair. After asking the rhetorical question, “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” Qohelet immediately responds with a contented embrace of all that he has—his toil: “So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot.”¹⁷⁰ Here, Qohelet comes to terms with the human condition—his limitations and mortality—and in the awareness of his “lot” he finds a certain solace and liberation through which he is able to “rejoice in his work.” Aware of what he does not know, he turns to action, work, his daily existence. He simply goes on living without any resolve or answer to his questions. Qohelet contends that a mere spectatorial account of the world cannot provide a full explanation of human reality. He transforms from a man of *knowing* to a man of *doing*.

Denver, CO. (14 September 2008).

¹⁶⁷ Camus, *Myth*, 119.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁶⁹ 1.15.

¹⁷⁰ 3.21-22. Qohelet repeatedly reacts to *hebel* with the charge to find pleasure in life and to live life to its fullest. For example, he writes in 2.24, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil;” in 3.12, “I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;” in 8.15, “And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.”

Similarly, Camus contends that the touchstone of human inquiry is not through cognitive powers but through the powers of personal experience and relationships. An emphasis on the powers of reason disparage the emotional, and even the spiritual, dimension of human beings. He writes that “reasoning...leaves out altogether the most widespread spiritual attitude of our enlightened age.”¹⁷¹ Here, Camus uncovers the positive implications buried beneath the alienation, nothingness, and absurdity that humans experience, and thus he defines his existence as a participator *in* the world rather than a spectator *of* the world—that is, he may truly understand himself through *acting* and *doing* rather than *thinking* and *knowing*. In the attempt to organize the universe and the projects of men, the Hellenist overlooks the limits of his system building. He does not notice how the sciences cannot humanize the universe or explain away its absurdities. Camus and Qohelet, however, recognize that authentic existence entails a honest participation in the world, a confrontation with the absurd, and a utilization of one’s freedom—namely, the choice to live. In his essay “Kohleth and Camus: Two Views of Achievement,” Matthew J. Schwartz explains that man’s very decision to live and work authenticates existence. For Qohelet and the absurd man, “[t]he world seems alien and threatening, and only by means of his heroic achievements can the hero become worthy to surpass or transcend these limitations.”¹⁷²

What is true for both of these figures is that they cannot change their situation. What they can do is what Camus calls “revolt.” Revolt, the first of three positions consequent to a confrontation with the absurd (the other two are Freedom and Passion), is “not a refusal to

¹⁷¹ Camus, *Myth*, 29.

¹⁷² Matthew J. Schwartz, “Kohleth and Camus: Two Views of Achievement,” *Judaism* 35 (1986), 31.

accept the absurd but a decision to live keeping it constantly before one.”¹⁷³ In his revolt, the absurd man indirectly opposes the injustice and despair that the absurd gives him. He opposes these effects when he decides to keep living in spite of them. In other words, revolt is the “spirit of defiance in the face of the Absurd. More technically and less metaphorically, it is a spirit of opposition against any perceived unfairness, oppression, or indignity in the human condition.”¹⁷⁴ Moreover, revolt is a desire for the impossible: “it is Camus’ fundamental principle that man’s grandeur and possible happiness lie in his refusal to give up his desire for the impossible. If man is to save himself, he must never cease to revolt against the limits of his condition at the same time that he refuses to pretend that they are not there.”¹⁷⁵ Revolt, thus, is the honest awareness of human limits, and this is, in turn, an honest confrontation with the absurd, a refusal to defeat it or be defeated by it. For both Camus and Qohelet, it is the “the world that disappoints”¹⁷⁶ that compel them to “revolt” against their fate and choose life. It is in the consciousness of limited knowledge that they may truly live, and it is in *living* and *becoming*, rather than *thinking*, that they may transcend the absurdity of their existence.

There is certainly a sense of uneasiness in both Qohelet and Camus’s writings. Barrett points out that this uneasiness is a central characteristic in the man who questions God and confronts his alienation: “deep within the Biblical man,” he writes, “lurks a certain *uneasiness*, which is not to be found in the conceptions of man given us by the great Greek philosophers. This *uneasiness* points toward another, and more central, region of human existence than the contrast between doing and knowing, morality and reason,” namely the

¹⁷³ Barnes, 165.

¹⁷⁴ Simpson, n. pag.

¹⁷⁵ Barrett, 165.

¹⁷⁶ Camus, *Myth*, 37.

importance for man to honestly confront his finitude and mortality.¹⁷⁷ Camus, like the biblical man, does not seek to resolve the tensions of his absurd existence. Instead, he finds his meaning in the uneasiness his finitude creates. He recognizes that these tensions are necessary for him to confront and survive the truth of his condition, and, by doing so, he may transcend the paradoxical nature of the human experience. Out of the uneasiness of the mind Camus turns to the actions of the body—the flesh and blood of experience—and focuses on living passionately—rather than relying on his reason to explain life to him. Interestingly, the limitations of human reason do not create more despair for man, but instead lead him to a better grasp of what he knows, his humanness and ability to embrace his life.

The mysteries that remain unknown to Qohelet compel him to find “enjoyment” in his toil, the life he does have “under that sun.” The uneasiness Sisyphus feels as he climbs his mountain awakens his consciousness and evokes in him a “silent joy.”¹⁷⁸ Thus, in the end, like Qohelet, Sisyphus chooses life and joins the Hebraic tradition by discovering the very meaning of his life in the struggle to survive his endless toil; he embraces his condition, rejects surrender, and embodies the “Hebraic concept of the man of faith who is passionately committed to his mortal being.”¹⁷⁹ Sisyphus and Qohelet can only find true serenity the moment they come to terms with their relationship with the unsolvable mysteries of the universe. As Camus tells us, Sisyphus “*is*, as much through his passions as through his torture.”¹⁸⁰ Thus, the very thing that makes life absurd—the limits of his reason—is what keeps man alive on earth. It is the very inadequacy of his reason, that which once tormented him, that eventually redeems him. The awareness of his absurd state, as well as his honest

¹⁷⁷ Barrett, 71.

¹⁷⁸ Camus, *Myth*, 125.

¹⁷⁹ Barrett, 76.

¹⁸⁰ Camus, *Myth*, 120.

willingness to confront it, authenticates his existence: “The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.”¹⁸¹ Thus, Camus famously concludes at the end of the essay that the “struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.”¹⁸² Qohelet and Camus find a way to transcend the absurd by embracing what they do know—their potentiality as human agents who can act, eat, drink, and enjoy their work despite their limitations. They recognize alienation as a kind of triggering mechanism that compels the individual to transcend his finitude. He is interested not so much in overcoming his alienation by making the absurd universe his human home, but by making his confrontation and revolt against the absurd (and the alienation it creates) a “controlling experience”¹⁸³ that transforms his “alienation to unity.”¹⁸⁴

When Camus says, “But I do know that, if such a meaning exists, I do not know it and that it is impossible me just now to know it,”¹⁸⁵ he qualifies this statement by using “just now,” thus, leaving “the door open both to the possibility of there being such a meaning somewhere and this being possibly communicable to him at some time in the future through some faculty or medium of which he hitherto had no experience.”¹⁸⁶ His inability to know or understand the meaning of things at the present moment does not “rule out the possibility of his arriving at such an understanding one day in the future though some medium presently unimaginable to him.”¹⁸⁷ It therefore becomes man’s limited human reason that compels him to keep living, because it is in living that he may gain a knowledge he would not have known

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 121.

¹⁸² Ibid., 123.

¹⁸³ Sagi, 41.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 115.

¹⁸⁵ Camus, *Myth*, 38.

¹⁸⁶ Akeroyd, 8.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 38.

before.

Chapter Two

The Weight of Nothingness: Meursault, Qohelet, and the Futility of Human Action

Above, it was argued that Sisyphus and Qohelet, upon discovering the limitations of human reason, turn from *knowing* to *doing*. This turn or “revolt” is a life-affirming response to the absurd: Qohelet finds enjoyment in his daily toil; Sisyphus finds happiness in his continuous struggle up the mountain. This shift toward action, however, does not resolve the tensions of the absurd, for the absurd is the brute fact of human reality, and Sisyphus and Qohelet realize that to deny this fact is to live a delusion, and thereby deny life itself. To be authentically human is to not merely pass *through* the absurd, but to acknowledge it, experience it, and live in its tensions; they must embrace its tensions as a catalyst toward authentic existence. Qohelet, truly realizing his lot as a mortal subjected to a seemingly distant deity, concludes that “all is *hebel*.” But learning that he cannot make straight what has been made crooked, he resolves to remain in a crooked world. He responds with an affirmation of his existence: “There is nothing better for a person to do than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.”¹⁸⁸ Likewise, Sisyphus embraces his absurd existence and makes the mountain his home. In their honest confrontation with the absurd they gain a sense of victory; although they do not conquer the absurd, they are not conquered by it.

But even though Camus and Qohelet do not succumb to despair, a sense of absurdity remains. This feeling of absurdity arises out of the second source of the absurd: the futility of human action.¹⁸⁹ To explore this particular theme in Camusian thought we turn to *The*

¹⁸⁸ 2.24.

¹⁸⁹ The phrase “human action” is quite broad. Throughout this chapter I will address the specific “actions” to which this phrase refers, some of which include: communication

Stranger, his most seminal contribution to modern literature.

The absurd appears slightly different in *The Stranger* than it does in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Although the futility of human action certainly emerges out of Sisyphus's laborious existence—his endless pushing of the rock—he does not initially confront the absurd through his endless toil, but in the great void between the “human need [for meaning] and the unreasonable silence of the world.”¹⁹⁰ His absurd encounter arises primarily out of unmet expectation; the world does not satisfy “his longing for happiness and for reason.”¹⁹¹ Moreover, the absurd in *Myth* is essentially an abstraction that alienates man from the concrete world. It is a divorce born of the inability to grasp the nature of reality through human reason. To make his world concrete—to feel at home on the mountain—Sisyphus embraces his eternal task. The limits of his reason drive him to the commitment of his actions.

In *The Stranger*, the absurd is not an abstraction but a concrete experience. Unlike *Myth*, a philosophical essay which gives us the “notion” of the absurd, *The Stranger* is a fictional illustration which gives us the “feeling” of it.¹⁹² Through simple yet powerful narrative form, Camus incarnates the absurd into the flesh and blood of human experience, as it concerns the everyday life of an ordinary man. In his in-depth analysis of the novel, Patrick

(speaking, hearing, listening, comprehending), activities (e.g., sleeping, drinking, eating, walking, swimming, etc.), emotions and experiences (love, joy, happiness, sorrow, fear), relationships (mother/child, male/female, etc.), choices, work (manual labor, projects) and, perhaps the most ambitions of all human endeavors, the search for the meaning of life. Within the realm of “human actions” are also the volitional acts of expecting, assuming, and desiring.

¹⁹⁰ Camus, *Myth*, 28.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁹² Victor Brombert, “Camus and the Novel of the ‘Absurd,’” *Yale French Studies* 1, Existentialism (1948), 120.

McCarthy argues that this “feeling” of absurdity arises out of the “daily routine of work.”¹⁹³ More specifically, alienation occurs as the individual discovers that “his identifications, his relationships, his style of life, and his work are not meaningfully correlated.”¹⁹⁴ He experiences a divorce between causes and their effects. Alienated from himself and fellow men, the novel’s enigmatic narrator, Meursault, questions the meaning and significance of human relationships, emotions, communication, and the daily choices of, what he calls, his “absurd life.”¹⁹⁵ A similar divorce between an act and its meaning appears in *Ecclesiastes*. Qohelet examines the various projects and accomplishments of his life only to find them *hebel*—meaningless and empty. He cannot reconcile his lifelong labor with its inherent lack of purpose. Both Meursault and Qohelet discover a breakdown in the anticipated equation of life: their efforts and actions acquire no real achievement or profound meaning. Sagi explains that this particular “manifestation of the sense of the absurd” arises specifically out of “the break in the continuity of meaning in everyday life.”¹⁹⁶ The seriousness in which a person once took his or her life is reduced to frivolity, and one’s efforts feel futile in the dizzying routine of days. Before exploring the parallels between Meursault and Qohelet’s discovery of the futility of human action, it is important to further elucidate the meaning and usage of the term “absurd,” specifically its affinities to this notion of “futility.” This connection will help one grasp the parallel themes of *The Stranger* and *Ecclesiastes*.

In ordinary language, most people use “absurd” to mean “ridiculous,” “idiotic,”

¹⁹³ McCarthy, Patrick, *Albert Camus, The Stranger: A Student Guide*, Second Edition (Cambridge: U of Cambridge P, 2004), 75.

¹⁹⁴ N. Karl Haden, “Qoheleth and the Problem of Alienation,” *Christian Scholars Review* 17 (1987), 54.

¹⁹⁵ Camus, *The Stranger*, Trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage, 1988), 121.

¹⁹⁶ Abraham Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 74.

“senseless,” “ludicrous,” or “foolish.” These words are often used to describe the abnormal outcome of typically normal situation. For example, one might call the mathematical expression “ $2 + 2 = 5$ ” an “absurdity.” Although we might say that the mathematician asserting this formula is certainly “senseless” or “foolish,” neither him nor the equation is “absurd;” they are just *untrue*. “Absurd” takes on a much deeper and, ironically, more serious implication than the words “foolish” or “ridiculous” provide. The philosophical use of the term is often linked to “meaningless,” not in the sense of incoherency, but in the sense of uselessness. But the term “meaningless” in this context needs defining. Although “meaningless” points to one of the various implications of “absurd,” and is one used interchangeably with “futility” throughout this chapter, this term, too, can be somewhat misleading. The etymology of “absurd” can eradicate this ambiguity.

Camus’s French *absurde* is derived from the Latin *absurdus*, which translates literally as “out of harmony” or “what is unharmonious to the ear.”¹⁹⁷ Its root is not *surd*, which means “deaf,” but *svar*, denoting “tune” or “sound.”¹⁹⁸ This Latin origin is, to some extent, akin to musical and mathematical terminology—the disharmonious tonal product of sound waves or the extraneous sum total of integers. In musical language, the etymology signifies discord—a dissonance or contradiction between sound waves. To illustrate in mathematical terms: the expression “ $2 + 2 = \textcircled{R}$ ” is not just incorrect, but *absurd*. There is a clear relational collapse between the initial problem “ $2 + 2$ ” and the superfluous solution “ \textcircled{R} .” The relational break in the logical formula and cause-effect sequence does not merely signify a mistake, but something worse: it is nearly *offensive* as it annuls the very purpose of the formula. Here, there is not merely inaccuracy, but futility.

¹⁹⁷ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 23.

¹⁹⁸ Charles Halsey, *An Etymology of Latin and Greek* (Boston: Ginn, Heath, & Co), 151.

It is important to note that this disharmony takes place between two pre-existing things rather than the non-existence of a thing. Therefore, the term “absurd” refers not so much to a sense of *meaninglessness*—the absence of meaning—as it does to a *loss of meaning*—a negation of meaning. This connotation also applies to Qohelet’s *hebel*. As Fox explains, “while *hebel* is a near-synonym of ‘meaningless,’ the terms differ insofar as ‘absurd’ is not merely the absence of meaning, but an active violation of meaningfulness.”¹⁹⁹

Before moving further, it is necessary to establish more solidly the correlation between Camus’s “absurd,” Qohelet’s *hebel*, and the sense of futility. In addition to connecting *absurdus* to a sense of disharmony, it is helpful to notice that *absurdus* and *hebel* and their “violation of meaningfulness” indicate a gap between *I-It* relationships: action-reaction, signifier-signified, cause-effect, self-world, subject-object. Whether it is a gap between language and semantics or a breakdown in the cause and effect progression, the sense of disharmony entails a loss of efficacy; the two notes simply do not produce the desired result, and the musical expression is useless. As a result, *absurdus* is a complete collapse in lucid connectivity between human projects and the results they produce. The absurd is an abyss between demand and satisfaction.

To further illustrate, a return to the Sisyphean situation is necessary. Sisyphus begins his journey up the mountain with a sense of purpose. He pushes his rock in order to reach the top. There is *meaning* behind his project. But as he stands upon the summit, the rock rolls down, and all the significance of his struggle is lost. The value and purpose of his endeavors are crushed by endless repetition. Sisyphus exists in a cycle of labor that reaps no reward. What began as *meaningful* becomes *meaningless*. The task is stripped of all teleology; the

¹⁹⁹ Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 36.

climbing achieves no aim. The crashing boulder mocks the sweat of his brow. The groans of his great efforts are not muted by this loss of meaning, but are “out of tune” as the cause and effect progression is destroyed. In the wake of this defeat, Sisyphus becomes aware of the broken machine of which he is a part.

Thus Camus’s *absurde* and Qohelet’s *hebel* refer to a world that has undergone a fundamental breakdown, a broken machine whose parts hang useless. Ours is a world of discord as all human projects fail to yield their projected outcomes. The efforts of men produce nothing but senseless noise. This kind of reality deprives human life of substance, reducing all movements into trifling irrelevancy. What is ironic about all of this is that the sense of meaninglessness and “break in continuity”²⁰⁰ is heightened by the very continuity of life—the predictable activities of the mechanical work week. Days pass, the hands of the clock tick on, but no real progress is made. The things that Western man regards most valuable (e.g., virtue, relationships, truth, the pursuit of knowledge) are lost in the mundane moments of everyday life. The repetition of life recycles these values until they are old, decrepit, and seemingly useless. In *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*, David E. Cooper explains that the endless repetition of life brings dread, and an ironic feeling of anxiety often arises from the comfort of routine; this “sense of absurdity indicate[s] that there is no final, rational determination of the large decision in life, of our ‘fundamental projects.’”²⁰¹ The futility of daily life is also born of the unfounded solemnity with which people approach their everyday lives: “It is in this tension, between the necessary seriousness with which we are engaged through our beliefs and values and their lack of a justificatory ground, that absurdity

²⁰⁰ Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, 74.

²⁰¹ David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 155.

is located.”²⁰² Underneath this absurd canopy, all choices and actions become equal. One event is just as *unimportant* as another. In the wake of average everydayness, the absurd is the leveling of all human activity in which “[a]ll scales of value disappear. All experiences become equivalent and are to be measured quantitatively. To smoke a cigarette or to kill a man, to desire a woman or to gobble a meal, amount to the same thing. All these actions have the same value or lack of it, for all are equally devoid of real significance.”²⁰³ As we shall see, both Meursault and Qohelet seriously confront the implications of this kind of reality. They each experience a breakdown in meaning in the cyclical nature of human experiences. Meursault’s encounter with the sense of futility needs to be considered first.

The Stranger is a simple yet complex novel. The simple plot is divided into two parts: Part One tells the story of Meursault, a young shipping clerk who begins a casual, romantic relationship with a former coworker the day after his mother’s funeral. The couple spends a weekend at the beach where Meursault irrationally kills an Arab he recognizes. Part Two explains Meursault’s arrest, trial, and time in prison as he awaits his death sentence. At the center of this simple plot is the complexity of the passive, indifferent, and deathly honest narrator. The puzzling Meursault has given rise to numerous contradicting interpretations. For example, G. Rasin calls him “utterly strange”²⁰⁴ while Diana Keegan calls him “an ordinary man.”²⁰⁵ Harry V. Jaffa considers him a “criminal”²⁰⁶ while Victor Brombert

²⁰² Ibid., 142.

²⁰³ Brombert, 110.

²⁰⁴ G. Rasin, “*The Stranger*: Condemned to Death by Character,” *The Maryland Bar Journal* 41.4 (July/August 2008), 52.

²⁰⁵ Diane Keegan, “Meursault the Stranger,” *A Study of Camus’ Notion of the Absurd and its Mythology in Catch-22 and Slaughterhouse-Five* (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2008), 4.

²⁰⁶ Harry V. Jaffa, “Macbeth and the Moral Universe,” *Claremont Rev Books* 8.1 (Winter 2007/2008), 27.

contends that he is amoral, “neither moral nor immoral.”²⁰⁷ Manschreck describes Meursault as a nihilist who is “utterly bored,” “indifferent to everything” and “emptied of hope.”²⁰⁸ Cruickshank describes him as a representation of the socially and politically marginalized, a “symbolical figure representing man’s metaphysical status as an outsider, a being who does not feel he belongs—and who does not seem to belong—to the world in which he has been placed.”²⁰⁹ Robert C. Solomon concludes that he is a paradox, “both the reflective transcendental narrator and unreflective bearer of experience.”²¹⁰ Sartre argues that even with a lucid understanding of the “theories of the absurd,” Meursault “remains ambiguous.”²¹¹ Whether Meursault is an ordinary or strange man, a victim or a criminal, is not our main concern here. In this chapter, we will study him as a symbol of the futility of human action as he demonstrates a subject-object/self-world breakdown and a collapse within the cause-effect progression.

Meursault encounters a loss of meaning when he realizes that his choices, opinions, and actions (such as speaking, loving, thinking, etc.) do not produce any profound effect on the totality of human existence. Brombert argues that through this awareness Meursault becomes “supremely conscious of the futility of his own existence.”²¹² He is a “man realizing the gap between the eternal nature of the universe and his own finite nature, and perceiving how much his worries are out of proportion with the futility of all his efforts.”²¹³ Meursault is a figure whose entire structure—psychology, behavior, beliefs—embodies this particular

²⁰⁷ Brombert, 119.

²⁰⁸ Clyde L. Manschreck, “Nihilism in the Twentieth Century: A View from Here,” *Church History* 45.1 (March 1976), 92.

²⁰⁹ Cruickshank, 44.

²¹⁰ Robert C. Solomon, *From Hegel to Existentialism* (New York: UP of Oxford, 1987), 250.

²¹¹ Sartre, “An Explication of *The Stranger*,” 8.

²¹² Brombert, 120.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 120.

source of the absurd, evident especially in his detached voice and minimalistic point-of-view, his monotonous lifestyle, and his distrust in the functionality of language.

A breakdown of meaning initially appears in the literary design and narrative style of the novel. Meursault's indirect style and limited first-person point-of-view textually convey a lack of substance in human experiences. Brombert notes that the "events of the external world as well as the events of his personal life have no meaning to Meursault. He does not perceive the causal link. And Camus intensifies this impression by writing most of the dialogues in an indirect style, as well as by the somewhat artificial but effective use throughout the book of the present perfect tense."²¹⁴ Meursault's oversimplified recording of detail, detached point-of-view, and indirect style remove depth and emotional attachment, concurrently creating an ambiguous and open-ended text. Whereas a first-person point-of-view often explains the narrator's thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about him or herself and other characters, as well as describe the events he or she witnesses, Meursault excludes significant information that most readers need (and want) in order to fully grasp the meaning and motivation of various actions and events. Anderson notes that instead of interpreting and reflecting upon the implications and meanings of emotional experiences, Meursault "simply describes objects, events...as they come to him" and he is unable to determine their usefulness, meaning, or significance.²¹⁵ For example, during the vigil at the funeral home, Meursault shows no emotion for his mother's death; instead, he describes the world of objects: "The furniture consisted of some chairs and some cross-shaped sawhorses...The room was filled with beautiful late-afternoon sunlight. Two hornets were buzzing against the

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

²¹⁵ David Anderson, "Incompetent Texts in Camus, Sartre, and Celine," 1995. www.sccs.swarthmore.edu. Web. 18 April 2010.

glass roof.”²¹⁶ Meursault gives the reader no account of his emotions, thoughts, or attitudes toward his mother’s death beyond these shallow descriptions. The only “feeling” he does mention is his drowsiness: “I could feel myself getting sleepy.”²¹⁷ His colorless descriptions of inanimate objects distract him from the significance of his mother’s death, and this detachment leaves death inconsequential to his own life. His disconnection between experience and implication also leaves the audience deficient of meaning. Events happen with no relationship to other events. His perception clouds the reader’s ability to interpret the death of a mother and its effect on her son. Similarly, this “missing” meaning clouds Meursault’s own perceptions. At the vigil, he experiences a moment of near-delusion, as if reality itself becomes an illusion. Though he can clearly perceive “Maman’s friends,” the significance and meaning of their presence seems lost: “I saw them more clearly than I had ever seen anyone, and not one detail of their faces or their clothes escaped me. But I couldn’t hear them, and it was hard for me to believe they really existed.”²¹⁸ Throughout most of his narrative, Meursault seems to exist somewhere between wake and sleep. The objective truth and reality in front of him seem hazy in the “harsh light.”²¹⁹ He later admits that he “felt a little lost between the blue and white of the sky and the monotony of the colors around [him].”²²⁰

Meursault’s first-person point-of-view and scrupulous attention to detail ironically create gaps in the narrative, failing to accurately or vividly describe the meaning or motivations behind certain actions and events. Meursault devotes numerous pages of the

²¹⁶ Camus, *The Stranger*, 6.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

novel simply to describing the simple, random activities of strangers,²²¹ people's clothing,²²² and the afternoon busyness and various noises of the street corner.²²³ These descriptions supply the reader with dry details, but they provide no explanation or further commentary on the motives or effects. Sartre's famous critique of *The Stranger* points out the link between Meursault's everyday encounters of absurdity and the literary style Camus employs to describe the "climate of this absurd;"²²⁴ Sartre concludes that Camus's artwork is "magnificently sterile,"²²⁵ detached from vivacity and empty of substantive meaning. Jacob Golomb describes Meursault's narrative voice and language as "quite terse" as "background scenery is left out and the objective descriptions lack softness. Only expressions of rejection or approval are recorded without justification or explanation" in order to reveal "the unviability of unidimensionality in the realm of human emotions and intensions."²²⁶ Meursault perceives a one dimensional world in which the depth and substance of objects and people are indeterminate or inaccessible. Adrian van den Hoven also argues that this minimalistic narration "results in the reader/spectator being left with a very partial overview of events."²²⁷ Whereas "first-person narratives in which the action is filtered through the main character's perspective" present objective meanings to the reader, these explanations are missing, and as a result "one cannot help but entertain a certain ambivalent attitude

²²¹ Ibid., 11, 18, 19, 21, 23, 36, 49, 83,

²²² Ibid., 9, 14, 15, 16, 17, 22, 44, 45, 47, 64, 76, 85, 92, 93, 96

²²³ Ibid., 21, 24, 38, 47, 48, 104, 105

²²⁴ Jacob Golomb, "Camus's ideal of authentic life." *Philosophy Today* 38.3 (Fall 1994), 268-271.

²²⁵ Sartre, "An Explication of *The Stranger*," 7.

²²⁶ Golomb, "Camus's ideal of authentic life," 273.

²²⁷ Adrian van den Hoven, "Sartre's Conception of Historicity and Temporality: The Quest for a Motive in Camus' *The Stranger* and Sartre's *Dirty Hands*," *Sartre Studies International* 11.1/2 (June 2005), 208.

toward the final outcome.”²²⁸ Essentially, these gaps in information present more questions than answers, and as Sagi notes, the “enigmatic novel views existence as a riddle, and conveys this in its literary design.”²²⁹ Meursault’s hollow narrative voice positions the meaning of his actions and thoughts as obscure and indeterminate to both himself and the audience.

The structure of the novel and Camus’s literary design also portray the futile and cyclical nature of human life. Hoven argues that a subtle manipulation of time and reoccurring events portray the meaningless repetition of human actions: “the second part [of the novel] functions as a repetition of the first... The second half could be called an absurd and even mystifying retake of the first, and consequently it is not really possible to reconcile the two halves.”²³⁰ Hilmi Uçan also recognizes the effect of this unconventional narrative structure: “there is not a vivid pattern of events which is a characteristic of classical narratives” but instead “daily events without any exaggeration as if there is nothing that happens.”²³¹ The entire first half of the novel, before the murder on the beach, describes Meursault’s mundane tasks; the second half is a commentary on the inherent meaninglessness of those tasks through Meursault’s thoughts during his trial and time in jail. The two halves are the story of a man who finds no value or meaning in his choices or daily activities; he sees no connection between his actions and their consequences.

²²⁸ Ibid., 208.

²²⁹ Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, 81.

²³⁰ Hoven, 212.

²³¹ Hilmi Uçan, “Absurd philosophy in the novel *Aylak Adam* by Yusuf Atılgan and in the novel *The Stranger* by Albert Camus: alienation, doubt, loneliness, giving the subject the prime place and search for identity,” *International Journal of Turcologia* 2.4 (Autumn 2007), 61.

The cyclical nature of human existence also appears in the routine of Meursault's days. His average day consists of waking up, going to work—"the most difficult time of day"²³²—coming home, and smoking cigarettes. In the first several chapters he exists in a continual sequence of repeated tasks: he eats,²³³ drinks,²³⁴ goes on walks,²³⁵ sleeps,²³⁶ swims,²³⁷ and smokes cigarettes.²³⁸ He notices that his fellow neighbors share a similar, monotonous life. For example, he notes the routine of his neighbor Salamano:

Twice a day, at eleven and six, the old man takes the dog out for a walk. They haven't changed their route in eight years. You can see them in the rue de Lyon, the dog pulling the man along until old Salamano stumbles. Then he beats the dog and swears at it. The dog cowers and trails behind. Then it's the old man who pulls the dog. Once the dog has forgotten, it starts dragging its master along again, and again gets beaten and sworn at. Then they both stand there on the sidewalk and start at each other, the dog in terror, the man in hatred. It's the same thing every day.²³⁹

The morning after Meursault first sleeps with Marie, he lists a series of activities that show no sign of self-reflection or purpose.

I don't like Sundays. So I rolled over, tried to find the salty smell Marie's hair had left on the pillow, and slept until ten. Then I smoked a few cigarettes, still in bed, til noon...After lunch I was a little bored and I wandered around the apartment...A little later, just for something to do, I picked up an old newspaper and read it...I also washed my hands, and then went out onto the balcony.²⁴⁰

Meursault moves from one activity to another, each one further detached from the former.

There is no motive driving these actions, and nothing of profound significance is

²³² Sagi, 12.

²³³ Camus, *The Stranger*, 3, 21, 24, 26, 29, 37, 52.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8, 9, 11, 12, 32, 52.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 12, 14, 26, 42, 49, 52, 53, 55, 57, 78,

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 11, 18, 21, 26, 37.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 19, 20, 34, 50.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8, 21, 22, 24, 26, 32, 33, 52, 54,.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

accomplished. Numerous times he simply describes the passing of time as he walks around his apartment or sits on his balcony staring at the sky, listening to cars driving by, or watching people walk along the street.

I turned my chair around and set it down like the tobacconist's because I found that it was more comfortable that way. I smoked a couple of cigarettes, went inside to get a piece of chocolate, and went back to the window to eat it. Soon after that, the sky grew dark and I thought we were in for a summer storm. Gradually, though, it cleared up again, But the passing clouds had left a hint of rain hanging over the street, which made it look darker, I sat there for a long time and watched the sky. At five o'clock some streetcars pulled up, clanging away. They were bring back gangs of fans from the local soccer stadium.²⁴¹

Meursault later indicates that these actions and events—even the event of dying—have no real effect on his life. The day after his mother's funeral he says, "It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed."²⁴² His life continues its meaningless pattern. His mother's death was of no substantial consequence. Camus briefly alludes to this repetition in *Myth* with a description of a typical work day: "Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm."²⁴³ Life becomes the sum of repeated tasks and compiling weeks, and the significance of work renders void in the repetition. At the end of the novel, Meursault begins to view the ongoing interrogations of his trial as ordinary events of another ordinary day, and he admits to the "utter pointlessness" of the very trial that will determine his fate.²⁴⁴

A sense of futility also appears in Meursault's belief that all choices are equivalent.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 22-23.

²⁴² Ibid., 24.

²⁴³ Ibid., 10.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 105.

This equivalence reduces choices to a meaningless pattern of events, a “vicious cycle of working to live so that we can live to work so that we can work another day to live another day, and so on.”²⁴⁵ When asked if he would rather live in Paris or Algeria, Meursault replies, “it was all the same to me;”²⁴⁶ wondering if he should go back to the beach he says to himself, “To stay or to go, it amounted to the same thing;”²⁴⁷ as he walks on the beach he notices “the same dazzling red glare,”²⁴⁸ “the same light still shining on the same sand as before.”²⁴⁹ When he and Raymond return to the beach he admits that “our coming changed nothing.”²⁵⁰ When he is at the old people’s home, he thinks to himself: “Then I felt like having a smoke. But I hesitated, because I didn’t know if I could do with Maman right there. I thought about it; it didn’t matter. I offered the caretaker cigarette and we smoked.”²⁵¹ Smoking while keeping vigil over his mother’s corpse may be insulting or uncustomary, but actions are all the same, and they do not matter. They do not alter reality or amount to any true significance. Unlike a traditional story, this protagonist experiences little to no conflict; viewing each moment no different than the one before, each choice is futile, he has no quest or goal for which he strives; he simply exists. Meursault’s indifference to his mother’s death—just another event—defines the absurd man whose “absurd consciousness is an attitude...neither rational nor irrational, and features no ordering principle; in its world ‘chaos,’ ‘chance,’ and ‘equivalence’ dominate. This world does not permit belief ‘in the

²⁴⁵ Guthrie, 6.

²⁴⁶ Camus, *The Stranger*, 41.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

profound meaning of things.”²⁵² In the first half of the novel, Meursault lives an existence in which “days are added to days without rhyme or reason ... [and his life] is...interminable and monotonous.”²⁵³

One of the most important passages of novel appears near the end. While sitting in his jail cell just days before his execution, Meursault says:

I had lived my life one way and I could have just as well have lived it another. I had done this, and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done this thing but I had done another. And so? Nothing, nothing mattered...Throughout the whole absurd life I'd lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living. What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me when we're all elected by the same fate, me and billions of privileged people like him.²⁵⁴

Here, Meursault gives us a summation of his belief system: the inconsequential choices and activities of his life translate to him that human reality is absurd; its events have “no inherent meaning.”²⁵⁵ No matter what he did or how he lived his life, all is the same and “elected by the same fate.” “Nothing, nothing mattered,” he concludes, and the futility of his life is born of the fact that the very choices that make up his life are of no avail or consequence. Whether or not he marries Marie, goes to the beach, mourns his mother's death, takes a job in Paris, or kills a man makes no difference. All actions are “leveled.” He even admits that all forms of life—animal or human—are equal when he states that “Salamano's dog was worth just as

²⁵² Gerard Hoffman, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: concepts and strategies of postmodern American Fiction* (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 208.

²⁵³ Hoven, 209.

²⁵⁴ Camus, *The Stranger*, 121.

²⁵⁵ Steve Cowan and James S. Spiegel. *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian Introduction to Philosophy*. Nashville: B&H, 2009), 334.

much as his wife.”²⁵⁶ McCarthy explains that this kind of “leveling” of all human choices, actions, and events “triggers an onrush of futility.”²⁵⁷

This “onrush of futility” permeates every aspect of human functions, including the acts of thinking, reflecting, and acquiring knowledge. Meursault mentally fails to translate objects and abstractions into fixed facts and meanings, and the attempt to rise above ignorance seems futile. He admits thirty-one times to uncertainty or a sense of unawareness through phrases such as “I don’t know” or “I didn’t know.”²⁵⁸ He doubts the existence of God²⁵⁹; he doubts the ability to be assured of anything.²⁶⁰ His friend Celeste suggests that values are mere speculation, and that there is no real authority of any matter: “It’s pitiful” he says of the way his neighbor treats his dog, and rhetorically asks, “but really, who’s to say?”²⁶¹ When Raymond asks if Meursault thinks his girlfriend had been cheating on him, Meursault admits that “you can’t ever be sure.”²⁶² This uncertainty further heightens the feeling that “nothing matters.” When Raymond later tells Meursault that he will “have to act as a witness for him,” Meursault replies, “It didn’t matter to me, but I didn’t know what I was supposed to say.”²⁶³ During one of his dates with Marie, Meursault explains that Marie “wondered if she loved [him], and there was no way [he] could know about that.”²⁶⁴

Also within the arena of human action and the broken cause-effect progression is human communication. The sense that the causal link between a signifier and the signified

²⁵⁶ Camus, *The Stranger*, 121.

²⁵⁷ McCarthy, 75.

²⁵⁸ Camus, *The Stranger*, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 25, 32, 33, 34, 37, 39, 41, 45, 52, 66, 68, 74, 75, 80, 85, 89, 95, 99, 100, 111, 118, and 120.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

has collapsed heightens Meursault's feeling of futility. Although Camus precedes the poststructuralists and postmodernists that emerged during the second half of the twentieth century, *The Stranger* seems to anticipate the deconstructionist's notion of the inadequacy of human language and the fragmentation of communication.²⁶⁵ Camus's view of the gap in human knowledge closely ties in with Derrida's deconstruction of texts and meanings. Camus's epistemology, similar to the poststructuralist's unraveling of the determinacy of meaning, presents only "experience of presence" rather than "experience of meaning." Thus, man is given a world wiped clean of values, and he is left to fill the gaps. Hence Camus's statement in *Myth*: "This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. *There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is*

²⁶⁵ Numerous scholars have traced Camusian influence on and connection to the postmodernists and their emphasis on the inadequacy of language. Robert C. Trundle notes that although the golden age of postmodernity did not begin until the 1970s, ten years after Camus's death, Camus's philosophy of the absurd is "central to postmodernism" (79). Gerhard Hoffman points out that "[p]ostmodern writers were born and grew up in the climate of existentialism," particularly Camus's emphasis on "human resistance against a meaningless universe" (202). Martin Esslin explains that the Theatre of the Absurd, which often highlights the inadequacies of language, is the "expression of the *philosophy* of Sartre and Camus" (24). Rasin similarly argues that Camus reconstructs the traditional hero to create what would become the "absurdist hero" of the Theatre of the Absurd (53). Uçan argues that Camus's questioning of traditional values of the judicial system is a direct threat to the foundations of modern man, and "later this questioning would be pursued by Ionesco and Beckett in theatrical works" (62). According to Alan Pratt, Camus's pseudo-nihilistic disposition has a strong presence in postmodern thought; many times the "nihilist is used to characterize the postmodern man" ("Nihilism"). Joe Kincheloe argues that Camus's absurdism is a particularly postmodern "fictive element" of the narrative structure he calls "nihilistic postmodernism" in which the "possibility of meaning is brought into question" (66). Kincheloe also notes that "the one existentialist concept that became most important for postmodern fiction is the idea of the absurd" (207). Ignacy S. Fiut argues that the postmodern writer "actualizes the concept of man proposed by Camus in the mid-twentieth century to an even greater extent" (341). Fiut further contends that Meursault embodies the core characteristics of the postmodern individual. Through Meursault, Camus "anticipated his future model of man and the corresponding philosophy. Nowadays, this philosophy is described, in most general terms, as a postmodern way of thinking" (341).

construction.”²⁶⁶ Quentin Kraft effectively argues that in this confession, “Camus comes very close to Derrida because he is saying that signs, or rather writing—what he calls construction—informs and takes priority over all but the most rudimentary experience of presence.”²⁶⁷ In Meursault’s case, the meaning of “presence”—people, objects, sounds, movements—if such a meaning exists, is incommunicable as the meanings in language are lost in an unstable system of signs. Sam Morris relates “[s]tructuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstructionism” to Camus’s suspicion that “it is possible to make any absolutely true statement,” thus rendering human speech and words themselves nearly useless.²⁶⁸ Thus, as a result of the futility of human language arises the futility of human existence.

The famous opening lines of the novel point to the inability of language to communicate a determinate meaning: “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.”²⁶⁹ This passage immediately discloses Meursault’s skeptical view of human language as an adequate system of communication, a skepticism which permeates throughout the rest of the novel as he questions the significance of love, death, and existence. message and authority of the telegram, doubting its ability to articulate a determinate meaning. As McCarthy notes, the ambiguity of the telegram reinforces this sense of futility in human communication, that “language is unsatisfactory.”²⁷⁰ Arthur Scherr explains that the “the vagueness of the

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 19, emphasis added.

²⁶⁷ Quentin Kraft, “Toward a Critical Renewal: Camus and Bloom Street,” *Beyond Poststructuralism*, ed. Wendell V. Harris (University Park: UP of Pennsylvania, 1996), 241.

²⁶⁸ Sam Morris, “Angst and Affirmation in Modern Culture,” *Philosophy Now* (Sept/Oct 2009), 16.

²⁶⁹ Camus, *The Stranger*, 3.

²⁷⁰ McCarthy, 14.

telegram (whose wording itself is callous)” suggests that language itself is vague.²⁷¹ Here, Meursault is a figure of Gene Edward Veith’s conception of the “postmodern man” who points out the “inadequacies of language.”²⁷² To Meursault, a determinate message is disoriented by an arbitrary system of signs and signifiers, rendering language essentially futile; the ambiguity in the text negates its very purpose—to communicate a fixed and knowable meaning.

This deconstruction of language simultaneously deconstructs the reality language shapes.²⁷³ This binary breakdown distorts Meursault’s perception of an existence with meaningful experiences and relationships; human emotions become elusive when the signifiers that carry the substance of their meaning unravel. For example, Meursault questions the meaning and value of love and marriage. Recounting a conversation with Marie, he states that “she asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn’t mean anything but that I didn’t think so.”²⁷⁴ Later he adds, “it [marriage] didn’t make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to. Then she wanted to know if I loved her. I answered the same way I had the last time, that it didn’t mean anything but that I probably didn’t love her.”²⁷⁵ When asked if he loved his mother, he states, “I probably did love Maman, but that didn’t mean anything.”²⁷⁶ “Love” is an empty concept to Meursault, and this emptiness of meaning is born of the loss of substance between the signifier and the signified—between the word

²⁷¹ Arthur Scherr, “Camus’s *The Stranger*,” *The Explicator* 59.3 (2001), 150.

²⁷² Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 199.

²⁷³ Veith explains that human language “shapes” or “constructs” reality, and because language is a “cultural creation,” the meaning of abstract concepts such as love or fear or justice are essentially “social constructs.” They carry no fixed meanings but are determined by individuals and societies (51).

²⁷⁴ Camus, *The Stranger*, 35.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

“love” and its consequential weight in real life. Confessing or not confessing his quasi-love amounted to the same thing because words are a demotic nothingness. Meursault’s apathetic, passive outlook is born of his distrust in language. This distrust carries over into his actions, specifically his refusal to use language.

To Meursault, words—and the actions they signify— do not “mean anything,”²⁷⁷ and this conviction keeps him silent. Numerous times he either refuses to speak or admits that he does not have “anything to say.”²⁷⁸ Other times, when someone asks him a question, he simply does not answer (or he quickly agrees in order to avoid further explanation).²⁷⁹ Most times, however, he rarely speaks his mind at all but simply listens and observes. For example, he remains silent instead of telling Marie that his mother’s confinement in the people’s home, as well as her death, “wasn’t [his] fault” because words “didn’t mean anything.”²⁸⁰ His explanation is pointless. At his trial the investigating magistrate asks him three times to explain why he fired upon the Arab’s prostrate body, and each time Meursault answers only with silence. Rossi points out that even the “repetitive nature of the passage” further heightens the senseless and monotonous pattern of life.²⁸¹ Referring to the way his neighbor speaks, Meursault says, “He spoke slowly, and I noticed that he had a habit of finishing everything he said with ‘and I’d even say,’ when really it didn’t add anything to the meaning of his sentence.”²⁸² Here, Meursault suggests that speakers and their words have no real authority, and *how* someone speaks doesn’t make meaning any more determinate or actual. In this refusal to speak, Meursault “embraces silence, rejecting both meaning and the

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 3, 20, 35, 41, 65.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 4, 10, 20, 29, 32, 35, 42, 44, 53, 56, 68, 98, 108, 116.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 10, 23, 32, 35, 36, 45, 53, 66, 68, 83, and 116.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 20.

²⁸¹ Rossi, 409.

²⁸² Camus, *The Stranger*, 50.

Word.”²⁸³ Meursault’s vague point-of-view correlates to this sense of futility of human communication, an inability and useless struggle to discover and articulate any determinate meaning of the external world; thus, Meursault becomes a “neutral” narrator, incapable of making declarative statements concerning the meaning of the external world: “The neutral style of the novel...serves as a perfect vehicle for the descriptions and commentary of its anti-hero narrator, the ultimate ‘outsider’ and a person who seems to observe everything, including his own life, with almost pathological detachment.”²⁸⁴

The futility of human communication also appears in the second part of the novel, during the trial and Meursault’s time in prison. While speaking to the examining magistrate, Meursault recounts the events of the day that he killed the Arab: “Raymond, the beach, the swim, the quarrel, then back to the beach, the little spring, the sun, and the five shots from the revolver. After each sentence he [the magistrate] would say, ‘Fine, fine.’ When I got to the body lying there, he nodded and said, ‘Good.’ But I was tired of repeating the same story over and over.”²⁸⁵ Here, Meursault realizes the emptiness of the explanation proved in his “repeating;” the summations of that fateful day are merely words. He cannot construct a “coherent story from them,”²⁸⁶ and out of these futile efforts the meaning of his actions become “incoherent.”²⁸⁷ Just as the telegram’s message “doesn’t mean anything,” language creates a reality that “doesn’t mean anything.” As a result, the inadequacy of language leaves Meursault ignorant and skeptical of the meaning or purpose behind his actions. His lack of purpose is directly connected to his sense of futility. If his actions, choices, and words do not

²⁸³ Veith, 44.

²⁸⁴ Simpson, n. pag.

²⁸⁵ Camus, *The Stranger*, 57.

²⁸⁶ Anderson, n. pag.

²⁸⁷ Uçan, 59.

matter and serve no purpose, his efforts are utterly futile. As Brombert notes, to Meursault “[n]othing has meaning, there being no aim.”²⁸⁸ Both Meursault and the world are indifferent to his existence, to the events and activities of his life. But the absence of God is not the cause of this sense of futility; this encounter with the absurd is more than a man confronting a godless universe. This futility is a human problem man must confront universally.

The sense that human actions are repetitive and futile in Meursault’s “absurd life” parallel Qohelet’s attitude toward his “*hebel* life”²⁸⁹ “under the sun.” Qohelet opens his book in verse form with a description of the cyclical progression of natural phenomena:

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
 What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?
 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
 but the earth remains forever.
 The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.
 The wind blows to the south
 and goes around to the north;
 around and around goes the wind,
 and on its circuits the wind returns.
 All streams run to the sea,
 but the sea is not full;
 to the place where the streams flow,
 there they flow again.
 All things are full of weariness;
 a man cannot utter it;
 the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
 nor the ear filled with hearing.
 What has been is what will be,
 and what has been done is what will be done,
 and there is nothing new under the sun.
 Is there a thing of which it is said,
 “See, this is new”?
 It has been already
 in the ages before us.
 There is no remembrance of former things,
 nor will there be any remembrance
 of later things yet to be among those who come after...

²⁸⁸ Brombert, 120.

²⁸⁹ 7.15.

I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.²⁹⁰

Qohelet views nature itself as a monotonous cycle that achieves no aim. The world moves in constant rotation—the rhythmic rising and setting sun, the continual shifting of seasons, the evaporation cycle, the flow of water returning to rivers and seas, and the circulating currents of the wind. The hands of the ecological clock go round and round, and the predictable pattern of days brings nothing but “weariness.”

Qohelet sees in nature’s cycle a reflection of the futility of human life. In “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” Fox explains that these natural phenomena also illustrate “in large the futility of human efforts,”²⁹¹ and in the wake of nature’s endless cycle, human reality appears as a sequence of reoccurring events in which people live and die yet produce no real progress. “A generation goes, and a generation comes” but there is “nothing new under the sun.” Qohelet observes that men work all of their lives but achieve nothing of profound significance. This discovery finally compels him to question his own hopes and goals: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” In Chapter 2, he surveys his years of work and wealth, and realizes that life is “empty,” not in a sense that life is lacking wealth or accomplishments, but in a sense of futility, like the sea that is “not full” albeit waters constantly flow into it.

I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees... So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem... Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ 1.2-12.

²⁹¹ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” 423.

²⁹² 2.4-11.

A sense of futility arises when the efforts and actions that make up life acquire no gain, change, or satisfaction. The inventory of his life renders no return. His only “reward” is temporary pleasure which, he concludes, essentially “does nothing.”²⁹³ Even the joys and pleasures of life—like Meursault’s sensual relations with Marie—provide no real, lasting satisfaction or purpose.

Fox points out that Meursault’s conclusion that all human actions are futile is “highly congruent” with Qohelet’s summation of life that “all is *hebel*.”²⁹⁴ Similar to Meursault’s absurd experience in which everything is “all the same” and “nothing mattered,” Qohelet’s *hebel* describes his disappointment with “a stale taste of repeated and meaningless events.”²⁹⁵ Haden, too, notes that *hebel* captures the “changeless monotony which characterizes the affairs of men and the course of nature.”²⁹⁶ Qohelet and Camus discover a relational breakdown, a lack of harmony between the actions of the self and the indifference of the world. Life seems cruel because human choices and projects do not produce their intended outcomes. As Fox points out, “*Hebel* for Qohelet, like ‘absurd’ for Camus, is not merely incongruous or ironic; it is oppressive, even tragic. The divorce between act and result is the reality upon which human reason founders; it robs human actions of significance and undermines morality.”²⁹⁷ Like Meursault, Qohelet finds his life “inherently absurd” because “no one, present or future, receives benefit from the toil.”²⁹⁸ Similar to Meursault’s awareness that individual choices, words, and actions do not “mean anything” is Qohelet’s

²⁹³ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” 416.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 409.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 409.

²⁹⁶ Haden, 57.

²⁹⁷ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” 410.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 418.

realization that he lives under a sovereign yet seemingly distant God and his efforts reduce to mere happenings. The labors of life become nothing but a “vapor”—nothing of real, lasting importance. Crenshaw offers an insightful summary of Qohelet’s conclusions regarding man’s alienation from God: “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.”²⁹⁹

Meursault’s assertion of an absent God and an indifferent universe echo Qohelet’s despairing views of a life which brings no satisfaction. Though he exists in a world created by an all-powerful God, he realizes that at the human level, he is powerless.

Moreover, Qohelet also realizes that the absurd equalizes all human actions. The absurd levels the efforts of both the righteous and unrighteous. He makes this clear in 9.1-3:

But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all.

Fox gives us an extensive but enlightening passage on the leveling of human efforts, connecting this powerlessness and futility of labor to the absurdity of life:

An action may be called absurd in condemnation either of its performance or of its outcome. When the intention is to condemn the performance, the performer is implicitly condemned. . . . When, however, we believe that an action is in principle morally good, or at least neutral, and yet find that it does not yield what we consider proper results, then it is not essentially the action that is absurd but rather the fact that there is a disparity between rational

²⁹⁹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 23.

expectations and the actual consequences. This is the way in which Qohelet calls laboring for wealth and growing wise absurd. The fact that labor and wisdom are absurd renders the human condition absurd whether one chooses a life of laziness and folly or of industry and wisdom.³⁰⁰

As Fox explains, Qohelet, like Meursault, may choose a life defined by the pursuit of wisdom or folly, laziness or industry, and each path is the same. Meursault may kill a man or love a woman, each action the same as the other, leveled by the absurd.

Like Meursault, Qohelet recognizes the inadequacy of human language, particularly that words often cause confusion and uncertainty. Speaking seems useless if transcendent meanings or revelations are ineffectively communicated through human language. This distrust in human communication is evident in several passages. In 6.11-12 he writes, “The more words the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?” In 8.1 he rhetorically asks, “And who knows the interpretation of a word?” In 7:6 and 10.14 he associates laughter and unnecessary words to foolishness, and thereby makes a “*hebel*-judgment... upon an action that can be avoided, namely, excessive talk:”³⁰¹ He later proclaims, “For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity;”³⁰² “A fool multiples words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him?”³⁰³

Both Meursault and Qohelet clearly experience a strong sense of futility at the human level. Life seems meaningless when their efforts bring no return and their choices bring no change. But what positive implications, if any at all, come out of a sense that human actions

³⁰⁰ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” 425.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² 7.6.

³⁰³ 10.14.

are futile and meaningless? How does Meursault's response to futility parallel Qohelet's? What do these parallels tell us about the necessary tensions which move the religious individual toward the stages of true self-realization and authentic existence? In the first source of the absurd (the first stage of confrontation), the individual revolts, embraces the absurd, and uses the limits of his reason as a catalyst toward human action. In the second stage, an honest awareness of the futility of human action leads to radical freedom, a freedom to break out of a state of tranquillization.

Before discussing the steps toward radical freedom, it is necessary to first explore a similar yet subtle judgment that Meursault and Qohelet place on human existence. As mentioned previously, the most obvious distinction between Camus and Qohelet is their theological views. Out of this fundamental difference, however, emerges a profound parallel. Despite their differing views on God's existence, Camus and Qohelet share a deep understanding of human depravity, specifically the theological concept of sin. These parallels appear in their use of language, in their description of human reality as a broken or fallen system.

We have established that Camus's "absurd" is a sense of disharmony, a collapse within the subject-object/cause-effect relationship. Qohelet's *hebel*, too, connotes a collapse: the corruption of the human world. In religious language, this corruption is often described as *fallenness*. As McCabe explains, when Qohelet describes his life "under the sun," he is speaking of a "fallen world"³⁰⁴ in which finite creatures live under the oppressive curse of sin. In modern language we might say that as Adam and Eve exited Eden, they concurrently entered the absurd experience—a world in which death is the result of the daily grind—an

³⁰⁴ McCabe, 100.

ephemeral life of labor that only returns man to the dust from which he came. This reality is the curse of the Fall:

And to Adam he [God] said...
 “cursed is the ground because of you;
 in pain you shall eat of it all the days
 of your life;
 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth
 for you; and you shall eat the plants of the
 field.
 By the sweat of your face
 you shall eat bread,
 till you return to the ground,
 for out of it you were taken;
 for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”³⁰⁵

This curse—a life of grueling work against the thorny ground—is the immediate consequence of sin, and *fallenness*³⁰⁶ replaces *goodness* as the new condition of human reality. The punishment condemns man to survive by the sweat of his brow until he lies buried in his grave. Several times in his book, Qohelet alludes to this curse. In order to reinforce his *hebel* motto, he repeatedly employs the Hebrew *amal*, literally signifying “labor” or “toil” but subtextually “misery,” “trouble,” and “travail,” in order to describe the dreaded curse of fallen humanity.³⁰⁷ For example, in 4.4 he links toil to the sin of pride and envy—traditionally viewed as “original sin” and the primary motive behind Eve’s disobedience³⁰⁸: “Then I saw that all toil [*amal*] and all skill in work *come from a man’s envy* of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.” The repetition of *amal* “characterizes existence in the same way the Yahwist [postulated author or authors of parts

³⁰⁵ Genesis 3.17-19.

³⁰⁶ The terms “fall” and “fallenness” are not biblical terms. Like “Trinity,” they are theological short-hand for a truth found in a biblical *Weltanschauung*.

³⁰⁷ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 67.

³⁰⁸ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The fall to violence: original sin in relational theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 27.

of the first six books of the Bible] did in the story of the Fall.”³⁰⁹ When Qohelet recounts his *amal* and concludes that “all is *hebel*,” he makes a direct judgment against the inherited curse of humanity. Though he tempers this judgment with his contextual qualifier “under the sun,” as well as acknowledges that some values do exist in the world, his point is that all human events occur within a world which is corrupted from its original state and now absorbed in the aftermath of the Fall. Though some experiences provide temporal pleasure and meaning, these values are trumped by the certainty that they occur in an ultimately broken system. As Fox explains, “within the totality of events under the sun many things are not absurd—some important values stand; some fundamental rules are valid—but the absurdities spoil everything.”³¹⁰ Fox contends that the reoccurring phrase “all is *hebel*” (which appears thirty times in the book) can be “understood as speaking of the events of human life...describing actions (toiling, speaking, getting wisdom) and experiences (pleasure), for these prove absurd in the context of absurd events.”³¹¹ If we take “all is *hebel*” as the all-inclusive judgment of human reality, then all the events that occur within that reality are reduced to nothing but *hebel*.

Camus does not accept the theological notions of “original sin” or a “fallen world.” Instead, he simply calls his world “absurd.” But the lexical variations of these descriptions are misleading. The distinction between Camus and Qohelet’s views of the world is merely semantic, not substantive. And Camus recognizes this. His conception of human reality may be described best in religious language. “For sin,” he says, “is what alienates from God. The absurd, which is the metaphysical state of the conscious man, does not lead to God [...] the

³⁰⁹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 60.

³¹⁰ Fox, “The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet,” 424.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 424.

absurd is sin without God.”³¹² While this statement certainly reinforces the central distinction between Camus and Qohelet—their views on the existence of God—it simultaneously underlines a shared conception of human depravity. Both acknowledge a “problem” in human reality. This problem is sin/absurdity, the very cause of alienation, and thus the difference in their conclusions is purely lexical. As Hardy notes, Camus’s “absurd” is “sin without God” or “estrangement from God.”³¹³ Rossi also links Camus’s absurd to the biblical concept of sin when he defines “absurd” as “an attitude toward the eternal problem of evil in the world”³¹⁴ He later adds,

the sense of absurdity is the atheistic equivalent of the Christian concept of sin, and more exactly, of original sin. It is a consciousness of a fall, an ‘incalculable fall before the image of what we are’ (Sisyphus), a sense of deficiency arising from the void which separates the irrationality of the world and our desperate longing for clarity and unity.³¹⁵

The sense of futility that Meursault and Qohelet encounter in their daily routine of work, excessive babble, and life projects is, whether they realize it or not, an encounter with the curse of sin, an inherited alienation from God.

This *fallenness*, therefore, which seems to correspond to Camus’s sense of absurdity and Qohelet’s *hebel*, is a spiritual condition, a result of human rebellion against a holy God. That is, the absurd and *hebel* judgments are descriptions of sin. As Hardy explains, “If we accept the common interpretation of sin and we equate it with that which separates us from God, then the absurd is nothing but a consequence of sin.”³¹⁶ Thus, we might associate Camus’s “absurdity” with theological *fallenness*, for Qohelet’s “fallen world” is alienated

³¹² Camus, *Myth*, 28.

³¹³ Hardy, 373.

³¹⁴ Rossi, 400.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 402.

³¹⁶ Hardy, 373.

from God just as Camus's "absurd" is "sin without God." E. Stanley Jones relates the "sense of futility" to both an "outer collapse" and "inner breakdown," that is, a state of spiritual wryness caused by the feeling that the individual parts of life do not make a whole, the sense of human projects "not getting anywhere" or "working out any Great Design."³¹⁷ When man cannot connect this link between an action and its meaning, he has witnessed what Brombert calls "the divorce between the physical and the spiritual nature of man."³¹⁸

"Absurd" and "*hebel*" each signify an alienated race trapped in a disappointing world. Camus's longing for reason and reconciliation confirms Jones's notion that the Hebraic conception of *fallenness*—a human world in need of recovery—describes the universal desire to overcome alienation and get back to God in the Garden. He notes that the atheist or theist must realize that the human "longing to solve" is built into the very "nature of reality."³¹⁹ Jones affirms that the sense of futility applies universally—an existential category that has application for all people at all times—and it is "written into the structure of all being."³²⁰ Both Meursault and Qohelet's awareness of futility and need for recovery relay into "the way we do everything—the way to think, to feel, to act, to be in every conceivable circumstance and in every relationship."³²¹ Meursault and Qohelet are honest with themselves and admit to this sense of futility. They refuse to pretend. To deny that the world is fallen/absurd is to live "against" the very "nature of reality."

When we understand Camus's "absurd" as analogous to Qohelet's *hebel*, both describing *fallen* human reality, then Meursault's world is simply Qohelet's world "without

³¹⁷ E. Stanley Jones, *The Way* (New York: Abington Press, 1946), 4.

³¹⁸ Brombert, 120.

³¹⁹ Jones, 1.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

God.” Nothing more changes. Qohelet lives in a “fallen world” in which “unresolved tensions are a part of the baffling puzzle of life;”³²² similarly, Camus lives in a “fragmented universe” in which his “nostalgia for unity” is disrupted by a “divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints.”³²³ Out of this semantic variation arises a unifying theme: a honest skepticism of the world they inhabit. But it is in this honest skepticism that we can begin to see the positive implications of the confrontation with the absurd, for it is skepticism that births self-awakening and constructs a refusal to conform to illusions too readily accepted by the public. The sense of futility and *fallenness* begins to clear a path toward individual and radical freedom.

This path from futility to radical freedom forms when the individual begins to see the consequences of *fallenness*. We may better distinguish the beginnings of this stage by exploring a notable affinity between Hebraic *fallenness*, Camus’s “absurd,” and Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Verfallenheit* (fallenness). One Camus biographer notes that Heidegger’s *Verfallen*, which is the antithesis of authentic Being and encompasses *Dasein*’s (Human Being) immersion in the world of average everydayness, highly influenced Camus’s underlying “sentiment of absurdity.”³²⁴ Although *Verfallen* is a purely ontological concept, it is similar to the biblical account of fallen humanity. In *An Existential Theology*, John Macquarrie effectively argues that there is a “connection” between this existential *Verfallen* and the “ethico-religious” concept of *fallenness*. That is, these (ontological and religious) descriptions of the human condition are essentially and inseparably intertwined. The Hebrew account of fallen humanity “claims to be an actual description of man’s condition” and

³²² McCabe, 100.

³²³ Camus, *Myth*, 33.

³²⁴ Rossi, 401.

“already assumes [Heidegger’s] ontological concept of fallenness;” thus, *Verfallen* and biblical *fallenness* each refer to a loss of “authentic Being.”³²⁵ For Heidegger, inauthentic Being is the alienation that arises from a profound awareness that the human world is a “broken home.”³²⁶

Heidegger describes the nature of man’s fallenness as two-fold. The first is the initial fall into physical reality. Man discovers himself within a world of objects existing apart and independent from his own body, and the universe seems indifferent to his survival. In the biblical image, man leaves the security and comfort of the Garden where he lived in harmony with himself and God, but outside of paradise he is a homeless creature estranged from the Creator. He may now only understand himself through his “actions and movements,” and by engrossing himself in his work, he “no longer feel[s] separate, contingent or extraneous to reality” but “feel[s] part of the world.”³²⁷ This fall entraps man in a world of objects in which he must work the ground and survive “by the sweat of [his] face” in order to make this world his home, and in many ways this fixation with work is a desperate attempt to manipulate and govern a wild, unpredictable nature. The sense of control that man gains in his making of medicines, machines, and modern conveniences parallels Emil Brunner’s notion that self-sufficiency is an illusion; it is the futile attempt to *be* a god as a substitute for true salvation. Brunner, living at the same time as Heidegger, explains in his classic lecture series *Christianity and Civilization* that the condition of this fall, an “intense preoccupation with the world of things” is an “expression of [man’s] delusion that he can solve the problems of his existence by the mastery of things, or, expressed in biblical language, his reaction to the

³²⁵ John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 103.

³²⁶ Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, 8.

³²⁷ Morris, 15.

temptation, ‘Ye shall be as gods.’”³²⁸ This biblical allusion to man’s desire to “be as gods” leads us to the second aspect of fallenness.

The initial fall into the physical world puts Camus and Qohelet in confrontation with a sense of futility. The second aspect of *fallenness* is what Macquarrie calls “a fall into collectivism, in which the individual surrenders his will to the depersonalized mass, and follows the crowd.”³²⁹ This second fall is an extension of the first. After his eviction from Eden, man descends deeper into the demands and comforts of social conformity and desensitization. It seems that the same fall which cut the spiritual cords connecting man to God is the same fall that binds him to the human race; the individual loses his individuality and plummets into the sphere of the “public”³³⁰—he is stripped of his individual freedom and becomes a product of his culture, a lemming of the “they.” As a member of the masses he succumbs to the familiarity and disillusionment of everyday life, and he fashions this “everyday life as lived, for the most part, in bad faith, sunk in the ‘they’ and under the sway of the Other.”³³¹ Beginning with the concept of *Verfallen* and this descent into the herd, Camus in *The Stranger* formulates a life-affirming response to the tranquillizing familiarity and futility of the machine-obsessed modern world. He takes the Heideggerian concept of *Verfallen*, “a state of estrangement from authentic Being and absorption in the anonymity of day to day living” and realizes it in the monotony of “up in the morning, streetcar, four hours of work, etc.”³³² Thus, Meursault, via his mundane, day-to-day tasks and choices, is “in part

³²⁸ Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1949).

³²⁹ Macquarrie, 101.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

³³¹ Cooper, 127-128.

³³² Rossi, 401.

the incarnation of this idea.”³³³

But Meursault’s fall into the public sphere—his contact with various social institutions (workplace, funeral home, religion via the priest, court system) and individuals³³⁴ who live by mere appearances and expect him to accept their common values and beliefs—is not finally a fall into despair, but is the first major step toward radical freedom. Out of his sense of futility—the meaningless repetition of life—Meursault seems to experience what David E. Cooper calls “existential *Angst*,” an “experience of groundlessness and the absence of anything holding one in place and anchoring one’s actions.”³³⁵ This feeling of angst comes over him the strongest while he solitarily awaits his execution. Every day is the same in his prison cell, and he feels that his life is “coming to a standstill there.”³³⁶ Furthermore, he is utterly exposed, alone, and foundationless during his trial—he has no witnesses, no explanation for his actions, and no evidence to support him. He is, as Edward Joseph Hughes fittingly puts, a “universal, angst-ridden hero becoming the *victim* of the judicial system.”³³⁷ Unlike the jury, lawyer, priest, and judge, his groundlessness leaves him without a *telos* in the social context, and the only thing that he can be certain of is his individuality and temporary existence. He thinks to himself sitting in his cell, “But I was sure about me, ... sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting for me. Yes, that was all I had.”³³⁸ Importantly, this feeling of groundlessness is not something to avoid or resolve, because it does not defeat man but draws him toward the freedom to regain his authenticity and

³³³ Ibid., 401.

³³⁴ Marie, Raymond, Salamano, Céleste, the caretaker, the priest, the magistrate, and his boss—all of which characterize different forms of the “common man.”

³³⁵ Cooper, 130.

³³⁶ Camus, *The Stranger*, 72.

³³⁷ Edward Joseph Hughes, *Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature* (Cambridge: UP of Cambridge, 2001), 106.

³³⁸ Camus, *The Stranger*, 120.

individuality. It removes the illusions of a well-ordered world. As Cooper explains, existential *Angst* is a “sense of freedom. If *Angst* has special significance in modern times, this is not because life has become too ‘dishevelled’ or ‘wide and wild’, but because it has become too *comfortable*... This *Angst* is not something to be ‘treated’; on the contrary, we need to be called to it, and away from a state of tranquillization.”³³⁹ *Angst* serves as a sort of triggering device or alarm clock that awakens the individual and demystifies the delusions of everyday comforts. It produces in man a deep structure of freedom, a freedom to embrace the futility of everyday existence and find the courage and contentment to make the very most of the mundane. Recognizing the monotony of everyday living shakes us from our sleep, reintroduces us to the possibilities of seeing ourselves as individuals apart from the public. As Hardy explains, the confrontation with the futility of our existence is an “affirmation of freedom”³⁴⁰ that reminds man that he is not a part of the great world machine, but a free agent that may choose himself and his actions. The first stage of winning absurd freedom is a “return to awareness [conscience], the escape out of the sleep of every day.”³⁴¹

Unfortunately, and ironically, the necessary tensions of the absurd which lead to this radical freedom are often hidden precisely in what constitutes them—the comfort and complacency of our predictable schedules; the comforts of life disguise the absurd from our glazed-over eyes, and the futility of our efforts are “hidden beneath the cover of well-ordered movements, life-adjustments, daily routines. Here the parts all fit together and life runs apparently smoothly.”³⁴² The autonomous man’s authenticity and passion for living is crippled by a “quick-fix culture” of modern-day conveniences, microwave dinners, and

³³⁹ Cooper, 14.

³⁴⁰ Hardy, 374.

³⁴¹ Rossi, 399.

³⁴² Hardy, 370.

kitchen appliances, a superficial world in which we can “retreat into the latest soap opera and calm our minds with easily-absorbed fictional characters, as opposed to working through our varying selves with a mind to self-development.”³⁴³ Until an individual is sincerely conscious of the absurd, he cannot embrace reality and employ his individual freedom to live in it. To Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, this radical freedom is an “open confrontation,” an openness to absurdity that Heidegger also ascribes to *Dasein* [being]: “a freedom released from the illusions of the ‘they.’”³⁴⁴ While most of society joins the bandwagon and too easily believes in traditionally-held values, the lucid awareness of the subject-object breakdown removes the illusion and brings awakening to the individual willing to honestly confess its presence. The individual ignorant of his or her need of repair will not find recovery.

For Meursault, “everyday life is a ‘fall’—an ‘individualized’ existence in which a person recalls himself from bad faith and the ‘they.’”³⁴⁵ By confronting the absurd he is freed from pretending, performing, and conforming to the crippling comforts of social norms. He becomes his own individual again, responsible for *his* life. Importantly, as Hardy notes, this freedom is not merely a temporary “psychological state of man,” but an “absolute openness toward the universe and willingness of man to embrace even the Absurd.”³⁴⁶ This is Meursault at the end of the novel:

For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman. I felt as if I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a ‘fiancé,’ why she had played at beginning again. Even there, in that home where lives were fading out, evening was a kind of wistful respite. So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again... And I felt ready to live it all again too. As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle

³⁴³ Morris, 16.

³⁴⁴ Cooper, 162.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁴⁶ Hardy, 373.

indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so much like a brother really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again.³⁴⁷

Here, Meursault adopts Buber's "open confrontation" as he embraces the "gentle indifference of the world." He is content in a world without meaning. He has accepted the inescapable fact that his efforts are futile. Though he finds no meaning for his life, that his actions do not validate his existence, he finds a certain peace with this discovery. He accepts the meaninglessness and in it finds authentic freedom. He is not bound by meaning, he is not forced to "become" or "reach" some end purpose, but he is fully responsible and free to choose himself. He may still possess what the absurd cannot take from him: "mortal freedom."³⁴⁸ This radical freedom can only be achieved by accepting absurdity. When one accepts the absurd, he becomes free in that he is no longer constrained by tranquillization and self-delusion of the herd. Meursault's liberating indifference to the social pressures surrounding him aligns with Camus's literary vision of a Christ-figure. In his 1955 preface to the novel, Camus writes this profound statement about his absurd hero:

...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...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...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...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 happen to say, again paradoxically, that I had tried to draw in my character the only Christ we deserve."³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Camus, *The Stranger*, 122-123.

³⁴⁸ Barnes, 169.

³⁴⁹ Camus, "Preface to *The Stranger* (1955)," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Trody (New York: Vintage, 1970), 336.

Like Christ, Meursault refuses to perform for the masses, please the crowd, or conform to his society—the tranquilized herd who pretends its existence holds itself together. Instead, Meursault acknowledges the truth of his futility, and in his embrace he finds freedom.

The experiences born of the absurd indicate “the radically free, individualized character of human existence.”³⁵⁰ Meursault’s intense honesty breaks him free from those who live their lives believing half-truths and superficial explanations. He lets go of the illusion—that the projects of man, the world and its comforts, and self-imposed goals will satisfy the human heart. Meursault’s brutal candor and willingness to freely die for his convictions shames the theist who blindly lives with no convictions at all, and with no sense of his own finitude.

Camus’s above description of Meursault sounds curiously similar to Qohelet at the end of his life. He, too, is a man who stands naked and poor in his final days realizing the emptiness of human accomplishments crushed beneath a broken machine. His awareness of the finitude, futility, and *fallenness* of human existence creates the freedom to live an authentic and truly “examined” life. William P. Brown offers a lengthy but enlightening outlook on Qohelet’s life-affirming conclusion in light of the absurd. Brown points out that the futility of life paradoxically provides value to the human individual who can find freedom to enjoy everyday life in spite of its seeming triviality. Essentially, we become more authentically human when we can harvest the invaluable from the valueless.

The outcome of the examined life and world is a heightened awareness of life’s ‘vanity’ (*hebel*); its futility and fragility, its absurdity and obscurity are all rooted in the inscrutably sovereign will of God. But that is not all. Inseparably wedded to such awareness is a newly acquired freedom to savor those fleeting moments of enjoyment that allow one to catch flashes of grace amid the absurdity. Such glimpses had been, Qoheleth contends, overlooked by more imperious theological perspectives that attempt to penetrate the very

³⁵⁰ Cooper, 144.

mind of God. Qoheleth's search is all about finding God not in some discernible scheme of history or on some spiritual level suspended above the fray of human existence, but in the details of the daily grind of living. Qoheleth offers modern readers the dread and delight of the everyday, the glory of the ordinary.³⁵¹

Recognizing the futility of his toil, Qoheleth does not abandon his mortal existence, but embraces his mortal freedom to enjoy the simple pleasures of everyday life. From his sense of futility comes the freedom to make the most of the mundane. Confronting the absurdity of his actions, Qoheleth still finds contentment in living and joy in his labor despite its emptiness. Hence his numerous life-affirming assertions to enjoy the work of his hands though it renders no reward. He contrasts his more despairing verse of life's vanity with passages that affirm the joys of existence: "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God;"³⁵² "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man;"³⁵³ "So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot,"³⁵⁴ "Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot,"³⁵⁵ "Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God;"³⁵⁶ "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of

³⁵¹ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 14.

³⁵² 2.24.

³⁵³ 3.12-13.

³⁵⁴ 3.22.

³⁵⁵ 5.18.

³⁵⁶ 5.19.

your eyes.”³⁵⁷ His initial *hebel* judgments shake him from his sleep so that he may begin to see the beauty in the mundane, so he may embrace the seeming meaningless and keep living. As Crenshaw explains, Qohelet discovers the inescapable paradox of *fallen* humanity, both the “futility” and “domain of human freedom.”³⁵⁸ One passage in particular captures this paradox: “So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.”³⁵⁹

Meursault and Qohelet reconcile the futility they feel with their own passion for life. Their struggle to embrace the truth and to act captures the paradoxical predicament to which all individuals are called. Camus and Qohelet remind us that “we can become so bogged down by the actualities of just surviving day by day that we forget to enjoy the knowledge and feeling of being alive in the world.”³⁶⁰ We may break free from mindless, delusional lifestyles that hinder us from the substance and joyous experiences life does allow. This embrace of the absurd is a sort of rite of passage; the individual must come to terms with his condition before he may truly, authentically exist. Out of his awareness that human efforts are futile arises a new freedom and passion for life: “man frees himself only at that point at which he recognizes that the world has no importance... Closely allied with this view... is the statement that it is indifference which kindles love in the heart of the man who has once known the world’s absurdity.”³⁶¹

The individual is free from the restraints of the public, the predetermined ways of being in the world built by a deluded herd that lives and works day-in and day-out without

³⁵⁷ 11.9.

³⁵⁸ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 145.

³⁵⁹ 11.8.

³⁶⁰ Morris, 15.

³⁶¹ Barnes, 164.

reflection, accepting the superficiality of an inauthentic existence. Barnes points out that the “adherence to any fixed and extended purpose limits the freedom which is one of the gifts of confrontation with the absurd.”³⁶² We are given the freedom not to create truth and reality but to *believe* the truth of reality. In the acceptance of the absurd man may gain a sense of peace, and he may ultimately understand the true value of his individual freedom.

³⁶² Ibid., 174.

Chapter Three

Longing for the Impossible: Caligula, Qohelet, and the Certainty of Death

On January 3, 1960, Camus was enjoying a holiday in the country with his wife and daughter. He had planned to ride a train back to Paris from Provence the next day, but, at the last minute, decided to join his friend and publisher, Michel Gallimard, and travel by car. In the small French town of Villeblevin, Gallimard lost control of the Facel Vega, and both were killed. Camus was just forty-six years old.

It is highly ironic that Camus, a motorphobic, died in a car with a train ticket in his pocket; he had once remarked that the most absurd way to die would be in an automobile accident.³⁶³ He had predicted that tuberculosis would be his killer, but this unforeseen tragedy made the very popularizer of the absurd an affirmation of its invasive actuality. In his touching “Tribute to Albert Camus,” Sartre called the accident “a scandal” because such an unpredictable death “suddenly projects into the center of our human world the absurdity of our most fundamental needs.”³⁶⁴ Sartre’s observation is not incorrect here; that men, like Camus, spend their lives in search of a meaning which transcends mortality, yet are suddenly swept away by the merciless hand of death—a fundamental absurdity. Sartre later adds this poignant passage:

At the age of twenty, Camus, suddenly afflicted with a malady that upset his whole life, discovered the Absurd—the senseless negation of man. He became accustomed to it, he *thought out his* unbearable condition, he came through. And yet one is tempted to think that only his first works [the cycle of the absurd] tell the truth about his life, since that invalid once cured is annihilated by an unexpected death from the outside.³⁶⁵

³⁶³ Kenneth Shouler, *The Everything Guide to Understanding Philosophy* (Avon, MD: F&W, 2008), n. pag.

³⁶⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Tribute to Albert Camus,” 175.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Just before his death, Camus was asked to list his favorite words, a list that gives us an important insight into his *Weltanschauung*. His reply: “world, pain, earth, mother, people, desert, honor, misery, summer, and sea.”³⁶⁶ The triad of “world-earth-people” suggests a deep concern for humanity; “mother” and “honor” point to the relational and ethical spheres of human life—values assigned to the warmth of familial relationships and the dignity of human citizenship; “pain-desert-misery” followed by “summer” and “sea” indicate the paradoxical relationship between the joys and pains of his childhood near the Mediterranean shores. Ultimately, these ten words express his restless struggle to balance all opposites, the ultimate paradox being this: the passion for life juxtaposed to the certainty of death.

The notion of human mortality is central to both Camusian thought and the motifs of *Ecclesiastes*; Camus and Qohelet each describe the brevity of life and the finality of death as fundamental aspects of the human condition. Paul de Man contends that Camus’s whole vision of human nature hinges on man’s “subservience to the laws of time and mortality.”³⁶⁷ Lo believes that Qohelet is so intensely preoccupied with the finality of death that the “death theme binds the whole book together in a special way.”³⁶⁸ C. B. Peter divides Camus and Qohelet’s conceptions of the absurd or *hebel* into four categories or “aspects of existence,” three of which we have explored already in *Myth* and *Stranger*. In *Myth* we saw that “man cannot understand the universe rationally;” Sisyphus and Qohelet encounter this first stage of the absurd confrontation: a turn from the limits of reason to the certainty of action. In *The Stranger* we saw two “aspects of existence” which might be paired together into one: “the

³⁶⁶ J. Brisville, *Camus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 223.

³⁶⁷ Paul de man, “The Mask of Albert Camus,” *Albert Camus: Criticisms and Interpretation*, ed. Harold Bloom (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 2003), 92.

³⁶⁸ Lo, 88.

changeless monotony which characterizes the affairs of men and the course of nature” and that “there is no profit or advantage...in wisdom...pleasure...nor in toil.” In Meursault and Qohelet, we see this second stage: a shift from the futility of action to the embrace of radical freedom. Out of the absurd confrontation, they gain a sense of authentic individuality; they employ their lucid awareness of the absurd in order to escape the comfortable inauthenticity of average everydayness; in this freedom, man may “open” himself to futility and “accept his lot and rejoice.”³⁶⁹ But in his newly resurrected individuality, man still faces the final category of absurdity: the reality that “death ends all.”³⁷⁰

This third source brings us to the third installment of the “cycle of the absurd,” Camus’s first, and perhaps finest, drama, *Caligula*. Although *Caligula* was not published until 1944 and first performed in 1945, Camus began writing it in 1938, a few years before he began *Stranger* and *Myth*. Thus, as Philip Thody notes, *Caligula* is the first of Camus’s works to “announce his discovery of the absurd,”³⁷¹ a vision of life that emerges from Caligula’s realization that he exists in a universe in which “men die and they are not happy.”³⁷² That death is an ultimate source of absurdity suggests that *Caligula* is, in some ways, highly autobiographical. Sprintzen adds that the play “revolves around the struggles...of the twenty-five-year-old emperor to come to terms with the twin problems of the inevitability of death and the hypocrisy of social conventions...These were also the central preoccupations of the twenty-five-year-old Camus during the war years.”³⁷³ For

³⁶⁹ 11.9.

³⁷⁰ C. B. Peter, “In Defense of Existence: A Comparison Between Ecclesiastes and Albert Camus,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 12 (1980), 29-31.

³⁷¹ Philip Thody, *Albert Camus* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1989), 47.

³⁷² Camus, *Caligula*, 40.

³⁷³ David Sprintzen, “Caligula in Camus” (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), n. pag.

Camus, like Caligula, it is the harsh fact of human mortality—particularly his father’s death and the heightened awareness of his own impending death when he contracted tuberculosis—that not only first awakened his mind to the absurd, but kept the absurd constantly before him. Most scholars attribute Camus’s “intense preoccupation with the dichotomy of death and life”³⁷⁴ to his illness and, more accurately, its insult to passionate living. Browker adds that Camus’s “vision of absurdity” began with his “love of life and his concomitant awareness of the inevitability of death, his sense of *nascentes morimur*, of being born to die.”³⁷⁵ Thomas W. Busch observes that the inescapable reality of dying and the sense of complete powerlessness it produces finally drove Camus toward the “elaboration of the absurd.”³⁷⁶ Walter A. Strauss also recognizes the autobiographical nature of the play: “It is perhaps no coincidence that Camus, like his hero at the opening of the play, was twenty-five years old when he wrote *Caligula*. This suggests the possibility that Camus himself had undergone a shock at an early age; and one cannot help but recall that he was first threatened with tuberculosis at that period of his life.”³⁷⁷

In this four act tragedy, Camus portrays the infamous Roman emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (commonly known as Caligula) as the embodiment of the absurd, a historical *homo absurdus*. At the sudden death of his beloved sister and mistress, young Caligula becomes cognizant of the absurd, whereupon he resolves to “push the absurd

³⁷⁴ Walter A. Strauss, “Albert Camus’ *Caligula*: Ancient Sources and Modern Parallels,” *Comparative Literature* 3.2 (Spring 1951), 169.

³⁷⁵ Michael Hamilton Bowker, *Albert Camus and the Political Philosophy of the Absurd*, Diss. University of Maryland, 2008 (College Park: U of Maryland, 2008), 77.

³⁷⁶ Thomas W. Busch, *Circulating being: from embodiment to incorporation: essays on late existentialism* (Bronx, NY: UP of Fordham, 1999), 1.

³⁷⁷ Strauss, 169.

to its logical conclusions”³⁷⁸ by launching a violent rampage of random rapes, murders, tortures, and various punishments—a reign of terror that he hopes will awaken his disillusioned patricians to the sickening yet “childishly simple, obvious, almost silly truth” that “men die and they are not happy.”³⁷⁹ Therefore, he orders all Roman citizens to disinherit their children, leave all their possessions and monies to the State, and be executed. Caligula’s obsession with “absurd logic” finally leads to his own tragic downfall and assassination.

From the moment he learns of his sister’s death, Caligula is tormented by the dichotomy of his passion to live and the truth of human mortality; he is plagued by this existential dilemma—his constant “Being-toward-Death”³⁸⁰—until his own assassination. His tyrannical reign of terror is an attempt to escape the inescapable condition of reality—and to have a hand at playing God. His fundamental goal, he says, is to be as a “god on earth...to tamper with the scheme of things” so that “men will die no more and at last be happy.”³⁸¹ Thus he embarks on his fanatical mission to challenge conventional assumptions and subvert the essential values of the Western world: “the family, work, patriotism, religion, literature, and art”³⁸²—all are undermined in the wake of annihilation. At the climax of his rage, Caligula declares:

I live, I kill, I exercise the rapturous power of a destroyer, compared with which the power of a creator is merest child’s play. And *this*, this is happiness; this and nothing else—this intolerable release, devastating scorn, blood, hatred all around me; the glorious isolation of a man who all his life long nurses and gloats over the ineffable joy of the unpunished murderer; the

³⁷⁸ Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 51.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁸⁰ Rossi, 401.

³⁸¹ Camus, *Caligula*, 49.

³⁸² Patricia Hopkins, “Camus’ Anti-Shaman,” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 48.1: 33-44.

ruthless logic that crushes out human lives.³⁸³

Interestingly, as his patricians condemn such cruelty, Caligula justifies his fanatical decrees with the higher motive—perhaps a sort of Kierkegaardian “teleological suspension of the ethic”—to defend what he believes to be more valuable than life itself: truth. In this case, we see a similar lucidity, courage, and passion that we see in Meursault and Sisyphus; Caligula shares the same brutal honesty as these absurd heroes when he exclaims, “I’m surrounded by lies and self-deception. But I’ve had enough of that; I wish men to live by the light of truth. And I’ve the power to make them do so.”³⁸⁴ A passion for life compels Caligula to push the absurd to its logical conclusions. Thus he finds himself existing in a paradox—though he wants to live with purpose, he realizes that death negates his passion for life as it renders that very life meaningless. Sprintzen argues that “Caligula is committed to the Truth...Life is too precious to be wasted through habit, or squandered in superficial social ritual. And yet it is ultimately meaningless. Caligula lives this ambiguity as he levels all values, thus bringing the truth of the absurd home to his subjects, while teaching them the value of that present which they took for granted.”³⁸⁵ Thus, Caligula’s discovery of the absurd is two-fold. First, he realizes that death will finally consume all living men, and thus all human existence is eventually reduced to nothingness. Secondly, he discovers the absurdity that “everyone lives as if he did not know the truth about death.”³⁸⁶

Here, death is the ultimate source of absurdity. Moya Longstaffe argues that *Caligula* characterizes the absurd as “a problem of our mortality”³⁸⁷ and that the “encounter with death

³⁸³ Camus, *Caligula*, 72.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁸⁵ Sprintzen.

³⁸⁶ Barnes, 166.

³⁸⁷ Moya Longstaffe, *The Fiction of Albert Camus: A Complex Simplicity* (Oxford: Peter

is the moment of ultimate truth.”³⁸⁸ Patricia Hopkins notes that Caligula is the “most pedagogical of tyrants, constantly reinforcing the lesson that men are mortal and that any notion of transcendence is rendered absurd by the inevitability of death.”³⁸⁹ Richard Taylor notes that “the most evident absurdity is death, and the problem, man’s responsibility for death.”³⁹⁰ According to Barnes, transience exhausts all the value we once placed in life, reduces all existence to insignificance: “Finally, there is the fact of death and the feeling which it induces in us. Before the ineluctable end of our destiny all is rendered ultimately useless, all efforts, all ethics.”³⁹¹ For Caligula, death is the fundamental principle of reality, the “ultimate truth”³⁹²—it alerts man of the absurd, it is the absurd itself, and it is the absurd’s climactic grand finale. Indeed, death acts as the underlying principle of reality, the great equalizer; and it not only reveals to us the absurdity of life, but determines the fate of all people, actions, and events.

Thus the death of Caligula’s sister is the most pivotal point of the drama, driving Caligula into a violent fury of revenge against the crushing reality of human mortality, the “essential absurdity of life.”³⁹³ Sagi notes that death is the central catalyst which drives Caligula into confrontation with the absurd and passion for truth: “Drusilla’s death troubles Caligula and challenges his existence more because of what it reveals about human existence than because of the personal dimension of the beloved’s loss. Human experience is absurd,

Lang, 2007), 38.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 114.

³⁸⁹ Hopkins, n. pag.

³⁹⁰ Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1985) 400.

³⁹¹ Barnes, 166.

³⁹² Longstaffe, 38.

³⁹³ Barnes, 24.

and provides no harmony or understanding of existence.”³⁹⁴ This source of the absurd differs from the other two (the limits of reason and futility of actions) because they are what Donald Lazere classifies as “epistemological”³⁹⁵ absurdities; they are directly offensive to the category of human reasoning. The third source, however, is a “metaphysical” absurdity constituted by “the brevity of life and inevitability of death...and the absence of a God and an afterlife that would give this life a transcendent purpose or universal system of moral values.”³⁹⁶ The severity of death and its crushing weight on the efforts of a lifetime shock man into the absurd confrontation and into the full realization of his mortality: “the idea of death,” Strauss writes, “becomes a kind of metaphysical dynamite,”³⁹⁷ a truth which disturbs us but, most importantly, reminds us that we are not immortal. Caligula, like most of Camus’s absurd figures—Meursault in *Stranger*, Maria in *The Misunderstanding*, Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*, Diego in *The State of Siege*—confronts this reality; they are “shaken into a consciousness of the absurd because they themselves come into contact with death, because they become aware of being themselves ‘condemned to death.’”³⁹⁸

To some extent, *Caligula* acts as a continuation of Meursault’s reflections prior to his execution. Like Meursault, Caligula is an outsider, rejecting the values and rituals of Roman society and ultimately refusing to live to its standards. David Sprintzen makes the convincing point that the freedom which removes Meursault from the pressures of the public sphere is the same freedom which places Caligula before this final source of absurdity. Like Meursault, Caligula feels

³⁹⁴ Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, 100.

³⁹⁵ Donald Lazere, *The unique creation of Albert Camus* (New Haven: UP of Yale, 1973), 52.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁷ Strauss, 169.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

a passionate will to live and a contempt for the hypocrisy of the everyday, torn...between celebrating life and coming to terms with death. Struggling to emerge from the habitual, the daily routine and social ritual, the individual stands forth in hard-won uniqueness, only to come face-to-face with a reality of death made more poignant by that singular achievement.³⁹⁹

As Caligula transcends above the tranquilized individuals of Rome, a delusional society that lives blindly unaware of the absurd, he confronts what he himself cannot transcend, for the freedom he gains, as Barnes points out, is a “mortal freedom” and still “temporary limited.”⁴⁰⁰ This freedom still faces the certainty of death. Not only is freedom limited, but we might also say that it is, for a time, an illusion of freedom. But this sense of freedom is important to the third stage of the absurd confrontation, as it leads to the final response. This will be further explored later in the chapter.

Although the eponymous hero and absurdist themes of *Caligula* reflect, in part, Camus’s experiences and own contempt for mortality, Caligula is not Camus’s mouthpiece. Nor is he an absurd hero like Meursault and Sisyphus; although he is certainly conscious of the absurd, he is unwilling to accept it, and thus he becomes a “rebel *against* an absurd world.”⁴⁰¹ Indeed, the author does not condone or commend the tyrant’s violent behavior, but uses him as a vehicle to explore the nihilistic implications of the absurd, inferences that he will ultimately reject and prescribe that the authentic individual avoid. Cruickshank notes that the “motives of [Caligula’s] revolt—a desire for lucidity and a readiness to act in accordance with the truth he finds—would have Camus’ approval, but the methods of his revolt are utterly wrong.”⁴⁰² Camus portrays Caligula as both a villain and a victim of the absurd; his very passion for life heightens the cruelty of death, and though he discovers the

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Barnes, 169.

⁴⁰¹ Sprintzen, n. pag.

⁴⁰² Cruickshank, 147.

truth of the absurd, he erroneously strives to escape it by becoming cruel himself. Thus, to Camus, Caligula becomes “the most human and most tragic of errors.”⁴⁰³ Golomb describes Caligula as a “nihilistic hero of authenticity in the midst of absurdity” who, by the logic of the absurd, “comes to a tragic end;”⁴⁰⁴ E. Freeman considers Caligula “a lunatic absolutist,” an obsessive eradicator of hundreds of innocent people for the sake of “truth;”⁴⁰⁵ Simpson calls him a “murderous lunatic, slave to incest, narcissist and megalomaniac.”⁴⁰⁶ Of all Camus’s characters, he is certainly the most mad. Unlike the melancholic Meursault and the cooperative Sisyphus, the realization of life’s absurdity transforms Caligula into “a monster of vice and cruelty.”⁴⁰⁷ Similar to other mad kings, such as Pirandello’s Henry IV, Shakespeare’s King Lear, Pushkin’s Boris Godunov, and Strindberg’s Eric XIV, Caligula creates chaos, inverts all traditional values, and aims to undermine all metaphysical assumptions in order to show that human mortality ultimately upsets everything. He shows that the dichotomy of the passion for life and the contempt of inevitable death will forever disappoint the human desire for cohesion and unity, a contrariety, he says, that can “confound the sky and the sea, blend ugliness and beauty, infuse suffering with laughter.”⁴⁰⁸ Camus does not want his audience to side with Caligula, but sympathize with him, for he does not celebrate the emperor’s sadistic acts, but underlines his tragic downfall in order to unveil the destructive consequences of misplaced freedoms and a mulish refusal to embrace the absurd, rather than merely believe it. Camus gives us Caligula to teach us and to, as one

⁴⁰³ Sagi, *Albert Camus and the philosophy of the absurd*, 107.

⁴⁰⁴ Golomb, 273.

⁴⁰⁵ E. Freeman, *The Theatre of Albert Camus: A Critical Study* (London: Methuen, 1971), 38.

⁴⁰⁶ Simpson, n. pag.

⁴⁰⁷ Cruickshank, 1978.

⁴⁰⁸ Camus, *Caligula*, 27.

of the patricians observes, show us an “insight into the secret places of the heart.”⁴⁰⁹ Caligula teaches us the truth of our mortality, and that we must come to terms with our impending death in order to embrace the present moment. His assassination, however, ultimately demonstrates the ruinous effects of an inauthentic life—the failure to preserve life in the presence of absurdity. Ultimately, Caligula fails to realize that just because death is inevitable, and that by “impersonating the cruelty and violence of nature and of the gods”⁴¹⁰ he can force its more sudden arrival, he “still cannot find in death the escape from despair—*his* condition of life.”⁴¹¹

By the end, Caligula realizes his failure, that by his obstinate refusal to live contently as a mortal man, he has become a villain of the very life he passionately loves. His failure arises from an obsessive rebellion against the absurd; he is unwisely “tamper[ing] with the scheme of things.”⁴¹² He confesses in the final act: “I have chosen a wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn’t the right one.”⁴¹³ Caligula realizes that the freedom that once compelled him to embrace his mortal life has led him to his own death. Golomb likens Caligula to Kierkegaard’s knight of faith, for, like Abraham, Caligula’s “‘purity of heart’ drives him to ‘follow the essential to the end.’ But this leap is not the leap to absolute faith, but rather a leap to absolute nothingness.”⁴¹⁴ (This analog between the absurd hero and Abraham will be discussed in the conclusion, as it will also uncover some important parallels between Camus and Qohelet.) Pratt also points out that Caligula’s avoidance of the absurd

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁴¹⁰ Ben Stoltzfus, “Violence As Tragic Farce In Camus’ *Caligula*,” in *Violence and Drama*, ed. Redmond-James (Cambridge: UP of Cambridge, 1991).

⁴¹¹ Kenneth Harrow, “*Caligula*, a Study in Aesthetic Despair” *Contemporary Literature* 14. 1 (Winter 1973), 37.

⁴¹² Ibid., 40, 48.

⁴¹³ Camus, *Caligula*, 73.

⁴¹⁴ Golomb, 273.

concurrently positions him in a destructive path: “In *Caligula*...the mad emperor tries to escape the human predicament by dehumanizing himself with acts of senseless violence, fails, and surreptitiously arranges his own assassination.”⁴¹⁵ Ironically, and tragically, in his longing for order and immortality, Caligula imposes disorder and senseless murders, ultimately leading to his own “superior suicide.” Here is the theme of the play presented by the author himself in the 1958 preface to the U.S. edition:

Caligula ... discovers on the death of his sister and lover Drusilla that ‘people die and they are not happy.’ From this point on, obsessed by his search for the absolute, poisoned with contempt and horror, he tries to exercise, through murders and systematic perversion of all values, a freedom that he discovers at the end is not the right one. He rejects friendship, love, simple human solidarity, and the concepts of good and evil. He takes literally all those around him, forces them to see things logically, and levels everything around him through the force of his rejection and through the urge to destroy that his passion for life leads him into. But if his truth involves revolting against destiny, his mistake is to deny humanity. One cannot destroy everything without destroying one’s self. This is why Caligula depopulates the world around him and, faithful to his own logic, does what he needs to do to give those who will kill him the means to do so. *Caligula* is the story of a superior suicide. It is the most human of stories and the most tragic of errors. Faithless to humanity out of faith in himself, Caligula accepts to die for having understood that no one can save himself by himself, and that one cannot be free while opposing humanity.⁴¹⁶

As some of the language of this preface implies, *Caligula*, unlike *Myth* and *Stranger*, seriously explores some of the moral and metaphysical implications of the absurd. Camus realizes that his wish to affirm values—“friendship, love, simple human solidarity, and the concepts of good and evil”—is groundless in an absurd and godless world. Consequentially, Caligula’s absurd confrontation leads him to the belief that “[t]his world has no

⁴¹⁵ Pratt, n. pag.

⁴¹⁶ Camus, Preface, Trans. Justin O'Brien, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Knopf, 1958), vi-vii.

importance,”⁴¹⁷ and “since there is no right or wrong, everything is permitted.”⁴¹⁸ But Caligula’s “logical” response to the absurd—a series of senseless, random killings—eventually leads to his own demise, and thus his downfall proves that if absurd awareness leads to the affirmation of life, then even logical implications must have limits. Caligula’s retribution suggests that even Camus “rejects some potential implications of the absurd.”⁴¹⁹ Sagi adds that Caligula’s nihilism points to Camus’s own “frustration with the conclusions deriving from the absurd.”⁴²⁰ Here, Camus is not satisfied with nihilism, and thus he begins to more honestly confront the logical conclusions and moral implications of his absurd vision of life—a universe without God, meaning, or eternal values. Through Caligula’s destructive life and tragic death, Camus’s “philosophical suggestion” then becomes: “that everything is not permitted and the absurd still carries ‘limits.’”⁴²¹ Indeed, Caligula demonstrates that even though everything is possible and permitted, not all is “desirable.”⁴²²

To assert some potentially positive moral implications of the absurd, Camus speaks through Cherea, Caligula’s chief adversary. Cherea is also aware of the absurd, but, unlike Caligula, he admits that his own love for life trumps the logic of absurdity, and thus he cannot succumb to its nihilistic implications. In one of the most dramatic scenes he says to Caligula:

Because what I want is to live, and to be happy. Neither, to my mind, is possible if one pushes the absurd to its logical conclusions. As you see, I’m

⁴¹⁷ Camus, *Caligula*, 14.

⁴¹⁸ Thomas Landon Thorson, “Albert Camus and the Rights of Man,” *Ethics* 74.4 (July 1964), 288.

⁴¹⁹ John Foley, *Albert Camus: From Absurd to Revolt* (Montreal: UP of McGill-Queen, 2008), 25.

⁴²⁰ Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, 107.

⁴²¹ Thorson, 288.

⁴²² Stoltzfus, n. pag.

quite an ordinary sort of man. True, there are moments when, to feel free of them, I desire the death of those I love, or I hanker after women from whom the ties of family or friendship debar me. Were logic everything, I'd kill or fornicate on such occasions. But I consider that these passing fancies have no great importance. If everyone set to gratifying them, the world would be impossible to live in, and happiness, too, would go by the board. And these, I repeat, are the things that count, for me.⁴²³

Here, Cherea imports a sort of common-sense morality, one that affirms life and recognizes that not all is permitted if one wants to live. Here, Cherea is the voice of Camus, the absurd hero who sees the value of the absurd and the potential for awareness and change. Here, also, is the central theme of the play: life is meaningless, death is inevitable, but man longs “to live, and to be happy;” thus, man affirms his existence as defiance to the absurd, and his contentment in living as a mortal evades nihilism: “In *Caligula*, Camus asks whether the absurd leads inexorably to nihilism, and through the character of Cherea he suggests that it does not. Despite being, like Caligula, conscious of the absurd, Cherea appears to discern a communal ethic of human solidarity in the face of the absurd.”⁴²⁴ Cherea admits to the absurdity of life, but confesses that this is an offense to his love for life and humanity. He admits that “what’s intolerable is to see one’s life being drained of meaning, to be told there’s no reason for existing. A man can’t live without some reason for living.”⁴²⁵ Cherea believes that even in an absurd universe, humans can find the passion to live and avoid a nihilistic end. He discerns the necessity to affirm values, choices, and actions that promote life, not threaten it. This is why he says, “I believe that some actions are—shall I say?—more praiseworthy than others.”⁴²⁶ Indeed, Cherea realizes that the absurd demands an ironic response: both the confession and contempt of its presence. If he is to live, Cherea must

⁴²³ Camus, *Caligula*, 51.

⁴²⁴ Foley, 25.

⁴²⁵ Camus, *Caligula*, 21.

⁴²⁶ Camus, *Caligula*, 52.

remain in the paradox of the absurd, for “the only escape from cosmic absurdity lies in the proud and contemptuous admission of its actuality; this attitude in itself constitutes a sort of happiness.”⁴²⁷

Here, we begin to see the reason that many theistic thinkers critique Camus and readily point out his failure to follow the logical conclusions of the absurd. Through Cherea, Camus begins to formulate unjustifiably a code of social ethics—that killing humans is wrong—even though he realizes that the absurd negates all possible systems of universal values or moral absolutes. Further, through Cherea, Camus admits that he is not satisfied with Caligula’s nihilistic conclusions, and thus, as Ray Davidson notes, he imports an “ethic of humanist persuasion” in order to avoid a nihilistic morality.⁴²⁸ If there is no transcendence, no afterlife, and if the physical world is the total sum of reality, then man stands hopeless and naked beneath a vast expanse of nothingness; with no purpose or cosmic blueprint, he is abandoned to freely roam in a world devoid of moral absolutes. Sprintzen explains that it is the actuality of the absurd that frees Caligula from moral obligation: “If there is no transcendent purpose to life, then there is no compelling reason to subject one’s actions to moral constraints. In ordinary circumstances we are prisoners of our fears of divine retribution or our hopes of divine salvation. Alone ‘among a nation of slaves,’ Caligula is freed of such illusory scruples: freed to act upon whim, desire, or calculation.”⁴²⁹

But in this reality, Camus sees a positive implication. Although absurdity may lead to nihilism and moral relativity, Camus argues that mortality may also lead to a freedom that

⁴²⁷ Strauss, 169.

⁴²⁸ Ray Davidson, *Camus: The Challenge of Dostoevsky* (London: UP of Exeter, 1997), 115.

⁴²⁹ Sprintzen, n. pag.

provokes “profound sensitivity and passion for life.”⁴³⁰ The absurd man is still free to live passionately, for the “[r]ecognition of his mortal freedom renders man indifferent toward the future but all the more passionate to drain off the full intensity of present experience.”⁴³¹ Ben Stoltzfus describes Caligula as a “[t]ragic man...confronting his own mortality, and what he sees reflected in the mirror is not only his future death, but the image of total freedom. This freedom, this glimpse of the possible, exists always in the present.”⁴³² Cherea, the true “absurd hero,” also realizes that he is not subject to providence or a cosmic plan, and the “more he is without a future and without hope, which is in itself a bond, the more he is really free.”⁴³³ The central differences between Caligula and Cherea are their employment of freedom and the place that their passion leads them—Caligula’s to his own demise, Cherea’s to contentment in living as a mortal.

Though Camus objects to Caligula’s nihilism, he does accentuate an important aspect of what he considers his *humanness* or “human longing.” For Caligula, his total freedom not only forms a severe discontent with his mortality, but a deep longing for what he calls “the impossible.”⁴³⁴ The impossible is, as Richard Kamber puts it, a “higher reality,” “eternal life,” or that which “can be identified with the realm of the superior God”⁴³⁵ that may provide his ephemeral life substance and meaning. Caligula refuses to embrace the absurd because, though he admits his mortality, he cannot let go of his yearning for the possibility of immortality, what the human world cannot give him. While his subjects judge this desire as hopeless insanity, Caligula, fully conscious of the truth (i.e., the certainty of his death), likens

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Barnes, 169.

⁴³² Stoltzfus, n. pag.

⁴³³ Barnes, 169.

⁴³⁴ Camus, *Caligula*, 73.

⁴³⁵ Richard Kamber, *On Camus* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), 21.

his supposed madness to brutal honesty, a radical confession that his dissatisfaction naturally points to something beyond “the world that disappoints.”⁴³⁶ He exclaims,

I am not mad...in fact I have never been more level-headed. It is just that I have suddenly felt the need to attain something impossible. Things as they are no longer seem satisfactory to me...This world, as to its order, is intolerable to me now. So I need the moon or happiness or immortality, something which may sound crazy perhaps but which is not of this world.⁴³⁷

The pursuit and possibility of “the impossible” is essential to the absurd confrontation, for it keeps Caligula aware of his mortal condition and gives him some sort of purpose for living. Barnes explains that “it is Camus’ fundamental principle that man’s grandeur and possible happiness lie in his refusal to give up his desire for the impossible. If man is to save himself, he must never cease to revolt against the limits of his condition at the same time that he refuses to pretend that they are not there.”⁴³⁸ Here, Caligula embodies the tensions that define the human condition, tensions that cannot or should not be fully resolved in a human world. Caligula demonstrates that human existence is a struggle and a longing for solidarity—a desire that echoes universally, and points to a central characteristic of the authentic individual.

Here one can begin to identify an underlying parallel between Caligula and Qohelet. They are two figures confronting their mortality and finding utter dissatisfaction. Just as Caligula discovers that “men die and they are not happy,” Qohelet perceives that “no man has power...over the day of death,”⁴³⁹ and that in the wake of human mortality, “all is vanity.”⁴⁴⁰ He bitterly points out that “[t]he living know they will die,” that “the dead know

⁴³⁶ Camus, *Myth*, 37.

⁴³⁷ Camus, *Caligula*, 15.

⁴³⁸ Barnes, 164.

⁴³⁹ 8.8.

⁴⁴⁰ 3.19.

nothing, they have no further reward, even the memory of them is forgotten.”⁴⁴¹ Like Caligula, Qohelet realizes that he is constantly “being-towards-death,” and the certainty of this trumps all that he has done “under the sun.” Maja Milèinski notes that the “frame of the book [*Ecclesiastes*] is the insight that everything is nothingness and that death is the border which destroys and unpredictably crosses all human plans and endeavors.”⁴⁴² To Qohelet, “life ends at the grave,” and “we have no ultimate purpose for living.”⁴⁴³

Indeed, the finality and certainty of death is a central theme of *Ecclesiastes* specifically because death is one of the few certainties that render everything “under the sun” utterly meaningless. Longman concurs that Qohelet’s two largest problems are “death and the future’s uncertainty,”⁴⁴⁴ and this dilemma “frustrated Qohelet so much that he reflected on it at great lengths. He concluded that death rendered every human ‘achievement’ and status useless. After all, they will pass away and will not be remembered.”⁴⁴⁵ Human mortality disrupts all pursuits, all meaning, accomplishments, and even failures. In several passages, Qohelet’s *hebel* motif directly refers to the ephemerality of life, that all human existence is “vanity,” but a “breath” or “vapor,” and that all men “return to dust.” Numerous passages refer to the finality of death, specifically its role as the great equalizer and fate of all mortals, both man and beasts, the wise man and the fool, and the rich and poor: “All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return,”⁴⁴⁶ “As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may

⁴⁴¹ 9.5.

⁴⁴² Maja Milèinski, “The Problem of Longevity and Death in Daoism,” *IZVLEÈEK* (1999), 344.

⁴⁴³ Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1985), 4.

⁴⁴⁴ Longman, 179.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁴⁶ 3.20.

carry away in his hand;”⁴⁴⁷ “For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!”⁴⁴⁸ “For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity;”⁴⁴⁹ “This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.”⁴⁵⁰

Interestingly, and surprisingly, although Qohelet perceives his world within a theological framework that acknowledges the existence of God, he does not, just as Caligula does not, seem to acknowledge with absolute certainty the concept of an afterlife.⁴⁵¹ In 9.10, Qohelet cynically refers to “Sheol,” a place devoid of all signs of a conscious existence: “...for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.” Roland E. Murphy points out that this definition of Sheol “goes beyond the usual description: no activity, no calculating, no knowledge, no wisdom...Sheol is the epitome of nonlife, the total absence of life.”⁴⁵² Crenshaw also emphasizes Qohelet’s disregard of an afterlife: “Qohelet saw no basis for optimism about the next life, either in its Hebraic expression, the resurrection of the body, or in its Greek expression, the immortality of the

⁴⁴⁷ 5.15.

⁴⁴⁸ 2.16.

⁴⁴⁹ 3.19.

⁴⁵⁰ 9.3.

⁴⁵¹ It must be noted that this view is not a consensus among biblical scholars. Some scholars note that at times Qohelet subtly alludes to a vague conception of a life after death when he mentions his expectation of a “future judgment.” However, these points are mostly speculative as Qohelet’s allusions, at most, only suggest a very vague sense of an afterlife and distract from his primary focus on earthly existence from man’s point of view.

⁴⁵² Roland E. Murphy, “The Sage in Ecclesiastes and Qoheleth the Sage,” *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, Ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 268.

soul. For Qohelet, Sheol was a place of nonbeing.”⁴⁵³ Longman adds that “Qohelet himself never clearly transcends the created order to discover meaning or significance anywhere in the universe,”⁴⁵⁴ and his skepticism and uncertainty of an afterlife is highlighted in his rhetorical question: “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?”⁴⁵⁵ For Qohelet, death appears to be the absolute end. After life on earth there are no actions, thoughts, knowledge, or wisdom; all physical and mental experiences no longer exist. His “under the sun” refrain “entails the entirety of human possibility.”⁴⁵⁶ Martin Shuster further explains this key aspect of Qohelet’s human view of the world:

...[Qohelet] radically rejects any form of survival after death. Not only that, but [Qohelet] goes to great lengths to show that even the weakest proposal for survival after death, that is, the remembrance of a name or person through progeny, is, likewise, ultimately a vain belief. As the book frequently laments: there is no remembrance of the past.⁴⁵⁷

George Mendenhall also notes that the notion of a life after death is totally absent in much of Old Testament literature:

Most of the scholarly world agrees that there is no concept of immortality or life after death in the Old Testament. The human body was shaped by God from the earth, and animated with the ‘breath of life’...At death, the person becomes... ‘a dead breath’...and the body returns to the dust whence it came. At the same time, when people die, they descend to Sheol, which can only be defined as the place where the dead are dead. The presumption is that the deceased are inert, lifeless, and engaging in no activity.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵³ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

⁴⁵⁴ Longman, 62.

⁴⁵⁵ 3.21.

⁴⁵⁶ Longman, 231.

⁴⁵⁷ Martin Shuster, “Being as Breath, Vapor as Joy: Using Martin Heidegger to Re-read the Book of Ecclesiastes,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33.2 (Dec. 2008), 224.

⁴⁵⁸ George Mendenhall, “From Witchcraft to Justice: Death and Afterlife in the OT,” *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, Hiroshi Obayashi, ed. (Westport, CT: Glenwood Press, 1992), 68.

As Mendenhall mentions, an emphasis on the brevity of life with no concept of an afterlife can be seen in various parts of the Old Testament. For example, in Psalm 39 we read a passage in which the poet urges Yahweh to keep the truth of his mortality constantly before him:

O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!...surely all mankind is a mere breath!⁴⁵⁹

The frailty and brevity of human life is a common theme throughout Hebrew wisdom literature, and Qohelet is adamant to emphasize and complain about its ascendancy over all human life. It seems, then, that Qohelet, like Caligula and Cherea, is solely concerned with man's brief, earthly existence, with no sense of belief in or hope of an afterlife. It is precisely that they live within a closed system that renders the brevity of their earthly lives as empty and absurd.

Despite Cherea and Qohelet's cynical, yet realistic, views on death, their honest awareness of mortality leads them to some positive implications. Though death is their end, it is not the end of human possibilities. Ultimately, *Caligula* and Qohelet's book serve as a response to nihilism; Qohelet and Cherea seek to both formulate a life-affirming response to a nihilistic premise and to use the absurd as a means to transcend a nihilistic end. As Manschreck explains, *Caligula* confronts the "problem of nihilism" and "the nihilistic dilemma of man: we live and die not knowing if there is any meaning to life. Death claims human beings, and in a sense we can only wait, doing or not doing what we deem best."⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁹ 39.4-6, 11.

⁴⁶⁰ Manschreck, 92.

Caligula's rebellion and own retribution illustrate the destructive consequences of absurdity turned to nihilism, and through him Camus teaches us that this is not to be the response of the authentic self: "Caligula is rendered immobile by his own nihilism. Because he responds to the absurd by forgoing all morals, all motivation to create meaning, all solidarity, all appreciation for life and its sensory experience, Caligula passively accepts his failure. Through Caligula, Camus condemns Nihilism as a passive, weak, destructive way of coping with the absurd."⁴⁶¹ Thus, Camus speaks through Cherea, that the honest and authentic man is conscious of the absurd but also aware of his internal need for human solidarity.

Qohelet also presents an escape from nihilism. Manschreck notes that although nihilism, traditionally defined as a nineteenth and twentieth-century philosophy of "despair" based on the "loss of transcendence," emerged from a "shift from an other-worldly to a this-worldly concern,"⁴⁶² it "reaches far back as Ecclesiastes."⁴⁶³ Qohelet certainly expresses a nihilistic attitude when he acknowledges that death is the ultimate end. But, like Cherea, he resolves to exist in the tensions between his longing for duration and the inevitability of death, and from this awareness he is able to passionately experience the present moment. Here, Qohelet and Cherea find a sort of will to live within the struggle of life itself, for in a constant striving "to make something out of the nothingness," they "grasp [their] life from death itself."⁴⁶⁴ Michial Farmer notes that like Caligula and Cherea, Qohelet is continually aware of his coming death, and that he exists in a state of "being-towards-death—a state

⁴⁶¹ Maria K. Genovese, "Meaningful Meaninglessness: Albert Camus' Presentation of Absurdism as a Foundation for Goodness" *Pell Scholars* (2010).

⁴⁶² Manschreck, 86.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁶⁴ Michael Azar, "The stranger, the mother and the Algerian revolution: a postcolonial reading of Albert Camus," Trans. Kevin Halliwell, (*Eurozine* Oct. 2010), n. pag.

which, however grim, opens up potentiality to the person who exists in it.”⁴⁶⁵ Rossi also adds that the “dread of annihilation,” as felt by Qohelet and Caligula, is “preliminary to the final Freedom-toward-Death, which is won when all illusions are abandoned before the ‘nothingness of the possible impossibility of existence.’ As such, death is disclosed as the extreme potentiality. Facing it, completely denuded of conventional attitudes, man becomes his authentic self.”⁴⁶⁶

The consciousness of both “the universality of death”⁴⁶⁷ and “being-toward-death” reinforces the fact that all men, regardless of status or age, can pursue and achieve “authentic existence” and knowledge that “compels one to enjoy life.”⁴⁶⁸ This knowledge calls the individual to authenticity and passion by acknowledging the finality of death but not dwelling “on the actual moment of death; rather, through the possibility of death, focus on a more authentic life, a life cognizant of the possibilities and impossibilities of existence.”⁴⁶⁹ Qohelet and Cherea’s initial emphasis on death points to the importance of the present life. Thus Qohelet writes, “Whatever your hand finds to do, *do it with your might*, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.”⁴⁷⁰ Here, Qohelet’s solution to the problem of mortality is not an intellectual program, but an existential commitment, “a method of living.”⁴⁷¹ This existential response is echoed centuries later by other theists. For example, Paul Tillich calls the individual to have the “courage to be” in the face of nothingness; Martin Buber finds God and authentic living in “the encounter

⁴⁶⁵ Farmer, n. pag.

⁴⁶⁶ Rossi, 410.

⁴⁶⁷ 9.1-3.

⁴⁶⁸ Shuster, 227.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 226.

⁴⁷⁰ See *Ecclesiastes* 9.10.

⁴⁷¹ Farmer, n. pag.

between the *I* and the *Thou*,” Karl Barth reminds us that we may better understand our finitude through both the “testimony” of personal experience and “revelation” of an infinite God.”⁴⁷²

For Qohelet and Caligula, the truth of their mortality creates a longing for something beyond the temporal world; ironically, it is the actuality of death that heightens absurd sensitivity but also the realization that they desire immortality. As Peter explains, this absurd sensitivity exist within a “paradox” between the “longing for eternal joy” and “experience of agony,” the “longing for immortality” and the “ending in death.”⁴⁷³ Caligula’s search for “the impossible” sounds curiously similar to Qohelet’s awareness of the tension between the “eternity” God has put “into man’s heart” and his alienation from God, an estrangement that keeps him from finding “out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”⁴⁷⁴ Further, Scipio, Caligula’s young pupil, suggests that Caligula’s desire for immortality is shared universally. He admires Caligula’s passion for the impossible, and he tells the patricians that the “same flame burns in each of our hearts.”⁴⁷⁵ In the final act, Caligula further expresses his search for the impossible and his deep sense of dissatisfaction that the world cannot fulfill this void:

If I’d had the moon, if love were enough, all might have been different. But where could I quench this thirst? What human heart, what god, would have for me the depth of a great lake? There’s nothing in this world, or in the other, made to my stature. And yet I know, and you, too, know that all I need is for the impossible to be. The impossible! I’ve searched for it at the confines of the world, in the secret places of my heart...Oh, how oppressive is this darkness!”⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Peter, 37.

⁴⁷⁴ 3.11.

⁴⁷⁵ Camus, *Caligula*, 83.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 73.

Caligula's discontent with mortality and longing for "the impossible" is a fundamental characteristic of the absurd confrontation. We also see this yearning for "the impossible" in Sisyphus's "wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."⁴⁷⁷ This human longing is a key part of the parallels we see between Qohelet and Camus's absurd heroes. Qohelet is profoundly affected by a fallen world of injustice, suffering, and death—that which constitutes his inauthentic self. But his authentic self materializes from his admission to the actuality of *hebel* and his need for recovery. His honest awareness of the absurd and sense of homelessness—the tensions in which he resolves to exist—is a reflection of his spiritual state—his inauthentic self striving to be authentic. Walking the earth while waiting to return to the dust from which he came, Qohelet struggles to believe that he is nothing more than a "mere breath" abandoned by his Creator. Thus, he admits life's meaningless, but goes on rejoicing in the short life he does have—"God's gift to man."⁴⁷⁸ As Akeroyd points out, the honesty and authenticity of the man willing to confront the absurd is the essence of "spiritual understanding"—a continual, conscious, and internal struggle between the limited self and the eternity seeking soul, the alienated self existing in a broken system yet fully conscious of the longing for the impossible and eternal—that which exists outside the physical realm.

Cherea recognizes that he, too, possesses a longing that moves him beyond a hopelessly dead nihilism and awakens him to live passionately. He shows us that the authentic self cannot move toward passionate living until the absurd is actualized. The profound realization of what *is* heightens both Cherea and Qohelet's absurd sensitivity and

⁴⁷⁷ Camus, *Myth*, 21.

⁴⁷⁸ 3.12-13.

authentic existence. This is also seen in Meursault and Sisyphus; their “spiritual nostalgia”⁴⁷⁹ emerges from the fact that they do not suppress their human longings despite their absurd sensitivity, and, as Akeroyd points out, this “spiritual understanding of Camus’s characters is a constant—they have discovered what *is*”⁴⁸⁰—their mortality, their “being-toward-death,” their longing for the “impossible.” Both the disgust for the absurd (such as Caligula’s denunciation of his sister’s death) and the courage to exist in its tensions (such as Cherea’s commitment to living in spite of his inevitable death) discloses what Akeroyd calls the “spiritual nostalgia that absurdity provokes”—the same “longing to solve...need for clarity, and cohesion” that Camus speaks of in *Myth*.⁴⁸¹ Akeroyd also suggests that the conflict between Caligula’s desire for “the impossible” and his patricians’ delusional complacency is the “simple presentation of the spiritual state of man and his society.”⁴⁸² The spiritual part of man—his longing for the impossible—is at odds with his physical state—his daily life in the society of men. The spirituality of Caligula, Cherea, and Qohelet is their mutual sense of abandonment, the feeling of being locked in a closed system in which they are born to die, and their “spiritual nostalgia,” born of the “eternity” in their “hearts”⁴⁸³ or that “flame” that “burns” in each of their “hearts,”⁴⁸⁴ which fights against their soul’s imprisonment in their mortal bodies. While Caligula portrays both a discontent for mortality and a desire for immortality that we see in Qohelet, Cherea provides a solution similar to Qohelet’s life-affirming response: he unsuccessfully commissions Caligula to turn his attention away from a “nebulous future” so he may focus on “the present” which “requires every ounce of energy

⁴⁷⁹ Akeroyd, 5.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Camus, *Myth*, 38.

⁴⁸² Akeroyd, 4.

⁴⁸³ 3.11.

⁴⁸⁴ Camus, *Caligula*, 83.

we have.”⁴⁸⁵ He recognizes that man must acknowledge the finality of death before he can begin living his present life to its fullest.

By uncovering Qohelet and Cherea’s similar attitudes toward the absurd we see that Camus, knowingly or not, portrays the absurd man as a spiritual man at odds with his mortal body. Though Qohelet and the absurd heroes Sisyphus, Meursault, and Cherea are conscious of their mortality and find their fallen state unsatisfactory, they also recognize that this state is an integral part of their *humanness*, and that to recognize and accept the absurd—their state of fallenness—they become authentic beings. At the same time, Caligula and Qohelet’s state of inauthentic Being (fallenness or *Verfallen*) constantly opposes their “heart’s” desire for the impossible and their striving for authenticity and wholeness, and consequentially, this opposition prohibits them from reaching true understanding of their Being-toward-Death. As Rossi explains, “*Verfallen* is also the state in which we avoid the authentic Being-toward-Death by accepting a conventional attitude toward death or one of unknowing indifference, and from which we can emerge to choose our authentic self only by attaining to a real understanding of death.”⁴⁸⁶

For Cherea and Qohelet, the tensions of this final stage—the certainty of death—direct their full attention to present, earthly concerns, and their “being-towards-death” calls them to live this momentary life passionately. Indeed, this “real understanding of death”⁴⁸⁷ is a “spiritual understanding,”⁴⁸⁸ and the spiritual man is called to a life of striving and becoming, of recognizing alienation, mortality, and his longing for “the impossible” while living passionately committed to his earthly existence. Qohelet and the absurd hero cannot

⁴⁸⁵ Stoltzfus, n. pag.

⁴⁸⁶ Rossi, 401.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁸ Akeroyd, 5.

separate themselves from their death, so it becomes central to their existence—they do not ignore their state of “being-toward-death.” They constantly keep it before them as an integral part of authentic existence, a condition which keeps them passionately alive. As Wesley Barnes clearly puts it, “Death will terminate individual existence,” but as the authentic individual “chooses his own death and accepts its movement toward him over time, he is able to incorporate death as a part of his own existence.”⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁹ Wesley Barnes, *The Philosophy and Literature of Existentialism* (Woodsbury, NY: Barron's, 1968), 21.

Conclusion

Camus, Qohelet, Kierkegaard, and the Absurd Vocation

As the third and final stage of the absurd confrontation directs man to this temporal life, it also accents the fact that the absurd confrontation is a life-long vocation. It demands a daily commitment to earthly existence and calls the individual to continuously embrace the fleeting moments, to live and breathe in the paradox of striving for authenticity in a state of a “being-towards-death.” This call compels a theist like Qohelet to not focus on an eternal life in a way that would cause him to disparage earthly existence. This final point—that a confrontation with the absurd is a life-long vocation—calls the individual to focus on the nature of mortality and its relationship to life in this world rather than the next. Though the absurd man sees himself as an alien of this world—at odds with it—he do not disparage his earthly existence, but sees it as integral part of his total being. This focus on earthly existence is a part of man’s spiritual quest. When discussing the religious person's sometimes exclusive focus on God ("the vertical"), Akeroyd points out, “There is something slightly unhealthy about the vertical when it is that and that alone...it is indeed possible to be so heavenly minded that one is no earthly good!”⁴⁹⁰

In closing, a brief review of Søren Kierkegaard’s thought can further illustrate the relationships between Camus and Qohelet. Kierkegaard also focused on “the Absurd” as a definitive part of authentic existence. Kierkegaard, like Camus and Qohelet, shows us that the tensions of the absurd, for both the atheist and theist are not to be resolved, but embraced as an essential part of becoming authentic and honest human beings.

⁴⁹⁰ Akeroyd, 12.

Interestingly, several scholars have noted that Qohelet's absurdity is highly germane to Kierkegaard's category of "the Absurd," or the "paradox of faith" that he describes through the story of Abraham and the "near-sacrifice of his son Isaac."⁴⁹¹ In his commentary on *Ecclesiastes*, Brown argues that "Qohelet...anticipates Søren Kierkegaard's 'knight of faith;'"⁴⁹² Vincent A. McCarthy calls Kierkegaard a "Danish Qohelet,"⁴⁹³ Thomas L. Cooksey considers Kierkegaard's pseudonym "A" a "latter-day Qohelet."⁴⁹⁴ Further, both Kierkegaard's absurdity and Qohelet's *hebel* find their origin in the Hebraic tradition; Kierkegaard discovers the paradox of faith in Abraham, the father of the Hebrew tradition. It seems that Qohelet is a pre-Kierkegaardian knight of faith—a man who believes in God yet refuses to ignore the sense of absurdity and struggles of life. Kierkegaard and Qohelet realize their inability to fully reconcile the ways of an infinite God to finite man, and thus they each embrace the paradoxes between the eternal God and mortal man.

There is also a kinship between Kierkegaard and Camus for several reasons. Many scholars consider Kierkegaard one of the first of modern philosophers to introduce "the absurd 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."⁴⁹⁵ Interestingly, Camusian absurdity can be considered, to some degree, a secular continuation of Kierkegaardian absurdity. Poole provides an important insight on this continuity between Kierkegaard and Camus:

⁴⁹¹ Bowker, 31.

⁴⁹² Brown, 14.

⁴⁹³ Vincent A. McCarthy, "Narcissism and Desire in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or I*," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or Part 1*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: UP of Mercer (1995), 57.

⁴⁹⁴ Thomas L. Cooksey, *Masterpieces of Philosophical Literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 137.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

Kierkegaard's frank acceptance of logical unthinkability of the central doctrine of Christianity [the incarnation], and his relegation of this problem of the Absurd, had allowed in turn, a hundred years later, of a translation into the secular world, in the form of [Camus's] secular Absurd. Camus' text [*The Myth of Sisyphus*] is, as it were, *Philosophical Fragments*, with all its premises, and yet taking its conclusions literally... Camus found in Kierkegaard an ideal model for an existentialism without God. The absence of God being so painful, the Absurd is the only way out.⁴⁹⁶

Simpson adds:

Though it is hard to say whether Camus had Kierkegaard particularly in mind when he developed his own concept of the absurd, there can be little doubt that Kierkegaard's knight of faith is in certain ways an important predecessor of Camus' Sisyphus: both figures are involved in impossible and endlessly agonizing tasks, which they nevertheless confidently and even cheerfully pursue.⁴⁹⁷

Parallels also appear in Camus and Kierkegaard's heroes. As one critic points out, "like Kierkegaard's heroes, Camus's heroes of absurd authenticity, 'obeying the flame,' commit 'the existential leap.'"⁴⁹⁸ Though they experience a sense of groundlessness, they cling to their mortality in a hope to conquer their fate, and their passion for authentic living fuels their affirmation of life. Even Camus admired, to an extent, Kierkegaard's nerve to engage with such arduous matters as the absurd, and he once 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."⁴⁹⁹ With these connections between Kierkegaard and Camus and Qohelet in place, the parallel between Camus and Qohelet's notions of the absurd as they relate to the maturation and vocation of the authentic individual can be better understood.

Kierkegaard gives various definitions of the absurd. He first introduces the concept through his interpretation of Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah. Abraham encounters the

⁴⁹⁶ Poole, 56.

⁴⁹⁷ Simpson, n. pag.

⁴⁹⁸ Golomb, 268.

⁴⁹⁹ Camus, *Myth*, 25.

absurd the moment he hears from God to kill Isaac, his promised son. This absurdity is a test that presents “the possibility of faith,”⁵⁰⁰ whether Abraham will choose to exist within the paradox of divine revelation (God’s command to sacrifice Isaac) and the universality of ethics (do not kill). As Kierkegaard puts it, “the possibility of faith presents itself in this form: whether he will believe by virtue of the absurd.”⁵⁰¹ Aware of the absurdity of sacrificing his own son, Abraham willingly obeys God, and chooses to live in the tensions of the “paradox of faith.” Thus in Abraham we see a “quintessence of faith,”⁵⁰² a faith that believes and acts “on the strength of the absurd.”⁵⁰³ In this, Abraham demonstrates the “leap” or “step of faith” which is, according to Kierkegaard, a “particular, personal, irrational, and absurd relationship to the divine.”⁵⁰⁴

In another definition, the absurd is a theological expression describing the nature of Jesus of Nazareth—the absolute paradox, the God-man. As the creator of time itself enters the temporal reality of a fallen world, he not only *enters* the absurd, but *becomes* absurd. The transcendence of God takes on full immanence, and as he falls to the human level, he exists as a paradoxical fact: “What, then, is the absurd? The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up. etc., has come into existence exactly as an individual human being, indistinguishable from any other human being...”⁵⁰⁵ In one of his journals, Kierkegaard describes the absurd in

⁵⁰⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, Trans. and ed. A. Dru (London: UP of Oxford, 1938), 238.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁰³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and trembling: Dialectical lyric by Johannes de silentio*. Trans. A. Hannay (London: Penguin, 1985), 65-70, 75-76, 83-85.

⁵⁰⁴ Bowker, 32.

⁵⁰⁵ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: UP of Princeton, 2000), 210.

similar terms as Camus, referencing human reason and the leveling of all human actions; but, unlike Camus, he affirms the essentiality of human action as a direct work of faith:

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 the 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 ... I must act, but reflection has closed the road so I take one of the possibilities and say: This is what I do, I cannot do otherwise because I am brought to a standstill by my powers of reflection.⁵⁰⁶

While both Camus and Kierkegaard certainly differ in religious beliefs, they both see themselves as “aliens” in the world.⁵⁰⁷ They also recognize that the absurd itself alienates man, and that he is not satisfied with this discovery. They do not eagerly find pleasure in the absurd, but view absurdity as “an undesirable, though *given* aspect of the human condition.”⁵⁰⁸ As a result of this dissatisfaction, they each seek the means to live authentically before of the truth of their limited reason and mortality, and underline that authentic existence consists of a continual awareness of their state of alienation. They both indirectly overcome this alienation by an assertion that man *belongs* in his absurd existence—that it is *in* the tensions of the absurd that man authentically exists; he finds his home in his state of homelessness.

But Camus rejects Kierkegaard’s theistic existentialism as a “destructive mode of thought,”⁵⁰⁹ a delusional attempt to “escape the antimony of the human condition” by

⁵⁰⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Alexander Dru (Oxford: UP of Oxford, 1938), n. pag.

⁵⁰⁷ Cooper, 8.

⁵⁰⁸ Jerry L. Curtis, “Albert Camus as Anti-existentialist,” *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 22.1 (1975), 117. Curtis, 117).

⁵⁰⁹ Richard Raskin, “Camus’s Critiques of Existentialism,” *Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy* 5 (2001), 162.

adopting “the great cry of hope.”⁵¹⁰ According to Camus, the Danish philosopher dishonestly evades the truth of the absurd by importing God and an afterlife; he depends on unjustifiable assertions of transcendence which may construct meaning and value. Camus’s main problem is that this imposed transcendence fraudulently eradicates the absurd; the belief in God is a superficial means of escape from the truth of what *is*. To insert God is to insert a false hope that unties the necessary tensions. Camus cannot accept theism because of his “distrust of ideas which deny the necessity for polarity as an inherent factor within the complex of man’s earthly predicament. Any attempt to evade this polarity is equated quite seriously to...self-deception” or “philosophical suicide.”⁵¹¹ In *Myth*, Camus describes this self-defeating method of Kierkegaard and other theistic existentialists: “Through an odd reasoning, starting out from the absurd over the ruins of reason, in a closed universe limited to the human, they [theistic existentialists] deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them.”⁵¹² Camus’s main complaint here is that theists, rather than accepting the “inescapable” absurdities of the human situation, attempt to “resolve the tensions.”⁵¹³ He claims that Kierkegaard does not “maintain the equilibrium,” but “wants to be cured.”⁵¹⁴ He also argues that revolt (i.e., living with the absurd constantly before one) requires both the awareness and presence of the absurd itself, which is composed of the polarity necessary for authentic living. Thus Camus’s primary objection with theism is that it negates authenticity when it asserts transcendence as a means to both evade absurdity and give meaning to life; the “leap of faith” to God’s side is an attempt to resolve the inescapable tensions of the

⁵¹⁰ Camus, *Myth*, 38-39.

⁵¹¹ Curtis, 113.

⁵¹² Camus, *Myth* 31.

⁵¹³ Curtis, 118.

⁵¹⁴ Camus, *Myth* 38.

human condition.

But in these accusations, Camus both misinterprets Kierkegaard's intentions and underestimates the continual paradoxes of existence, tensions that remain even for the man of faith. The individual still experiences what Kierkegaard calls the "strenuousness of faith."⁵¹⁵ Ultimately, it seems that Camus himself does not notice the affinities between himself and the "knight of faith." In both Kierkegaard and Qohelet, the tensions of the absurd are never resolved; the "leap of faith" to God does not immediately rescue them from the absurd situation. Instead, the very leap becomes a part of his absurd existence; it does not settle the absurd, it *is* the absurd. Though Camus claims that Kierkegaard finds hope and comfort in God because God resolves the paradoxes, Kierkegaard admits that he, like Qohelet, is only "a poor existing human being who neither eternally nor divinely, nor theocentrically is able to observe the eternal but must be content with existing;"⁵¹⁶ In this confession, Kierkegaard admits that he is incapable of knowing whether or not God resolves such paradoxes. Here, Kierkegaard echoes Qohelet's notion that even though human knowledge is limited and the mysteries of God remain unknown, man must keep living, working, and rejoicing. Kierkegaard's "strenuousness of faith" is evident in Qohelet's call to "fear God and keep his commands"⁵¹⁷ juxtaposed to the moments he hates existence;⁵¹⁸ he knows God is real, but he is still frustrated with life. Despite his uneasiness, he is still content in existing. Likewise, Kierkegaard realizes that his faith does not produce the comfort and certainty in knowing eternal truths; in fact, his faith complicates existence. He is still a limited mortal alienated

⁵¹⁵ Kierkegaard, "Subjective Truth, Inwardness: Truth is Subjectivity," in H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong (Trans. & Eds.), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript To Philosophical Fragments* (Volume 1, chap. 2) (Princeton: UP of Princeton, 1992), 210.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁵¹⁷ 12.13.

⁵¹⁸ 2.17.

from transcendence, and this reality still creates absurdity. Finite man must still exist within the “daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty.”⁵¹⁹ While Camus assumes that the “leap of faith” evades the absurd, it actually enhances it; to Kierkegaard, faith itself is the maker of paradoxes that confront the single individual. Rosanna Picascia offers an insightful and poetic description of these uncertainties of the paradox of faith:

Kierkegaard’s metaphor for faith consists not in a ship sitting calmly in fair weather, but rather, a ship that has sprung a leak and requires man to put all his efforts into keeping the ship afloat, all the while never seeking the harbor as a refuge. Living in faith is agreeing to exist in contradiction; it is agreeing to constantly reaffirm the battle of faith, not merely to acquire additional faith, but to maintain the faith that one has. Abiding in faith is agreeing to endure uncertainty despite the desire for objectivity. Only eternity can provide certainty; existence ‘has to be satisfied with a struggling certainty.’⁵²⁰

From these points, it seems that existing in the “paradox of faith” or tensions of the absurd is a vocation; it is a life-long calling to that single individual not only willing to confront the absurd, but to passionately live his temporal life in the face of it. Like Camus’s absurd heroes, Qohelet feels like an alien of this world, and he must come to terms with his finitude, with the absurd nature of his existence, and embrace, even without justification, the absurdity of his own faith in an invisible, transcendent reality. Scientific proofs, human reasoning, and personal experiences can only take him so far; he must eventually stand upon the edge and leap to an affirmation of life. In this leap, the absurd itself becomes a part of his being, and the more he remains in its tensions and refuses to resolve them, the more authentic he becomes.

Importantly, Kierkegaard and Qohelet remind us that the “battle of faith is a unending struggle for the existing individual. As faith grips tighter around the paradox, the only

⁵¹⁹ Kierkegaard, “Subjective Truth, Inwardness: Truth is Subjectivity,” 203.

⁵²⁰ Rosanna Picascia, “The Struggles of Faith: A Defense of Kierkegaard.” Conference lecture, GW University, April 2007.

certainty that increases is the certainty of uncertainty. Thus, the greater the faith, the greater the struggle; the greater the struggle, the greater the inwardness; the greater the inwardness, the greater the accent on existence.”⁵²¹ In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard portrays the struggle of faith as a difficult yet essential part of his existence; in retelling Abraham’s journey, he seeks to “describe the pain of the ordeal...to suck all the anxiety and distress and torment out of a father’s suffering in order to describe what Abraham suffered, although under it all he had faith.”⁵²² Like Sisyphus who embraces his labor on the mountain; like Meursault who finds the freedom to open himself up to the indifference of the world; like Caligula who longs for “the impossible” though remains condemned in his mortal body; and like Qohelet who finds that “all is *hebel*” but resolves to “accept his lot and rejoice in his toil,”⁵²³ the knight of faith is so consumed with his own struggle up the mountain that he does not focus on the hope or comfort in the eternal. Like Camus’s absurd man, he remains an alien in the world yet finds a certain “peace” in his “striving” for “conquest.”⁵²⁴ Picascia points out that Kierkegaard’s absurd hero defines his very existence by the tensions of absurd situations. He is not concerned with comfort and hope, because he is “too busy existing. While Camus claims that Kierkegaard’s faith in God is enough to ‘negate that anguish’ [of the absurd], Kierkegaard argues that the existing individual can never find consolation in the unknowable eternal; all ‘eternal truths’ appear as uncertainties.”⁵²⁵

⁵²¹ Ibid., n. pag.

⁵²² S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Trans & Ed. H.V. Hong & E. H. Hong (Princeton: UP of Princeton, 1983), 53.

⁵²³ 5.19.

⁵²⁴ Camus writes, “A stranger to myself and to the world, solely with a thought that negates itself as soon as it asserts, what is this condition in which I can have peace only by refusing to know and to live, in which the appetite for conquest bumps into walls that defy its assaults?” (*Myth 20*).

⁵²⁵ Picascia, n. pag.

Likewise, Qohelet does not find immediate solace in the hope of transcendence, but resolves to exist in the tensions that define his humanness on this earth. Though he longs for unity, seeks explanations for injustice, and hopes to reconcile an absurd reality offensive to his expectations and desires, he finds no immediate answer. Richard Hillier correctly points out that like Kierkegaard, Qohelet is uncertain of his future, but does not fraudulently seek escape from absurdity via an “anxious flight away from the world to a Higher Being, but by a still plumbing of the depths of the situation as it is.”⁵²⁶ Camus and Qohelet face their predicament without the certainty of eternity, for “being ‘swallowed up in his God’ belies a solace that is nonexistent.”⁵²⁷ As Kierkegaard argues centuries after Qohelet and several decades before Camus, the single individual “can never rest in the certitude of the universal; he is constantly battling objective uncertainty.”⁵²⁸ Further, Qohelet affirms that authentic existence is not solely found by seeking God “as a Being situated ‘out there’ to whom we may fly away from the world in times of need and extremity, but as the Ground of all being,” the Being who is “encountered precisely as we engage in... ‘a deeper immersion in existence.’”⁵²⁹

Through his absurd heroes—Sisyphus, Meursault, Caligula, and Cherea—and their encounters with the absurdity of life, Camus paints a vivid image of the alienated individual striving for authenticity. Knowingly or not, he expresses the spiritual weariness born of the human need for meaning, a desire that echoes universally—a longing that Qohelet expressed centuries earlier. These figures exist with an intense awareness that human knowledge is

⁵²⁶ Richard Hillier, *Reading Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to the Bible’s Strangest Book* www.rjhillier.net/content/html (3 March 2011).

⁵²⁷ Picascia, n. pag.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Hillier, n. pag.

limited, that this world disappoints, that life is short, but, most importantly, that these realizations may compel man to make the most of his brief existence, to freely embrace his love of life, and that their absurd confrontation provides the opportunity to live in honesty. Camus is like Qohelet in that he shares a deep concern for his existence and the dignity of his life without any justifiable foundation. They each remind us that the “absurd element is essential to life,”⁵³⁰ and that authentic living must make room for life’s sense of meaninglessness, that “absurdity is...not something to ‘overcome’, but rather to recognize and live with.”⁵³¹

⁵³⁰ Hardy, 372.

⁵³¹ Cooper, 150.

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