

Intersubjectivity and Coping with Absurdity

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Intersubjectivity and Coping with Absurdity

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Introduction

Why does existentialism remain such a popular philosophical and cultural force if, as many have contended, it only envisions, and even promotes, despair and suffering? Perhaps this is because existentialism recognizes innate truths about human experience that speaks to people in a way that transcends time. Perhaps this is because it is not existentialism that leads to despair, but the world itself which does, and existentialism merely gives a name to the sense of dread and un-belonging that so many identify with. The term “existentialism” has come to take on many connotations, some grounded in philosophical origins, while others are more pithy declarations of adolescent angst. Regardless, there is seemingly something inherently true and profound at the core of existentialism, as evidenced by its continued popularity beyond the realms of academia.

But, existentialism, as a philosophical approach, is not a monolithic notion. In actuality, it is a retrospective label for varied works by thinkers who chose to examine existence itself with radical skepticism. As such, existentialism is often accused of being overly nihilistic, a contrarian approach to the world that denies everything and laughs at the suggestion of stable meaning and consistency. This dramatized understanding of existentialism fails to consider the whole truth of existentialism, overlooking the nuances that allow it to be, as Jean-Paul Sartre so famously proclaimed, a form of humanism.¹ Sartre’s claim for the “humanistic” nature of existentialism is evidence that these theories reveal the truth of human existence. They speak to the feelings of agony and anguish that many are all too familiar with, but fail to confront, instead busying themselves with the mundane nature of daily life in order to escape the terror of pure understanding. Conversely, existentialism forces one to come face to face with fears they have long ignored, and others that they never considered. Existentialism is therefore a double-edged

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” *Existentialism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2005)

sword, presenting people with confirmation and truth, as well as terror. It is the terror of utter freedom and the eschewing of all meaning that most find shocking, and thus these are often the only aspects of this rich philosophy that people focus on. Unfortunately, too often existentialism is not remembered for the profound truths it expresses and the way it confirms our innate feelings, but solely for its more reductive and nihilist elements.

Thus, the aim of this deep exploration of existentialism is to save it from neglect and from poor interpretations. Such analysis will hopefully demonstrate the tangible and practical outcomes of Existentialism and reveal its empowering nature. This process must necessarily start at the beginning, with part one providing a thorough definition of and introduction to existential philosophy. It then moves into a full analysis of the differences between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, two of the most significant figures within the existentialist movement. Camus's concept of "the absurd" is compared to Sartre's emphasis on the liberating freedom of existentialism as a vehicle for understanding the fundamental differences between these two authors. In part two, Sartre and Camus's brief treatments of interpersonal relationships are also considered, through a comparison of Sartre's master/slave dialectic and Camus's more ambiguous, but also more uplifting depictions of social life. A review of these differences leads us to the conclusion that Camus's worldview and concept of meaningful existence provides a more accurate portrayal of life that maintains the spirit of the existential approach by simply questioning existence itself, instead of searching for solutions. However, ultimately, Camus's theories fall short of providing a satisfying description of the world, for he is unable to provide a way of coping with the existential truths he unveils. This is discussed in part three, where we also explore how he offers an incomplete analysis of interpersonal relationships. Camus touches

on the fact that our existence is predicated on understanding the self in the context of others, but never provides a clear, unified outlook on the role of the Other. In part four, it becomes necessary to turn more fully to the theme of what phenomenologists call ‘intersubjectivity,’ the notion of fundamental interrelatedness with others. This is discerned largely via analysis of Emmanuel Levinas’s theories. Levinas was a phenomenological thinker whose work includes fundamental underpinnings that bring him close to Camus’s existentialist viewpoint, and indeed supplement it in important ways. His theory of “the face of the Other” richly describes the fundamental, magnetic nature of interpersonal attachments. By applying Levinas’s work on intersubjectivity to Camus’s existential framework, we are finally able to crystalize a theory of the Other within the context of absurdity. In the end, it is evident that Camus’s absurdism need not lead to despair, but can be the basis for meaning-making if we choose to attend to our relationship with the Other.

Chapter One: Understanding Absurdity

I. The Human Condition is Absurd (6-7)

Albert Camus defines the absurd in myriad ways throughout “The Myth of Sisyphus.” The effect of these overlapping, yet ambiguous descriptions is to define the multi-layered nature of the absurd. Camus asserts, “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”² This internal conflict comes from the fact that while humans have an inherent drive for concrete meaning in their lives, the world refuses us an answer. The world is not ordered to give clarity and meaning to the instance of our being, yet humans will for these things with a force beyond their control. The indifference of the universe feels to us like a communication barrier: “between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled.”³ This is inherently a constitutive issue, as we struggle to define ourselves before and against the unreasonable nature of the world. The universe refuses to provide evidence of any significance to being, yet we cannot let go of this illogical hope.

Camus also states that the, “divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of the absurd.”⁴ The location of absurd experience is thus between the world and the self, and is born out of disconnect between the individual’s expectations from the world and the way the world is actually experienced. Camus concludes that these two perspectives, and their associated suppositions and beliefs, are constitutively incongruous. This becomes a deeply personal struggle, as the individual tries to resist the indifference of the universe and find meaning. Initially leaving us feeling empty and marginalized, we must find a way to understand

² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 1942. Trans. Justin O'Brien (Vintage Books, 1991) 28.

³ Ibid, 19.

⁴ Ibid, 6.

the absurd world, and subsequently, to cope. This internal struggle profoundly impacts one's worldview and will be considered in further detail throughout this first chapter.

II. Existentialism v. Absurdism (7-14)

Camus's philosophy of the absurd is related to, but not synonymous with, the form of existentialism found in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialist philosophers. These thinkers emphasized lived philosophy and thus focused on the concrete questions of embodied existence, in contrast to the metaphysical and epistemological inquiries that dominated the nineteenth century. Existentialism is thus a philosophical doctrine that privileges the individual perspective and generally accepts that the world lacks profound, God-given meaning. Sartre's particular existential doctrine rejects belief in God and emphasizes human freedom and agency, calling the individual to embrace the meaninglessness of the world in order that they may independently assert and define his or her personhood. Camus would agree with this invocation of individuality and would assert that one cannot begin from anywhere but his or her own experience. Sartre considers this in terms of individual existence: "just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself."⁵ Sartre believes that all individuals are deeply, intrinsically independent with a sense of agency that is meant to be realized. Moreover, for Sartre, this is within the reach of all those who can embrace the demands and responsibility of crafting one's own life. Camus begins to differentiate himself from Sartre on this point, as he maintains that there is an inherent limit to our capacity for free and responsible action, due to the insurmountable fact that we are "thrown" into the world.⁶ Thus, Camus maintains that the final account of our ceaseless quest for meaning is tragic.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Being and Nothingness," *Existentialism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2005) 22.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Being as Such: Falling and Thrownness." *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Harper and Row, 1962) 219–224.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre defends his notion of freedom, stating that he does not mean that a prisoner is free in the literal sense. Instead, he claims that “he is always free to try to escape (or get himself liberated); that is, that whatever his condition may be, he can project his escape.”⁷ The prisoner retains his ability to resist and project his desires over and above the situation that constrains him. Sartre states that his formulation of freedom “compels us to abandon at once the distinction between the intention and the act.”⁸ Here, he makes it clear that existential freedom comes from a liberated mind, able to imagine all possibilities. He takes on an “if you can dream it, you can do it” attitude here which, while empowering, comes up against real and significant barriers. Sartre acknowledges that the “brute being” of things-in-themselves pose an “obstacle” to being, creating a “situation” in which freedom appears to come to its limits.⁹ However, he asserts that the situation is rendered possible if one merely reevaluates it. The freedom to choose to look at the instance differently leads to the conclusion that “man encounters an obstacle only within the field of his freedom.”¹⁰ This is another way of saying that the primacy of freedom remains intact. In turn, Sartre implies that individuality is always radically self-created. Since the meaning of all obstacles is derived from our own perspective, as determined by our freedom, such obstacles “reveal to me the way in which I stand in relation to the ends which I assign myself.”¹¹ He believes that the only restrictions on freedom are those that we create for ourselves. Sartre thus concludes, “The essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom.”¹² Our existence is irrevocably tied to our being, and therefore cannot be taken away from us. Thus, Sartre’s position is that to exist is to be unconditionally free.

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” *Existentialism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2005) 240.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹² *Ibid.*, 243.

While this phenomenological account elucidates Sartre's claims, the notion that the individual independently creates all meaning passes too quickly over the relationship between self and world that is central to both Camus' work and core to the way existence is actually perceived and lived. Identity necessarily exists within the interchange between self and world, therefore treating the individual as though he or she lived in a vacuum; independent of the limitations and interactions that condition life, is not a true look at embodied experience. Camus ultimately takes up a more nuanced assessment of the world, asserting that there is more to human life than simple, unhampered freedom, acknowledging that man is also influenced by his context. As such, he contends one does not "make" his or herself despite the world, but in accordance with it. Camus understands that we are all influenced by a myriad of factors, and thus honors existential freedom, but tempers his definition of it. Camus's understanding of interpersonal and contextual influences will be further assessed in parts two and three.

Another lens through which one can analyze Sartre and Camus is the personal versus the collective. Sartre asserts that thinking from a subjective perspective leads to the inevitable truth of "man's inability to transcend human subjectivity."¹³ As such, we can only choose rightly and justly for ourselves. We cannot pretend to understand matters beyond our purview. This leads Sartre to contend that man, "in choosing himself, is choosing for all men."¹⁴ This implies that one is making the only possible choice based on their narrow understanding, and therefore this decision must stand for all of us. The subjective perspective is thus inherently limited but, as it is our only means of understanding, the individual choice always implies the universal one. In crafting one's ideal self-image, one makes a choice that would be good and equal for all, the image of how all should be. This is not an invitation to explore the interpersonal, but rather raises

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Being and Nothingness," *Existentialism*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 24.

the individual to a God-like role, placing him or her outside and above all other individuals. It is essential to understand that Sartre's notion of "universal choice" is a metaphorical one. By 'choosing for others,' he simply emphasizes that the onus each of us has is to choose well, as if one's choices were to be applied for all people, in essence, to become the moral standard. Here, he is invoking the Kantian notion of moral responsibility proclaimed in the Categorical Imperative: "Act only according to the maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law."¹⁵ Thus, he is drawing on foundational philosophy to argue for a compulsory interpersonal responsibility that is grounded in freedom itself. Further, in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses how freedom comes with significant responsibility: "he is the one by whom it happens that there is a world; since he is the one who makes himself be."¹⁶ We are each the author of our own world, and Sartre contends that even in hardships, in relationships with others, and in facing obstacles, the situation belongs to us, because we create the world as a reflection of ourselves, imbued with individual perspective. This total responsibility for the self, to deal with the fact of one's abandonment in the world, then reflects onto others.¹⁷ Sartre states that our interactions with others take the form of our freedom encountering other freedoms, which appear as "transcendences-transcended" which we are bound to face as, "opportunities and chances."¹⁸ Such a view suggests a way of life that diminishes the subjectivity of the Other, for it posits other individuals as mere "conditions" or "situations," simply artifacts of the world. It sees the Other as a thing to be overcome by personal freedom and will. Perhaps the existentialists believe that God is dead, but Sartre appears to assign individuals into the same unqualified position of power and freedom otherwise reserved for God. Each of us is his or her own moral standard affirming

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, "Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals," 1785. Trans. James Ellington. (Hackett Publishing Company, 1993) 30.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," *Existentialism*, 252.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 254.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 255.

his or her own freedom, but nonetheless remains in tension with others, subsequently subjugating their will and freedom to our own. As such, Sartre neglects plurality and posits sociality as an endless conflict.

Thus, existentialism is a radical defense of individualism. Sartre is able to recognize that existence does not operate in theoretical space. He asserts that one who accepts existentialism “cannot be anything unless others acknowledge him as such.”¹⁹ This means that we always desire recognition from the Other. If we cannot achieve this, we must view the Other as an obstacle to our freedom, or a tool to craft and define oneself. The Other is thus diminished to the role of object, a mere player in the life of the subject, the “I.” He thus states, “the other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself.”²⁰ At the end of the day, “man decides what he is and what others are.”²¹

This definition should be challenged, as it does not represent a genuine communing with other beings. Instead, it accentuates the singular power of the individual and elevates subjectivism. If the Other is either an obstacle or a tool in pursuit of self-actualization, there is neither reason nor means to recognize the subjective experience of the Other, and in turn no authentic community is recognized that is not plurality of competing freedoms. Yet, existence cannot be fully contemplated without considering the genuine interaction between self and world, which imbues it with meaning. Sartre underplays this fine distinction because he is convinced of the radical freedom of the subject, which leads him to understand the interpersonal strictly in terms of opposed freedoms. In short, the question of the world is only a secondary concern.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Being and Nothingness,” *Existentialism*, 41.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 41.

²¹ *Ibid*, 42.

Camus, unlike Sartre, does not provide any doctrinal declarations or prescriptions for how to best live one's life. He contends that the absurd is an inescapable experience, by which our existence has the form of an unending relationship between world and self. If the absurd is rooted in such a liaison, then existence is inherently a personal endeavor, about which no sweeping claims can be made. Sartre's assertions incorrectly equate the common experience of "thrownness"²² in the world with the precondition of collective human experience. Sartre inadvertently denies individual authenticity by assuming a universal experience. Conversely, Camus would posit that the absurd individual does not "choose for all men," but makes a choice within the narrow scope of his existence. In absurdity, one embraces his or her existence against the thought of suicide – there at the limit of all possible choices – and in doing so affirms his or her individual identity. The primary virtue of Camus' position is his hesitancy to make collectivist claims and his emphasis on explaining the general relationship between the individual and his or her world, instead of creating an overarching theory of human experience. This approach both reaffirms the individuality of existence and is capable of recognizing the rich diversity of humanity.

Sartre's advocacy for radical self-determination is well represented in his famous assertion, "you are free, so choose."²³ He details two necessary consequences of this: we begin in abandonment, which can lead to anguish and despair.²⁴ Abandonment in the world is the notion that "we, ourselves, who decide who we are to be."²⁵ There is no longer an overarching system of values or ethics that can provide grounding; rather it is up to the individuals to unilaterally form themselves. This leads to anguish before such an enormous task. Despair, then, is the

²² Martin Heidegger, "Being as Such: Falling and Thrownness." *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Harper and Row, 1962) 219–224.

²³ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Being and Nothingness," *Existentialism*, 33.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 34.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 34.

recognition of the restrictions implicit in a finite existence. We learn that “we must limit ourselves to reckoning only with those things that depend on our will, or on the set of probabilities that enable action.”²⁶ The emphasis should be directed towards the temporal and the concrete, as these are the tools for defiant self-determination. Yet, one may rightly ask whether this narrow conception of the relation between self and world provides room to pose the fundamental questions of philosophy that emerge from the confrontation with the ineffable. Sartre philosophy is one of action, a formula for tackling the meaningless void of the world. While this awakens us to the illogical and careless nature of the world, something is lost in a theory that seeks to quickly answer the question of the absurd. Sartre recognizes the absurd and the suffering that comes with it, but chooses to emphasize the ways in which we can overcome the nature of our existence, rather than how awareness of the absurd may positively shape our identity. The question of whether his decision signals a cowardly withdrawal from difficult insights or is a selective choice to narrow the field of inquiry is beyond the scope of this paper. Either way, the outcome is the same, as Sartre avoids confrontation with the absurdity of existence, while Camus immerses himself in the tension and banality.

Camus himself resisted the label of existentialism. He was not alone in this, as it has often been applied posthumously to earlier authors, who would have balked at the notion of their writings being turned into doctrine, such as Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. These philosophers, with quasi-existentialist ideals, sought to challenge conventional thinking and incite change, and would have feared reducing any philosophical discussion to a movement with established principles. The point was to engage and question, and both Camus and Sartre should be put to this test as well. Camus appears to adhere more strongly to this critical rigor, as he prescribes no answers, but instead opens the mind and questions conventional wisdom. He

²⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Being and Nothingness,” *Existentialism*, 34.

challenges our worldview without making significant speculations as to how one should go about living. In this way, it is perhaps appropriate to view Camus as more stringent about the parameters of the existential project, and more focused on individual experience than doctrine.

The core difference between existentialism and absurdism lies in how these theories deal with the meaninglessness and startlingly indifferent nature of the world. Sartre advocates for finding power and individuality through this understanding, and contends that the individual determines and asserts his or her selfhood. Thus, one faces their abandonment and works through it to assert their existence over and above it. In doing so, the world, and the Other as an implicit part of it, is relegated to the background. Conversely, Camus's theory focuses on the interplay between such a futile world and the self as he or she searches for meaning. As an extension of this, Camus honors the importance of interpersonal relationships in shaping our experiences and acknowledges that all people have a fundamental need to connect with others.²⁷ Camus's formulation of the absurd does not seek to become a dogma or a prescription for how to lead one's life. Absurdism instead emphasizes acceptance of the essential suffering that comes from confrontation with our meaningless existence. His only command is that we sit with this internal discomfort in order to understand our own existence better. While both of philosophers believe in radical self-determination, they each have a distinct notion of how one interacts with the absurd or groundless nature of existence. This preliminary distinction between Camus and Sartre is essential to understanding how absurdism presents a nuanced and mature version of the central insights more often associated with Sartre's existentialism.

III. In Defense of an Absurd Worldview (14-22)

Camus primarily draws on the work of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers to ground his arguments. These philosophers have been posthumously labeled as existentialists, for

²⁷ Camus view of interpersonal relationships, in conjunction with the absurd, will be discussed further in part two.

together, as Camus notes, they explore how humans experience their own existence. These authors, namely Jaspers, Shestov, and Kierkegaard, all acknowledged the chaotic and ineffable nature of the world. Their response to this inevitable truth, according to Camus, was to “deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them.”²⁸ In many cases, this approach leads to an escape from the absurd truth of existence into religion, or at least mystical thinking. Jaspers resolves the absurd by stating that the “absurd becomes god.”²⁹ In a religious tone, he asserts that one cannot use reasoning to understand the mysteries of the world and that an embrace of our inherent lack of understanding liberates us from an absurd state. Shestov similarly states that existence is intelligible up to a limit, after which the laws of nature “turn against themselves to give birth to the absurd.”³⁰ Shestov’s solution is to accept the seemingly irrational nature of the world and actively cease our search for meaning. He believes that there exist limits to human understanding that preclude us from accessing the truth, and thus we turn to God as the provider of truth and meaning. Camus accuses each of these authors of conflating the irrational with God as an attempt to “solve” the absurd. The problem hitherto has been an inability to “live with one’s ailments”³¹ and to maintain the tense balance between the self and the world, which defines the absurd. While Camus appreciates the questions that these thinkers move through, he sharply criticizes their collective tendency to provide an answer to absurdity. This tendency seeks to resolve the conflict and thus ease the struggle of life, but goes too far, erasing the struggle all together, and thus, turns us away from the experience of the absurd itself.

This exegesis of early existential theories provides significance and historical relevance to Camus’ task. His claim that the human experience is absurd is not a hollow axiomatic

²⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 32.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 33.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

³¹ *Ibid*, 38.

declaration of a post-religious society. Camus' argument is deeply rooted in the ethos of the early twentieth century. It builds on an age-old question revitalized by Heidegger: "why are there beings at all instead of nothing?"³² As well as exploring Nietzsche's notion that suffering can serve as a vehicle to meaning making.³³ Thus, Camus's notion of absurdity can be interpreted as a new perspective on questions that are in fact well known, but remain resistant to answers. He readily accepts the "thrownness" of our existence, as Heidegger would say.³⁴ However, he proposes that one should not only consider how they experience the world, but also what meaning the world may provide to them. One must perceive a broader view of existence, as the relationship between the abyss of the world and the reasonable individual. In this reformulation of the existentialist project, there is no room for solutions because the true fact of existence resides precisely in this dichotomous relationship and can never be "solved."

Therefore, Camus values clear-eyed authenticity, over and above other elements of existentialist thinking. Whereas Sartre's response is to emphasize the importance of freedom, Camus's criticisms of these authors demonstrates that he primarily values a precise and honest understanding of the individual's position within the world. He seeks to avoid solutions to the absurdity of the world, as he clearly views these as inauthentic ways of confronting the absurd. Sartre's philosophy of freedom and self-realization is already a "solution," for it avoids prolonged, direct confrontation with the absurd and the suffering that comes with it. Those who would follow him would learn, much too quickly, that there is not only freedom, but also the power to execute it. Camus asks more questions than he answers, because his primary project is

³² Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Plot. (Yale University Press, 2000) 1.

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," *Existentialism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2005) 40.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, "Being as Such: Falling and Thrownness." *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Harper and Row, 1962) 219–224.

to awaken the individual to absurd truth and his vision is one that refrains from supposing it can be solved. While this lack of solutions will ultimately be unsatisfying in the context of lived philosophy, one must appreciate the philosophical impetus of Camus's work, as he strives for authenticity with an approach that values questions over answers.

This is not to say that Camus rejects reason and rationality as the basis of the philosophical argument. He only criticizes the multiple "leaps" of logic that are taken in the arguments of thinkers like Kierkegaard, Shestov, and Jaspers – and presumably Sartre – who are too eager for solutions. Still, Camus's project is not to deride the structure of these other arguments, but rather to imbue them with an understanding of modern experience. Thus, he posits that all humans are reasonable beings encountering a world that is, "neither so rational nor so irrational. It is unreasonable and only that."³⁵ Irrational can be taken here to mean things or events that lack logic and predictability. They are not governed by rules or patterns of any kind. The absurd world is therefore not irrational precisely because it is predictable: it consistently treats all people with indifference and shows us its meaninglessness. Unreasonable, however, has an altogether different tone, as it is defined as "behaving in a way that is not fair or sensible."³⁶ It is easy to see that world is absolutely unreasonable, as it lacks any and all empathy that would imbue it with the sensitivity to consider what may be just or fair. This places us in constant confrontation with something that is unreasonable to us, which therefore cannot be further dissected or analyzed. Thus, the absurd does not rest on a presupposition of irrationality, for it maintains unifying logic and underlying patterns. Instead, the absurd is dependent on the inability of humans to understand the world into which we are thrown, for our sense of what is "reasonable," is rejected by the absurdity of the world.

³⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 49.

³⁶ From the Collins Dictionary, Harper Collins Publishers.

Camus provides multiple examples of the absurd from daily life. He utilizes these examples to more thoroughly illustrate and clarify his thesis. He defines the absurd, for example, as “the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photographs.”³⁷ Here one sees the schism between one’s self-image and the foreign representation of our selves that the world throws back at us. One recognizes that one’s face as his or her own; yet they feel distant from and cannot fully understand their reflected self.

Camus proposes that this also occurs when observing others. He states that all people “secrete the inhuman.”³⁸ It is in these moments we see the strangeness of the individual, the fact that he or she is at once an embodied thing; another object in my world, and simultaneously a subjective being – feeling, observing, and thinking as I do. He provides the example of a man speaking on the phone: “a man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive.”³⁹ This example particularly highlights the deficit between the action and desired effect. The man is talking on the phone to articulate a point, to communicate a message, or to connect with someone. To him, his action is a means to an end. But from an outside perspective, his actions appear out of context, almost in a vacuum, and thus, are reduced to nothing. The observer sees through what his actions are trying to represent, and with this mere change in perspective is reminded that all which is said and done is truly inconsequential due to the meaninglessness of life. Camus also calls this feeling “nausea,”⁴⁰ and states that this is the feeling of the absurd.

³⁷ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 15.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 14.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 15.

⁴⁰ In Sartre’s “Nausea,” he posits nausea as the experience of understanding pure being. This is an expression in the Heideggerian vein, understanding the endless, inescapable nature of existence. Thus, Sartre’s “nausea” focuses on the vastness of existence, and as an extension, its endless possibilities for human beings, while Camus’s understanding of the same term reflects a genuine understanding of the meaninglessness and emptiness of our

Of course, numerous examples of the absurd are readily apparent within one's own life as well. Upon reflection, we are frequently met with the silence of the world, with the unending refutation of our desire for clarity and meaning. A common example is childhood cancer, as it is a fatal, unexplained travesty. We all desire a reason for why the cancer occurred, and a simple biological explanation cannot suffice. Further, we tend to appeal to the corrupt nature of humankind when attempting to explain a terrible fate. One may justify the suffering of an individual by claiming that they were morally depraved or had previously committed some injustice. Even if this explanation is faulty, for it is predicated on a just and meaningful world, it is not applicable to those with childhood cancer, due to the tender and innocent age of the afflicted. Other examples of senseless loss of life follow the same pattern. In instances of mass shootings and genocide, the initial response of both the public and the media is to focus on the shooter. Why did this happen? What were his motives? Were there warning signs? One attempts to explain away the absurdity seen in the sheer magnitude of loss. It is particularly unsettling when these questions are left unanswered, as they were in the most recent mass shootings in Las Vegas and at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. A concrete motive was never identified, thus the public is forced to contemplate the catastrophic nature of the event, unable to evade the experience of the absurd through appeal to a motive. This is the silence of the world before the great suffering of humankind.

If the absurd is truly characterized by utter indifference, the universe must also be silent before matters of great joy. One sees this in the fleeting nature of truly joyful moments, as time seems to run faster when one is experiencing bliss. There is always an unsaid sadness in such moments, as one recognizes the transient nature of such happiness. One notices that not only is

finitude. Thus, these terms should not be taken to mean the same thing, and here one should consider Camus's connotations for this term.

such contentment unable to be contained; there is no absolute promise that one will ever experience such joy again. This realization acknowledges that moments of joy are not rewards from the universe for enduring times of suffering, but instead are simply contingencies. In an absurd world, experiences of goodness and joy are equal to experiences of deep anguish. And so we see that moments of pure happiness, in which one forgets the harsher realities of existence, do not substantiate counter-arguments to an absurd world, but are in fact evidence for it. These moments are as arbitrary and fleeting as instances of suffering. If these experiences are objectively considered together, one sees that the world is intensely indifferent and that life is truly a series of contingencies.

Another element of the absurd experience that is readily seen in daily life is the discrepancy between one's self-image and the image of the individual that the absurd world reveals. This results in a discord within the individual, as one encounters two contrasting images of the self. Such a break in the self creates the feeling of disengagement from one's own existence. This brings to mind the notion of the "unheimlich," or the uncanny, which was proposed by Nietzsche and later taken up by Sigmund Freud. The uncanny is the feeling of not being at home with oneself, for things are at once familiar, but maintain a sense of un-belonging. Freud states, "The uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimlich*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it."⁴¹ He provides numerous examples, all united by the underlying feeling of something disturbing and unsettling because it reminds us of something familiar, but does not quite fit with our experience. These examples include life-like dolls, random events that appear meaningful after the fact, and accidentally retracing ones steps. Freud, being a psychoanalyst, emphasizes the repressed memories that

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (The Hogarth Press, 1956) 245.

contribute to the feeling of the uncanny, but his greater claims can be readily applied to existential philosophy. What he reveals is the fact that our perception of our existence is readily challenged by the world. In essentially the same way as the absurd, the uncanny breaks our perception of self and challenges the normally accepted fact that our movement through time is linear and progressive. The absurd/the uncanny serves as a disruption to the ease of an unanalyzed life, forcing one to confront their flawed self-conception and their place within the world. Moments in which we experience the absurd/the uncanny remind us that the world is not ordered to our needs and projections. The self-constructed individual who has crafted his identity is reminded that the meanings he has created are ultimately transient, that the world has no internal logic, and that life is a meaningless string of contingencies.

The uncanny is therefore merely the name for the daily experience of discord between who we want to be and who we truly are. This uncanny quality is evident in other situations, such as when one hears the sound of his or her recorded voice. One often dislikes their own voice and believes that it sounds nothing like them. One is also often unsettled by photos of themselves from the past, as they depict who one was, not who they currently are. Immediately, one identifies the image in the photos as both “me” and “not me.” It is a haunting feeling to be depicted in a way that does not match one’s sense of self. Again, one’s internal idea of self, laden with meaning and connections to the world, is confronted with an external “thing,” whether it is a sound or photo, which purports to be “us” as well. This external representation is one-dimensional, not rich with meaning and life, as our self-perception certainly is. Much of this uncanny feeling thus comes from seeing the self out of context, reduced to a thing or object. This highlights the absurdity that comes from our continual expectation for depth and meaning in the world, which can only answer be answered by the indiscriminate nature of existence.

There are other experiences that help us understand the same point, such as the disconnect within the self that occurs in instances of déjà vu, during which one has a feeling of familiarity, yet cannot place their memory within the realm of their conscious past. Insomnia similarly threatens the internal relationship of the self. The individual desperately seeks sleep, an escape from conscious existence. However, they instead remain awake, forced to continue their encounter with the world. The individual keeps himself or herself from their nightly respite from existence. These instances reveal moments in which we are not who and what we think ourselves to be. This experience discloses the truth that the individual is not merely self-determined. The cold indifference of the world relentlessly greets the individual, denying him or her the possibility of their self-determined existence, answering only with the necessity of the absurd.

The claim that the world is absurd is thus strongly substantiated through daily experiences. The world continually demonstrates its indifference and endlessly challenges our false sense of self. Additionally, once one begins to parse the threads of Camus's argument, it becomes clear that his project includes an attempt to clarify and critique previous existential works. It is true that he approaches these works from a new perspective, but is in fact taking up the same questions that philosophers have been asking for centuries. His theories, at their core, concern the experience of being and how we are to understand the "thrownness"⁴² of our existence. The silence of the universe and the feeling of discord within the self highlight the indifference of the world and are felt daily by the individual. These uncanny moments, coupled with our unreasonable expectations, come to define the absurd.

⁴² Martin Heidegger, "Being as Such: Falling and Thrownness." *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Harper and Row, 1962) 219–224.

IV. The Question of Suicide (23-24)

Armed with an understanding of what an absurd life entails, one must then consider how to live with an absurd mindset. How does one cope with an absurd existence? And how does the absurdity of the world impact our experience? Camus is concerned not just with the philosophical doctrine, but also with the implications of an absurd world on the meaning of life. He begins “Myth of Sisyphus” with the bold assertion that, “judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”⁴³ He is interested in exploring if life is worth the effort if it is inherently bereft of meaning. From his perspective, it is a question of whether “the Absurd dictate[s] death.”⁴⁴ The terms are stark: is suicide necessarily the answer if we acknowledge the absurdity of the world? Camus recognizes that those who commit suicide necessarily believe that life is not worth living, but he nonetheless maintains that this is not necessarily the only outcome of an absurd existence. He concludes that, for many, there is little link between the meaningfulness of life and choice of whether or not to kill oneself.⁴⁵ Per Camus, the absurdity of the world does not necessitate suicide, for many contend that life is both meaningless and worth living. Camus states, “The real effort is to stay there,”⁴⁶ to bear the burden of absurd truth without bending under its weight. Grasping the truth of existence leads to two fates: “suicide or recovery”⁴⁷ – or succumbing versus embracing. Camus contends that the answer to this essential question of philosophy is necessarily the latter, stoically remaining in a world that continually denies us the meaning we crave.

With this response, Camus fails to formulate a convincing argument that is cohesive with lived experience. Firstly, he seemingly takes on the perspective that one does not, and should

⁴³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

not, commit suicide simply because it is “not worth it.” He assumes that life is worth living in the face of the absurd simply because we are already alive, and might as well continue living. He treats this as a rational choice, proposing that we might as well remain along a path of disappointment rather than succumbing to nothingness. This fails to take into account the emotional nature to an act like suicide and utilizes a cost/benefit analysis, which is again inconsistent with human thought. Secondly, he takes for granted that resisting suicide inherently gives life meaning. It is not necessarily true that those who contemplate or attempt suicide ever “recover” to the point of existential freedom and liberation. Many remain in the cycle of destructive thoughts and can never again fully engage with the world in the same way. He appears to presume that all individuals must come to this breaking point in order to truly understand absurdity and find meaning in the struggle. Again, this is incongruous with daily life, and beyond that, a dangerous assertion to make. Thus, Camus’s argument against suicide remains unconvincing, though it remains essential to accept his conclusion that life is worth living if we are to continue to parse his theory. Thus, let us next explore how Camus views life after acceptance of absurdity.

V. Living with the Absurd (24-31)

“The absurd man,” according to Camus, lives with absurd truth as self-evident, but does not let it consume them. Absurdity is neither rejected by this person, nor controlling of them. Camus states, “Their truth must be preserved, which consists in not being satisfied. He does not want preaching.”⁴⁸ Again, the most important aspect of an absurd life is the equilibrium between the drive and desire for certainty and an understanding of the chaotic, irrational nature of the world. Camus continues to reassert the importance of authenticity and honesty through his resistance to doctrinal messages about how to live one’s life. The task of the absurd individual is

⁴⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 49.

therefore to preserve and revel in the truth, never succumbing to the abyss of meaninglessness, nor worshipping false idols to spare suffering. Camus states, “living is keeping the absurd alive”⁴⁹ in order to keep the truth in front of you, instead of escaping from it. This tension, however, is unpleasant, as it does not afford any satisfying adages, but instead encourages one to be cognizant of the truth and become comfortable in the absurd.

One may perhaps question why it is essential to understand and accept absurd truth or inquire what can possibly be appealing about confronting it. The warm embrace of ignorance may constantly beckon us, but we must recognize that we will never find truth within it. Once discovered, one cannot retreat into a comfortable state of ignorance, precisely because one has now been awakened to the truth of existence. An individual cannot un-learn the absurdity of existence, and must therefore begin to cope with it. Secondly, one must consider the historical perspective. By the mid twentieth century, when Sartre and Camus were gaining notoriety, the death of God was a widely understood notion, if not one that was universally accepted. Many were beginning to doubt the conservative status quo and develop a sense of agency in response to the World Wars and radical social change. Camus was also a member of the Communist party and was constantly considering the political and social ramifications of his theories. In light of this, his emphasis on the truth becomes a call to arms, urging individuals to become empowered by the truth in order to reassert their individuality.

Thus, per Camus, there are three different outcomes from embracing struggle: revolt, freedom, and passion. Everyday confrontation with the absurd requires revolt because the call of death always threatens to “settle the absurd,”⁵⁰ promising quiet comfort in nonexistence. Suicide is an indulgence in the world’s meaninglessness. In Camus view, this is not the way to confront

⁴⁹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 54.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 54.

the world, for it is a denial of personal agency and avoids confrontation with the absurd. Our rightful state thus becomes one of defiance. The absurd individual refuses to bend before the lure of suicide and therefore does not break free from the struggle by accepting death. Secondly, we have absolute freedom of action, or the ability to make unhindered choices based solely on our desires. The absurd reveals that “there is no future,”⁵¹ and thus all temporal stresses concerning goals and desires are completely futile. But the meaninglessness of personal actions and the intense apathy of the world liberate us, for we then experience true, existential freedom. This freedom is distinct because it is a liberation of the mind, free of determinations or expectations. We are still fettered by societal expectations and cannot escape the requirements of embodiment. However, we are free to determine and assert ourselves within the context of this existence. Finally, existential freedom allows us to develop a deep passion for life; for if every choice we make is chosen freely, then we lead a life fully lived. We are thus able to passionately embrace life because of an appreciation for the unyielding indifference of the world and the lack of concrete future that lies ahead. As Camus simply states, “the point is to live.”⁵²

Camus provides examples of living with absurd, in full recognition of the true state of the world. These take the form of Don Juanism, drama, and conquest, each of which allow people to push the limits of his or her transient existence. It is in these instances that the “absurd man,” as Camus calls him, comes up on the boundary between self and world to more fully embrace the absurdity of existence. These are individuals that are deprived of hope, but do not despair, and “know how to live in harmony with a universe without future and without weakness.”⁵³

The Don Juan character is the ultimate seducer, but he does not love in a typical way. He loves with an absolute self-awareness, conscious of the apathy of his liaisons and the

⁵¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 58.

⁵² *Ibid*, 65.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 91-92.

overwhelming meaninglessness of his life. He does not view his life as a project to be conquered, but rather an experience to be enjoyed. The Don Juan loves in a way that “brings with it all the face in the world, and its tremor comes from the fact that it knows itself to be mortal. Don Juan has chosen to be nothing.”⁵⁴ In choosing to be nothing, he is really accepting the terrific emptiness of his life. It is the ultimate acceptance of truth while refusing nihilism and suicide. Camus asserts, “He achieves a knowledge without illusions.”⁵⁵ Without the comfort of false meanings, the Don Juan is at peace with his existence. He both understands the truth of absurdity and the necessity of moving past these truths to create a life worth living. Therefore, “the logical outcome of a life completely imbued with the absurd [is] the grim ending of existence turned toward short-lived joy.”⁵⁶ The Don Juan is the ultimate example of the individual who knows the absurd and is happy because of it, not in spite of it. The meaninglessness of his concrete existence liberates him to embrace the everyday, the passing moment, the next woman to come into his life. Although Camus contends that he does not aim to provide moral prescriptions or ways of being – a tendency he resists through much of his work – he himself did embrace this approach of living passionately and loving life precisely because of its fleeting, meaningless nature.

Camus posits that drama allows us to play-act in a way that allows one to transcend the self, which in turn provides perspective on the absurd relationship between self and the world. He contends that drama reveals, “the profound nobility that is found in indifference. Above all, it directs our concerns toward what is most certain – that is, toward the immediate.”⁵⁷ The actor must necessarily focus on the present moment, on the task at hand, because it consumes his

⁵⁴ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 73.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 75.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 78.

whole being. It is an exercise in which one must focus on only what he can do and control and surrender to the rest. The indifference of the world truly becomes liberating, and is the very thing that releases us to create meaning in our lives. Theater affords one the opportunity to live beyond the self, to have “eternal vivacity,” as Camus calls it, quoting Nietzsche.⁵⁸ In a way, it awakens us to the possibilities of the self, drawing out our capabilities and the infinite nature of being within a meaningless world. Life is thus lived as a great adventure, in the spirit of *joie de vivre*. Much like the Don Juan, life is not a project or a battle to be won, but an experience to be reveled in, with all its emotional depth.

The image of the conqueror appears to perhaps be contradictory to the liberated embrace of life represented by the Don Juan and the actor. While conquest necessarily involves suffering and oppression, it is also entirely in the spirit of the temporal. The conqueror is concerned with the immediate, what matters within this life. Camus states, from the perspective of the conqueror, “Between history and the eternal I have chosen history because I like certainties.”⁵⁹ He is not willing to give up the transient meaning of this life for the possibility of a greater meaning after death. He believes that conquest expresses the one true aim of life: the creation of man. He notes, “conquerors know that action is in itself useless. There is but one useful action, that of remaking man and the earth. I shall never remake men. But one must do ‘as if’.”⁶⁰ In conquest there is the constant, unrelenting acknowledgement that the victors and the losers have no meaning outside the context of war. They are defined by their action, and necessarily acknowledge that after the conquest, they will be one people, not divided into the conquerors and the conquered. By virtue of their position, the absurd is already recognized. Thus, the conqueror moves beyond the indifference of the world, to “make man.” As with the Don Juan and the dramatist, the conqueror

⁵⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 82.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 86.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 87.

clings to the present; understanding that “even humiliated, the flesh is my only certainty.”⁶¹ The concrete human experience is the most essential, the engagement of the transformation of lives the most foundational. He knows that “nothing of the conqueror lasts.”⁶² His empire will fall, but his impact has been made. The conquerors renewed emphasis on the now and acknowledgment of the indifference of temporality, is evidence that he recognizes the absurd and lives beyond it.

It is important to bear in mind the ways in which this differs from Sartre. Sartre’s “refusal” is a rejection of all preconceived meaning, which leads to true freedom of choice, and subsequently, a deep satisfaction derived from a truly independent existence. Camus, conversely, speaks of a revolt against the meaninglessness of life that Sartre encourages us to accept. Camus believes that such an acceptance can only lead to suicide, as we cannot achieve freedom of choice if we act as though the world is utterly without purpose. Therefore, his notion of radical freedom and passion result from standing before the question of suicide and proclaiming that while we understand the meaninglessness of the world, we will not concede that our existence also lacks meaning. In this way, Camus suspends the individual between the indifferent world and our constant yearning, thus revealing the truth of absurdity. The validity of this theory will be explored later, through unpacking the applicability of this worldview. This process will reveal the ways in which Camus advocates for a philosophy that, while an accurate phenomenological description, is impossible to live, as it reveals truth but leaves us hopeless.

Living with the absurd thus becomes an embrace of one’s fate and acceptance of the fact that we are beings that desire clarity but will never receive it. His outlook on the absurd life is crystallized in the infamous final lines of “Myth of Sisyphus”: “He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of

⁶¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 87.

⁶² *Ibid*, 88.

that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."⁶³ We must take the assertion that Sisyphus is "happy" with his eternal and pointless task to be hyperbole. However, Camus does seem to assert that there is peace in the acceptance of absurdity, which is wholly satisfying. To Camus, it is only by embracing this task and committing oneself to facing suffering that we can live with the absurd. Recognition of such absurdity allows one to both embrace their desire for clarity and reconcile his or herself to an inevitable, meaningless existence.

Thus, Camus asserts that the absurd turns the individual back to the concrete, the human, the embodied form of existence. This is portrayed in the Don Juan character, the actor, and the conqueror, each of who embrace life, due to, not in spite, of its ephemeral nature. Sisyphus accepts his fate and finds transient meaning in his eternal struggle. Yet, while these instances emphasize how one may turn back to the self through acceptance of his or her fate, Camus forgets that individuals are not isolated instances. For, if one learns the value of their independent existence, must they not also embrace the value of the Other? Toward the end of "Myth of Sisyphus," Camus makes the suggestion that the Other is perhaps related to the experience of the absurd. This is a point that he fails to develop, at some cost to the scope of his theory. At the end of his exegesis on "the Absurd Man," he states, "How can one fail to realize that in this vulnerable universe everything that is human and solely human assumes a more vivid meaning?"⁶⁴ The meaninglessness of the world forces one's attention to humankind, for embodied existence is the only given. After recognizing one's status and value as an individual, he or she must necessarily look to the Other as a reflection of the self. Camus contends that in a

⁶³ Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 123.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 88.

meaningless world, the most essential thing is the human experience, but how are we to understand our own experience without the context of the Other? He goes on to notes that relations with others are “the true riches because they are transitory.”⁶⁵ The fleeting nature of life is what allows it meaning, and the same is true for interpersonal relationships. The lack of permanency is not sad or challenging, for the absurd individual readily accepts that which he cannot change and chooses to live passionately regardless.

Therefore, Camus entertains the notion that relating to others is a necessary and positive outcome of the absurd, but does not tie this concept into his overarching theory. He neglects the fact that absurdity not only changes one’s relationship to the self, but also one’s position towards others. The consequence of this is that his theory maintains an unfinished quality, failing to fully explore the social implications of the absurd. Of course, all of that said, Camus does consider the interpersonal in a few of his other works, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, which we will turn to shortly.

⁶⁵ Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 88.

Chapter Two: Inklings of the Interpersonal

I. Sartre on the Interpersonal (32-34)

Before exploring Camus's varied formulations of the interpersonal, it is helpful to establish Sartre's concept of the Other, in order to provide a counterpoint to Camus. Sartre's existentialism is essentially individual, primarily concerned with the freedom and personal development of the individual. However, as we have already seen, the individual does not exist without context, thus Sartre did comment on the relationship between self and other, albeit solely for the purpose of illuminating the influence of others on the development of the self.

Sartre's theory of the Other is heavily based on Hegel's master/slave dialectic, which presents all relationships between self and other as based in a power struggle. Hegel concedes, however, that there exists a "possibility of transcending struggle through relations of reciprocal, mutual recognition."⁶⁶ Sartre rejects this notion, arguing that there is an unconditionally hostile nature to all human relationships. He posits that it is impossible to subdue the desire for power and control, and as such, there is no possibility for mutual understanding and empathy. This logic necessitates that one's interactions with others are always confrontations – attempts to assert power or submission to the influence of the Other. However, it remains impossible to deny that the Other has influence on our lives, shaping our behavior and sense of self. Thus, Sartre asserts, "I can know myself only through the meditation of the other."⁶⁷ By considering his or her connectivity to others, one begins to understand the self more fully. One's self-image has been conditioned only through internal reflection, and as such, remains incomplete. Experiencing the Other fills out the self, presenting one with alternate perspectives by which to grasp and perhaps

⁶⁶ Quoted from: Storm Heter, "Sartre's Political Philosophy." ed. Christian J. Onof (*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). However, the sentiment expressed here is discussed in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

⁶⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Encounter with the Other," *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, ed. Gordon Marino (The Modern Library, 2004) 375.

ground one's own existence, though this turns out to be a futile task. As such, "the other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the other."⁶⁸ This reveals that a comparison necessarily draws the self-image and the external, societal image into conflict. "I am ashamed" because I have not fully known myself, and because it becomes clear that it is the Other who defines me. One begins to experience the body as both self and not self, as elements of our identity have been challenged and are partially crafted by external sources. In this struggle, the uncanny nature of identity is revealed.

Therefore, Sartre concedes that the individual is conditioned by the intersubjective, but posits this relationship as necessarily unsettling. The gaze of the Other reminds one that he is subject and object, both he who sees and that which is seen. He is also aware that the Other is undergoing the same experience, understanding his or herself to be subject and object, the possessor and the possessed. Thus, a power dynamic is established, as one has the possibility to be the controller, the powerful subject with authorship over his identity. But, he is at the same time also vulnerable, to subjugation by the Other, and fears being perceived incorrectly. This is essentially a reformulation of the master/slave dialectic, in which some will necessarily dominate, and some will necessarily be dominated. It is this fear of domination that continually puts one on the defensive, inhibiting him from engaging in the egalitarian, empathetic relationships that Hegel hypothesized. Sartre articulates this concern in an almost personal tone when he notes, "we are dealing with my being as it is inscribed in and by the Other's freedom."⁶⁹ The Other presents a constant threat to the self, and as such, Sartre views interpersonal relationships as either successful or failed attempts at gaining the upper hand. In later writings, published as "Notebooks for an Ethics," Sartre does recognize the possibility that such a struggle

⁶⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Encounter with the Other," 392.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 405.

could be overcome through solidarity with the Other. But Sartre still emphasized that there is a power dynamic that defines all human relationships. This struggle can be overcome, but never eradicated, and so the empathy that Hegel advocated for can still not be embraced. Sartre's theory of the Other thus remains intensely subjective, emphasizing individual development through use of the Other and refuting the assertion that real meaning and depth can be found in relationships. This formulation differs significantly from Camus's, who takes up Hegel's mantle and suggests that there is value to be found in the interpersonal.

II. The Other and the Absurd: The Stranger (34-39)

The interpersonal becomes an essential realm to explore as one begins to consider the applicability of Camus's absurdism. Existentialism is, by its nature, a philosophy concerned with lived experience and as such, seeks to examine the world in order to understand what constitutes a life best lived. Theoretical arguments have their place in existentialism but the main project of the movement, at least from the perspective of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus, was to challenge conventional modes of thinking in order to instigate radical individual and social change. Other individuals are an indispensable and significant part of such a lived experience and thus must be examined with respect to existentialism.

Camus's discussion of interpersonal relationships within the context of the absurd is relatively limited. He does not engage the concept of the Other in "Myth of Sisyphus," as relationships do not figure centrally in his philosophical argument for the absurd. However, it is obvious that even the absurdist hero, asserting himself through revolt, freedom of action, and passion, does not live a life bereft of social relationships. It is therefore essential to consider instances in which Camus explores such interactions. *The Stranger* and *The Plague* both provide examples of interpersonal interactions and reveal Camus's conflicted feelings towards both their

purpose and role in an absurd world. While these are not his only works that make reference to social bonds, these novels are particularly revealing of the complexity of human relationships.

The Stranger is a famously bleak portrayal of absurdism and the meaninglessness of life. The novel follows Meursault, a French citizen of Algiers, through his life in the days that follow the death of his mother. He is apathetic towards all aspects of his life, as demonstrated by the notorious first lines of the novel, “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know.”⁷⁰ Many critics have declared Meursault an absurd hero, for he remains unattached and lacks passion throughout his life and seemingly accepts his death when he is sentenced for murder. His most significant relations are with Raymond, his neighbor, who Meursault considers a friend out of convenience, and Marie, his girlfriend. The turning point of the novel occurs when Meursault accompanies Raymond to the beach. When the brothers of Raymond’s Arab mistress confront them, a fight erupts and Raymond is stabbed. Meursault retreats from the scene but then later returns and shoots one of the men four times. It is in the subsequent trial for his murder that Meursault’s true character emerges and he begins to reflect on himself and his relationships. It is only then that we see his attitude develop overtime to one that craves the presence of the Other.

Before Meursault commits the murder, he has a passive attitude towards all decisions and exchanges. His frequent refrains are “it doesn’t matter anyway” or “it didn’t mean anything.” He expresses this deeply held indifference when he states, “I probably did love Maman, but that didn’t mean anything.”⁷¹ All of his relationships hover at the surface level, as Meursault expresses no desire to move beyond acquaintanceship into a deeper, meaningful friendship. He has relationships of convenience with his neighbors Salamo and Raymond, and is uncomfortable when Salamo attempts to deepen the friendship by revealing that he is distraught over his lost

⁷⁰Albert Camus. *The Stranger*, 1942. Trans. Matthew Ward (Vintage Books, 1989) 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 65.

dog. These friendships provide distraction from the benign nature of life. He frequently states that he enjoys spending time with Marie, but thinks little of her when she is not around. When Marie asks if Meursault loves her he responds, “I told her it didn’t mean anything but that I probably didn’t love her.”⁷² He is indifferent to their liaison and he understands it is temporary. To him, love is obsolete and almost beyond comprehension. Meursault’s descriptions of Marie are solely about her physical appearance. He emphasizes her body and her lips, but never speaks of her eyes or her face. She is a means of pleasure to him, and as such, he has difficulty recognizing her unique subjective experience as an independent being. One can deduce that Meursault understands and accepts the absurd state of the world and thus acts “as if there is no future,” indulging in the pleasurable aspects of life and never thinking beyond the present moment.

Meursault’s outlook appears to change once he begins to experience isolation and boredom in prison. He is terrifically lonely and is finally unable to distract himself from the one absurd truth he has always evaded: that he desires clarity and temporary meaning, which all humans yearn for. One first sees inklings of this when he Marie visits him in prison and he wistfully thinks of her dress, “I wanted to feel the thin material and I didn’t know what else I had to hope for other than that.”⁷³ While still emphasizing Marie as an object of use, Meursault does betray a sense of longing. He has come to grips with the finality of his sentence and now realizes that he is not free as he once was, and therefore desires freedom of choice. He admits that “the main problem was killing time,”⁷⁴ demonstrating fear of his own thoughts, which he must consider when faced with silence and solitude. Inevitably, however, he must confront himself, which occurs when he realizes that the incessant voice he has been hearing is his own.

⁷² Albert Camus. *The Stranger*, 41-42.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 75.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 78.

It is finally in the courtroom, under the pressure of his inevitable fate, that Meursault reveals his desire for human connection. He feels both isolated and ostracized. Two figures seem to intently focus on him and he notes, “I had the odd impression of being watched by myself.”⁷⁵ He realizes that he has become a spectacle for those in attendance, and thus has become the Other. This pure otherness threatens to undo him, as he states, in a rare expression of emotion, “I had this stupid urge to cry.”⁷⁶ Denied even a chance to speak by his lawyer, Meursault becomes increasingly detached from himself. He is denied this primal mode of connection throughout the trial, which eventually reduces him to state that he felt he was leading “a life that wasn’t mine anymore.”⁷⁷ Being denied a voice and the opportunity for interpersonal connections at his most vulnerable is truly what kills Meursault. His final urge to connect is denied, and thus he retreats past anger and fear to a point of utter hopelessness. He states: “the utter pointlessness of whatever I was doing there seized me by the throat, and all I wanted was to get it over with and get back to my cell and sleep.”⁷⁸ A secondary pressure of the courtroom setting is the feeling of being on stage, on display. In this environment Meursault is forced to delve into his past and consider his motivations; it is no longer an option to avoid connection and emotion. He is thrust into the realm of the interpersonal, among those that cope with the absurd through such connections. Meursault becomes fully aware, for the first time, of his crushing loneliness and the fact that he has been inauthentic to the truth of existence.

The final chapter of *The Stranger* is a portrait of Meursault as a despondent man, past the point of hope or reconciliation to the truth. He is sentenced to execution and his mind is blank as he awaits his fate in the jail, save for thoughts of escape and mindless games to occupy him. He

⁷⁵ Albert Camus. *The Stranger*, 85.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 90.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 104.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 119.

states, "I'd realized that the most important thing was to give the condemned man a chance."⁷⁹ Meursault bemoans that his pleasurable life has been taken from him and constantly expresses that he had not been given a chance to defend himself. However, it is really Meursault that never gave himself a chance. He never embraced the Other as a means to coping with absurdist dread, instead he turned inward and developing a careless, emotionless affect. In Camus's terms, he effectively committed suicide long ago, as he has no interest in engaging life beyond mere existence. He constantly thinks of "the dawn and my appeal,"⁸⁰ looking towards a fruitless future that only delays his eventual suffering. It is only when Meursault lashes out against the priest in the final pages that one sees a raw, genuine display of emotion. He bursts with anger and pain as he expresses the absurd truths he has always known, but failed to properly cope with. He shouts, "What did other people's death, 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."⁸¹ This catharsis finally brings him peace and destroys the tensions of the trial and his time in prison. He finally copes, although unhealthily, with the truth of existence. With quiet resignation, he notes, "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 indifference of the world."⁸² In this moment, Meursault finds peace and perhaps, according to him, even the elusive happiness of a man condemned to death. He arrives at the truth, but too late to save himself from self-destruction.

What *The Stranger* leaves unanswered is the purpose and nature of interpersonal relationships. Meursault grapples with the presence of the Other and has a history of fraught relationships, but *The Stranger* does not provide any meaningful conclusion as to what the role

⁷⁹ Albert Camus. *The Stranger*, 111.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 112.

⁸¹ Ibid, 121.

⁸² Ibid, 122.

of the interpersonal should be. Camus clearly believes that relationships are an integral part of life and as such, should be addressed, but does not clearly define the attitude that the individual should develop towards the Other. Camus's novel, *The Plague*, further explores the interpersonal, providing another perspective on the importance of these relationships.

III. The Other and the Absurd: The Plague (39-45)

Dr. Rieux of *The Plague* grapples with the absurdity of existence in a distinctly different way than Meursault. He is a serious man charged with the gravely sobering task of helping plague victims. His own experience with his wife's sickness appears to have already revealed the absurdity of the world to him. When he is assured that the plague is not contagious, Dr. Rieux responds with an attitude of resignation: "I told him it was all the same to me."⁸³ He accepts the indifference of the world, which is represented particularly well by the plague itself. Throughout the novel, the citizens of Oran are awakened to the indiscriminate nature of the plague's suffering and begin to understand the temporality of human life. In the context of the sheer loss of life, those who survive clearly see that it is absurd to even be alive in a world so careless. The doctor, however, feels a particular sense of duty and consumes himself with the task of helping patients who will no doubt die anyway. He states, "there lay certitude; there, in the daily round. All the rest hung on mere threads and trivial contingencies; you couldn't waste your time on it. The thing was to do your job as it should be done."⁸⁴ Dr. Rieux accepts that which he cannot control and gains existential freedom in the process. He is liberated by this choice to simply do what he can. Therefore, he does the very thing that Camus suggests in the face of meaningless suffering, he simply remains there, not merely existing, but living.

⁸³ Albert Camus. *The Plague*, 1947. Trans. Stuart Gilbert (Vintage Books, 1991) 73.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 41.

Camus highlights that separation from others contributes to the horrendous nature of the plague. The narrator notes that with all communications cut off, initially, the citizen's interest in speaking with loved ones wanes. But eventually, their isolation unhinges them. Dr. Rieux states, "In fact, our suffering was twofold; our own to start with, and then the imagined suffering of the absent one, son mother, wife, or mistress."⁸⁵ The Other is ordinarily a source of comfort, a person to share both joy and suffering with. In their absence, people are left with little way to cope. It is noted that these individuals, "drifted through life rather than lived,"⁸⁶ failing to embrace absurdity and find temporary meaning. The fact of their isolation later drives them from aimlessness to sheer panic,⁸⁷ as they become acutely aware of their fate. It is important, however, to distinguish between awareness and acceptance. These individuals are aware, but unable to accept their fate, resorting to coping mechanisms that deny the plague itself. As Rambert describes, many people underplay the significance of the plague, believing that conditions must improve eventually. Others in bureaucratic positions ludicrously and inexplicably continue to perform their duties, as if somehow the rule of law will stop a ravaging disease. Some simply "look away" or refer help-seekers elsewhere, as if stopping to provide aid recognizes the severity of the problem and compromises their hope of a natural solution.⁸⁸ The constant refusal to accept the plague, which is also the refusal to face the absurdity of life, is a common thread for these individuals.

However, the citizens of Oran must eventually accept, at least at the physical level, the existence of the plague and its impact on their lives. This is largely due to the sheer magnitude of the travesty, as people cannot overlook the bodies that begin to fill the streets. Thus, people

⁸⁵ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, 71.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 73.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 100.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 105.

quickly pass from refutation to passive acceptance, becoming as worn and weary as soldiers in battle. The new normal quickly becomes suffering: “In some houses groans could be heard. At first, when that happened people often gathered outside and listened prompted by curiosity or compassion. But under the prolonged strain it seemed that hearts had toughened; people lived beside those groans of walked past the as though they has become the normal speech of men.”⁸⁹ People quickly became habituated to the absurdity of the plague, as people become sick and die at seemingly random intervals. In attempt to cope, many became withdrawn and self-serving, causing an eventual “feeling of exile and separation.”⁹⁰ The continued suffering and loss in Oran thus transitions from a banal to an unbearable phenomenon. The initial acceptance of the plague neglected to consider the emotional weight of its burden. Eventually, mass funerals become commonplace, stripping individuals of their identity and giving literal meaning to death as a great equalizer. As bodies continue to accumulate, the citizens have a difficult time accepting the plague’s meaninglessness, and start searching for ways to cope.

The one individual who balances the meaningless swirl of the plague with an insistence on order and respect for humanity is Dr. Rieux. He refuses to sink into denial, nor claim that the plague is a moral challenge that will elevate the people, as the local priest Father Paneloux claims.⁹¹ This response by Paneloux is an attempt to take ownership the plague, to turn it into something of use for the people of Oran. Therefore, Paneloux accepts the plague, unlike the other citizens of Oran, but only in an attempt to control it. Dr. Rieux, conversely, allows the plague to simply be. He is accepting without judging or claiming, and moves through the absurdity of the experience without forgetting its devastating impact. In speaking to his mother, he states, “what’s true of all the evils in the world is true of the plague as well. It helps men rise above themselves.

⁸⁹ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, 111.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 179.

⁹¹ Ibid, 91.

All the same, when you see the misery it brings, you'd need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind to give in tamely to the plague."⁹² To Dr. Rieux the plague is a fact of existence and a thing to be contended with. He resists labeling it on the spectrum between good and evil because it simply is and cannot be contained. Once one accepts this, the challenge is thus to find it within his or herself to resist giving over to the terror of the absurd. For Dr. Rieux, this takes the form of helping those that suffer, even though they must die. When pressed by Tarrou about why he chose his profession, Dr. Rieux admits, "mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death?"⁹³ In the midst of the plague, there is no use in appeals to the unknown. Dr. Rieux knows this all too well, admitting that it is "suffering"⁹⁴ that has shaped his view of the human condition.

Camus continually emphasizes the temporal, the concrete, and thus he seems to be asserting that one must rely on his or her capabilities. However, through the example of Dr. Rieux, he also seems to suggest that we can learn to rely on one another. Aiding another in their struggle against death appears to be a worthwhile adventure in the tizzy of meaningless suffering. Dr. Rieux's unique perspective is what allows him to emotionally survive the plague, as he is able to give meaning to a life that is self-aware of its inconsequentiality. This does not, however, mean that Dr. Rieux is the hero of this work, in fact Camus highlights that this is certainly not the case. This is seen in the plain and simple motives of the "sanitary squad" that Dr. Rieux assembles: "[the] certitude that a fight must be put up, in this way or that, and there must be no bowing down."⁹⁵ These men are grappling with the question of suicide. Confronted with the absurdity of their existence in the face of the plague, they boldly reject suicide in favor

⁹² Albert Camus. *The Plague*, 126.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 128.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 129.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 133.

of revolt, defiance against the systems ordered for the destruction of their bodies. The fight is thus not predicated on a moral high ground, but on the simple necessity of resistance. Dr. Rieux understood it was simply the thing to do, to cope, and thus led these men to a similar realization.

However, Camus reveals other ways of coping with the absurdity of the plague. Prior to the outbreak of the plague, Joseph Grand, a city clerk and acquaintance of Dr. Rieux, comes upon his neighbor, Cottard, as he is beginning to asphyxiate from hanging himself.⁹⁶ Cottard, a suspected criminal who never provides a clear reason for his suicide attempt, appears to live on the fringes of society. Noted to live a private life, he is fearful talking to the police and states he simply wants to be “left in peace.”⁹⁷ His life before the plague is marked by isolation and trepidation. However, with the advent of the plague, Cottard’s life, and ultimately his disposition, begins to change. Once a loner, he becomes a profitable black-market businessman, smuggling contraband into Oran after the city is placed under quarantine. Cottard notes, “I’ve been feeling much more at ease here since plague settled in.”⁹⁸ He relishes the way the city has changed, for now the citizens of Oran are finally feeling the panic, anxiety, and isolation that Cottard has always known. Social order has become obsolete and the absurd worldview that Cottard understood before the plague has become commonplace. In comparison to Dr. Rieux, who also embraces the absurd but finds meaning in it through helping others as a physician, Cottard never developed a means to cope with the meaninglessness of life that he perceived. Instead, he turned to a life of deception through crime and flimsy relationships. This set him up well to thrive in the time of the plague, finding his own coping mechanism, not through altruism, but through material wealth gained at the expense of others. The world during the plague is “interesting” to Cottard, and in fact is not altogether that different from before. He notes that the plague comes

⁹⁶ Albert Camus. *The Plague*, 19.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 34.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 141.

with risks, but “all the same, when you come to think of it, one ran quite as much risk in the old days crossing a busy street.”⁹⁹ Verging on nihilism, Cottard’s statement nonetheless rings true, as the plague has merely eradicated the social norms that kept absurdity in check. Cottard’s reasoning is not so different from Dr. Rieux’s: there is nothing left to do but face up to the plague and attempt to lessen its negative impacts. For Dr. Rieux this leads to an embrace of his job, throwing himself into helping others, while the same reasoning causes Cottard to become a self-preserving man who profits off the death of others. After struggling with the impulse to commit suicide, Cottard actively commits himself to embracing a world conditioned by absurdity.

Through the characters of *The Plague*, Camus reveals the many possible ways with which one can deal with life’s absurdity. All the characters of this novel, in some way, represent the possible consequences of embracing the struggle of the absurd. The first possible consequence, per Camus, is revolt against the meaninglessness imposed by absurdity. The townspeople waver between suicide and revolt, as they struggle to embrace defiance and slide into desperate, meaningless complacency. However, Dr. Rieux, Grand, Rambert, Father Paneloux, Cottard, and Tarrou all defy this attitude, resisting the plague, albeit in starkly varied ways. The second consequence, as was previously discussed, is freedom of action. Understanding the absurd gives people the freedom to live as though their lives were not conditioned by death, for there is no concrete and meaningful future to look forward to. This is the next stage, in which individuals can actualize the reality of the situation and recognize their motivations. Dr. Rieux, Cottard, and Grand all reach this point, as they are able to point to a reason for their resistance. They have moved past grappling with the absurd questions, and instead have progressed to building beyond the conditional restrictions of a world stricken by plague.

⁹⁹ Albert Camus. *The Plague* 144.

While Camus portrays Dr. Rieux in a favorable light, it can be argued that only Cottard, the selfish ex-criminal, is able to have the passion for life that Camus posits as the third and final consequence of absurd existence. He revels in the absurdity and is elated at the freedom he feels, knowing he has no future, no meaning to consider, no purpose to fulfill. Thus, much like *The Stranger*, Camus leaves us with a mixed message. Who is the absurd hero of this novel? Dr. Rieux, our main character, settles into his role and develops a strong understanding of the absurdity of his patient's conditions, all the while maintaining a calming demeanor. Or is it Cottard, the morally questionable scoundrel who nonetheless builds a life and achieves real happiness because of his acceptance of the absurd. It appears that Camus is hinting at the ambivalent nature of the absurd man, portraying multiple variations at one time. Once again, he is refusing to prescribe a theory or demarcate individuals as dealing with the absurd in either "good" or "bad" ways. Thus, *The Plague* can be considered to be an imagining of life after acceptance of the absurd.

Camus's exploration of the interpersonal through *The Stranger* and *The Plague* demonstrate his clear understanding that "the Other" is an essential feature of an absurd life. However, these views are largely anecdotal, presented through multiple characters and often overshadowed by the larger, existential points of the novel. Thus, it is difficult to delineate a unified understanding of the interpersonal from these works. We are left with the feeling that the Other is a force to contend with, a power which can orient and upend one's sense of self, but remain altogether unclear as to what one must do with this information. Therefore, Camus's theory approaches the sort of coping mechanisms that aid us in our struggle against an absurd world, but eventually fall short of providing a satisfying way to deal with the absurd.

Chapter Three: A Critique of Camus

Camus's initial assertion that, "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart"¹⁰⁰ ultimately does not hold up against accounts of actual individuals experiencing the absurdity of daily life. Camus's entire theory of the absurd is predicated on the assumption that an understanding of the nature of existence and mere resistance to the temptation of suicide will enable us to thrive. He believes one should be capable of seeing the truth of our conditions, and if one does so, is able to live well. The major barriers he sees to this process are ignorance, clinging to false sources of meaning, and profound despair due to meaninglessness. All of these mislead us into a haunted existence interrupted by absurdity. In Camus's formulation, the absurd man has integrated the meaninglessness of the world into his psyche. He revels in the truth and dedicates himself to the task of the simultaneous protection of and resistance to the absurd. The absurd man is at the center of this flux, between the forces that threaten to overwhelm and those that ignore the truth. He grapples with both the internal consistency of individuals and the external meaninglessness of the world. This ideal of the absurd man is plausible in the philosophical context, as they are a reflection of the absurd themes of existential freedom, the indifference of the world, and, perhaps most importantly of all, the interplay between these factors.

Yet, this ideal does not hold up when one considers the human condition on an experiential level. The abstract notion that Camus proposes lacks applicability to the way humans actually live. Camus himself seems to acknowledge this schism between the absurd hero and embodied individuals. He notes that, "everyone lives as if no one 'knew'."¹⁰¹ While not all people accept the paradigms of absurdism, even those who have lost faith in God and see the

¹⁰⁰ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 123.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 15.

world as deeply indifferent to their desires still continue to live as if the world were ordered to their needs. It seems to be nearly impossible to act as though our actions are not laden with meaning, as if the universe is, in fact, ordered to fulfill our desires. Whatever our technical understanding and theoretical acceptance of the absurdity of life, we still cling to our hollow beliefs about the importance and power of an individual human life. Perhaps this is due to avoidance of the very despair that Camus feared, but when one lives in this way, they are not living honestly or in the spirit of absurdity. What is revealed is the tension between what an individual believes to be true and how he or she actually acts.

Camus provides further evidence of our deep belief in meaning in his argument for why people experience great suffering but do not take their own lives: “in a man’s attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world.”¹⁰² Thus, the layperson comes to the same conclusion as Camus: that life is fundamentally worth living. Camus then infers that an individual’s continued existence, despite suffering, is due to a deep passion for life itself. His manner of understanding rejects the proposals of Jaspers, Shestov, and Kierkegaard, and instead claims to uncover a passion that arises through a deep understanding of the world and acceptance of one’s place within it. None of this involves Camus proposing a particular way for all to live. Instead, he opens us to the truth of the world, allowing each of us the freedom to choose with right understanding. Thus, he arrives at the conclusion that such a liberated perspective will necessarily make life worth the struggle, creating meaning through this lifelong tension between the self and the world. An assumption of this argument is that against the forces that beat us down, we find purpose and value in the very struggle itself.

However, it does not follow from this argument that simply because an individual refuses to take his or her own life, they enjoy the internal, uphill battle for existence. This struggle is

¹⁰² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 8.

surely an essential part of the human experience, but it is not necessarily, and in fact not likely, the source of meaning in one's life. It is an artifact of existence, not the reason for it.

It may also be said that the fact that people can live and thrive under such tension is not evidence against those who cannot. In the throes of suffering, it is possible for people to find meaning, and within meaning, reason to continue on. But it is frequently what people do with their pain that imbues them with resilience and crafts their future. This notion was clearly evident in *The Plague*, wherein citizens find a reason to live primarily through their methods of coping. For each character, the plague brings them to the point of reckoning with their own existence and forces them to accept the absurdity of this disaster, and by extension the indifference of the world that is complicit in it. However, it is not this understanding that allows the citizens to survive, but rather what they do with it. It is impossible to experience such despair and suffering, justify it in the context of a meaningless world, and simply move on. Each character copes in some way, from the productive assistance that Dr. Rieux provides, to the manipulative economy that Cottard establishes. Though we may have different coping mechanisms, they all achieve the same purpose: providing an external expression to the internal anguish that we all feel. It is through these new patterns that each begins to rebuild during and after the plague. These individuals craft new identities embedded in the meaninglessness of the world, but also predicated on the understanding that meaning giving is an essential part of human nature. Thus, it is the ability to cope that "is enough to fill a man's heart."¹⁰³ The possibility and actualization of self-reliance in a time of struggle give each of us the internal resilience to look at life anew, with refreshed positivity. Through coping mechanisms, one is able to imbue his or her life with purpose and value. This is arguably the truest expression of complete understanding of the absurd, for those that are able to cope can accept meaninglessness without falling into despair.

¹⁰³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 123.

The value and necessity of coping can be seen in examples more commonplace than a plague or being sentenced to death. Traumatic events, such as sudden deaths of a family member, the loss of one's home in a fire, or even a divorce spark the same survival mechanisms. In these instances, one's world is suddenly distorted and the meanings they have created, which are centered on the existence of others or nostalgic memories, suddenly crumble. In these circumstances, it is certainly not sufficient to say the struggle is enough, for it is the struggle itself that challenges one's sense of self and one's perspective. One cannot find meaning in these challenges themselves because they unmoor individuals, not only creating pain and suffering, but also destroying the context that can help one come to understand their suffering. Thus, it is only after one has contextualized and analyzed their struggles that one can begin the process of meaning making. Such introspection and reassessment that come from struggle, therefore, are the true loci of the growth, change, and self-actualization that seemingly accompany strife.

Camus's theories, as espoused in "Myth of Sisyphus" and evidenced in *The Plague* and *The Stranger* suggest that coping is an essential part of the absurd experience, but fail to enumerate a path towards such discernment. From Meursault to Dr. Rieux, all of Camus's characters that have undergone crises respond with a method of internal processing and external action that mitigate the trauma of their experience. Meursault is reclusive and destructive in his coping mechanisms, demonizing love and assistance from those around him. The internal narrative he creates is consistent with this, increasingly transfixed by a possible appeal for his case. Camus seems to hint that this is an unhealthy pattern of behavior, as Meursault exhibits self-deception and isolation. In contrast, Dr. Rieux can be read as the absurd hero of *The Plague*. Propelled not by moral conduct, but a strong sense of duty and an attitude that aiding others is

simply the thing to do, Dr. Rieux continues his work caring for the ailing people of Oran and even enlists others to minimize the spread of the plague through the sanitation squads.

Camus's own voice is not clearly present in these works, as he employs an anonymous narrator in *The Plague* and Meursault serves as the narrator in *The Stranger*, making it difficult to discern his beliefs and value judgments about the actions of his characters. However, Camus seems to hint at a positive view of Dr. Rieux and negative perception of Meursault. For one, *The Plague* is a tale of action, chronicling how the citizens of Oran deal with this travesty. This is consistent with Camus's fondness for the man of action, he who embraces the freedom afforded by absurdity and lives life with purpose and independence. By contrast, Meursault is largely indifferent and indecisive throughout *The Stranger*, and the novel becomes increasingly concerned with his mental state, as he becomes isolated. Additionally, the eventual death of Meursault must be interpreted as a commentary on his inability to develop a strong sense of self that could ground him in the face of such disaster. From the time of his arrest until his final moments, he cycles through emotions and grieving stages without rhyme or reason. These swings between acceptance and defensiveness, quietness and violent eruption demonstrate that while he may have accepted his death, he has not developed internal consistency through stable faculties that would allow him to cope.

Dr. Rieux, conversely, is stable and strong throughout the novel, never wavering on any of his decisions, both the good and the bad, as evidenced by his decision to send his wife to a sanitarium. He has developed a sense of self and has committed to specific principles due to his ability to find meaning in the chaos. For Dr. Rieux specifically, these values are intrinsically connected to recognizing and appreciating the autonomy and value of others. His life, both personal and professional, becomes increasingly tied to other people, while Meursault slowly

becomes more irrelevant to others through his isolation. Thus, Camus seemingly suggests that Dr. Rieux's methods for coping are better suited for the absurd because he is able to create and maintain a stable sense of self through his interpersonal connections.

It becomes clear that Camus sees the importance of coping with the truths he espouses and the possibility that perhaps such mechanisms function best when borne out of contact with the Other. However, this point is woefully underdeveloped, both by Camus himself and the philosophical community's general understanding of Camus's principles. He seems to hint that the interpersonal is the most fruitful avenue to contend with absurdity, but does not provide the necessary arguments or adequate evidence. Such little attention to this topic gives the appearance that this is a non-essential element of Camus's theories, but if one explores deeper, it becomes clear that it is certainly central to the ethos of his work. He seemingly understood that this Sisyphean burden would be too much for any one person to bear, acknowledging that we do not always live in accordance with what we think and know. But he falls short of providing a practical understanding of how to live with this truth. Interpersonal connections are the closest thing to a coping method that Camus provides and he ostensibly understood their value, yet was unable to weave intersubjectivity into his existential perspective. Thus, it is fitting to further analyze the role of intersubjectivity in an absurd world.

Perhaps if Camus were a theoretical thinker, this discussion would be unnecessary. Theory does not necessitate a connection to lived experience. But Camus emphasized engaged philosophy, that which has real, practical applications to everyday life. He was part of an entire tradition of thinkers who prided themselves on the practical use of their theories and proclaimed to be working from the complexities of daily life. Thus, if Camus's understanding of life fails to apply to real, embodied experience, then he has necessarily failed at his task as an existential

philosopher. Existential philosophy must be practical enough to provide guidance, but not stringent rules, for everyday life. While Camus approaches this point, and certainly is more discerning than his contemporaries, he eventually provides an unfulfilling image of the world, in which redeeming meaning from suffering is a murky process.

We are thus moved to complete Camus's project, bringing his tenets to the fore with a new emphasis on applicability to daily living, especially living with others. Camus's suggestion that interpersonal relations can provide an outlet for meaning making will be taken up and expanded, by providing evidence that the Other orients the self within an absurd world. By filling out Camus's theory with this practical understanding of self, we may hope to make Camus's principles more evidently germane and indeed recognizable. Thus, we must begin where Camus broke off, with an in-depth analysis of the interpersonal domain of human existence.

Chapter Four: Levinas and Intersubjectivity

I. Existence and Intersubjectivity (53-62)

Camus thus leaves us with the need to delve into the interpersonal and explore the strong, dark power that others have in shaping our experience. In contemporary philosophy, the theme of the interpersonal appears in and is best explored through a term familiar to Camus: the phenomenological investigation of what is called ‘intersubjectivity.’ Intersubjectivity elucidates the concepts that Camus was working around, but never gave a name to. By bringing intersubjectivity into the common understanding of Camus, we begin to flesh out the principles at the very core of his work, which often went unstated and underappreciated.

Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenological methods and inquiry, was one of the first philosophers to consider intersubjectivity in the philosophical discourse. Husserl's first concern was to understand, in a most fundamental way, our relation to things and to the world itself. It was this pursuit that led him to the theme of intersubjectivity, because of its capacity to demonstrate the link between self and world. Intersubjectivity shows up in phenomenological work as a structure and condition of our relation to things and to the world, asserting that the world is deeply connected at a fundamental level, and takes this as a dimension of our existence. This raises the question of what we are to one another and to the world itself. In simplest terms, each of us is both a subject, insofar as we relate to things in a world where we find ourselves, and an object, insofar as we also appear among the things and in the world where others find themselves. I see the Other and she sees me, but not merely as an object. We know this difference from experience. Intersubjectivity acknowledges a duality to existence, for we craft our identities and the identities of those around us, whilst they do the same. By extension, “intersubjective experience is empathic experience; it occurs in the course of our conscious

attribution of intentional acts to other subjects, in the course of which we put ourselves into the other one's shoes.”¹⁰⁴ Thus we understand that the Other is not merely object, as they appear to us, but is also capable of being a subject, an independent-minded individual.

Therefore, intersubjectivity touches on the heart of Camus's discussions of the interpersonal. It establishes the “perceiving other,” giving a name to Camus's recognition of the influence of the interpersonal on the individual. Understanding this principle will inform our subsequent investigation into the process of meaning making in an existential world, as we will come to recognize the necessity of the Other in order to understand the self.

Emmanuel Levinas, who is most well known for emphasizing “the priority of the other,” further developed intersubjectivity. He proposes that the Other is alongside me and already there with me as I relate to the world, in a manner that transcends the world. Thusly, the relation with the Other is not confined by the world, but in an experiential sense precedes and exceeds it. Everything we do in the world stems from our interrelatedness with the Other. This theory posits that such connections are the first mode through which one experiences the world and asserts that this interaction is more fundamental than metaphysics or logic. Levinas's theory of the Other can be readily applied to the work of Camus, and his account of interpersonal relations will be considered at length later in this section. However, before delving into this discussion, it is essential to establish a connection between Camus's worldview and the phenomenology of Levinas. This will serve to ground Levinas's stance on the Other and will substantiate a connection between Levinas and Camus by drawing parallels between their phenomenological perspectives. They both ask: how do things appear, in actuality? And, how do we, as individuals, experience the world? Although Levinas's perspective is broadly open to religious meaning and Camus worked from a background in existentialism and agnostic beliefs, both answer these

¹⁰⁴ Christian Beyer, *Edmund Husserl*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016).

questions with ontology and phenomenology. This inclination was likely due to the influence of Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer on Camus and the impact of Husserl and Heidegger on Levinas. Through their investigations, both authors discern that there is a fraught relationship between man and the world and that the individual frequently feels unmoored from his place within the world, and therefore is constantly searching for meaning. They each highlight the tension between world and self that colors our existence, and acknowledge that this necessarily results in a struggle to understand oneself and one's place in the world. This underlying link between Camus and Levinas must be accentuated because it emphasizes the fundamental similarities between these authors. Although they emerge from different philosophical traditions, they share the same essential questions and arrive at a similar worldview. Camus and Levinas differ most significantly in their conclusions on how one should deal with the destabilizing nature of existence, with Levinas looking to the face of the Other for spiritual redemption, and Camus taking a more negative and skeptical approach. These differences represent what each is most known for, as Levinas comes with connotations of religious thought, but in actuality, he should be considered as a phenomenological philosopher who simply utilized religion in his conclusions. Camus, conversely, is often inaccurately labeled a nihilist and too strongly associated with other existentialist thinkers. Additionally, it is important to consider the time period in which both thinkers were writing: the turn of the twentieth century. Both saw and responded in distinct ways to the end to classical philosophical techniques. Thus, we see that both authors embraced the notion that, "with the end of traditional philosophy, the task of genuine thinking is itself an ethics."¹⁰⁵ With the demise of structure and tradition, all one can do is turn, in kindness, to the Other. Through reevaluating the similarities between these thinkers

¹⁰⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, ed. Philippe Nemo. trans. Richard A Cohen (Duquesne University Press, 1985) 2.

and setting forth a comparison, it will become clear that ethics is at the heart of each author's understanding of, and concern for, the world.

Heavily influenced by the work of Martin Heidegger, Levinas begins *Existence and Existents* with a discussion of the difference between the general experience of Existence and existence as an acute state of being – an individual life. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger asks about the difference between beings (Seienden), as substances or things, and Being, in the verbal sense (Sein), in order to ontologically query man's position within the world. He concentrates initially, though significantly, on the special kind of being that we are, noting that we have a uniquely active relation to our own existence that is defined by a sense of urgency, which he calls "care." Our being – our "Dasein" (there-being) – is the mechanism through which Being shows up as beings. In search of an answer to the question of the meaning of Being, Heidegger first looks very closely at the sole being who can ask such a question – us, as Dasein. *Being and Time* thus moves from a study of Dasein toward Being. Levinas takes up this concept and discusses "Being" (Sein) versus "beings" (Seinenden) in *Existence and Existents*. Importantly, however, Levinas reverses Heidegger's order, as the French title of this book is *De l'existence à l'existent*, or from the being to Being. Similar to Heidegger, he makes a movement from the general to the concrete, turning over the metaphysical and phenomenological aspects of *l'existence* before considering the status of embodied existence. He states that the individual is "the instant of creation, the act over its Being."¹⁰⁶ Individual beings can be thought of as concrete instances of Being-as-such and are deemed an "existent" by Levinas. Existence, however, is more similar to the essence of an existent; the Being that Heidegger speaks of. Levinas establishes this connection between existence and existents in order to investigate the instances in which these identities become undone, when one feels disconnect between the self and the world.

¹⁰⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, 1978) 2.

Therefore, Levinas's primary project is to consider the relationship that the individual has to their existence. He acknowledges that man is attached to his finite existence and yet, deeply troubled by it. The introduction of *Existence and Existents* concludes with the assertion: "It is because the *there is* has such a complete hold on us that we cannot take nothingness and death lightly, and we tremble before them. The fear of nothingness is but the measure of our involvement in Being."¹⁰⁷ Levinas defines the "there is" as the marvel that Being exists; yet the recognition that this state of existence is conditioned by nothingness.¹⁰⁸ This again harkens back to Heidegger and his fundamental question of metaphysics: "why are there beings at all instead of nothing?"¹⁰⁹ Thus, Levinas is asserting that man has a relationship with both the concrete reality of his existence and simultaneously has an awareness of the nothingness that conditions the world. He is wrapped in the sense of unity that comes with the experience of Being, however he is cognizant of, and terrified by, the abyss that threatens his sense of self. Here, Levinas begins to explore the same dichotomous tensions considered by Camus, whose absurdist position highlights the indifference of the world and the desires of man, emphasizing a discord between self and world. The condition Levinas describes is very similar to that of the absurd, as he recognizes a similar dualism within reality. He contrasts the apparently concrete nature of human existence and the understanding that the world is conditioned by nothingness, which can be taken to mean lacking unity and stable meaning.

This "duality," as Levinas calls it, is further explored through moments in which one feels tension between these two parts of identity. He highlights that there exist "certain moments in human existence where the adherence of existence to an existent appears like a cleaving."¹¹⁰ It

¹⁰⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1.

¹¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 9.

is in these moments that one feels the self, as an existent, a living being, come apart from existence, the overarching, meaning-laden notion of Being. These moments tend to occur in instances of deep isolation or suffering, where it is incredibly difficult for one to find light and meaning. Such a cleaving changes one's perception of time, as he or she feels disengaged from the world and the forces that control it. The individual feels that they are only an existent, connected to the experience of their body, but lacking the grounding experience of existence. This notion appears to be very similar to Camus's position that the absurd exists in the two-part relationship between self and world. The individual seeks to create meaning and unity within their life in order to synthesize one's instance of being with the larger idea of existence. However, one is occasionally made aware that meaning and clarity are evasive and thus, one frequently feels disconnected from the world. Although Levinas does not accept Camus's thesis that life is meaningless, he does acknowledge the ways in which meaning can become divorced from the individual instance of existence.

Levinas states that, "existence appear[s] as a burden to be taken up."¹¹¹ He is indicating here that a meaningful life requires effort and active engagement. One cannot merely choose to not participate in life, for life demands the full care and attention of all our faculties. This is elucidated well in the assertion: "it is not just that one is, one is oneself."¹¹² Selfhood is therefore compulsory, but also an identity that is crafted. It is not possible to exist only in the objective sense, for one is forced to also see the self as subject. Man is therefore bound to existence and ceaselessly driven to engage in life fully and attempts to find clarity. This is very similar to the ceaseless and intrinsic nature of man's absurd desire for meaning. While this imprisonment to existence has some clearly negative outcomes, which will be discussed, it is important to note

¹¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 4.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 16.

that this internal insistence on connection to existence through full and active participation in life prevents us from sliding into complacency. For Camus, this prevents an individual from resorting to suicide or false conclusions, such as religion, while for Levinas it ensures that we remain attached to the instance of our being, not sliding into weariness, indolence, or fatigue. In this way, Camus's and Levinas's theories each provide hope, providing a positive view of the human condition, as they contend that one cannot give up the search for depth and meaning. Therefore, man is naturally driven towards a deeper connection with the world.

That said, neither Camus nor Levinas denies that the mere act of meaningful existence requires considerable effort and affords limited consolation. The simultaneous necessity and difficulty of this task can be traced back to our simultaneous desire for meaning and “the unreasonable silence of the world.”¹¹³ This was well established by Camus's theory of the absurd. Similarly, Levinas notes that such an existence can result in “weariness of oneself.”¹¹⁴ One becomes tired of the task they are bound to: continually creating and asserting their identity. He states, “In weariness existence is like the reminder of a commitment to exist.”¹¹⁵ Existence, as a concrete, engaged life, is not a given, but is also not optional. One must engage with existence-as-such in order to survive. This can be likened to the existential assertion that one's self-created identity must be asserted against and despite the absurd nature of the relationship between the individual and the world. Camus acknowledges the ways in which this may inflict suffering in his depiction of Sisyphus and a man on the brink of suicide. Such struggles engender great suffering for those who accept the absurdity of the world. Levinas also touches on suffering in his assertion that existence is, “irremediably eternal and doomed to pain.”¹¹⁶ We have an

¹¹³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

¹¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 11.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

undeniable drive to create meaning and participate in the world in order to define ourselves, but both authors recognize that this process is inherently fraught and exhausting.

Existence is thus a tiresome project, as it must continually be asserted over and above the nothingness that conditions the world. Levinas utilizes the examples of fatigue and indolence as examples where an individual has not taken up the “burden” of existence, retracting from the world. He or she more closely resembles a mere “existent,” a being without Being. These attitudes towards life, he contends, have an “intention of refusal.”¹¹⁷ In these instances, an individual rejects the project of his existence – to create a life via connection with the world. This withdrawal is defined as, “the recoil before existence which makes up their existence.”¹¹⁸ One is therefore failing to pursue the experience of existence, and as a result, is denying their life any grounding or significance. To draw a parallel to Camus, such a person is refusing to give their life a transient meaning and orientation. The individual who refuses existence-as-such denies himself the opportunity to partake in this method of coping with the absurd. To Camus, such a person would be guilty of succumbing to the void and failing to maintain the balance between the self that desires to find meaning in the world, and the self that knows they will never obtain it. Camus would view such a retraction as a refusal to accept, and therefore engage with, the absurd. As previously discussed, Camus believes this leads to suicide, or at the least, a life lived in despair. Thus, both authors touch on the consequences of surrendering the search for meaning, and living a life in escape of the dichotomous nature of existence.

Levinas asserts that existence itself must be considered as distinct from an individual’s relationship with the world. This relationship to the world is formulated through the myriad of ways in which one is deeply rooted to their conditions and circumstances. This is well

¹¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 11.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 11.

encapsulated in the statement, “to be in the world is to be attached to things.”¹¹⁹ He states that objective being in the world, on the level of an object-as-such, does not necessitate meaningful engagement with the world. For example, a rock exists as an object, a thing-as-such, but does not create the attachments and connections that generate a relationship with the world. Levinas establishes that the mere fact of existence is distinct from the emotion-laden connection with things and other people that classifies a relationship with the world. A step beyond simple existence, a relationship with the world is a conscious choice that necessitates attachment, and therefore makes man vulnerable and open to the possibility of suffering. However, it is also this very attachment that provides one with connections to the world that imbue one’s life with meaning. Levinas discusses one’s relationships with objects, stating that desires for things are ends in themselves. Quite simply, one wants to eat because they are hungry, one wants to sleep because they are tired. These desires make one vulnerable to discomfort and pain, but do not deeply impact us because they are not bound to our sense of self. Hunger does not threaten to undo the individual in the same way that existence does. Here, Levinas discerns between persons and objects. He states, “persons are not simply in front of one another, they are along with each other around something.”¹²⁰ A person is not an object of use, but a distinct individual with his or her own subjective experience. One of the most disarming but powerful aspects of the Other is the mere existence of their own subjectivity. It presents a challenge to the egocentric self, as it forces one to consider the minds of others. The notion that individuals are along with each other also creates the image of two equals, accompanying one another in a journey. Thus, intersubjectivity is something that is always present, connecting all individuals in a fundamental manner, but is something we do not realize until we have the distinct opportunity to encounter

¹¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 27.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 32.

the face of the Other. This will become an important notion in the next section, which will discuss, at length, Levinas's understanding of how we relate to others and how it impacts one's sense of self.

II. The Other and the Self (62-69)

Levinas asserts that, "intersubjectivity is not simply the application of the category of multiplicity to the domain of the mind."¹²¹ Intersubjectivity is thus not the ability to recognize the Other as Other and to comprehend the notion of independent minds. Instead, intersubjectivity is created through the external presentation of the Other, with his or her spatial presence, and the very fact of his or her alterity.¹²² It is precisely that the Other is so different from myself and that he or she exists in such a close spatial relationship with me that produce the uncanny experience of intersubjectivity. These factors lead to the understanding of the Other as both self and non-self, like me in many ways, and yet totally and irrevocably his or her own, independent individual. Relatedly, he notes: "Intersubjective space is initially asymmetrical."¹²³ This asymmetry comes from the fact of my experiencing the presence of the Other as a one-sided encounter within the self. Seeing the face of the Other, which will be discussed later, initiates an essential understanding of the fundamental alterity of the Other that changes one's perception of the world and of self. Therefore, intersubjectivity goes deeper than merely understanding the independence and emotional capacity of the Other. It is found in the identity-affirming and world-shaping interaction that comes with complete understanding of the Other.

In Cohen's introduction *Ethics and Infinity*, he asserts that, "the surplus of the Other's nonencompassable alterity - not the alterity of horizons - is the way ethics intrudes, disturbs,

¹²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 98.

¹²² *Ibid*, 98.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 98.

commands being.”¹²⁴ For this precise reason, Levinas is often considered to have taken “ethics as first philosophy.” On the face of it, this is a radical presumption, for it circumvents the traditional routes of metaphysics and logic, which seek to define and order the world. However, Levinas maintained that he utilized a metaphysical approach and stayed true to the discerning tone of the early twentieth century. Thus, it is his metaphysics, his assessment of the ordering forces of the universe, which lead him to the discussion of the Other. This reveals the significance he placed on his formulation of the Other, for it is not merely a theory of ethics, which could be dismissed as having little practical application, but a theory concerning the fundamental causal factors of things. What results, per Cohen, is that “Levinas insists on ethics, on a metaphysical responsibility, an exorbitant and infinite responsibility for other human beings, to care not for being...but for what is beyond and against being, the alterity of the other person.”¹²⁵ This is a challenge precisely because it is not the call to care for being-as-such, the plural version of the self, which we know and understand. It is not the charge that all human life is sacred because of our deep moral and emotional capacity, but instead the notion that the differences, not the similarities, between self and other, drive one to care and respect others. There is no precondition of humanity’s shared exceptionalness, but instead represents a deeper pull towards the Other merely by the fact of his or her existence.

Such connectivity leads to what Levinas deemed responsibility for the Other. This occurs automatically, upon the moment of “the look” when one perceives the Other: “Since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having taken on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility is incumbent upon me.”¹²⁶ The relationship that arises out of this brief moment between two people creates responsibility through recognition of the relatedness

¹²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 10.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 96.

between self and Other. Levinas emphasizes that this moment of connectedness is due to the face of the Other, which is the metaphysical representation of the Other's alterity. The notion of "The Face" becomes a central aspect of his metaphysical and phenomenological understanding of the Other. He notes, "the face orders and ordains me,"¹²⁷ creating a command for empathy that one cannot ignore. As such, it forces one to connect and look at the Other as more than just "not self" and therefore unworthy of care and attention. Metaphysically, Levinas describes that it is "in describing the face positively, and not merely negatively,"¹²⁸ that the Face imposes responsibility on the perceiver. By this, he implies that the Face is essentially "other" from the self, and therefore must be described by the transcendent nature of alterity. Alterity, as Levinas utilizes the term, occurs in the intersection between self and non-self, describing the Other as both intrinsically like oneself, but also wholly independent. This creates a relationship in which the Other is theoretically knowable, but remains distant and not understood to us. As such, in the moment what occurs is, "the fearful face-to-face situation of a relationship without intermediary."¹²⁹ Such an intermediary would be a shared goal, or comradeship fostered through familial or social bonds, things which unite individuals and create a sense of mutual obligation. But Levinas emphasizes that such social bonding is not at the heart of intersubjectivity. Alterity is precisely the recognition of the Other as other, deemphasizing the similarities and highlighting the unique space that another occupies. Intersubjectivity is not predicated on shared experience, thus, but stands over and above interactions. It is an instantaneous connection that depends simply on the spatial connection of two individuals. This brings about the notion of asymmetry that defines these relationships: "The intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for his reciprocity...The I always has

¹²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 97.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 96.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 98.

one responsibility more than all the others.”¹³⁰ Here, Levinas again highlights that the response of the Other is not predicated on mutual understanding. It is a non-reciprocal connection, a caring relation that is triggered simply by the face of the Other being in proximity to the self.

The Other is also an escape from being, per Levinas. Levinas was intensely focused on the painful, solitary aspects of existence and how they condition our relationship to the world, and by extension, the Other. Similar to Camus, he emphasized the way insomnia challenges one’s sense of self, unmooring an individual from their identity. He notes, “it is an indefectibility of being, where the work of being never lets up; it is its insomnia.”¹³¹ Being is posited as an arduous task, one we are compelled to complete, with little respite except sleep, which serves as “the breakup on the insomnia of anonymous being, the possibility to ‘suspend,’ to escape from this corybantic necessity, to take refuge in oneself so as to withdraw from being.”¹³² Sleep is an internal escape from the work of existence. This is predicated on the assumption that the world is horrific and cruel when it is truly understood. Quite similar to Camus, Levinas thus posits that life is grueling work, from which individuals are constantly seeking respite. When understood, this manifests more deeply as what Levinas deems the “noise of the universe.” This phenomenon is similar to anxiety, a feeling of being deeply unsettled that can come with analysis of one’s place within the greater cosmic forces. Levinas explains this discontent as follows, “‘there is’ is the phenomenon of impersonal being...there is neither joy nor abundance: it is a noise returning after every negation of this noise. Neither nothingness nor being.”¹³³ Akin to Camus’s description of uncanny experiences, in this state man is suspended between his identity as subject and as object – that which acts and that which is acted upon. Levinas takes this as the usual state

¹³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 98-99.

¹³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 62.

¹³² *Ibid*, 62.

¹³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 48.

of the individual, caught in the push and pull of the universe, with significant anxiety just from the fact of his or her being. This understanding creates a significant parallel to Camus, for both thinkers view the world as naturally ordered to create anxiety and suffering for man. Thus, through the creation of these social bonds, “the responsibility for the Other, being-for-the-other...stop[s] the anonymous and senseless rumbling of being.”¹³⁴ Relating creates connection, which gives context and meaning, combatting the ennui of existence that all people encounter.

The Other thus provides us with an alternate state, something more lasting than the mere escape of sleep. Levinas emphasizes, “it is not a matter of escaping from solitude, but rather of escaping from being.”¹³⁵ Social relations are not temporary solutions to the pain of loneliness, a transient state that all individuals occasionally find themselves in. Rather, the Other is a transformative experience that allows one to move beyond the very fact of their anxiety-ridden existence. Levinas compares this to the notion of knowledge by noting that, “sociality will be a way of escaping being otherwise than through knowledge.”¹³⁶ Knowledge is described as the act of knowing the Other, through conventional methods of learning in relationships. He posits that these ways of understanding the Other, through conversations, observations in social situations, and quality time allow us to “consume” the Other instead of fundamentally relating to him or her. Consuming is the desire to accumulate all possible knowledge about other people, in order to position them in relation to the self. By understanding others in this way, we make them useful to ourselves, allowing us to better understand ourselves within a social network. The social relatedness that Levinas advocates for is of an entirely different type, as it is a connectedness that allows us to transcend the limits of our normal existence. He further explains, “the face is signification, and signification without context...the Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a

¹³⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 52.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 59.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 61.

character within context...the face is meaning all by itself.”¹³⁷ In Levinas’s conception of relatedness, the Other does not play a role or serve a function in our lives. He exists as an independent “I,” wholly other than the self, without requiring explanation or justification.

Levinas provides two poignant examples: relationships of eros and paternity. Two of the most fundamental, significant relationships one can have are those with lovers and with children. In these dynamics, one can understand how reciprocity is insignificant and ultimate responsibility for the Other is assumed. For relationships created out of eros, Levinas asserts that, “it is the relationship with alterity, with mystery, that is, with the future, with what in the world where there is everything, is never there.”¹³⁸ By relating to the ultimate alterity of the Other, one comes to see the transience of the world. Such unconditional caring and respect for the absolute other reminds one that such attachments are inherently temporary, yet constitute “everything.” They provide all the meaning that one could possibly find within a lifetime. We feel this intrinsically; yet also understand that such devotion is predicated on the fragile nature of human life. This is also a prime example of the absurdity of existence, wherein one is reminded of the deep meaninglessness of things, at their core, yet creates and maintains meaning at the level of relationships. Similarly, in the parent/child relationship, one experiences the joy and pain of alterity. In these associations, the feeling is particularly heightened, for one’s progeny are, quite literally, both self and non-self. Levinas highlights this peculiarity with his statement that, “paternity is a relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being Other, is me.”¹³⁹ The child is identified as “me” both due to the flesh-and-blood relationship and due to the lifetime of connectedness that arises out of raising a child. Here, the relationship has a precedent and thus assumes a significant and fundamental role, for it changes the life of both parent and child.

¹³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 68.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 71.

Finally, the significance of the Other is further compounded by the immediacy of the look. Levinas emphasizes that one has an instantaneous understanding of the Other, in his or her complete alterity. This recognition is both a natural ability of the individual and also an insult to his or her self-centered world. We are not accustomed to sincerely considering the Other, and as a result, “the appearance in being of these ‘ethical peculiarities’ – the humanity of man – is a rupture of being.”¹⁴⁰ It fractures one’s sense of self to consider the Other as subject, to conceive of an individual who is “not me” as independent. So why do we not shirk from this uncomfortable interpersonal relationship? This is because it is a compulsory fact of existence. As Levinas notes, “the saying is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it.”¹⁴¹ The face of the Other calls to us, not compelling us to respond out of guilt, but urges us to react to an ingrained understanding of the suffering of the Other. Levinas provides the example that it is hard to be quiet in a situation with other people, not because we feel guilty or rude, but because we respond to a desire to relate, to honor the sanctity their alterity, and to create a connection.

An adequate account of the Other, and of our relation to the Other, is undeniably one of the central pieces of Levinas’s thesis, and can be taken as the culmination of his metaphysical investigation. What he proposes is that our existence is defined by “an infinite responsibility before others.”¹⁴² This responsibility comes from the essential, inescapable look of the Other. Therefore, though he takes a phenomenological approach, Levinas ultimately places the highest value on understanding the nature of the intersubjective encounter, rather than enumerating the metaphysical qualities of the Other. Such an emphasis on relations again grounds Levinas as a thinker focused on “lived philosophy,” deeply steeped in and concerned with the nature of our

¹⁴⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 87.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 88.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 15.

experience. While responsibility for the Other may seem a large burden to bear, Levinas emphasizes that it is actually the very phenomenon that brings individuals beyond the finitude of their being, into a more fundamental connectedness. This existence beyond being is what he posits as infinity. While Levinas does not make any metaphysical claims as to the meaning of existence, he does note that the individual is greatly fulfilled by the transcendent experience of interpersonal relations. He affirms that, “a truly human life cannot remain life satisfied in its equality to being, a life of quietude, that it is awakened by the Other, that is to say, it is always getting sobered up, that being is never – contrary to what so many reassuring traditions say – its own reason for being.”¹⁴³ He thus implies that the Other allows us to live beyond the self, not for the self, and thus creates meaning within a world conditioned by emptiness. And it is solely within this experience that one can challenge the finitude of their existence. As such, “asymmetrical intersubjectivity is the locus of transcendence.”¹⁴⁴

III. The Value of Intersubjectivity within an Existential Framework (69-73)

Levinas takes up many of the same questions, claims, and worldviews posited by Camus, particularly in Camus’s later works. The inherent yearning to understand the infinite nature of existence, as it extends beyond the finite self, can be viewed as an essentially existential project. It is precisely the insistence of both authors on understanding the duality between subject and object that allows one to see them as different approaches to the same project. Each begins with a largely phenomenological approach to existence-as-such in the Heideggerian tradition, and unravels existence to the point of yearning for connectivity. Their methodological assertions on the nature of existence remain sound and relevant, however, these thinkers suggest that there is a shade of existence that occurs beyond the scope of analysis. Perhaps this is why each focuses on

¹⁴³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 122.

¹⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 100.

the emotional quality of the Other, to demonstrate that true connection must be apprehended *a priori*. Thus, existentialism, for Levinas and Camus, circles the interpersonal. While never solely focused on relations between self and other, both thinkers imply that one cannot understand the self without a mirror in the Other. We, as humans, never exist out of context, in a vacuum with only our minds and the infinite possibilities afforded through freedom. The Other is our constant companion, thus Levinas and Camus's consideration of intersubjectivity adds an essential, and previously underexplored, dimension to existentialist philosophy.

It is now crucial to explore how these theories can be cemented into a unified, and ultimately more satisfying, worldview. If one is to take Levinas as an essentially existential thinker, due to his primary concern with lived experience and the suffering that is a conditional part of life, then one can perceive Levinas's work as a completion of Camus's existentialism. Camus established the powerful, raw freedom of all persons, in the tradition of French existentialism, but then set himself apart through his unique formulation of the absurd. The absurd illuminated the meaningless nature of the world and provided us with glimpses of the esoteric coping mechanisms that all individuals participate in. He also contends with the presence of the Other, however, as previously established, never fully explains his view of intersubjectivity and the role of connectedness. With these lingering questions, we turn to Levinas, whose rigorous analysis of the Other transcends most phenomenological discussions of interconnectedness. Levinas's notion of fundamental responsibility and care for other persons, as elicited by the face of the Other, finally places a name on the ineffable nature and value of our interpersonal relationships. Thus, Camus benefits significantly from Levinas's return to the phenomenological problem of the Other. As Levinas notes, "when in the presence of the Other, I say 'Here I am!', this 'Here I am!' is the place through which the Infinite enters into

language.”¹⁴⁵ The Other thus inserts his or herself, somewhat violently, into one’s purview. As previously noted, the experiencing of seeing, as well as being seen, powerfully orients us towards the Other in ways that change our concept of self. Without Levinas’s phenomenology, the location and influence of the Other remain imprecise and undervalued.

However, Levinas also benefits from the foundational nature of Camus’s existentialism. Levinas’s theoretical thinking certainly allows us to analyze the philosophical nature of the Other, but fails to implement these revelations into the fabric of daily life. Camus grounds us in lived philosophy and provides context, and thus concrete applicability, to Levinas’s more abstract project. Camus’s existentialism is therefore enhanced and clarified by Levinas’s intersubjective stance.

Synthesizing these two philosophies into a singular theory that is both phenomenologically sound and true to lived experience is not merely an academic exercise. The understanding of the Other, within a world not ordered to our needs, finally provides us with the tools to cope with the absurdity of our existence. Beyond his vague analysis of interpersonal relationships and the salience of morality, Camus’s major shortcoming, if he is to be an existential philosopher, is his inability to provide us with a coping method. Aside from the fact that his argument against suicide remains unconvincing, the notion that “the struggle is enough”¹⁴⁶ also fails to provide tangible meaning. Delighting in the existential burden of life may appear to be a powerful and possible response, but this is a romanticized view of what this burden entails. Thus, we conclude that Camus’s argument is painfully true and ultimately disheartening. Levinas’s intersubjectivity satisfies what his argument lacks, allowing Camus existentialism to become practical and less theoretical.

¹⁴⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 106.

¹⁴⁶ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 123.

Therefore, these philosophies are complementary. But what does Levinas's response to Camus look like at phenomenological level? The interpersonal connection must be grounded in the perspective of seeing the Other as both self and non-self. With the look of the face, one comes to recognize that the Other experiences the same feelings of existential dread, meaninglessness, and absurdity, as do we, but is also not "I." One thus sees their feelings mirrored, but located outside the self. Empathy for the Other and sympathy for the self are thus simultaneously evoked in this moment. We feel the scourge of our existence, but we also recognize that it is not only I who experiences the dreadfulness of freedom couched in nothingness. In this way, the Other serves as a constant reminder of the absurd. They bear witness to the world in a similar, but nuanced, way as compared to the self. What results is that the Other experiences to the world alongside me. They affirm the validity of my suffering as I acknowledge theirs. This sense of accompaniment universalizes and legitimizes individual experience, allowing one to face absurdity with a deeper understanding. This can be seen colloquially in the knowing look that passes between two lifelong friends or lovers, or when twins reports to feel the pain of the Other, out of deep empathy. Connection takes on a sacred quality, as it provides a respite from the isolating and agonizing nature of existence.

However, our experiences are not equal. We can never truly understand what it is like to be another individual; we cannot actually feel another's pain. Thus, the mystery of the Other keeps the absurd within our reach, as we fundamentally understand, but cannot fully process, the fact that the Other is the unknowable known. The Other thus exists in between self and non-self. This tension prevents us from slipping into the quiet contentment of ignorance about the world, and by extension, our place within it. We are constantly forced to reckon with the absurd because the Other elicits an understanding of it within us. Yet, much the same way that two people can

experience grief over the same incident in different ways, our experiences are not equal, but we are not alone. The Other is both solace from and a reminder of life's absurdity. What is gained is a sense of accompaniment that softens the blow of absurdity but does not allow us to ignore the meaningless nature of the world. We are thus able to contend with the absurd without avoiding it or explaining it away, finally arriving at the authenticity that was Camus's philosophical goal all along.

Conclusion

I. The Problem with Existentialism (74-75)

The search for meaning within life is a necessary but incredibly difficult task that we each confront daily. This undertaking of meaning making is not so much a choice, but an essential part of human existence. We never cease to reach out to the world for meaning, like a child attempting to make sense of the world, overwhelmed, reaches out to his or her parents. But the warm embrace of clarity and significance that we desire does not greet us; instead we are faced with the cruelty of our existence and the unending pain of discernment. However, this process is made all the more difficult by the prescription that existentialism offers to us. How are we to proceed, to attempt the futile process of meaning making, if our only guidance are variations on the epithet, “You are free, so choose”¹⁴⁷? As established in chapter one, this proclamation of apparent freedom, coupled with Camus’s rejection of the entire question of suicide, does not leave us feeling liberated and emboldened. Rather, when applied to daily experience, these tenets leave us confused about how to act and unsure of what constitutes an “absurd hero.” This impracticality sets the individual up for failure, unable to apply theory to practice, which is ultimately a violation of the core of existentialism itself.

This leads us to a point only previously alluded to, which is that existentialism, as Sartre and Camus’s theories have presented it, ultimately fails to live up to its promise of liberation when it is applied to the experience of the everyday. As such, existentialism is interpreted and remembered for its denial of inherent meaning, its radical notions of self-determination, and its post-structuralist tendencies. The existential ideal of liberation through re-contextualizing the world is theorized, but never is fully fleshed out by these authors. Although the querying and anti-axiomatic nature of existentialism itself is inherently reflected in this choice, it prevents one

¹⁴⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Being and Nothingness,” *Existentialism*, 33.

from applying its theories in any actionable way. Therefore, under the careful lens of practical application, Camus and Sartre's version of existentialism begins to crumble under its own weight.

However, this fracture does not destroy the theory, but merely requires a consideration of how this inconsistency may be remedied. This project has sought to consider how existentialism may be contextualized in a way that allows for the resolution of the dissonance between theory and practice. The goal thus is not to undermine existentialism, but to save it from the ways that it fails to live up to all that it has to offer. The re-contextualization of existentialism within an intersubjective framework affords the opportunity for existentialism to be recognized as the profound and appropriate worldview that it is. Reaffirming the absurdity of the world and our ceaseless yearning for meaning, Levinas provides a response, but not an answer, to the problem presented by Camus's existentialism. By deepening Camus's original project on existence-as-such and authenticity, intersubjectivity provides us with a nuanced image of the world and mode of coping for the individuals ailing within it.

II. Coping and Transcendence (75-77)

It becomes important to discuss precisely what this description is and what its implications are. We must not think of intersubjectivity as an answer to absurdity because this interpretation would fly in the face of Camus's entire endeavor into dismantling our desire for clarity. Absurdity can never be fixed, nor can it ever be overcome. But it can be dealt with, and surely must be confronted. This view is affirmed both by Camus, his affection for the "man of action," and by our lived experience, where we see that tragedy is never "solved," but is merely encountered, processed, and worked through. "Coping," is the best term to describe how intersubjectivity allows us to consider absurdity, but even it requires a nuanced explanation.

Engaging in interpersonal connections does not allow one to overcome the conditions of one's existence or provide any lasting happiness free from struggle. Coping with the absurd through intersubjectivity, instead, affords an opportunity to work through the absurd in a meaningful way. It distills the complexity of existence and the world and allows us to focus on the absurdity inherent in the alterity of the Other, and the simultaneous beauty and terror that arise from encountering the Other.

Levinas's notions of the Other as "infinite" and the interpersonal as the context of "transcendence," briefly touched on in chapter four, deserve another look at this juncture. Transcendence and infinity are implicit in the interpersonal, per Levinas, and we therefore must consider what these elements are and how we may reconcile them with the notion of "coping." One of the essential theses of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* is, "The other person transcends totality and, thereby, exhibits his or her 'infinity.'"¹⁴⁸ Levinas is challenging the metaphysical limits of his theory, asserting that the Other, as they present themselves to us, is over and above the world and the limited nature of embodied existence. Our perception of the Other, occurring through recognition of his or her "nonencompassable alterity,"¹⁴⁹ which causes us to confront the subjectivity of the Other as well, necessarily leads us to this point. On perceiving "the Face," the Other transcends the limitations that we have placed on them, which is an expression of infinity. Levinas defines infinity as "'the exceeding of limits' (*TI*, 26). It implies both the limits and their surpassing. The limits are those of the subject or 'I' (the 'same'). The surpassing of them is accomplished by the presence of the Other as other. It occurs through the Other who is in me and yet transcends me."¹⁵⁰ This formulation of infinity thus acknowledges the dual nature of the Other, as both "self" and "not self," and creates a parallel to the notion of coping. The Other, in

¹⁴⁸ James R. Mensch, *Levinas's Existential Analytic*. (Northwestern University Press, 2015) 20.

¹⁴⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 10.

¹⁵⁰ Mensch, 21.

transcending the limits of selfhood, is not “overcoming” the absurdity of existence in anyway. Conversely, one is able to see clearly, for the first time, the truth of totality, or in Camus’s terms, the truth of absurdity. By fact of this recognition, we perceive the Other as transcendent, for he or she exceeds the limits we place on them, as he or she is a subjective being much in the same way we are. However, the Other still very much remains in this world.

To analyze Levinas’s proposition from an existential standpoint, he does not surpass or “solve” absurdity. Instead, the Other is dwelling with us, alongside us, coping in a way that is radically like us. This concept upends our subject-centered view of the world and self, allowing us to experience our environment anew. As Levinas states, “the relation with the Other alone introduces a dimension of transcendence and leads us to a relation totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term’ (*TI*, 193).”¹⁵¹ Transcendence is therefore a radically different perspective on the same. Encountering the alterity of the Other, recognizing his or her infinity, and thus, their transcendence, we remain “in the world but not of it.”¹⁵² We gain a nuanced understanding and a revived mode of being, for it is the Other who allows us to cope through transcendence.

III. Implications (77-79)

Through this comparative, analytical lens, we can recover the true spirit of “lived philosophy.” The simple fact is that the world is conditioned by the Other; we do not self-discern in a vacuum. The social sphere is the only realm in which the notions of identity and selfhood are operable, because others give us the context for meaning itself. When we consider the Other, we consider ourselves. The need to understand our relation to the Other is therefore a natural inclination for all people. Thus, the application of intersubjectivity to absurdity allows us to

¹⁵¹ Mensch, 118.

¹⁵² John 2:15-17.

engage in meaning making and self-discernment in a way that accords with our experience while still retaining an existentialist's perspective.

Beyond its applicability, an intersubjective approach is deeply practical. It allows us to engage meaningfully in our lives and truly take agency, because it couples radical freedom with the opportunity for transcendence. We can avoid the crippling nature of existential dread or nihilism – things that Camus's philosophy risks – and continue on living in a way that feels transiently meaningful. We learn that despair is not the outcome, but neither is religion or other methods of placation. One is finally able to engage with the world, and all of its absurd truth.

The two key elements of a life lived with an intersubjective/absurd perspective are accompaniment and authenticity. In practice, the emphasis on the interpersonal is the action of accompaniment. As Levinas notes, "persons are not simply in front of one another, they are along with each other around something."¹⁵³ It is not merely the face-to-face interaction that matters, but the individual and the Other facing the world. The Other is therefore my fellow sufferer, my fellow discerner, whom I acknowledge as subject, as he or she does the same for me. The Other does not bear my burden, nor I theirs, but instead stands silently alongside me, and I alongside them, before "the unreasonable silence of the world."¹⁵⁴ Secondly, the Other keeps us in authenticity, never letting us escape absurdity through some outlet that would deny its existence. The unknowable suffering of the Other, the fact that his or her alterity prevents one from ever fully knowing the Other, is what forces us to dwell in absurdity. By witnessing the Other, our responsibility for him or her prevents us from giving up. We remain there, in the tension between self and world, for him or her. Thus, we never "solve" the absurd, but also do

¹⁵³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 32.

¹⁵⁴ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

not succumb to despair; instead we cope alongside the Other, with our face ever turned to the absurd.

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