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# Camus, Existentialism, and the Absurdity of Tyler Durden

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**CAMUS, EXISTENTIALISM, AND THE ABSURDITY OF TYLER DURDEN**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of Classics, Philosophy, and Religion  
of the University of Mary Washington  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Jordan William Reece

May 2015

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Jordan William Reece  
(digital signature)

05/01/15

# Camus, Existentialism, and the Absurdity of Tyler Durden

A thesis presented by

Jordan William Reece


In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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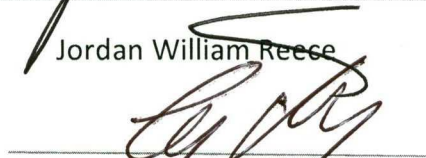
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The University of Mary Washington



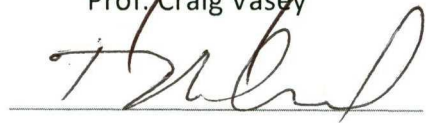
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Jordan William Reece



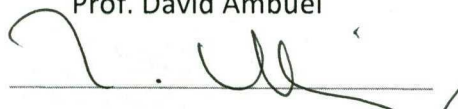
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## Camus, Existentialism, and the Absurdity of Tyler Durden

### I. Introduction

Albert Camus was a French-Algerian writer, famous for such works as *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, *The Rebel*, and *The Stranger* to name a few. Camus was not just a philosopher, but a writer who influenced pivotal members of the existentialist movement, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, with whom Camus had a close relationship at the beginning of Sartre's literary career. Camus is commonly identified as an existentialist himself, although he ardently denied this label, believing that he espoused a theory of what we today identify as "absurdism." Interestingly, Camus believed that he was not even a philosopher. Ronald Aronson shows that he claimed as much in a November, 1945, issue of *Les Nouvelles Littéraire*, by saying "that he did 'not believe sufficiently in reason to believe in a system'" (Aronson 2012, 4). Even Sartre had a falling out with Camus due to differences in opinion concerning the nature of his work, specifically Camus' 1951 novel-length essay entitled *The Rebel* (Camus 1954). But the question still remains of whether such things can really separate Camus entirely from the camp of existentialism. Just as Mill and Bentham disagreed on the nature of pleasure without scholars thinking that one or the other was not a utilitarian, perhaps Camus' avowed differences with existentialists do not mean that he was not one himself.

Considering Camus' extensive work as a writer, we must also question whether or not his rejection of existentialism could be simplified into a single difference of one area of disagreement, or whether there are potentially other differences between Camus and the existentialists that justify the division. In doing so, I will determine whether or not we really can view Camus as an existentialist. I will be asserting an interpretation of Camus' and other

existentialist thinkers' work which provides a theoretical framework to place Camus outside of the scope of existentialism. My interpretation takes seriously claims of Camus and Sartre that deny Camus was an existentialist, and attempts to legitimize this possibility. Noting that Camus died prematurely and could have changed his views later in life, I will offer an approach to Camus, while by no means definitive or wholly comprehensive, that rejects the notion that Camus was an existentialist. That is the aim of this essay.

In what follows, I will delineate the core concepts of Camus' philosophy, as well as the ideas expressed by notable existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. I will then compare and contrast their philosophies and draw a conclusion concerning the true nature of Camus' philosophy, in order to ultimately prove that Camus developed a unique set of views that are distinct from those of the existentialists. Having established Camus as advancing ideas independent of his existentialist counterparts, I will then attempt to show a cinematic character consistent with Camus' ideas. The infamous Tyler Durden from David Fincher's 1999 movie *Fight Club* will serve as the perfect backdrop by which we can see the conclusions of Camus and his thoughts on how the absurd hero must live his or her life (Fincher 1999). This is important because it shows a character outside of the literary portrayals of absurd heroes in the works of Camus himself, such as *The Stranger*. This advancement of an absurd hero created more than 30 years after the death of Camus will show how Camus' ideas still permeate art and culture today, and help us to understand the nature of the absurd human.

## II. Sartre and de Beauvoir

To begin, we must start with a definition of the term “existentialism.” To provide this, I will use a foundational work of the movement, Sartre’s “Existentialism is a Humanism” (Sartre 1998). It is important to note though, that I will depart from Sartre when considering what an existential ethics would look like. Existentialists certainly concerned themselves with questions of ethics, so any essay on existentialism must consider how the theory deals with moral philosophy. I will use Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to set up this moral system, as it is a major essay by de Beauvoir, instead of just the small section on ethics in “Existentialism is a Humanism.” There are hardly better places to start in attempting to define existentialism than these two essays. In “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Sartre states that the one thing that all existentialists have in common is that they believe that “existence precedes essence” (Sartre 1998, 441). The implications of this simple statement are more far reaching than we might at first assume. To begin, it entails that there is no real essence to humanity. In other words, humans are entities that make up their own identity and decide who they are going to be. Sartre explains, “For we mean that man first exists, that is, that man first of all is the being who hurls himself toward a future and who is conscious of imaging himself as being in the future. Man is at the start a plan which is aware of itself... nothing exists prior to this plan” (Sartre 1998, 442). As Sartre explains here, an individual first exists and that fact is all that defines him or her at birth. But looking toward the future, the individual creates an identity by deciding his or her values and making decisions in life accordingly, independent of a predefined essence. Sartre, an atheistic existentialist, argues that God does not exist (Sartre 1998, 442). If God does not exist, there is no supernatural craftsman to imbue us with any essence, or an underlying particular reality of what it means to be human. As such, when the existentialist

says that “existence precedes essence,” he or she is essentially stating that people exist and create their identity themselves through the set of choices that they make throughout their life. Everyone wills their own “essence” by choosing actions which will define who they are and how the world sees them as a human being.

Bearing this in mind, subjectivity becomes important to each individual. Subjectivity in this context refers to the fact that humans create their identity, and this is true of all of humanity. But additionally, by creating ourselves, we are creating an image of what we believe to be the best course of action for not just ourselves, but humankind. Sartre states, “In fact, in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil” (Sartre 1998, 442). We act in accordance with what we think is best for us. In doing so, we can never truly choose evil. In this regard, Sartre agrees with Socrates and suggests that we never truly will evil, since willing evil inevitably results in our own harm and this conflicts with our basic instincts of self-interest and survival. But this fact does not merely involve the individual. Sartre argues that any decision we make is an expression of our values and identity. As such, we are elevating certain values and ideals above others and tacitly suggesting that this is the way everyone ought to live life. “Ought” in this context means that since willing any action means an individual expressing value, and because we cannot will evil, every action an individual makes is arguing for an ideal of humanity that is determined by his or her identity. In doing so, we now can understand why no one would ever truly choose evil. If we are creating ourselves out of an image we hold as best for humanity, willing evil would be antithetical to

that pursuit since it would be self-destructive. He explains this universality by citing an example of making a decision to get married and be monogamous (Sartre 1998, 443). By making any decision, I am making a subjective statement about what I believe is the best course of action for life. If I want to have children, and be monogamous, the world itself is affected by that realization. Humanity feels the consequences of every decision we make, so following an ideal of humanity that creates destruction is what we must avoid since it creates harm to the self as well as others.

When we first consider the idea that subjectivity is all we have, we might find cause to despair. If everything is subjective, if there is no sense of objective truth that we can aspire to and if there is no God, then nothing matters and there is nothing we can hope for. Sartre reacts to this by merely pointing to this as a fact of human reality that we must swallow. He aims to show that while this may at first appear to be a curse, this, along with the other facets of existentialism, will allow us to be truly free. This awareness of subjectivity and the implications of our actions are personified through what Sartre calls "anguish," as David Detmer explains in his book *Sartre Explained: From Bad Faith to Authenticity* (Detmer 2008). It is worth noting that anguish has a more complex explanation in its original work, *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1966). Detmer starts by saying that, "Sartre begins his analysis by distinguishing anguish from fear" (Detmer 2008, 71). Detmer provides the example of us hiking up a path and quickly finding ourselves at a ledge along which we must advance without a guardrail to save us from potential death. We must continue but what would happen if a gust of wind were to suddenly push us off into the abyss? This is fear. In this circumstance, it is the fear that the wind may pick up and force us to our deaths.



But there is a difference between anguish and fear. We are afraid that we may fall to our deaths while walking up the path. So if we decide to advance forward, we must take into consideration all of the variables that might force us to fall, such as the placement of rocks, and winds blowing against us. Then, we are forced to consider the possibility that even if we take into account all relevant, dangerous factors in going up this path, we still may decide to step over the ledge as we go forward and fall to our deaths (Detmer 2008, 72). Detmer says that it is this worry about our future conduct, despite our best efforts to act in the way we see fit, that Sartre calls anguish (Detmer 2008, 73). Detmer sees Sartre as advancing anguish as the rejection of determinism, at least judged by our own experiences: that we are free to act and choose as we like, but we must always be wary of the consequences of all of our actions, intended or not (Detmer 2008, 71-72). Anguish is pivotal to Sartre's freedom since it forces us to confront the notion that everything we do has consequences and we must be able to deal with those consequences, even if they are not the intended outcome of our actions. We are bound by our freedom to make choices. This freedom in anguish relates to the idea that every action we take is a positive value judgment and we must be ready to handle the consequences of the values that we hold.

Once we accept the anguish of our situation-- not to be confused with fear-- we continue our path towards existentialism. The next aspect we must deal with is that of forlornness. Sartre explains that, "When we speak of forlornness, a term Heidegger was fond of, we mean only that God does not exist, and that we have to face all the consequences of this" (Sartre 1998, 444). Nietzsche is famous for the saying that "God is dead" ("The Gay Science," 109). According to Sartre, existentialists must take that fact seriously. He cites

French rationalists' attempts to have a secular ethics without the existence of God, but he rejects this possibility outright (Sartre 1998, 444). Sartre continues by explaining that if God is dead, the possibility for all objective values dies with him. God, the all-powerful creator, the omnipotent being, no longer serves as a moral reference point through which ethical judgments can be justified. God does not exist and Sartre believes humans cannot by themselves justify any moral claims in an objective way. With the death of God, everything becomes permissible because there are no true goods, or justifiable values for us to hold on to in terms of objective truth. But, that does not mean that we cannot create meaning and decide what is good and what is valuable for us alone. This is the forlornness that is important to Sartre. But this forlornness is essential to the true freedom that the existential human obtains. Values become ambiguous. Sartre critiques moral systems through an analogy of a son who must choose to fight in the Free French Forces or stay with his mother, with the ultimate realization that no one can tell him what to do other than his own instincts (Sartre 1998, 445). There is no objective moral system that can truly aid us in that regard. All we have is ourselves, and we must live with the decisions that we make. Once we let go of any standard of value through forlornness, we are free to do as our instincts tell us.

But simply because we are free to do as we like, does not mean that we can do anything. The freedom created from forlornness allows us to create our own values and morals, but we ought to always act in accordance with the mores that we give meanings to. Sartre says, "Since we have defined the situation of man as one of free choice, without excuse and without help, any man who takes refuge behind the excuse of his passions, or by inventing some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver" (Sartre 1998, 445). The system of values that

we have decided as our own is willed by our ontological freedom from our instincts. As such, we must act in good faith when making moral judgments and we cannot hide behind outbursts of emotion or external values when choosing what course of action to take. Good faith, in other words, means willing your own code of conduct as opposed to others, created from your innate freedom, and allowing others to do the same. The moment that we deceive ourselves into acting in a fashion that disregards this liberty, or that claims we could not have done otherwise, we are lying to ourselves, acting in bad faith, and immorally (Sartre 1998, 445). Therefore, we must be honest with ourselves and in tune with our own goals and values when choosing how to act.

Despair is another aspect of “Existentialism is a Humanism” that the existentialist must realize. Feeling despair means realizing that we can only rely on ourselves. We are only in control of our own actions and there is a lot that is ultimately outside our power to influence. Sartre uses the example of waiting for a friend who is coming in a street-car (Sartre 1998, 446). Despair means that we have to accept the fact that a multitude of factors may prevent the intended outcome of our meeting. For example, the street car may crash, killing our friend; the street car may simply break down, preventing him from arriving; or, our friend might have decided that he has no desire to see us today. This is despair, insofar we must lack hope when it comes to the actions of others and the world around us. It means understanding that you are in control of very little in this world but you have complete autonomy over yourself. Sartre is very clear that accepting despair does not mean that we must be passive in our reception of how history unfolds. If we see something affecting us in a way that we find deplorable, we must act. As Sartre says, “The doctrine I am presenting is the very opposite of

quietism, since it declares ‘there is no reality except in action’” (Sartre 1998, 447). Since we are responsible for our own actions and identity, we have to act when history and humanity decide to act in accordance with an agenda that we find morally reprehensible. Even if the cause itself seems unwinnable and lost, we must choose to act rather than sit by passively as the events occur.

The final aspect of “Existentialism is a Humanism” that I shall describe here is the understanding that we can have no excuses. This entire doctrine has a certain quality that at first may lead us to despair at the possibility of its truth. By accepting existentialism, we deny that we are ever the victim of circumstance. We always have a choice, we could have always done otherwise, and it was always within our power to have seen different ends. Sartre says, “To be sure, this may seem a harsh thought to someone whose life hasn’t been a success. But, on the other hand, it prompts people to understand that reality alone is what counts, that dreams, expectations, and hopes warrant no more than to define a man as a disappointed dream, as miscarried hopes, as vain expectations” (Sartre 1998, 447).

One may decry Sartre and the existentialists for not taking into account the material aspects of a given individual’s life. For instance, that they were raised in a Christian household and therefore grew up to be Christian. But Sartre would argue that even if the material aspects of one’s life affect the decisions that one makes, one is still free to choose from a wide array of choices. Even if the person does not forego Christianity, he or she is still free to examine his or her own beliefs about the nature of Christianity, and at the very least examine his or her values on the matter. In doing so, one is free to choose what denomination one adheres to, or even

give up one's faith altogether. In the end, if existence does precede essence, then we can always rebel against our surrounding environment and attempt to modify our own identity.

Having examined "Existentialism is a Humanism," I will now explicate two additional ideas inherent in Sartre's theory that will be essential later in the essay. These two ideas are the "in-itself" and the "for-itself." Detmer explains the in-itself by providing the example of a chair. He says "The being of a chair,... is in-itself, that is, identical with itself, at no distance from itself, having no awareness of, or relation to, itself" (Detmer 2008, 64). Everything that exists as a particular aspect of a thing is an example of the in-itself. It is a part of an object's facticity, in that it identifies the determinate conditions of a given person or thing. For instance, a chair is brown, hard, made of a certain wood, etc. Interestingly enough, Sartre even includes human aspects of being into the category of the in-itself. Our ego and beliefs are merely aspects of our existence that we are constantly changing and affecting as a result of the relationship between our awareness of things around us and our ideas concerning them (Detmer 2008, 64). In this way, parts of someone's consciousness can be an aspect of their being in-itself, but how their consciousness interacts with the world is an aspect of the for-itself.

The for-itself is a very active part of our being in that it expresses our intentionality (Detmer 2008, 64). The for-itself is that which is inherent in any conscious being that sees the in-itself and attempts to affect it through a process that Sartre calls "nihilation." This nihilation can be roughly thought of as negation. For instance, if we take the particulars of a single human as our example, we can see aspects of the in-itself. The person is male, he is six feet tall, he has blonde hair, he works as a construction worker, and the list goes on. But the for-itself is

the aspect of his consciousness that “carves up,” as Detmer puts it, the aspects of his in-itself by actively shaping them (Detmer 2008, 65). As Sartre argues that we are condemned to be free, and existence precedes essence, he argues that the for-itself can act on the entirety of the qualities allocated within the in-itself. The for-itself is expressed in the ways in which the man is blonde. He may feel disgusted with his blonde hair or perhaps proud. It is his awareness of his bloneness and his relationship to being blonde that shows the for-itself in regard to the fact he is expressing a way of being blonde in some way. As a result, we can see that the in-itself is always manifested as a positive aspect of reality, since it simply exists in the present world as parts of an object or person. The for-itself is the relationship between an object or the quality of an individual and how it is viewed by a subject.

As mentioned, Sartre was a philosopher who wrote on a wide range of topics. But as Juliette Simont notes in her “Sartrean Ethics,” he failed to finalize a formal ethical schema. She says that “After all, Sartre never produced a completed ethical system even though his entire work is shot through with the ethical problematic” (Simont 1992, 178). We have seen that Sartre explicitly refers to moral systems even in “Existentialism is Humanism,” but Simont explains that Sartre was never able to finalize a specific ethics through which we can determine what is morally right or wrong, outside of anything but a, “moral perspective” (Simont 1992, 178).

Sartre definitely attempted to ask and answer questions of moral philosophy. But Simont contends that his attempts to create a “Sartrean Ethic” represent little more than a “philosophical wager,” as Sartre never formalized an ethic, and leads me to look elsewhere for a potential moral system for the existentialist (Simont 1992, 178). As a result, I would like to

depart from Sartre to focus on the ethical implications identified by de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (de Beauvoir 1949).

The distinction between the "in-itself" and "for-itself" is of special import to de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* because it allows her ethics to work. Anne Morgan, in "Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics, the Master/Slave Dialectic, and Eichmann as a Sub-Man" states that "According to Beauvoir human existence is characterized by an inherent dichotomy-- that each of us is both *for-itself* (transcendence) and *in-itself* (immanence)-- and that, as such, there is an ambiguity at the core of our experiences" (Morgan 2009, 41). Traditional attempts to explain the differences of experience in mental and physical phenomena come down to a choice between some form of idealism, physicalism, or dualism. But de Beauvoir does not attempt to make a classification concerning our ontology but rather notes an aspect of our phenomenology. Hers is a weak dualism, not necessarily attempting to prove the existence of both spirit and matter, but noting only that our world is a series of dualistic comparisons. It is weak because she is not explicitly claiming that our world is literally comprised of two substances: spirit and matter. Moreover, de Beauvoir agrees with Sartre that we are ontologically free in the sense that we are forced to constantly make choices, including the choice to do nothing. She says, "Every man is originally free, in the sense that he spontaneously casts himself into the world" (de Beauvoir 1949, 25). It is this "ontological freedom" that Morgan notes which allows us to think, create meaning, act, and examine our surroundings, as well as gives us the possibility of "moral freedom" (Morgan 2009, 41). But through this freedom of consciousness, the individual finds his or her relationship to the body.

While consciousness exists as some entity that allows us to focus in on the specific particularities of the world, it is the body that the mind possesses that allows consciousness to actually take part in the affairs of the physical world. We can then see that this implies our original relationship: our mind, or the for-itself, forces itself upon the physical world through our use of the body. But more than that, Morgan notes that the for-itself acts upon what can be thought of as the “facticity” of reality, and this facticity is quite literally “everything that impacts human life (other than consciousness itself), including the material and immaterial byproducts of consciousness” (Morgan 2009, 42).

That we have this union between the for-itself and the in-itself is all well and good, but there is something that de Beauvoir finds problematic about this union. Western culture has a strong tendency to prioritize things, such as the mind over the body. Throughout history, we have worked through a system that can only be understood in terms of binary opposites. This led to the point where many binaries are given an elevated status for seemingly arbitrary reasons. Another clear example important to de Beauvoir is the distinction between man and woman. It is this binary, which allows for the prioritizing of masculinity and sees femininity as “the other,” that can help us to understand why de Beauvoir would find privileging one of the two terms problematic (de Beauvoir 1949, 38). De Beauvoir argues that because masculinity has been privileged in society it has determined in a large way what femininity is. We see this when we think of traditional traits of the ideal woman as charming, graceful, and soft-spoken. She says that because masculinity is privileged, the western woman “chooses ... or at least consents to” this notion of femininity (de Beauvoir 1949, 38).



Morgan notes that the body itself is an aspect of our facticity that allows our consciousness to interact with the outside world and even our own bodies (Morgan 2009, 42). She continues by explaining that something happens soon after we realize that we are able to influence and interact with the outside world. We realize that the outside world can affect us as well. Morgan elaborates: "Although the world in its physicality existed before any human, the objects that she reveals are already imbued with human significance and meaning. Many people from many cultures have come before, and they have constructed the world in which she now finds herself" (Morgan 2009, 42). Even more than that, there are other beings in the world she inhabits now that affect her reality and create things and meanings that will alter her perception of the world and how she interacts with it (Morgan 2009, 42). But that is merely a factor of her existence, a facet of her world. She, in turn, will contribute to the world she inhabits and create her own contributions to the world through her freedom as a being for-itself. This is the subject-object binary, and it is important to her ethics.

In order to get a better understanding of the implication of this interaction, de Beauvoir explains:

It is known that this is the essential point on which existential ontology is opposed to dialectical materialism. We think that the meaning of the situation does not impose itself on the consciousness of a passive subject, that it surges up only by the disclosure which a free subject effects in his project. It appears evident to us that in order to adhere to Marxism, to enroll in a party, and in one rather than another, to be actively attached to it, even a Marxist needs a decision whose source is only in himself (de Beauvoir 1949, 20).

De Beauvoir and Sartre are serious about this notion that we are truly ontologically free, in as far as we are able to make choices and decisions on our own that are not limited by any opposing force. But de Beauvoir suggests that while we are free to act according to our will, the “other,” as it were, being manifested in the institutions of society, other individuals, and even nature itself, will act upon us and influence how we make our final decision. The “situation,” or set of material conditions affecting an individual, that are a result of where or when an individual is born only affect the individual in regards to how the individual chooses to react to them. Certainly, it may be said that the material conditions of a certain area may influence the way a particular individual develops. But at the end of the day, the decision to join a party is one’s own. More than that, the dialectical materialists cannot deny that the choice to select one specific party over any other is more of an example of ontological freedom than a result of an individual’s material surroundings. To go back to the original point, we can see that de Beauvoir is attempting to forego any privileging that occurs between the binary opposite of the subject-object dichotomy. In other words, we are free to act as we choose. But we cannot deny the influence of those around us and those that have come before us that affect how we choose how to be. In that way, neither is more important than the other. It is both that work together to create the world that we inhabit.

Morgan identifies this interaction/reaction relationship between the self/subject and the other/object as “due to the interdependent context in which we live” (Morgan 2009, 43). This interconnectedness allows the self to realize that while we are our own subjects, we are ultimately objects for any other consciousness that we may come in contact with. The individual proceeds to realize that it is not merely an individual, but a part of a collective of

individuals that operate and work in infinitely many ways to construct and create the world which they inhabit. The individual realizes that while it may be the center of its own Universe, it is not the center of anyone else's and the world seems indifferent to him or her. Morgan herself even notes that this interconnectedness is even manifested in oppression (Morgan 2009, 43). Our facticity and the identification of it by others allow for oppression and it is the facticity that makes us interconnected. For surely if there were an individual without facticity, others would not be able to disparage him or her, since the very nature of that sentiment is nonsensical in nature. How can we oppress that which has no qualities?

But let us return to ambiguity. We have this ambiguity within our existence, a pressure that we feel between body and thought, as well as between ourselves and the others that we see around us, both as a seeming hierarchical subject-object relationship. Kristana Arp, in her book entitled *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Ethics* claims that, "Rooted as they [humanity] are in the earth, humans can transcend their material origin in thought, but they can never escape it" (Arp 2001, 48). But de Beauvoir rejects this subject/object relationship, and would never want us to privilege thought over matter. There are a multitude of dualisms that exist naturally in society and in the world. It is when one term in a binary opposite is privileged, that another is inherently oppressed. Bearing this in mind, note that when establishing her moral premises, de Beauvoir makes an interesting claim. She says, "To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision," and at first glance, we cannot reconcile how freedom in and of itself, established for all of humanity and acting on that freedom, constitutes a moral action (de Beauvoir 1949, 24). We must first deconstruct the language she uses. De Beauvoir does not say to will myself, yourself, or

themselves, but says to will *oneself*. Using the indeterminacy of a pronoun such as “oneself,” de Beauvoir asserts the necessity to respect the subject, I, and the object, the other, when willing to be morally free.

To elaborate, when considering the ambiguity that we all face as both subject and object of ourselves and those around us, we must also bear in mind our inherent ontological freedom. Everyone is free. Everyone’s existence precedes their essence. Everyone creates their own identity. Just as we see others as objects, so too do others view us as objects. So de Beauvoir bears that duality in mind and asserts that the indeterminate “oneself” can be seen as both variables for the egoistic “I” as well as the objective “other.” Simply put, if we act freely and allow others to act freely, we are working under an ethic of ambiguity. This ethics of ambiguity is composed of two things. The first ambiguity is that the individual exists and is ontologically free to create his or her own identity by interacting with the outside world, which in turn changes itself and affects the individual. Secondly, by situating ourselves in the determined past events that have created our world and the infinite set of possibilities of the future, we ought to act in a way that allows for the greatest possible amount of freedom for ourselves and others. The moment that we oppress, or jeopardize the liberty that an individual experiences as a phenomenological fact of their reality, we are ceasing to act in a moral fashion. It stops being moral because the individual and all others, while ontologically free, are only able to define themselves through their relationship to others. But oppressing the individual and limiting his or her freedom means limiting an ontological necessity of an individual’s reality and their ability to express him or herself. In this way, acting while respecting the freedom of oneself is the only qualification for moral action and we have an

obligation to respect this freedom. This is further reinforced later in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* when de Beauvoir asserts, “To will oneself free is also to will others free” (de Beauvoir 1949, 73). By living in a world that was created by those before us, meaning is given through both ourselves and the world we inhabit. So while we create our identity and choose what we want to make of ourselves, our choices are ultimately limited within the scope of what has been established by those before us and around us. In that way, we realize the freedom of others, and the necessity to defend their freedom by establishing an ethics of ambiguity. For by preserving the freedom of others, we are preserving the freedom of those that come after us and allowing the potential for moral freedom.

This unique approach to morality puts de Beauvoir in a camp apart from traditional moralists. De Beauvoir is far more interested in respecting the underlying subjectivity of experience that affects us all in deciding how to act and the values we choose to endorse through that subjectivity, than she is in the results that any given action may have. For instance, if we detest violence and see a woman being beaten on the street, we will feel pain and terrible disgust at the scene. But if we fail to react according to the moral laws we have created for ourselves to live by, we are ontologically free to make that decision, but we are not acting morally because we are not stopping the woman from being oppressed, which infringes upon her freedom and violates the aforementioned laws we have for ourselves. We are also not acting morally since we are not creating an identity that is in line with the values we hold dear to ourselves, which is the expression of our freedom. Arp writes, “Although one cannot will oneself not to be free, because freedom is an ontological structure of human existence, one can fail to choose to will oneself free” (Arp 2001, 55). If we oppress others, then we are

stopping him or her from expressing their freedom, which is the sole moral good and a necessary aspect of our existence. In the sense that we did not choose to help the individual whose freedom was being oppressed, or respect our own subjective value system, we can fail to act morally. De Beauvoir's ethics is more concerned with the act of associating ourselves with the values we create, becoming who we choose to be, and allowing others to do the same, than giving specific actions predetermined moral content. In other words, she is not attempting to say that a given action, such as theft or lying, is transcendently immoral. Rather, she is saying that promoting the freedom of ourselves and others is the only way actions can have a positive moral content. That is moral freedom to the existentialist, and is what I use as my reference point regarding Camus.

Taking all of this together, this way of life implies a stalwart optimism. It gives us the freedom to be truly in charge of our destiny and do all that we hope to accomplish, if only we have the mental fortitude to take charge of our lives. Because of this, Sartre rejects the idea that existentialism can be reduced to a philosophy of sadness and traditionally defined despair. If we accept the anguish of life, the forlornness entailed by the inexistence of God, the despair we feel when we realize we cannot control everything, and the inescapable fact that we alone are responsible for our future and what happens to us, we will be truly free to make the best out of the world and our circumstances. When paired with de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity, an ethics based on freedom, existentialism is anything but depressing. It is a philosophy of freedom and individuality. By making freedom the basis for morals, de Beauvoir creates a society that truly respects the subjectivity and liberty of its citizens. That, in a nutshell, can be thought of as a definition of existentialism that I shall use as a backdrop in order to

show my interpretation of Camus as outside the realm of existentialism. Having established some of the fundamental aspects of existentialism, I now shall examine Camus. In doing so, I will prove that Sartre was correct in claiming during an interview that Camus was merely a, “Mediterranean” infused with, “... themes of classical pessimism” as opposed to an existentialist (Sartre 2009, 19).

### III. Camus

Camus begins his famous work *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* in a fashion that distances his work from traditional topics of philosophy (Camus 1955). Instead of focusing on questions of morality, God, or knowledge, Camus has a different focus. He says “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus 1955, 3). Camus’ first and foremost concern is the question of suicide. The beginning of the foundational work of Camus is not attempting to establish some sort of metaethical groundwork for how to live one’s life, investigate the possible existence of God, or demonstrate the most tenable political philosophy for instituting freedom on a wide-scale. Instead, to Camus, the first thing we must consider is the question of whether or not we ought to kill ourselves. Everything else is secondary to that central question. For if life is not worth living, then we would commit suicide, and all other questions of philosophy would be irrelevant. A dead body cannot pontificate, after all. To Camus, suicide itself acts as a sort of assertion. By committing suicide, one is admitting to the world that life is inadequate and not worth living anymore (Camus 1955, 5).

But then, we must aim to discover what instills within humanity this feeling of discontent that compels us to contemplate suicide. Camus believes that there are two essential aspects of life that render life unlivable and leads individuals to suicide. First, this realization that life itself is absurd. Second, the world around us is unreasonable, or at the very least, quiet to our desires for order and knowledge. Life is absurd because, as humans, we strive for this order and rational explanation of life and the world is unable to reconcile itself to our very human need for there to be order (Camus 1955, 21). We all feel the anxiety of life push down on us as we try to cope with the fact that life makes little, if any, sense to us, and any attempt to understand it leads to a feeling of anguish and sadness. Camus shows this disconnect between our attempts at rationalizing the world and our ultimate inability to do so by examining our efforts for truth. He remembers a thought experiment of Aristotle's, who makes the claim that if everything is true, then contrary assertions are true, which is illogical. If everything is false, then our assertion itself is false, leading to an annihilation of values (Camus 1955, 17). If we try to say only our assertion is true and all other assertions are false, others could do the same, leading to a contradiction between our claim being true for us, yet false for everyone else (Camus 1955, 17). Although Aristotle believed in the possibility of truth claims, he did consider the suggestion that they are not feasible in this experiment. So Camus uses this thought experiment as a means to show the problems for our intellect in creating any objective values or truth claims. If there is any meaning in the world, it is the meaning that we create ourselves, since objective value leads to logical inconsistencies.

In this regard at least, it appears Sartre and Camus are superficially in agreement. This inability to find transcendental truth values is what we have seen earlier in Sartre's concern



with forlornness, and it helps us see our first overlap between Sartre and Camus. Without God to give us prescribed values to adhere to, we cannot find objective meaning, and that leaves subjective meaning as the only possibility. It is worth noting that Camus published *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1942, and as Charles Forsdick points out in his essay entitled “Camus and Sartre: The Great Quarrel,” Camus and Sartre first came in to contact in 1938 and 1943; they wrote reviews of each other’s works, and this led to the beginning of their friendship (Forsdick 2007, 120). This relationship led to their mutual influence on one another, as noted by Forsdick, who says, “[in these] texts, there is already a sense of the two men shaping their views in relations to each other” (Forsdick 2007, 120). Furthermore, Forsdick also notes that although Camus and Sartre had a profound influence on the development of each other’s viewpoints, this relationship also ended poorly in a literary dispute over the publication of *The Rebel* (Forsdick 2007, 120). That being said, their tacit acceptance of subjectivity as the only grounds in which an individual can construct meaning or value is not surprising. But this belief is hardly grounds for Camus being qualified as an existentialist.

We can now focus on what Camus calls “absurd freedom” (Camus 1955, 51). To Camus, this notion of the absurd can appear depressing but instead of attempting to negate it or feel shackled by it, he maintains its positivity. Remembering we find ourselves in an unfair world, all we can be certain of is that we will die and that the universe is indifferent to our station. Moreover, with God remaining silent on the matter and not appearing to us in any discernable form, we find it impossible to adjudicate objectively between conflicting values and morals. But Camus does not accept this fate as an unhappy one. Rather, he sees it as liberating. He rejects the idea that a life without meaning cannot be a life worth living. If anything, a life without

meaning is the best life possible, as it is one that truly grants us liberty. Camus states that, “completely turned toward death (taken here as the most obvious absurdity), the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him. He enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules” (Camus 1955, 59). Having accepted the absurd condition and all that it entails, the absurd hero realizes he or she no longer has to live his or her life according to some pre-ordained set of values or meanings. He or she becomes free to act as he or she may please, without fear of damnation or salvation. We are free because we are truly able to act according to our own will and not merely echoing the values of those that exist and have come before us.

Camus calls this freedom “rebellion.” Camus thinks of this freedom as rebellion because it is an acceptance of the absurdity of life’s conditions, while aggressively attempting to create our own values, voided of true meaning, in the world. This rebellion also leads one to the conclusion that one ought not to commit suicide, because to Camus, suicide is just accepting the absurd position and giving in, and as such, it ought to be avoided. It is important to note that Camus is not attempting to make a system of values, but rather allow the absurd hero to act in a way that agrees with his or her being. Camus says it best at the conclusion of the first chapter of *The Rebel*. He says, “Rebellion is the common ground on which every man bases his first values. I rebel- therefore we exist” (Camus 1954, 28). Though the words “rebel” and “revolt” appear very little in *The Myth of Sisyphus* it is clear from the evolution of Camus that it was not until *The Rebel* that Camus truly formalized this notion of rebellion. As such, the absurd freedom we once knew turns into rebellion.

It would appear that Camus and Sartre are once more in accordance in regards to human freedom, and ontology. Sartre would state that we all are ontologically free beings. "We are condemned to freedom," he states in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1966, 485). As we have seen, Sartre believes that existence precedes essence, meaning that we are truly free to create ourselves and interact in the world around us in the purest way possible. But Camus rejects this, and tells us that the only way in which humanity frees itself is through rebellion. Rebellion against absurdity is the only true way to gain emancipation from the shackles of values determined by others. The man who does not realize his absurdity goes through life uncritically attempting to fulfill a specific role, identifying with values that have been passed through generations, without a consideration of their validity. The absurd awakens within humanity the ontological freedom that Sartre believes we are born with: an ability to forge our own sensibilities and to change entire aspects of our reality in order to become whoever we may want to be according to our fancy. Even de Beauvoir talks of how we create our identities through our ontological freedom. But what of anguish, what of forlornness, and what of despair? The positive perspective gained from accepting these existential terms as a given mean nothing to Camus outside of absurdity. It is not until an individual has confronted and continues to confront absurdity that any of it makes sense to the absurd hero. Only then does one feel the freedom that anguish entails. Anguish, forlornness, and despair are existential phenomena which are realized by our freedom and Camus puts himself outside of these terms by making the absurd paramount to gaining freedom. In that way, Camus differs from the existentialists in that he thinks that rebellion is a necessary act that allows humanity to realize freedom. Rebellion makes the positivity of anguish, forlornness, and despair apparent.

We then come to an important section of *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which Camus is critical of famous existentialist thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Lev Chestov, and Karl Jaspers (Camus 1955, 32-37). Why, after all, would Camus attempt to debunk existentialism if he saw himself as part of the movement? To begin his analysis, he claims that “to limit myself to existential philosophies, I see that all of them without exception suggest escape. Through an odd reasoning, starting out from the absurd over the ruins of reason, in a closed universe limited to the human, they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them” (Camus 1954, 32).

It ought to be noted, as Jacques Ehrmann does in his “Camus and the Existentialist Adventure,” that many critics find Camus’ understanding of certain existentialists is potentially flawed (Ehrmann 1960, 97). However, the very fact that Camus makes it a point to single out specific existentialist philosophers for criticism strongly suggests that Camus wanted to distance himself from existentialism. Even if his critiques are inadequate, in his attempt to undermine existential theory, he is still attempting to separate himself from the camp of existentialism. Considering Camus’ undeniable intellect and control of language, it is not hard to imagine that Camus’ aim was to create something fundamentally different from existentialism. While certainly not proof, the point is simply that Camus understood existentialism and attempted to create something different from it. Therefore, noting superficial similarities between absurdism and existentialism led to an inadequate analysis of Camus’ works. Simply put, this consideration creates the possibility that just as Camus potentially misinterpreted the existentialists, readers of Camus may be misinterpreting him. As such, he makes an effort to

distance himself from the common misconception that he is an existentialist by attacking those with whom he is identified.

Camus believes that one of the most impressive aspects of existentialism is that it recognizes and understands this concept of the absurd. Existentialists accept that absurdity is a part of the human condition. But their attempt to escape the feeling of absurdity is what Camus finds abhorrent. Camus thinks they accept irrationalism in their leaps of faith and in doing, escape the absurd by misinterpreting it. Existentialists flee the absurd by contorting the absurd and reinterpreting the absurdity in a way that makes the pressures of life more palatable. Having accepted the absurd, the burden of it becomes far too much for existentialists to bear, and they try to flee the absurd as Kierkegaard does by turning to faith to placate the absurd.

Jaspers begins by coming into contact with the absurd (Camus 1955 32). He is incapable of finding any transcendent meaning in the world and he feels his powerlessness in his attempts to find meaning in the world, which terrifies and depresses him. But, having realized his own incapacity for finding anything transcendent, Camus then quotes Jaspers as saying, "Does not the failure reveal, beyond any possible explanation and interpretation, not the absence but the existence of transcendence" (Camus 1955, 32-33). This is where Camus finds fault because he believes Jaspers is taking a leap of faith. Jaspers is making an unquantifiable claim, something that Camus detests, because Camus believes this jump has no evidence based in reality. Camus reduces Jasper's leap and irrationalism, correctly or incorrectly, to the following argument: we are unable to find the transcendent; therefore, the transcendent exists since we cannot understand it. He bases his claim on a paradox that has no real basis in reality.

In that way, the “absurd becomes god (in the broadest meaning of this word)” and becomes the answer to absurdity (Camus 1955, 33).

Camus turns next to Kierkegaard, claiming that the Danish philosopher is plagued by the absurd, wanting nothing more than to be desperately rid of this overwhelming sense of despair. That is the goal of Kierkegaard’s leap, according to Camus. As such, Kierkegaard turns to faith to solve the problem of the irrationality of existence. With the indifference of the world upon him, his way out is an unnecessary turn to faith that allows him to forego the anxiety of absurdity by rectifying it with God. This is irrational to Camus, who believes that the world is silent as to the possibility of the existence of God. Of Kierkegaard’s groundless jump, Camus states, “For him, too, antinomy and paradox become criteria of the religious” (Camus 1955 37). Camus believes the harsh reality of the world suggests no reason for him to bear a faith in God, yet Kierkegaard turns to God using paradoxical reasoning.

Finally, we come to Chestov. Camus agrees with a commentator that Chestov does little more than simply evaluate the absurd to be God, in the grandest sense possible (Camus 1955, 34). Camus then argues further that God could potentially be a hateful, oppressive being who exists and exerts his influence by making us suffer. As such, we can readily see why Chestov would identify God with the absurd. Chestov lived the absurd. He acknowledges it, even in his very definition of God (Camus 1955, 34). But in a strange turns of events, instead of turning to faith, as Kierkegaard does, he rather makes this irrationality an aspect of God’s existence. Camus states that we have absolutely no reason to believe that this would be the case, and as such, he could not possibly suffer such an illogical jump. With that, he finishes his critique.

Camus claims that the only ethics the absurd hero can accept is one dictated by God, “But it so happens that he lives outside that God” (Camus 1955, 67). Camus is not claiming God does or does not exist but just that we cannot know. As such, Camus does not attempt to tell us whether or not God exists. But Sartre, as we have seen in “Existentialism is a Humanism,” denies the existence of God and is therefore an atheist. Camus, on the other hand, is quoted in Henri Peyre’s “Camus the Pagan” as saying “I do not believe in God, that is true, but I am not thereby an atheist” (Peyre 1960, 20). Though Peyre makes the ludicrous claim that simply because Camus disassociates himself from Christianity and limits himself to only this world that he is necessarily a pagan, his quote is rather illuminating regarding Camus’ ideas concerning God (Peyre 1960, 22).

Sartre’s existentialism rejects God at the outset and proclaims that God is an absurd concept (Detmer 2008, 55). That means that if we attempt to suggest that God is the reason for our existence, we are merely adding more levels to the puzzle. If that is the case, then we must explain the reason for God’s existence and how God comes to exist. The Christian theologian may answer that God has always existed but then we must explain how exactly a sentient being can necessarily always exist, without first being caused. The question then shifts to what is the nature of God, as if the problem were not difficult enough to consider. The response would then be that the essence and existence of God is inexplicable, or we as mortals cannot possibly dream to ever understand anything as great as the nature of an omnipotent God. Detmer continues, “If the answer is that God’s existence is inexplicable, then we have abandoned the attempt to explain existence, and have admitted that it remains mysterious and unexplained” (Detmer 2008, 55). There are numerous questions that can be posited about God

and its nature, but the universe and God are silent to that end. With no reason to believe in God, with no basis for any understanding of God in reality, Sartre turns his existentialism into an atheistic existentialism.

We turn back to Camus, remembering that he claims that he is not an atheist. In the final chapter of *The Stranger*, Meursault continuously refuses to see the chaplain. But eventually, the chaplain enters and a confrontation occurs. After Meursault denies the existence of God continually, the chaplain finally relents and this sends Meursault into a rage of fury. He says, "He seemed so certain about everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head... But I was sure about me, about everything, surer than he could ever be, sure of my life, and sure of the death I had waiting for me... I have lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived another" (Camus 1989, 114-115). Meursault's anger is a response to the chaplain's blind faith. The chaplain believes for seemingly no reason in the existence of a God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. He believes that Jesus died for his sins, and that on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day he ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of God, Lord, the Father Almighty. Meursault is angry at his stalwart determination that all of these things are inevitably in his future, when he thinks that any person using the evidence before them in reality would believe otherwise.

Meursault is aware of the absurd. He is aware that life is inherently meaningless and that any attempt to give life meaning will be fruitless. Meursault understands the conflict humanity feels when Camus states that, "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 1955, 28). As a result, he rebels, and in his final moments Meursault claims, "I opened myself to the gentle indifference



of the world” (Camus 1989, 116). He does not worry about the retribution of an angry God, because he cannot possibly prove or be sure of its existence since God, if it does exist, and the universe are silent on the matter. All he knows is that he exists now and that people have been born and died for thousands of years before him, and will continue to die thousands of years after he has as well. He will not concern himself with the notion of God. He may or may not believe in God, but having accepted his fate and realizing the only things he can know is his absurd condition and the inevitability of death, he has no reason to concern himself with the question of God. It becomes an unnecessary question, entirely frivolous. The point here is that Camus rejects the question of God not because he himself does not believe in God. He rejects the problem of God because he realizes that we will never know, and can never know.

Whether or not his analysis of Kierkegaard, Chestov, and Jaspers in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is accurate, this is what sets Camus apart. So we ought not concern ourselves with questions of faith and divinity and make it a part of our dogmatic philosophies, but attempt to “live without appeal” so that we might find happiness in our lives (Camus 1955, 53).

But now we turn to my final consideration of Camus’ philosophy: his ethics. Thus far, we have talked of the absurdity that comes to pass when an individual and his or her need for order comes in contact with the world, and the necessary, liberating rebellion that allows an individual to follow his or her own whims. But Camus’ ethic does not promote immoralism; rather, it espouses amoralism. Camus believes that the only *true* moral code that the absurd hero, or any person for that matter, can accept is the moral code of God (Camus 1955, 66-67). In other words, the only moral code that forces the absurd hero to relinquish his absurd freedom and act a certain way is a code given to us by God. But as noted, Camus leaves the

question of God unanswered, since we cannot ever truly know the answer to the question. Bearing this in mind, the absurd hero uses his own integrity as judge of what he ought to do. Camus states that, "A mind imbued with the absurd merely judges that those consequences must be considered calmly. It is ready to pay up." (Camus 1955 69). This is a form of consequentialism, but certainly not in regards to morals. The absurd hero is concerned with consequences only insofar as the consequences may be harmful to the hero's wellbeing. If the absurd hero steals or murders, he or she is *responsible* for that action, but not guilty of committing a moral sin. The absurd hero is always "innocent" because Camus' amorality means he can never be guilty of any moral wrongdoing, only that he or she must answer for his or her actions (Camus 1955 68).

But Camus does not take seriously the notion that the absurd hero will go on a murderous rampage simply because he or she wills it. He believes that while the absurd hero will choose his or her own actions, he or she will always consider the consequences of his decisions before acting in regards to how they will affect him or her. That "'Everything is permitted' does not mean that nothing is forbidden ... It does not recommend crime, for this would be childish, but it restores to remorse its futility" (Camus 1955, 67). The ethics of *The Myth of Sisyphus* merely states that the absurd hero can do anything according to his or her own will, but he or she will always consider outcomes first because crime will result in punishment. It is worth reiterating that Camus is not arguing for moral consequentialism, and, more importantly, he is only arguing for a "moral system" for the absurd hero.

*The Rebel* shows a growth in Camus' theory. An example of this is found in *The Rebel* when he writes:

An analysis of rebellion leads us to the suspicion that, contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought, a human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed. Why rebel if there is nothing worth preserving in oneself? The slave asserts himself for the sake of everyone in the world when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something inside him that does not belong to him alone, but which he has in common with other men-- even with the man who insults and oppresses him (Camus 1954, 22).

This passage is pivotal to understanding Camus' development and requires a lot of background information to explicate. First, Camus is actively refuting one of the central tenants of Sartrean existentialism, namely, that existence precedes essence. But Camus is also attempting to make rebellion a part of humankind's metaphysical reality. The slave he references has two levels. On the metaphorical level, the slave is a stand-in for every human being since we ought to rebel against absurdity in order to gain true freedom. But on a more literal level, Camus is also writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust and is concerned with what he saw as the state-sponsored nihilism that came as a result of it, and talking about those oppressed under such governments. Jeffrey C. Isaac, in his book entitled *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, claims that, "Camus makes clear how dangerous and irresponsible he considers such a cynical leveling out of all distinctions" (Isaac 1992, 93). Camus earlier espoused a type of amoralism, but even in *The Myth of Sisyphus* he was critical of nihilism and its dangers. In fact, in *The Rebel* he attempts to give a history of nihilism. He does this for a few reasons but there is one reason in particular that I find important: to distance his ethics from nihilism and demonstrate how hazardous nihilism's ultimate negation of values can be.

With this in mind, this quote is suggesting a sense of human dignity we all intrinsically have by virtue of being human. Harold A. Durfee attempts, in his essay “Albert Camus and the Ethics of Rebellion,” to argue that if we should not kill ourselves, then we also should try to avoid hurting others and committing murder. He says, “Just as Camus had rejected suicide, for it would end the encounter [with absurdity] and thus ‘abolish its own foundations,’ so he also condemns murder. The very logic of the analysis of the ‘absurd’ forces one to the recognition of human life ‘as the single necessary good’” (Durfee 1958, 31). It is important to note that at this point Camus has changed the moral system put he roughly delineated during *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Now he claims that because humanity is necessary for the absurd to exist, the only transcendental good that can be thought of in the world is humanity, and as such, we ought not to commit violence or oppress others. After all, Camus says, “In this particular case and on the plane of intelligence, I can therefore say that the Absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together” (Camus 1955, 30). This implies that there is something intrinsic to what it means to be human that allows for the experience of the absurd. This is because he is explicit that the absurd does not exist as some force or entity in the world, but in the conflict between humanity and the world. Durfee furthers his analysis of Camus’ morality by suggesting that the absurd hero must be willing to fight oppression in all of its forms by saying “He [the rebel] must constantly fight to secure creativity and community ... In such a situation he can only attempt to minimize the crime which encompasses him and, if necessary, be prepared to sacrifice himself” (Durfee 1958, 37).

We can now fully understand the aforementioned passage. There is a shared essence of humanity. This essence originates from every individual’s contact with the absurd which allows

for absurd freedom. State-sponsored brutality can end humanity's conflict with the absurd through murder. As a result, the "slave" must assert his or herself against tyrannical forces that oppress and murder people, due to our shared dignity created through our conflict with the absurd. Lastly, even the oppressor has this in common with the slave, but the slave must be willing to sacrifice himself and the oppressor's life since oppression offends our dignity and ends the conflict with the absurd.

This is a great example of how Camus develops over time and furthers his theory from Sartre through the shared essence Camus describes. But it is this very nature that Camus attempts to focus on that deters humans from murder and violence, and not merely in cases of government oppression. Camus says as much, in that he believes that rebellion is truly a positive experience since it is the only act which affirms the value of humanity by virtue of that very rebellion against our absurd condition (Camus 1954, 102). This solidarity spoken of briefly before grows into the only morality that can be spoken for in Camus. In the evolution of Camus, we see the development of his ethics: one that affirms the value of human life, hence human freedom, and the rejection of oppression.

De Beauvoir and Camus come to similar conclusions concerning the value of human life, in that they believe their ethics should fight against murder and oppression in all of its forms, and allow for the freedom of the human spirit. But once more, we find their reasoning to be based upon different premises. Just as it would be ridiculous to consider Aristotle and Kant theorists of the same school just because neither approves of murder, we must examine these differences. As we have seen, de Beauvoir's ethics boils down to the phrase "To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision" (de Beauvoir 1949, 24). We are

all ontologically free to create ourselves and contribute to the surrounding world. As a result, willing freedom is willing a moral action because to do otherwise would be in contradiction to one's ontological freedom (de Beauvoir 1949, 129).

Camus does not take freedom as his starting point although he ends there. To Camus, ethics is about respecting the value of human life, for the absurd and the freedom that it provides can only come to pass with the existence of human life. Camus is thereby putting humanity's conflict with the absurd as the fundamental need of his theory. Additionally, by recognizing the importance of human life, we find solidarity in humanity and detest forms of oppression no matter how they represent themselves, and we must work to free the world of such tyranny. Fundamentally, the difference between the ethics of de Beauvoir and the ethics of Camus are tied to ontology. De Beauvoir accepts the idea that we create ourselves constantly and have no pre-defined nature and develops her ethics from there. Camus develops his ethics based upon humanity's conflict with the absurd that makes freedom possible. Lastly, Camus' rejection of the existential premise that existence precedes essence makes his ethics distinct from the existentialists.

#### IV. *Fight Club* and Tyler Durden

Having taken the stance that Camus is not an existentialist, we now must consider the question of how Tyler from the movie *Fight Club* is the embodiment of the absurd hero. The movie, based on a book by Chuck Palahniuk, describes the personality of Tyler (Fincher 1999). One of the first and most important aspects of Tyler's "existence" is that he is not real. Tyler is merely an aspect of the unnamed narrator's imagination, allowing him to access the parts of his personality that he wants to manifest himself as. Tyler, succinct as always, says, "I didn't create

some loser alter-ego to make myself feel better. Take some responsibility” (Fincher 1999).

Since the narrator is unnamed, I will refer to him as “Edward”-- the name of the actor who plays him. Tyler is the essence of rebellion that Camus affirms so wholeheartedly in *The Rebel*, and as such, we need to take him seriously.

But Edward is unnamed for a reason. For instance, Edward is a man living a miserable life, as evinced from his insomnia, simply existing through his life, neither enjoying nor disliking himself. We see ourselves in Edward, in that we sometimes place our lives in roles given to us by society that we detest, and in doing so, we feel our confrontation with the absurd. Tyler says that this type of life has us “chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need,” which causes Edward to create Tyler (Fincher 1999). He’s overwhelmed by life’s absurdity and simply cannot deal with it. He is too soft spoken to stand up and live as he chooses to. As a result, his sub-conscious creates Tyler in order to rebel against the oppression thrust upon him by his socio-economic status. Tyler is everything that he wants to be. Tyler is everything *we* want to be. And most importantly, Tyler is free, because he realizes the absurd. Tyler says, “I’m smart, capable, and most importantly, I’m free in all of the ways you are not” (Fincher 1999). Tyler does what he wants to do with no excuses and comes up with an antidote to what he sees as the virus of modern capitalism, which oppresses everyone as everyone is forced to make a living working jobs they hate and not realizing their potential freedom.

But more than that, Edward also reaches for Tyler because he is having a crisis of faith. He struggles to hold onto traditional conceptions of God and so he struggles with giving his life purpose and meaning. Edward is simply at a point in his life where he desperately wants to create something for himself but does not know how to do so or what he wants. He wants a

change, but he feels powerless to commit to any real change without some transcendental God giving him a reason to work to do something. So he rebels. He creates Tyler, and attempts to fundamentally change the stage of reality through "Project Mayhem," a terrorist group created by Tyler to cast off the socio-economic bonds put on humanity through capitalism (Fincher 1999). Tyler is the absurd hero in that he realizes the absurdity of his reality and he rages against it as Camus suggests. Tyler does not adhere to prescribed notions, and truly does as he pleases with no thought as to the consequences of his actions, as shown through his attempt to overthrow civil society with Project Mayhem.

We can interpret Project Mayhem as an allegory standing for the collective of humanity that has realized the absurd. For instance, all of the members of Project Mayhem must shave his or her head. Tyler says, "Like a space monkey, ready to sacrifice himself for the greater good" (Fincher 1999). As we have seen, even Camus had an ethics, and his ethics is tied to questions of the fundamental consideration of human dignity. Rebellion becomes the ultimate act in Camus' reality, and Tyler is the epitome of such an act. Tyler, by attempting to bring about "economic equilibrium" has attempted to overthrow the systemic abuse of the modern human by the capitalist ideology that manifests itself in America (Fincher 1999). Tyler detests the very idea that people must labor for a large portion of their lives, for example, at a gas station, simply to survive. He says, "In the world I see, you're stalking elk through the damp canyon forest, around the ruins of Rockefeller Center.... And when you look down, you'll see tiny figures pounding corn, laying stripes of venison on the empty car pool lane of some abandoned superhighways" (Fincher 1999). Tyler's ideal is the world in which we all are free but to get to that reality he creates a group whose very essence is rebellion, in an incredibly



Camusian fashion. Tyler is a freedom fighter, aiming to unlock the oppressed of our time, through Fight Club and Project Mayhem. His goal is to end the suffering of the majority by dismantling the very system that oppresses them, and he almost succeeds before Edward gains control of his psyche.

Tyler is tired of consumer culture that tells people how to live, what to buy, and how to act. He says, "Reject the basic assumption of civilization, especially the importance of material possessions" (Fincher 1999). Tyler expresses an incredible indifference to material possessions. While the casual observer might reject this claim, due to Tyler's extravagant clothing style, we must also consider the fact that Edward creates Tyler to be what he himself can't be. Tyler is stylish, because Edward feels shackled by society to dress a certain way and act a certain way. So Tyler wears an elegant, red leather jacket. But other than his physical appearance, Tyler is devoid of any real material possessions. He lives in a house on Paper Street that is falling apart. Edward describes the decrepit house he finds himself in, telling us that when he would turn one light on, another one would inevitably turn off (Fincher 1999). This shows an adherence to Camus' absurd. Tyler has no hope, and his detachment from possessions helps Tyler realize the absurd since he is not distracted from the irrationality of the world through material items. He simply works because he has to pay the bills and fund his adventures and halfway through the movie, Edward even foregoes that by framing his boss for assault by beating himself up and forcing the boss to pay him his yearly salary to keep quiet. Tyler transcends everyday adherence to notions of civilization by rebelling against the very fabric of society. Fight Club is not about violence. Fight Club is about living life and awakening oneself from the dulling slumber that consumer culture brings, in order to realize the absurdity of life. Those in Fight

Club find it so appealing because they realize the absurdity of their lives, working menial jobs that give them no sense of purpose, or as Tyler says, "An entire generation, pumping gas, and waiting tables. Slaves with white collars .... We're the middle children of history, man, no purpose or place. We have no great war, no great depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives" (Fincher 1999).

Those in *Fight Club*, and eventually *Project Mayhem*, are tired of living the prescribed life they are supposed to live. The absurdity of life pains them to the point where they are simply drifting through life. *Insomnia*, such as Edward has, is a perfect example of this. Edward tells us, "With insomnia, nothing's real. Everything's a copy, of a copy, of a copy" (Fincher 1999). Edward, for all intents and purposes, is representative of humanity living without acknowledging the absurd. He lives his life via a prescribed venue of existence, working as a recall coordinator of a major car company. Tyler himself gives us a perfect elucidation of Edward's situation by describing for us how he came to be. He says, "You were looking for a way to change your life. You could not do this on your own," and with that, we see the creation of Tyler (Fincher 1999). As stated, Tyler lives with the absurd in that every action he lives is an attempt to rebel against it, be it through *Fight Club* or *Project Mayhem*. Edward, conversely, is entrenched in a life he detests. He can no longer tolerate being a cog in a conglomerate car company with no purpose or meaning. Tyler allows Edward an escape from his mundane existence and grants him his freedom through his conflict with the absurd. As such, Tyler rebels against the absurd in every way, making himself the epitome of the absurd hero, and in that vein, becomes the greatest anti-hero in modern cinema.

Tyler is also one of the most appealing recent fictional characters because of his controversial, yet surprisingly charismatic and convincing ideas. His conception of God, or lack thereof, is no exception. Edward's and Tyler's fathers leaving them as kids clearly had a profound effect on them. This is nowhere more clear than during the scene where Tyler gives Edward a chemical burn. Tyler says:

Our fathers were our models for God. If our fathers bailed, what does that tell you about God? Listen to me. You have to consider the possibility that God does not like you. He never wanted you. In all probability, he hates you. This is not the worst thing that could happen. We don't need him. Fuck damnation, man, fuck redemption. We are God's unwanted children? So be it (Fincher 1999).

Tyler does not make a final judgment concerning the nature of God. All he does is consider the possibility that God hates us, thus answering the question of why our very existence is so irrational. Tyler uses phrases such as "in all probability" to show the fact that he accepts the absurd insofar as he is unable to truly tell us of the nature of God. As a result, all he can really say is: life is absurd. God may exist, and if so, he may hate us, so stop relying on ludicrous rationalizations about the nature of life that dominate society. Tyler's conception of God is precisely that of Camus' when he states, "I do not believe in God, that is true, but I am not thereby an atheist" (Peyre 1960, 20). While his speech may lead us to believe that Tyler has an idea of God that is similar to that of Chestov-- God's hatred of us merely gives him more power-- we have to focus on the fact that Tyler is speaking only in hypotheticals. He never once in the movie makes a transcendental claim about God or the nature of God. He merely proposes a

thought experiment in order to show to us the absurdity of our position in life in relation to God, or whatever that may signify. In that thought experiment, we realize our liberty. Having no more need of redemption and salvation, we need not subscribe ourselves to mores that others have created for us. In rejecting God, or at the very least realizing the possibility that God hates us, we realize the potential for true freedom because we no longer have to act in a fashion that is out of touch with who we are in the most basic sense.

Tyler is also under no illusions about death. Tyler, before we realize he is Edward's alter-ego, constantly is frustrated with Edward, because he finds it difficult to come to Tyler's absurd conclusions. When Tyler gives Edward a chemical burn, Tyler says that Edward must let go: "First you have to give up. First you have to know, not fear, know, that someday you're gonna die. It's only after we've lost everything, that we're free to do anything" (Fincher 1999). Having given up on trying to understand the true nature of reality, and having realized the absurdity of any attempt to do so, the absurd hero gains freedom in the most true sense. If we accept that one day we will die, and that life is silent on any questions concerning values, we realize that we have the freedom to act in any way we see fit and that all actions are equivalent. In that regard, we find ourselves cognizant of both Camus' ideas on the absurd, and his early ethic. Camus says "If I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to a limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living" (Camus 1955, 60-61). Camus is advocating for the idea that since we have no way to qualify objectively the difference between different experiences, the only true judge of how to inspect how one has lived his or her life becomes the number of experiences one has had. Realizing that nothing can truly be substantiated, Camus side steps this problem by claiming that it is not the quality

of life that matters, but rather the quantity of experiences. This does not mean living a long life. It is far more important that the absurd hero lives passionately, and as a result, takes part in as many experiences as humanly possible since death is on the horizon. As such, we can see how Tyler's realization of the necessity of death is important. Tyler *knows* that he will die, so he attempts to live his life as freely as possible in order to experience the greatest quantity of events. In doing so, he lives the most colorful life imaginable, as he can never truly say which experiences are better than others. This awareness of death is nowhere clearer than the scene in which Tyler allows the car that he is driving to drift into the opposite lane and into oncoming traffic. In the presence of a barreling truck, Tyler does not falter and he drives toward it. But fortunately the truck swerves out of the way at the last second. We can interpret Tyler's survival as saying that if we live without appeal and accept the absurd, we can accomplish anything even in the face of death.

Tyler is the modern Meursault and nowhere is that more clear than when he allows himself to be beaten to close to death by Lou. Then he proceeds to give out a "homework assignment." He tells Fight Club members to start a fight and lose on purpose (Fincher 1999). First off, this reminds us of the fact that Tyler and the absurd man cannot qualify any experience as any better than another. As such, getting beaten to death is just as much of an experience as eating a delightful meal. What constitutes the aggressive humor of those scenes, is the fact that such a demand is so ignorant of the expectations of modern life. Edward describes it by saying, "Now this is not as easy as it sounds. Most people, normal people, do just about anything to avoid a fight," and in that regard, he would most certainly be right (Fincher 1999). No matter how angry we may feel, we all attempt to let go of our anger as

opposed to expressing it. But Tyler does not care. Tyler opens himself up to the gentle indifference of the world by forcing his Fight Club members into direct contact with the absurd. By asking those in Fight Club to go out and start a fight that they will lose, he is directly advocating a confrontation with the absurd. The irrational, illogical nature of such a command, coupled with humanity's need for reason, cannot rationalize such nonsense. But the entirety of the club does it, and in doing so, feel more connection to Fight Club, and eventually, Project Mayhem. After all, even the priest who is provoked into a fight with a club member is seen later in the movie freeing himself through the rebellion of Fight Club (Fincher 1999).

Lastly, Tyler is concerned with freedom. While the ethics of *Fight Club* are never made explicit, if we take it to be a modern depiction of the confrontation of humanity with the absurd, we can most certainly understand how Tyler's drive for freedom is important. As shown, Tyler's existence is an act of rebellion against Edward's job, against society, and even against Edward himself. Tyler's end goal is to overthrow the capitalist system which he sees as politically, socially, and economically oppressing the men and women of modern society, by erasing financial records. Edwards states "If you erase the debt record, then we all go back to zero. It'll create total chaos" (Fincher 1999). Tyler isn't a terrorist in the traditional sense. He is not killing anyone, and his goal is not fear, but rather enlightenment. When Edwards confronts Tyler about the morality of killing people by blowing up the buildings, he makes it clear that this will not happen: "The buildings are empty. Security, maintenance, all our people. We're not killing anyone, man, we're setting 'em free" (Fincher 1999). Tyler's goal is freedom against oppression, and what is a greater oppressor than the socio-economic confines of an individual's life? Tyler's morality is Camus' morality. He affirms the inherent dignity of the human

condition and our conflict with the absurd, and makes every action of his life an effort against that tyranny.

#### V. Conclusion

In conclusion, although it is easy to judge Camus as an existentialist, there are many reasons why we are able to interpret him as something entirely different. It is true that both Sartrean existentialism and Camus' philosophy adhere to a belief in subjectivity as the only grounds for meaning and value. But Camus denies the existential premise that existence precedes essence by espousing a belief in a common nature to humanity that is manifested in our solidarity against the absurd, allowing for the respect of human dignity. Camus also sets himself apart from theistic and atheistic existentialists like Sartre by not concerning himself with questions concerning God. He argues that we can never know anything about God, so there is no reason to attempt to. Next, while both de Beauvoir and Camus express an ethics in which freedom is important, de Beauvoir takes this ontological freedom as the starting point for her ethics of ambiguity. Camus, on the other hand, takes the essence of humanity as the beginning for his ethics, and determines that we ought not to oppress due to our shared conflict against the absurd. Lastly, we see over 30 years after the death of Camus the creation of an absurd hero in Tyler Durden, which gives us an incredibly thought provoking portrait of what the absurd hero looks like. Even if one argues Camus was an existentialist, I hope this essay has proved he or she must at least be willing to admit the glaring differences between Camus and established existential thought.

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