ALBERT CAMUS'S MEDITATIVE ASCENT: A SEARCH FOR FOUNDATIONS IN *THE PLAGUE*

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ABSTRACT

Albert Camus's concept of absurdity states that human existence is fundamentally chaotic and meaningless. Despite this appraisal of existence, Camus tirelessly campaigned for human rights at a time when many intellectuals ignored the atrocities perpetrated by ideological compatriots. Scholars admire Camus's courage and foresight, but few have attempted to systematically examine Camus's philosophical development of values. Eric Voegelin argues that Camus's writings take the form of a philosophical meditation in which Camus conducted an analysis of existence through the medium of fictional creation. This meditation, which Voegelin likens to a Platonic *periagoge*, allowed Camus to establish a foundation of values that remained consistent with the logic of the absurd and fostered an appreciation of present reality. This study examines Camus's mediation by emphasizing the components that are present in his novel *The Plague*. Camus ultimately arrives at an aesthetic theory in which he equates beauty with the common dignity of mankind.

CHAPTER 1. THE SEARCH FOR FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

In his *Notebooks*, Albert Camus documented a conversation concerning political ethics and moral values that was held at the home of Andre Malraux in October 1946. In the company of fellow intellectuals Jean-Paul Sartre, Arthur Koestler, and Malraux, Camus posed the following question:

> Don't you agree that we are all responsible for the absence of values? What if we who all come out of Nietzscheanism, nihilism, and historical realism, what if we announced publicly that we were wrong; that there are moral values and that henceforth we shall do what has to be done to establish and illustrate them. Don't you think this might be the beginning of hope?[1]

Sartre replied that he could not direct his values solely against the Soviet Union, but Koestler concurred. "It must be said that as writers we are guilty of treason in the eyes of history if we do not denounce what deserves to be denounced."[2]

Camus's comments reveal that he was deeply troubled by the absence of life affirming values in the political dialogue of his time. The violent history of Twentieth Century Europe proves that his concerns were legitimate. Intellectuals, he thought, had reinforced this neglect of values by following the logic of political ideologies and philosophical principles to their absolute conclusions. Acknowledging his own culpability, Camus considered the possibility of renouncing his own intellectual tradition in order to combat the blatant disregard for the value of human life and happiness. Furthermore, Camus suggested that intellectuals or artists have the ability and responsibility to elucidate these values and their source.

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[1]Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1996), pp. 145-46.

[2]Ibid, p. 146.

Camus's concerns as expressed in this conversation draw attention to the question posed in this study. What is the foundation of Albert Camus's values? Specifically, how can one derive values from an existence that lacks meaning or coherence? Camus held such a view of existence, considering it to be absurd, but his life, speeches, and writings reveal a definite concern for the value of human life and the dignity of man. The purpose of this study is to consider the values that Camus held to be important and to identify the source and development of these values. As the following discussion shows, the affirmation of values was a challenging, but important task for Camus.

In his early works, Camus established the concept of absurdity as the true condition of man confronting the outside world. This concept of absurdity rests upon the assertion that human beings desire unity, meaning, and happiness. Confronted with the world, which is essentially chaotic, meaningless, and cruel, the human being finds himself in an absurd situation. "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."[3] Originally intending to establish absurdity as a first principle, Camus came to realize that this principle led to a startling conclusion.

> Awareness of the absurd, when we first claim to deduce a rule of behavior from it, makes murder seem a matter of indifference, to say the least, and hence possible. If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and we can affirm no *values* whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance.[4]

Camus realized that the notion of the absurd is not instructive in and of itself, and it seems to allow for moral relativism insofar as it does not affirm the existence of values. Without "higher

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[3]Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 28.

[4]Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 5. Emphasis added.

values" to guide one's actions, Camus argued, the only "guiding principle" is "efficacy" or the demonstration of strength.[5]

Of course, Camus witnessed the consequences of efficacy as a rule of action in the destructive clashes of World War II. During this time period, Camus witnessed the systematic eradication of human beings in the name of utopian ideas. At the onset of the war, he noted in his journal, "Often the values on which our life is built have almost collapsed. But never before have these values and those we love been threatened all together and all at the same time. Never before have we been so completely handed over to total destruction."[6] The relentless efficiency of totalitarian regimes attested to the destructive consequences of contemporary nihilism.

Having been deeply affected by these consequences, Camus sought to critique the nihilism which led to "logical crime" in his essay, *The Rebel*. "A nihilist," he wrote, "is not one who believes in nothing, but one who does not believe in what exists."[7] Nihilism is therefore a characteristic of futuristic or idealistic doctrines which seek to impose a false value above that of human life. "If nihilism is the inability to believe, then its most serious symptom is not found in atheism, but in the inability to believe in what is, to see what is happening, and to live life as it is offered. This infirmity is at the root of all idealism."[8] Perhaps the most common manifestation of this idealism is the desire for order.

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[5]Ibid, p. 5.

[6]Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1935-1942*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1996), p. 149.

[7]Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 69.

[8]Ibid, p. 67.

"The most elementary form of rebellion," Camus wrote, "paradoxically, expresses an aspiration to order."[9] This desire for order reveals that rebellion is metaphysical in character because such a desire is a protest against the human being's actual condition in a disordered world. Absolute order is essentially an idealistic demand in a world characterized by absurdity. Such idealistic protests culminate in the death of God and the deification of man. "His insurrection against his condition becomes an unlimited campaign against the heavens . . . Then begins the desperate effort to create, at the price of crime and murder if necessary, the dominion of man."[10] Thus, Camus divulged the absolute consequence of nihilism. Refusing to accept his absurd condition, the metaphysical rebel places the unattainable value of complete order above the existing value of human life. After eliminating God, man is put in His place.

As it seems, the establishment of life affirming values would be a powerful response to the idealistic or futuristic values of nihilism and total revolution. Camus clearly valued present experience over utopian values set in the distant future, but he did not explicitly establish the foundation on which present experience is to be valued. This is not to say that Camus's values were groundless or based on speculation, but that Camus had difficulty in presenting this foundation. His failure to do so along with his reluctance to take sides on some political issues, such as the Algerian conflict, earned him considerable criticism from his contemporaries. Holding the values of human life above the values of political doctrines, Camus was somewhat of an oddity juxtaposed to other French leftists, such as Sartre, who conveniently overlooked the oppression of the Soviet Union. Instead, Camus maintained that human life should be valued above political beliefs.

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[9]Ibid, p. 23.

[10]Ibid, p. 25.

The necessity of a foundation for values was not a trivial philosophical preoccupation for Camus. The establishment of values was important to him because of the criminal indifference shown towards the value of human life during his own lifetime. This issue, however, is still very important today in the Twenty-First Century. In this world of international terrorism and technological alienation, man still faces the dilemma of how one embraces values without subscribing to foundational ideologies. In this search, Camus's own progression can be especially instructive. Camus ultimately earned the reputation of a human rights activist before such a position was popular. Because his writings reveal such unmistakable decency and concern for the plight of mankind, the values which guided his writings are worthy of examination.

This thesis will examine the values that Camus upheld, and especially, the foundation upon which he based these values. Because Camus considered novels to be the most fruitful form of philosophical examination, this thesis will focus primarily on Camus's treatment of values in his most mature fictional work, *The Plague*. Furthermore, in an effort to add structure to this search, *The Plague* will be treated in the context of a *periagoge* as described by Eric Voegelin. Before discussing this Voegelinian taxonomy, however, it is necessary to survey the literature on the subject at hand in order to see what others have written about Camus's values.

Literature Review

Camus's reputation for morality and decency has led many authors to examine the details of his life and writings. Among these secondary works, two detailed biographies provide information on Camus's personal influences as well as his sensitivities and reactions to the political events that transpired during his life. Of the two biographies, Herbert Lottman's work, *Albert Camus: A Biography*, is a more detailed account of Camus's life, but he does not address

the problem that Camus faced when attempting to uphold affirmative values in a chaotic world. Lottman offers descriptions of the various influences on the young Camus, such as his father's repulsion to the death penalty and his high school philosophy professor's aversion to political orthodoxy.[11] Obviously, these experiences held some importance in Camus's recognition of values, but Lottman offers little more than a description of these experiences. He does not consider how these experiences developed into Camus's affirmation of certain values.

Oliver Todd's biography, unlike Lottman's, acknowledges the challenge that Camus faced while attempting to develop and maintain positive values in a world devoid of transcendent meaning. Commenting on Camus's progression after completing his dissertation, Todd writes, "Camus had freed himself from God, but not from the need to construct a code of behavior."[12] This freedom from God would undoubtedly develop into the notion of absurdity, but Todd argues that Camus's attitude towards absurdity continuously evolved, changing noticeably with the emergence of *The Plague*. He claims that during this period, Camus began to distance himself from the absurd and to recognize the necessity of value judgments in the idea of revolt.[13] Although Camus probably recognized the consequences of absurdity much earlier than Todd suggests, the biographer astutely realizes that these consequences created a dilemma for Camus. "Like his characters Rieux, Peneloux, and the journalist Rambert, Camus sought a foundation for his values."[14] Todd does not speculate on how one may identify this foundation, but he claims

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[11]Herbert Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (Corte Madera: Ginko, 1997), pp. 23-24, 86.

[12]Oliver Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Carol & Graf Publishers, 2000), p. 45.

[13]Ibid, pp. 167-68.

[14]Ibid, p. 215.

that Camus was envious of the unambiguous foundation of Christian values. According to Todd, Camus liked the fact that Christian values are provided in advance, but he considered these values to be irreconcilable with the world.[15] Todd's biography reveals that Camus admired the certainty of religious values, but he would not acquiesce to a foundation that he considered dishonest.

Focusing upon the political dispositions of twentieth century French intellectuals in his book, *The Burden of Responsibility*, Tony Judt dedicates a chapter to Camus and his politics entitled "The Reluctant Moralist." In this fairly typical characterization of Camus as a moralist, Judt argues that Camus became increasingly apolitical after witnessing the ease with which Vichy collaborators were marked for death after the German occupation of France.[16] This experience, Judt argues, caused Camus to develop a suspicion of power, which led to his theory of limits as a necessary check on rebellion.[17] Judt also describes Camus as having been out of place and uncomfortable within the French intellectual milieu because he placed moral concerns above political allegiance. "In place of reason Camus invoked responsibility. Indeed, his writings bear witness to an ethic of responsibility deliberately set against the ethic of conviction that marked and marred his contemporaries."[18] Camus's responsibility was to uphold the value of life above abstract political values. According to Judt, Camus wished to call upon "absolute standards and measures of morality, justice and freedom whenever it was appropriate to do so"

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[15]Ibid, p. 215.

[16]Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 107.

[17]Ibid, p. 127.

[18]Ibid, p. 124.

rather than having to balance the injustices of the East and the West in order to appear non-partisan.[19] In referring to absolute standards of morality, Judt argues that Camus's task of establishing values would have been easier if he had identified an honest and definitive foundation of these values. Apparently, Judt does not think that Camus ever developed these absolute standards, and his failure to do so left him vulnerable to criticism by intellectuals of the right and left.

Stephen Eric Bronner, who also classifies Camus as a moralist, identifies the challenge faced by Camus in developing values without a sturdy foundation. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he writes, "offers a new existential challenge: the possibility of experiencing happiness without hope."[20] His two books on Camus are partially biographical and partially critical, but neither provides specific detail on Camus's development of positive values. He gives ample biographical descriptions of the young writer's influences such as his poor upbringing, the "pagan preoccupation" of his high school philosophy professor, Jean Grenier, his early bouts with death and illness, and his Catholic upbringing.[21] These influences are important, but Bronner does not discuss how these influences contributed to Camus's development of values. He writes, "[Camus] is willing to rely neither on formal logic nor experience. He sees his method, which he never really articulates, as standing somewhere between reason and intuition."[22] Although this description is not specific, it reveals that Camus relied on his

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[19]Ibid, p. 115.

[20]Stephen Eric Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 47.

[21]Stephen Eric Bronner, *Albert Camus: The Thinker, The Artist, The Man* (Danbury: Franklin Watts, 1996), pp. 13-19.

[22]Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist*, pp. 44-45.

"feelings" in the form of intuition with an appeal to reason for lucid judgment. Recognizing that any systematic development of values is absent from Camus's work, Bronner comes to the conclusion that Camus's "Mediterranean thinking" serves as a moderating device to confront nihilism.[23] Mediterranean thinking refers to the prevailing mentality of citizens living in countries that border the Mediterranean Sea. With an emphasis on physical experience, happiness, and creativity, the Mediterranean mentality stands in opposition to that of Western European society which is preoccupied with rationality and efficiency. Absent from Bronner's analysis is a discussion of how Mediterranean thinking and the various influences of Camus's life guided his moral progression.

Scholars who admire or condemn Camus's ethical stance have attempted to follow his moral progression logically. Thomas Landon Thorson, for example, follows this progression logically from the basis of the absurd. In an article written only four years after Camus's death, Thorson upholds Camus as the epitome of a political philosopher. "Like Plato," he writes, "his [Camus's] major task as an intellectual became the search for reasons which would support the restoration of order and justice."[24] Unlike Plato, Camus could not appeal to transcendence in support of these values. Thorson argues that the idea of transcendence had been considerably discredited before Camus's lifetime due to "persuasive negations contained in the philosophy of his immediate predecessors."[25] Nietzsche had leveled a scathing critique of transcendent appeal and its ability to distract man from the reality of the present. This negation of transcendence was

[23]Ibid, p. 85.

[24]Thomas Landon Thorson, "Albert Camus and the Rights of Man," *Ethics* 74, no. 4 (1964): p. 283.

[25]Ibid, p. 283.

very persuasive indeed, and it had a tremendous influence on Camus. Following this intellectual tradition, Camus had to use the idea of absurdity as his starting place. Because hope and suicide are not viable reactions to the absurd, man is left only with the option of living with the absurd; this option affirms the value of human life. Thorson places the affirmation of human life at the core of Camus's absurdist reasoning, but he acknowledges that this is only an individual rather than a collective solution.[26] Unable to use a Platonic or "traditional" argument, Camus bases his collective justification of values on his idea of revolt in the name of life. Thorson correctly observes that Camus's experimentation with the concept of revolt reveals "limits" on action or some standard for "positive value," but Camus arrives at these implications with difficulty and without sufficient clarity.[27] Thorson's conclusion states that the affirmation of life, traced back to the logic of the absurd, allows Camus to uphold revolt while rejecting "new values" such as "reason" and "history."[28] Indeed, the affirmation of human life is consistent with Camus's logic, and Thorson's work summarizes this progression, highlighting the fact that Camus gives an adequate defense of human life without appealing to a transcendent ground. However, Thorson overlooks values other than human life such as solidarity, love, and happiness which must also be justified in terms of the absurd. Because Camus considered the absurd to be a primary truth, all values had to be commensurate with that truth.

Perhaps one of Camus's harshest critics, Herbert Hochberg similarly describes the progression from *The Myth of Sisyphus* to *The Rebel* as an attempt by Camus to establish

[26]Ibid, p. 288.

[27]Ibid, p. 289.

[28]Ibid, p. 290.

absurdity as the human condition and then to derive an ethic from that condition.[29] His analysis illuminates the challenge faced by Camus in deriving this ethic, but he ultimately argues that Camus failed because the notion of absurdity is unclear and the ethic derived from it is non-existent. Camus's position of absurdity, he argues, is attributable to his admiration of the monist pattern developed by the African neoplatonist, Plotinus, which relies on the mystic notion of a unifying transcendent source of all being and value known as "the One." He further argues that Camus's insistence on a rational comprehension of this unifying principle creates a criterion that is impossible to satisfy and ultimately results in the notion of absurdity.[30] The explanation for this contradiction lies in the finite nature of human reason which would be incapable of understanding something infinite and transcendent such as the One. "[Camus's] lack of coherence may be explained by the fact that, having denied a transcendent source of value, he must, if he is to have an ethic at all, anchor his values somehow in the world of ordinary experience."[31] Ordinary experience, however, is not as barren as Hochberg would like the reader to think. Other critics have seized upon the potential of human experience to give rise to positive values, but Hochberg seems to dismiss experience as a possible source.

David Sprintzen's book, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, is the most fecund secondary work concerning Camus's development of values. For Camus, he argues, "values can only be rooted in the experiential soil fertilized by lucid consciousness."[32] He subscribes to the general

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[29]Herbert Hochberg, "Albert Camus and the Ethics of Absurdity," *Ethics* 75, no. 2 (1965): p. 87.

[30]Ibid, p. 89.

[31]Ibid, p. 92.

[32]David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 63.

consensus that Camus had to find his values in the world of experience, but Sprintzen's description of this experience, and its significance for Camus, is more complex. Rather than argue that Camus's "nostalgia for unity" is a borrowed concept, as Hochberg does, Sprintzen claims that this nostalgia itself is borne out of experience, and Camus felt this appeal personally.[33] Although Sprintzen does not clearly outline Camus's method of deriving values from experience, he hints that the method is based on honesty in which Camus found it necessary to deny any values imparted on the world from without, such as a transcendent source.[34] This is not to say that values are formally deduced from first principles, but "lived prereflectively until their denial is felt to be unbearable."[35] Indeed, Sprintzen is one of the few authors to realize that revolt does not create values, but attests to their existence. Unfortunately, he offers little insight into the "prereflective" nature of values outside of his assertion that they emerge from a type of dialogue which he labels "intersubjective human experience."[36] Considering the relatively broad approach of Sprintzen's analysis, his attention to Camus's existential dilemma is praiseworthy. Furthermore, he shows that human experience is a vast and complex reservoir of values revealing that logical deduction is inherently limited in developing positive values.

Further removing Camus from the sphere of logical deduction, John Krapp claims that Camus explored the nature of values in an aesthetic manner by focusing on "ethical fiction."[37]

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[33]Ibid, p. 55.

[34]Ibid, p. 18.

[35]Ibid, pp. 129-30.

[36]Ibid, p. 131.

[37]John Krapp, *An Aesthetics of Morality: Pedagogic Voice and Moral Dialogue in Mann, Camus, Conrad, and Dostoevsky* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), p. 71.

Harboring disdain for moral monologues, Camus used this fiction not to present to the reader some ethical doctrine, but to present a dialogue of ethical voices from which the reader can freely choose. "The dynamics of this dialogue," Krapp argues, "offers a site where the structural component of ethical claims may be investigated."[38] Therefore, Krapp recognizes in Camus's fiction a balance between the ethical and the aesthetic. The ethic is presented in the "competing pedagogic voices" of the various characters; whereas, the aesthetic dimension involves maintaining the "structural tension" among these voices so that one does not gain authority over the rest.[39] Examining Camus's novel *The Plague*, Krapp argues that the novel is not a lesson on morality, but "a paradigm for the way moral consciousness may be nourished aesthetically in the conflict between ethical voices."[40] Following Krapp's analysis, it appears that Camus used his aesthetic abilities to present a dialogue, implying that values will necessarily be based on an intersubjective moral consciousness. Indeed, Krapp comments that almost all of the characters in *The Plague* resist the disease on the basis of communal solidarity.[41] For one who is seeking some further insight into the nature of values, Krapp is somewhat disappointing except for his ability to recognize fiction as the vehicle through which Camus explored the contingent nature of values. Brilliantly describing the aesthetic method employed in Camus's fiction, Krapp offers little more than the obvious position that Camus favors values that arise from communal solidarity and open exchange of ideas. As to the structural elements of Camus's philosophical progression in this aesthetic paradigm, Krapp is silent.

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[38]Ibid, p. 82.

[39]Ibid, pp. 82, 98.

[40]Ibid, p. 98.

[41]Ibid, p. 91.

It is not surprising that few authors offer a structural analysis of Camus's development of values because Camus himself never clearly outlined such a structure. That is not to say that a structural progression cannot be identified in Camus's works. The assumption here is that Camus essentially lived through this progression and did not formally outline it in his written works. Still, if such a progression exists, it should be identifiable given a broad treatment of Camus's writings. Eric Voegelin takes such a broad approach and identifies a structural and taxonomic progression in Camus's works that is invaluable to the project at hand. Voegelin's classification of Camus is similar to Krapp's. Voegelin also argues that Camus explored the development of values in an aesthetic fashion, but Voegelin provides a structure to this aesthetic progression that is grounded in a Platonic meditative process.

Eric Voegelin's Structural Taxonomy

As the preceding overview of the extant literature reveals, the answer to the question posed in this study is very elusive. The formulation of values is not a topic that Camus addressed directly or frequently, although it perceivably caused him considerable consternation. Eric Voegelin seized upon this uncertainty in his short commentary on Camus in *Anamnesis*. Voegelin sees in Camus's work a process of maturation that coincides with his analysis of existence. He refers to this process as a "meditation" or "ascent" and refers to Camus's work as a "prototype of the existential catharsis of our era."[42] Elaborating on this prototype, Voegelin organizes Camus's work into a structural taxonomy depicting three stages of a Platonic ascent or *periagoge*.

[42]Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans. M. J. Hanak, ed. David Walsh (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 369.

The taxonomic progression into which Voegelin places Camus is largely reflective of Voegelin's ontological concerns rather than Camus's. The meditation, Voegelin argues, is an applicable model for analyzing the nature of existence and confronting the uncertainty revealed in this exercise. In Voegelin's ontological construction, this uncertainty arises from the nature of existence, which can be described as a tension between the immanent and the divine. This tension is to be endured, or one runs the risk of losing contact with reality itself. "When a person refuses to live in existential tension towards the [divine] ground, or if he rebels against that ground, refusing to participate in reality and thus to experience his own reality as a man . . . it is he who loses contact with reality."[43] Such a loss of contact with reality implies a refusal to acknowledge the truth of existence as it is experienced in the present. It is a disconnect from lived experience. This disconnect is especially problematic because it creates a type of spiritual vacuum in which one places dogmatic principles. Voegelin argues that his era is partially characterized by the attempt to fill this "loss of reality" with a "second reality" in which man "generate[s] substitute images of reality in order to gain order and direction for his existence and actions in the world."[44] The dominance of second realities, according to Voegelin, leads to "massive disturbances of social order" because man bases his actions on a perverted view of reality.[45] Similar to absolutist ideologies, second realities often result in rebellious attempts to transform the world in a radical fashion.

Voegelin admires Camus's meditation primarily because he maintained an open hostility to political dogma. "The impact of Camus's work seems to stem from the inexorability of his

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[43]Ibid, p. 368.

[44]Ibid, pp. 368-69.

[45]Ibid, p. 369.

endeavor to achieve purity by purging himself of substitute realities."[46] For Voegelin, Camus represents a positive alternative to the loss of reality. Where this loss often manifests itself in "defiant revolution," it is "experienced and suffered" in the works of Camus.[47] Voegelin equates this suffering with reaching the depths of reality symbolized in Plato's cave allegory. "With the awareness of suffering from a shadowy life, however, the depths of the turning around, the *periagoge*, are reached and the ascent from the cave toward the light can begin."[48]

Placing Camus into the framework of the *periagoge*, Voegelin divides his "meditative progress" into three phases. The first phase is "governed by the experience of the absurdity of existence," as it is presented by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.[49] Awareness of the absurd in this phase allows Camus to reach the depths of reality and begin the ascent toward the truth.

The Rebel, Camus's essay on revolt, represents the second phase in which Camus endures absurdity while resisting the temptation of second realities. Voegelin writes,

> In [*The Rebel*] Camus masters the second phase of the ascent as he accepts that the uncertainty concerning the meaning of existence has to be endured as the burden of existence, and as he seeks to keep the tension free from dogmatic substitute realties, be they theological, metaphysical or ideological variety.[50]

Camus's ability to endure uncertainty rather than rebel against it is indicative of what Voegelin calls "efforts to refill the form of reality once again with the reality of existential tension."[51]

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[46]Ibid, p. 371.

[47]Ibid, p. 369.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

Voegelin conceptualizes the uncertainty of existence as a product of finite human reason, and he considers this uncertainty to be irreconcilable; therefore, he rejects any attempts at achieving unity through political means.

Finally, Voegelin reveals that the third phase of the ascent was left unfinished because of Camus's premature death. He speculates that Camus had progressed beyond rebellion toward "an active life ordered by a loving tension toward the divine ground, a tension in which the autonomous self dissolves."[52] This terminology is obviously more Voegelinian than Camusian, but his speculation on Camus's move toward affirmation suggests a definitive break with existentialism because the individual is no longer plagued by the unbearable freedom to act, but experiences the tension of existence in an ordered life. By Voegelin's description, the progression of Camus's work can be viewed as a maturation process from displeasure and defiance to appreciation and affirmation. The rebel, whose actions arise from the negation of this tension, is supplanted by the "man who lives in the here and now of the tension toward the ground."[53] Voegelin gives a compelling description of how this comes about,

> From its beginning the work [the corpus of Camus's writings] was deliberately conceived with a view to its end, as a meditation within the medium of myth. But in the end, to the degree that his quest becomes knowingly luminous to itself, the existential mood changes . . . The revolt is directed against the presence of life in the tension toward the divine ground; it manifests itself in the ideological apocalypse of futuristic utopias. When the futuristic alienation from the presence subsides, the joy of the here and now of existence begins stirring again; *kakodaimonia* [mean spiritedness] gives way to the *eudaimonia* [spiritual joyfulness].[54]

[52]Ibid, pp. 370-371.

[53]Ibid, p. 370.

[54]Ibid, p. 388.

Camus's mastery of the second phase, Voegelin suggests, allowed him to move through revolt to the third phase, an appreciation of the here and now. This appreciation is equivalent to the affirmation of the value of life, love and happiness insofar as these are values of the present rather that the distant future.

Voegelin's description of Camus's "meditative progress" emphasizes that Camus possessed the endurance and clarity to resist the temptations of nihilism. The use of art or myth aided Camus in this process. According to Voegelin, the "medium of myth" afforded Camus "the strength that sustained him for decades in the tension of his meditation and enabled him to see through the perversion of revolt and to overcome it."[55] Because the tumultuous "nonsense" of the present was disheartening for Camus, Voegelin argues that Camus chose myth as a "home" from which to create unity and meaning symbolically.[56] By emphasizing the "medium of myth" as the vehicle for Camus's meditation, Voegelin seems to suggest that Camus's role as an artist was essential to his arrival at an appreciation of the "here and now of existence." Camus's meditation, therefore, was not strictly philosophical, but aesthetic in nature. There is evidence in Camus's writing that he was exasperated by the "nonsense" of his time. In the essay, "The Minotaur," he wrote, "There are no more deserts. There are no more islands. Yet there is need for them. In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion; in order to serve men better, one has to hold them at a distance for a time."[57] Considering the necessity of a fictional "home" for Camus's meditation, it is safe to assume that he developed and nurtured life affirming values most successfully in his fictional works.

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[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 157.

Method of Analysis

As stated previously, the focus of this study is to identify the foundation and development of Camus's values. The answer to the question is very elusive in Camus's work and he never directly addressed the development of values in a world characterized by absurdity. However, Voegelin's short but evocative interpretation of Camus provides the framework for a meditation that may have served as a foundation or understanding of Camus's values. In an attempt to locate the origin of Camus's values, the three stage meditation of the *periagoge*, which Voegelin describes, will be elaborated upon and critically examined. A close examination of this meditation with comparisons to Camus's own works should help to illuminate the search for Camus's development of values. Further, if Camus conducted this meditation within the medium of myth, as Voegelin argues, the *periagoge* should be reflective of the major themes in Camus's most mature fictional work, *The Plague*.

The various stages of the *periagoge* are surely evident throughout most of Camus's writing, but for the purpose of this research, the focus will be upon how the *periagoge* is contained and developed within *The Plague*. However, this focus will not be exclusively on *The Plague*. Other works will be treated as essential for clarifying any issues that are developed in the stages of the meditation. The following discussion is meant to outline the three stages of the *periagoge* as they are contained within *The Plague*.

Absurdity, the first phase of Voegelin's structural taxonomy, is perhaps the most obvious theme in the novel. The experience of absurdity, Voegelin argues, allowed Camus to reach the depths of reality from which the ascent can begin. Mimicking the experience of absurdity, Camus presented the entire town of Oran under quarantine, with all citizens trapped among those infected with a deadly microbe. Dr. Rieux, the narrator, summarizes the nature of this setting

when denying leave to the foreign journalist, Rambert. “Oh, I know it’s an absurd situation, but we’re all involved in it, and we’ve got to accept it as it is.”[58] Trapped inside the walls of the city and exposed to a deadly contagion, the citizens of Oran fully experience the depths of reality in an absurd setting.

Camus’s notion of absurdity, originally developed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, depicts the human being alienated from his own life because of the incoherence of the world.[59] This alienation, which Camus referred to as “exile,” is present in *The Plague* also: “Thus the first thing the plague brought to our town was exile.”[60] He later described exile as the “sensation of a void within” and an “irrational longing” to escape the situation.[61] This void spurred by irrational longing is a result of man being denied that for which he hopes. “Hostile to the past, impatient of the present, cheated of the future, we were much like those whom men’s justice, or hatred, forces to live behind bars.”[62]

In the collection of short stories, *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus experimented further with the feeling of exile as a result of absurdity. Like the citizens of Oran, the characters in these stories experience a type of emptiness because they cannot fulfill their hopes in a world that is silent to those hopes. Therefore, the kingdom, which represents the life for which one hopes, is eternally elusive; and it exists only in the minds of nostalgic men. The setting of *The Plague*

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[58]Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans, Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 86.

[59]Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 6.

[60]Camus, *The Plague*, p. 71.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Ibid, p. 73.

represents the silence of the world because the citizens of Oran are faced with the prospect of death and isolation when their hope is for life and companionship.

As one can see, the experience of absurdity is prevalent in Camus's works, and it is portrayed expertly in *The Plague*. Voegelin suggests that this experience is essential for reaching the depths of reality from which one can begin the ascent towards the light. Further examination of this absurd experience with cross references to *The Myth of Sisyphus* will reveal the manner in which this experience can be instructive for the development of values.

Voegelin truly admires Camus's development in the second phase of the ascent, rebellion. Camus's meditation is instructive during this phase because he was able to withstand "second realities."[63] A common example of a second reality is the idea of historical rationality, conceived by Hegel, which Camus rejected as a source of values commenting that it can only be a source of nihilism.[64] Abusurdism, Camus argued, has "wiped the slate clean" leaving behind only the "blind impulse to demand order in the midst of chaos, and unity in the very heart of the ephemeral."[65] Camus presented rebellion as a natural reaction to man's absurd condition, but he acknowledged in *The Rebel* that rebellion must affirm limits or else negate "all of existence and all of human nature."[66] The metaphysical desire for unity requires that man confront the world with protest, but in that protest, man must not destroy the values for which he fights. This theory of limits was an attempt by Camus to reveal the contradictions in destructive revolutions.

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[63]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 369.

[64]Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 249.

[65]Ibid, p. 10.

[66]Ibid, p. 251.

Confronted with a chaotic and irrational existence, the citizens of Oran feel the impulse to rebel insofar as they abhor their own condition. "No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotions was the sense of exile and deprivation, with the crosscurrents of revolt and fear set up by these."[67] Perhaps one of the most evocative episodes in the novel is the death of a child. Dr. Rieux feels that the pain inflicted on the magistrate's innocent child is "an abominable thing."[68] Rieux, like Doestoevsky's Ivan Karamozov, refuses to believe in a scheme of existence where children are made to suffer. Rieux comments to the priest, Father Paneloux, "And there are times when the only feeling I have is one of mad revolt."[69]

This impulse toward "mad revolt" is present in *The Plague*, but Camus is careful to suggest that this revolt must be limited to the realm of possibility. For example, Jean Tarrou, a visitor to Oran, considers capital punishment to be a plague on mankind. However, when he joined a revolutionary sect in Hungary to abolish the death penalty, he found himself complicit in murder for the sake of his principles.[70] Tarrou quickly realized that his revolutionary comrades were quite willing to dispense capital punishment when it suited their idealistic ends; on the other hand, when helping Rieux in his medical duties, Tarrou experienced the humble satisfaction of rebellion.

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[67]Camus, *The Plague*, p. 167.

[68]Ibid, p. 214.

[69]Ibid, p. 218.

[70]Ibid, p. 251.

> The essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and becoming doomed to separation. And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical.[71]

In this juxtaposition, Camus revealed that saving the entire human race from evil or injustice is impossible. Any doctrine that asserts the possibility of such a quest would be characteristic of what Voegelin calls "second realities." The narrator, Rieux, comments upon the futility of vain hopes. "But for those others who aspired beyond the human individual toward something they could not even imagine, there had been no answer."[72]

Thus, *The Plague* nicely encapsulates the first and second stage of the *periagoge* as Voegelin describes it. The depths of reality are reached in the experience of absurdity that arises from being trapped in a plague-ridden town. From this depth, some characters rebel against the irrational nature of the situation, but the characters that limit their hopes to the immediacy of individuals, rather than abstract principles, experience a type of fulfillment at the conclusion of the novel.

The fulfillment experienced by the characters in the novel, closely resembles Voegelin's description of the third and final phase of the *periagoge*. Voegelin is somewhat vague in his delineation of this final phase. Camus, he writes, wished to "gain the freedom to create" in this phase, but his "untimely death" interrupted this progress.[73] Nevertheless, Voegelin speculates that this final phase was directing Camus towards "[n]ot morality, but fulfillment" as a result of a "new insight gained through love."[74] Voegelin even argues that Camus's meditative progress

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[71]Ibid, p. 133.

[72]Ibid, p. 300.

[73]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, pp. 369-70.

[74]Ibid, p. 371.

led him to a vague understanding of human nature. This human nature is not formal in nature, but rather, it is characterized by "an active life ordered by a loving tension toward the divine ground."[75] It is indeed in this final phase that the "existential mood" of the meditation changes from "mean spiritedness" to "spiritual joyfulness" as "the joy of the here and now of existence begins stirring again."[76]

If Voegelin is correct to argue that the "existential mood" of Camus's meditation changed in the final phase, the nature of this change will be essential for an understanding of Camus's development of values beyond rebellion. Moreover, this change in mood appears to be evident in *The Plague*. As the novel progresses, Dr. Rieux and the visitor Tarrou work assiduously in sanitation squads making medical rounds in an effort that can be characterized as a struggle or rebellion against the conditions of the plague. In the midst of this struggle, the two find respite in the experience and appreciation of friendship. Camus artistically portrayed the ephemeral happiness of friendship.

> Rieux could feel under his hand the weather-worn visage of the rocks, and a strange happiness possessed him. Turning to Tarrou, he caught a glimpse on his friend's face of the same happiness that forgot nothing, not even murder. . . . For some minutes they swam side by side, with the same zest, in the same rhythm, isolated from the world, at least free of the town and of the plague. . . . Neither had said a word, but they were conscious of being perfectly at one, and the memory of this night would be cherished by them both.[77]

Out of an absurd situation in which the only perceivable instinct is to rebel, some of the townspeople find joy in solidarity. This joy comes from the acknowledgement that man is to be

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[75]Ibid.

[76]Ibid, p. 388.

[77]Camus, *The Plague*, pp. 256-57.

valued presently. Camus revealed at the end of the novel that the purpose of the narrative is to affirm the value of man.

> Dr. Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.[78]

Because of the complex development of characters and situations in *The Plague*, this novel encompasses Voegelin's construction of Camus's meditation most fully. *The Plague* is the only work in which Camus traversed the entire meditative journey from recognition of absurdity through rebellion, and finally, to fulfillment and affirmation of the here and now. The intention of this research project is to follow the Voegelinian progression in some considerable detail as it is presented in *The Plague* in an attempt to identify the source of Camus's values and how he developed them and to evaluate the usefulness of this progression as a guide to understanding Camus. Before undertaking this analysis, however, it is necessary to establish the importance of fiction or myth as the site of Camus's philosophical meditation.

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[78]Ibid, p. 308.

CHAPTER 2. MYTHIC FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Camus considered himself more of an artist than a philosopher. This does not mean that he had no concern for philosophy but that his approach to philosophy more closely approximated artistic creation than traditional philosophical writing. Voegelin suggests that Camus's literary abilities allowed him to recreate instances of illumination that speak to the experiential core. Artistic creation allowed Camus to enliven his philosophical concepts by communicating on a deeper level that philosophical description cannot access. The symbolization of these illuminating experiences is of primary importance to the project at hand; therefore, this chapter is designed to highlight the importance of myth as a tool for philosophical inquiry.

Aesthetic Style and "The Medium of Myth"

Voegelin admires Camus's three-stage meditation "as a model and guide in the analysis of existence that nowadays everyone who, in opposition to the times, seeks to regain his reality as a man must undertake."[79] This "analysis of existence" is difficult. If it were easy for a man to "regain his reality," as Voegelin puts it, he would not have to turn to Camus for instruction. This, then, raises the question: What is it about Camus's meditation that provides insight and stability to this "analysis of existence?" The answer is that Camus relied on myth as a dwelling for his philosophical reflections. Voegelin wrote:

> Let us formulate the question concretely: From where did Albert Camus, whose work was mentioned earlier, get the strength that sustained him for decades in the tension of his meditation and enabled him to see through the perversion of revolt and to overcome it? For Camus this strength derives from myth.[80]

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[79]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 371.

[80]Ibid, pp. 387-88.

The artist, wielding the tool of mythic creation, can create a new world in which the reader can participate. Voegelin argues that Camus used artistic creation in this manner as an escape from the troubling atmosphere of the present. “The ‘nonsense’ [*Blödsinn*] of the time is no home for a man; he must choose a home in which he, alive, will again create a home in the dimension of time. Camus chooses myth.”[81] For Voegelin, myth itself serves as a foundation or “home” for Camus. Indeed, Voegelin describes Camus’s meditation as “[t]he quest for the ‘terre fidèle’ [faithful land].”[82]

Camus’s own writings reveal that Voegelin was correct to identify fictional creation as a comfortable “home” for Camus’s meditation. In 1958, Camus decided to republish a collection of essays that he wrote when he was only twenty-two. The collection was entitled “The Wrong Side and the Right Side.” In the preface to this republished collection, Camus reflected on the meaning of his life’s work: “[A] man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.”[83] Camus was referring here to illumination. Moreover, Camus revealed that such illumination is triggered by images, and the artist or fictional writer has the ability to recreate or rediscover these images. The philosopher, placing emphasis on explanation, encounters difficulty in rediscovering instances of illumination. Camus considered the task of the artist and the philosopher to be similar; although, the artist has a distinct advantage.

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[81]Ibid, p. 388.

[82]Ibid, p. 389.

[83]Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage International, 1970), p. 17.

> The philosopher, even if he is Kant, is a creator. He has his characters, his symbols, and his secret action. He has his plot endings. On the contrary, the lead taken by the novel over poetry and the essay merely represents a greater intellectualization of the art.[84]

Both philosophers and artists are creators, and they both aspire to create a world that in some way satisfies the human nostalgia for unity and purpose. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argued that the act of creation is more common than one often acknowledges:

> To think is first of all to create a world (or to limit one's own, which comes to the same thing). It is starting out from the basic disagreement that separates man from his experience in order to find a *common ground according to one's nostalgia*, a universe hedged with reasons or lighted up with analogies but which in any case, gives an opportunity to rescind the unbearable divorce.[85]

Holding that both philosophical and fictional writing, are forms of creation, Camus considered the fictional writer to be better equipped to handle images. He wrote, "Feelings and images multiply a philosophy by ten."[86] Images are evocative of experiences, and they are more participatory than philosophical essays. Perhaps this is why Camus reinforced *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the tale of Sisyphus's absurd punishment and *The Rebel* with the myth of Prometheus. Images themselves serve as a language that only the artist can properly translate to the reader. Camus understood this from the very beginning of his career as this early entry in his *Notebooks* reveals: "People can think only in images. If you want to be a philosopher write novels."[87]

The ability of the novelist to reach an audience with profound philosophical and political insights relies ultimately on his or her aesthetic method. John Krapp, mentioned earlier, argues

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[84]Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 100.

[85]Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 99-100. Emphasis added.

[86]Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, p. 210.

[87]Ibid, p. 10.

that Camus's aesthetic approach in *The Plague* relies on his ability to present a dialogue and refrain from moralizing. He writes, "*The Plague* illustrates less a thematic moral lesson than a paradigm for the way moral consciousness may be nourished aesthetically in the conflict between ethical voices."[88] Camus's aesthetic approach allowed him to develop a form of moral consciousness that is based on the "intersubjective human experience" mentioned by David Sprintzen.[89] Such a collective presentation of opposing viewpoints is reflective of the true existential condition of human beings in which they must derive ethical instruction from these competing viewpoints. Krapp describes Camus's approach as maintaining a careful balance between ethical and aesthetic concerns. "The work's ethical and aesthetic dimensions must not exceed one another; rather, they must mask one another so that what appears to the reader is a series of tensions among characters from which the structural mechanism of moral education can be elucidated."[90] Camus's reluctance to sermonize or spout forth moral principles is the element of Camus's aesthetic approach that Krapp truly admires. David Walsh, employing Camus as an example of a thinker who was troubled by the adverse effects of modernity, similarly praises the novel as a vehicle to examine the "tensions" present in reality. His description is worth quoting at length:

> When all doctrines and principles have become opaque, then it becomes a matter of necessity to return to the sources in experience on which all truth ultimately rests. . . . This is why the thinkers who have worked through the crisis of modernity prefer to communicate their insights through novels. In contrast to discursive arguments, the medium of fictional literature allows a more immediate presentation of the experience. This is also the orientation that has guided their approach to the medium. All three novelists whom we have examined, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, and Camus regard the

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[88]Krapp, *An Aesthetics of Morality*, p. 98.

[89]Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, p. 131.

[90]Krapp, *An Aesthetics of Morality*, p. 73.

> novel as a means of exploring the directional tensions of reality, rather than as a vehicle for expounding the author's own monological point of view.[91]

Both Walsh and Krapp agree that the success of Camus as a philosophical novelist rests upon his restraint. Indeed, this restraint is an aesthetic device that Camus employed to ground his fiction in the experience of competing ethical claims.

Cecil Eubanks and Peter Petrakis go further in their development of Camus's aesthetic theory than Krapp. They argue that Camus's aesthetic theory of politics relies on an understanding of symbols. They define symbols as such:

> Symbols are evocative signs capable of illuminating human experience, both individual and communal, and giving to those experiences meaning and significance. Necessarily ambiguous and containing elements of the nonrational, symbols act as meditations between the so-called empirical world and the world of imagination. They are not litteral descriptions of that empirical reality, nor are they simply flights of fancy. Symbols are both bound and free.[92]

The last sentence succinctly elucidates the special character of symbols as "bound and free." They are bound to our immediate experiences insofar as they tap into the shared experiences of mankind. This theory of the equivalence of experience was originally put forth by Voegelin.[93] Symbols are also free because the artist can use symbols imaginatively in order to create a new world in which to explore political realities. Such a new world is often arranged in a way that satisfies the human nostalgia for clarity and unity. Sprintzen argues that great art presents us with "a perfect world—an embodied version of a metaphysical response in which natural experience is reconstructed so as to speak to that *exigence ontologique*. We encounter in the

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[91]David Walsh, *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), pp. 219-20.

[92]Cecil L. Eubanks and Peter A. Petrakis, "Reconstructing the World: Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," *The Journal of Politics* 61, no. 2 (1999): pp. 295-96.

[93]Ibid, p. 297.

work a unified world in which our struggles take the form of destiny."[94] Such a unified world is created by paying careful attention to style.

Camus's conception of style is closely linked to his concept of absurdity, and this linkage necessitates limits of artistic creation. Novels cannot offer meaning that eliminates the absurdity of existence. "The absurd work requires an artist conscious of these limitations and an art in which the concrete signifies more than itself. It cannot be an end, the meaning, and the consolation of life."[95] In other words, art is meant to create a world that is reflective of the absurd, not to change the world in such a way that is ceases to be absurd. Eubanks and Petrakis argue that Camus's style reflects the Greek notion of "*sophron*" or "moderation." Style requires a delicate balance. "In order to satisfy the desire for unity without misguiding readers into a belief that reality itself is or can be somehow changed, the novel must conform to the demands of style."[96] Camus's style of self restraint infused his novels with an evocative quality that "speaks to our deepest existential needs."[97]

The ability of art and especially the novel to satisfy the human demand for unity while symbolizing concrete experience provides an ideal site for exploring politics in a symbolic manner. Eubanks and Petrakis write, "Camus insists, then, that the recovery of the fundamental symbols of politics resides in the narrative, specifically the philosophical novel, where the story is marked and human experience is acknowledged in all of its temporal character."[98] Any

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[94]Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examnation*, p. 222.

[95]Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 97.

[96]Eubanks and Petrakis, "Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," p. 307.

[97]Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, p. 225.

[98]Eubanks and Petrakis, "Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," p. 310.

political insight must be grounded in the equivalent human experience of absurdity. Philosophical novelists such as Camus symbolize the absurd nature of existence while at the same time suggesting that there is hope for mankind. The intention of this approach is to foster a new political understanding by confronting the reader with a world that is somewhat familiar, yet full of new possibilities.

In summary, Camus considered the novel as the most appropriate site for philosophical reflection. In the novel, the reader encounters not only ideas, but images that symbolize the shared experience of mankind. Paying careful attention to style, the novelist can also present the reader with a world that satisfies the human nostalgia for unity and clarity without compromising the existence of the absurd. Obviously, Camus attributed overwhelming importance to the novel as a vehicle for of philosophical expression; therefore, it is safe to assume that his own novels were an essential component of his philosophical development. The aspiration of this research is to identify the traces of Camus's meditative ascent in his most mature novel, *The Plague*.

The Meditative Ascent

Voegelin describes Camus's meditation as a *periagoge*, an awareness of suffering that leads one to turn away from the depths of existence and begin the ascent towards the light.[99] This is the journey of the philosopher in Plato's allegory of the cave. As discussed above, Voegelin divides the ascent into three stages, absurdity, rebellion, and fulfillment, the final stage having been cut short because of Camus's unexpected death in a car accident.[100] Following the stages of this ascent, this project will proceed with one section dedicated to each of the three stages. Each section will begin with a detailed discussion of the respective phase as Camus

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[99]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 369.

[100]Ibid, pp. 369-70.

conceptualized it. After clarifying the conceptual characteristics of the respective phase, the ways in which Camus explored the concept aesthetically and symbolically in his fictional works will be examined.

The Plague most fully encapsulates all three stages of the ascent. Petrakis and Eubanks noticed as much when commenting upon Voegelin's interpretation of Camus. "Camus'[s] reconstruction, particularly as a prototype for a politics of foundations without foundationalism, is perhaps best portrayed in his novel *The Plague*, where Dr. Rieux, its indefatigable hero, is a symbol for authentic political action."[101] The following analysis will attempt to follow the meditative ascent as it is presented in *The Plague* in order to identify these political foundations or values.

Before embarking upon the analysis of Camus's meditative ascent, it is necessary to issue some important preliminary qualifications concerning the structure of Voegelin's taxonomy. Voegelin's taxonomy of Camus's meditation is conceptually linear and distinct. His description of the meditation implies that Camus moved through the first two stages, absurdity and rebellion, on a journey to the final destination of fulfillment. This taxonomy, although it is useful for examining Camus's work, is artificially distinct and linear. As Camus shows in *The Plague*, absurdity cannot be abandoned; the rats will always come out again. Therefore, a linear progression from the absurd is problematic because absurdity continuously defines the human condition. Similarly, rebellion against the absurd will be ongoing, and fulfillment will wax and wane. It is also likely that Camus did not experience these three stages of the meditation in distinct periods, but rather simultaneously. Of course, treating the stages of the meditative

[101]Peter A. Petrakis and Cecil L. Eubanks, *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns: Searching for Foundations* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 178.

journey in a simultaneous manner would diminish the usefulness of Voegelin's taxonomy. For these reasons, the taxonomic progression described by Voegelin will be used as a guide for examining the foundations of Camus's values, but the linear and distinct character of the progression will also be treated with skepticism.

CHAPTER 3. ABSURDITY

Introduction

The first phase in Camus's meditative ascent, as described by Voegelin, is the experience of absurdity. Indeed, the concept of absurdity was one of Camus's most identifiable philosophical contributions, earning him considerable praise after the publication of *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The aim of this chapter is to describe Camus's concept of absurdity and to establish the significance of this concept for Camus's development of values in the meditative ascent. When taken in the context of the *periagoge*, the experience of absurdity mimics what Voegelin calls "the depths of the turning around."[102] For Camus, the absurd was indicative of a specific awareness of the human plight, and this awareness would guide his philosophical and fictional writing for the rest of his life.

The initial focus of this chapter is the conceptual discussion of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the philosophical essay in which Camus established the concept of absurdity. Then, the discussion turns to the symbolic or aesthetic representation of the absurd in Camus's fiction. Both the Sisyphus myth and *The Stranger* provide vivid examples of the individual facing the absurd, and these individual representations are key components in the development of an absurd consciousness. Following these examples, the focus shifts to *The Plague* in which the experience of absurdity becomes a collective reality shared by all inhabitants in the quarantined town of Oran. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the absurd and some thoughts on its significance as the first phase in the meditative ascent.

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[102]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 369.

The Concept of Absurdity

In his first major philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus developed the notion of the absurd to serve as the existential condition of man. This notion was implicitly recognized by existentialist writers whom Camus admired, but he thought the absurd was a broader principle that underpinned certain existential dilemmas. For example, he commented in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that Sartre's concept of nausea, Heidegger's analysis of anxiety, and even Husserl's method of phenomenology were symptoms of the absurd.[103] So, what exactly is absurdity, and what is its source? Put simply, the absurd is the existential condition that arises from the confrontation between the nostalgic human being and the coldly indifferent world in which he or she lives. In Camus's own words, it is "the metaphysical state of the conscious man."[104] Human beings desire order, purpose and happiness in their lives, and the world provides none of these—at least not in any permanent fashion.

To clarify this concept of absurdity, it is necessary to point out that absurdity itself is a characteristic of neither the human being nor the world solely, but of their interaction. Establishing the concept of absurdity as a first principle, Camus wrote,

> I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational [world] and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together. This is all I can discern clearly in this measureless universe where my adventures take place.[105]

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[103]Camus argued that phenomenology was "merely a description of actual experience" and not an explanation of existence. He took this to be a symptom of the absurd because it attests to the fact that no unifying principle can explain the world. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 13-15, 43.

[104]Ibid, p. 40.

[105]Ibid, p. 21.

Obviously, Camus attributed great significance to the notion of absurdity. It is not merely one characteristic of the human interaction with the outside world, but the defining characteristic.

Camus saw the absurd as one of three essential components that constitute the "drama" of existence.[106] Absurdity is born out of the confrontation between the two other components: the "human nostalgia" for unity or clarity and the "unreasonable silence of the world."[107] Therefore, the concept of absurdity depends upon the qualification of the two other components. If humans did not possess a nostalgia for unity, the so-called "unreasonable silence of the world" would not seem to be absurd. Likewise, if the events of the world did represent some reasonable unity of purpose, the nostalgic human being would not find existence to be absurd. Camus reinforced the existence of the absurd by showing that the human nostalgia for unity and clarity is real, and by arguing that the unreasonable world will never satisfy this nostalgia.

Some have argued that Camus borrowed his concept of "human nostalgia" from the Neo-Platonist, Plotinus.[108] It is likely that Plotinus influenced his thinking, but Camus also based this nostalgia on his own personal experiences, using a method very similar to Cartesian doubt. He wrote, "I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion."[109] Indeed, this very act of negating all uncertainties is itself characteristic of the human desire for understanding. Camus identified *reason* as the force that drives the human nostalgia for understanding. This longing for

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[106]Ibid, p. 28.

[107]Ibid.

[108]See Herbert Hochberg, "Albert Camus and the Ethics of Absurdity."

[109]Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 51.

clarity, known as reason, is inevitably directed towards the world in which one lives in an attempt to find some meaning or purpose. Camus argued that the rational pursuit of understanding would always take place on a human scale: "Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal."[110] Reason demands, not only the existence of a unified meaning of reality, but also that this unified meaning be comprehensible in human terms.

Could there be a unified purpose of events or a deeper meaning of existence? Camus's argument was not ontological in this respect, but epistemological: "I don't know whether this world has any meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it."[111] Rejecting any attempt to attribute meaning to the world from outside the realm of human experience, Camus's methodical doubt led him to "two certainties—[the] appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle."[112] Camus did not presume that reason is infallible, and actually, the limited nature of human reason contributes to the existence of the absurd. Neither did he presume that the world is devoid of transcendent meaning, but that human beings cannot understand such a notion, and therefore, it cannot mitigate the uncertainty that precipitates the existence of the absurd in the present sense.

The epistemological limit of human reason that Camus recognizes is an essential component of the absurd. The ability to recognize these limits based on practical experience is called *lucidity*. Absurdist consciousness requires reason as well as lucidity. Camus wrote, "The

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[110]Ibid, p. 17.

[111]Ibid, p. 51

[112]Ibid.

absurd is lucid reasoning noticing its limits."[113] The faculty of lucidity grounds man in his own experience preventing him from abandoning that experience in the name of false understanding. "If there is an absurd, it is in man's universe. The moment the notion transforms itself into eternity's springboard, it ceases to be linked to human lucidity."[114] Reason tempts, and lucidity restrains. Only the lucid individual will understand the limits of reason and recognize the divorce between the desire to understand and the inability to understand as a fundamental aspect of the absurd. From Camus's description, reason is the defining quality that sets man apart from the world, which is utterly irrational. "This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation."[115]

Much of Camus's writing in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is dedicated to establishing a conscious recognition of the absurd, but consciousness of the absurd was merely a beginning. The purpose of *The Myth of Sisyphus* was to determine whether suicide is a logical reaction to this absurdist consciousness. Camus concluded that suicide is an illogical reaction for the man who realizes his absurd fate. "Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now, no one will live this fate knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by that consciousness. Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it."[116] The absurdity of life is the inevitability of death; therefore, suicide amounts to the complete acceptance of the absurd outcome, death. The absurd man can recognize the factual existence of death through lucidity, but he cannot accept the

[113]Ibid, p. 49.

[114]Ibid, p. 35.

[115]Ibid, p. 51.

[116]Ibid, p. 53.

outcome. “In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death. But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled. It [the absurd] escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death.”[117] Thus, Camus recognized resistance or revolt as the logical outcome of absurdist reasoning. “That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.”[118]

In summary, the existence of the absurd allows three possibilities for the human being. One can reject the existence of the absurd through a lapse in lucidity or through a “leap” in reason. Such a leap is an “escape” in which “[t]he struggle is eluded” by imposing some meaning upon reality that originates outside of the realm of lived experience.[119] Camus insisted that lucidity must inform man of the limits of reason so that he may avoid leaps and retain his absurdist consciousness. Second, one may recognize the existence of the absurd and fully accept it. Suicide falls under this category, and it has already been mentioned that this is an illogical reaction to the absurd. It is indeed paradoxical to think of a situation that is both acceptable and absurd at the same time. Therefore, the very recognition of the absurd implies that one rejects one’s fate—although one is aware of it. This relates to the final possibility of resistance. Resistance is the logical reaction to an absurd situation, and for Camus this is the essence of life. He defined the individual experience as one of “permanent revolution”[120] Life itself is a permanent revolution against death, and the appreciation of life as a struggle is a defining attribute of absurdist consciousness. The following section, focusing on Camus’s two individual

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[117]Ibid, p. 54.

[118]Ibid.

[119]Ibid, p. 35.

[120]Ibid, p. 54.

absurdist heroes, shows that the love of life as a struggle against the absurd is a powerful symbol of absurdist consciousness.

Sisyphus and Meursault—Individuals Facing the Absurd

Camus concluded his philosophical essay on the absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, with an analysis of the god-defying mortal, Sisyphus. For many reasons, Sisyphus epitomizes absurdity. He stole water from the gods and gave it to the mortals, placed death in chains, and refused to return to the underworld after Pluto granted him a brief return to the Earth. For these offenses, Mercury seized him and forced him back into the underworld where he would endure the never-ending task of pushing an enormous boulder to the top of a mountain from where it would fall back down again. Camus considered Sisyphus to be "the absurd hero" because of his desire for life and his inescapable punishment. "His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing."[121]

This is not all that is to be said of Sisyphus. Camus was most interested in what happened to Sisyphus in the underworld—precisely where the story ends. Camus thought there was more to be gained from this myth. He wrote, "Myths are made for imagination to breathe life into them."[122] Camus imagined Sisyphus rolling the stone up the incline and finally reaching the summit. From there, the stone rolls back down the hill, and Sisyphus returns to the bottom. During this return, Sisyphus experiences what Camus called his "hour of consciousness" in which he fully realizes his absurd condition. "Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of in his

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[121]Ibid, p. 120.

[122]Ibid.

descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory."[123] Sisyphus struggles, not to escape his punishment, but to defy it. He undertakes this struggle, equivalent to the desire for life or happiness, with the knowledge that it will be everlasting, affording him only brief moments of reflection. Camus saw in Sisyphus a lesson about the desire for life and the struggle to preserve it. He wrote, "But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. . . . The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."[124]

In Sisyphus, Camus found the perfect symbolic representation of the absurd man. He defies the gods in the name of life, and his punishment resembles the struggle against death that all human beings must endure. In *The Stranger*, Camus presents the absurd in the symbol of a death sentence. In his rejection of suicide as a viable solution to absurdity, Camus wrote, "The contrary of suicide, in fact, is the man condemned to death."[125] This statement was meant to illustrate the radically different attitude in these two subjects. The man intending to commit suicide rushes toward death while he is still able to live; the man condemned to death experiences an extreme passion to live although death is rushing towards him. In the latter manner, the hero in Camus's novel *The Stranger* serves as a magnification of the absurd individual. Meursault, the narrator, is condemned to death for the crime of killing an Arab. After receiving this sentence, his every impulse is directed towards escaping. In other words, his death sentence reinvigorates his instinct to live. "What really counted was the possibility of escape, a leap to freedom, out of the implacable ritual, a wild run for it that would give whatever

[123]Ibid, p. 121.

[124]Ibid, p. 123.

[125]Ibid, p. 55.

chance for hope there was."[126] Ironically, the closer Meursault gets to his death, the stronger his desire to live. "So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again . . . . And I felt ready to live it all again too."[127]

Meursault, like Sisyphus, displays a desire to live that is an essential character of absurdist consciousness. However, Meursault's resistance to death is not absolute, and this is an essential feature of his significance. Camus saw to it that Meursault is sentenced by the jury for reasons other than his actual crime. He is primarily judged by objective assessments of his character such as his adulterous affair and the fact that he did not express emotion on the day of his mother's funeral. Mersault is condemned to death because he appears to be cold-hearted and unremorseful. In fact, he was merely sleepy on the day of his mother's funeral, and that was the reason for his apparent indifference. When his attorney beseeches him to lie about his actual feelings on that day, he refuses. Meursault loves life, but he refuses to lie in order to save his own life. As Camus stated in the preface, "the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game."[128] Meursault is a rebel, embroiled in the struggle just as all men are, but Meursault's struggle represents so much more than the resistance to death. Meursault's struggle is against the world in all of its absurd manifestations. He fights against inauthenticity, judgment, and social conformity showing that the absurdity of man's condition is quite prolific and not limited to the inevitability of death.

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[126]Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 109.

[127]Ibid, p. 122.

[128]Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, pp. 335-36.

In Meursault's unfortunate case, the absurdity of his life leads him to a premature death. Camus did not cease to grapple with the implications of death even after he had completed *The Stranger*. Death, man's final destination, is the most identifiable manifestation of the absurd. Camus revisited this theme in *The Plague* when his focus shifted from the individual experience of absurdity to the collective or communal experience. The initial pages of the novel reveal the elements of importance: "Perhaps the easiest way of making a town's acquaintance is to ascertain how the people in it work, how they love, and how they die."[129]

Pathos and *The Plague*

It has already been mentioned that the unique contribution of *The Plague* to the notion of absurdity lies in its presentation of the absurd as a collective experience. In *The Plague*, Meursault's struggle is shared by all. The symbol of shared suffering, or pathos, a major theme in the novel, is essential to forming a communal understanding of the absurd. Camus employed this symbol expertly in *The Plague*, and he showed that the equivalent experience of pathos can induce a renewed form of lucidity. Eric Voegelin describes pathos as a "deeper level" of communication in which all men are met on an equal plane.

> Pathos is what men have in common, however variable it may be in its aspects and intensities. Pathos designates a passive experience, not an action; it is what happens to man, what he suffers, what befalls him fatefully and what touches him in his existential core—as for instance the experience of Eros (481c-d). In their exposure to pathos all men are equal, though they may differ widely in the manner in which they come to grips with it and build their experience into their lives. . . . The community of pathos is the basis of communication. Behind the hardened, intellectually supported attitudes which separate men, lie the *pathema* which bind them together. However false and grotesque the intellectual position may be, the pathos at the core has the truth of an immediate experience. If one can penetrate to this core and reawaken in man the awareness of his *conditio humana*, communication in the existential sense becomes possible.[130]

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[129]Camus, *The Plague*, p. 4.

[130]Eric Voegelin, *Plato* (University of Missouri Press, 1957), pp. 29-30.

Voegelin points to the specific ability of pathos to provide an equivalent level of communication in which an awareness of the human condition is fostered. This insight by Voegelin accounts for Camus's success in representing the concept of absurdity in *The Plague*. Camus reached his readers on this deeper level of communication by aesthetically employing the symbol of pathos and by creating a world that is both absurd and intelligible to the reader.

Exile—An Individual and Collective Experience

The Plague is set in the town of Oran, a banal and bourgeois town that is quickly placed under quarantine after the outbreak of the plague. This quarantine gives the town a prison-like atmosphere in which all citizens are ensnared. The ensnarement combined with bleak future assessments creates an atmosphere of general alienation or exile. Separation from loved ones is perhaps the most common form of exile. Indeed, the narrator Dr. Bernard Rieux, completely embodies the sentiment of separation; shortly after the reader makes his acquaintance, Rieux sees his wife off to a "sanatorium in the mountains" for the treatment of her "long illness."[131] Throughout the novel Rieux is separated from his wife, uncertain of her well-being; and near the end, he receives word that she has died.

Raymond Rambert is a second character who represents an individual experience of exile. Rambert's case is somewhat different from Rieux's because Rambert, the French journalist, is trapped in the quarantined town of Oran when on an assignment. Once the town gates are closed, Rambert pleads with the town authorities to allow him to leave Oran, but the precautions of the quarantine prohibit this. "The gist of his argument was always the same: that

[131]Camus, *The Plague*, pp. 8-11.

he was a stranger to our town and, that being so, his case deserved special consideration."[132] Rambert's argument reflects the sentiment of the nostalgic human being looking for a specialized type of justice. The cruel reality, in an absurd universe, is that the world remains silent to these demands. In *The Plague*, the town bureaucracy perfectly mimics this irrationally silent world.

Rambert's existence in Oran as "a stranger" is compounded by the fact that he is separated from the woman he loves, and he is uncertain if he will be able to see her once more. In this sense, Dr. Rieux and Rambert are in very similar situations, but Rambert, not knowing of Rieux's wife from whom he is separated, chastises Rieux for not taking "the case of people who are separated into account."[133] In fact, Rambert admits that love is of central importance to him: "The truth is I wasn't brought into this world to write newspaper articles. But it's quite likely I was brought into the world to live with a woman."[134] Rambert is deprived of his supposed reason for living in the absurdity of the plague.

Rieux and Rambert witness the absurd in full force when they are parted from their loved ones, and originally, they suffer this longing individually. However, Camus revealed in *The Plague* that absurdity is also a collective experience in which a communal consciousness of the absurd can be instructive. At the beginning of Part II, once the existence of the plague is confirmed and the quarantine is enacted, the narrator describes the mentality of the town:

> From now on, it can be said that plague was the concern of all of us. . . . Once the town gates were shut, every one of us realized that all, the narrator included, were, so to speak in the same boat, and each would have to adapt himself to the new conditions of life. Thus, for example, a feeling normally as *individual* as the ache of separation from those

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[132]Ibid, p. 106.

[133]Ibid, p. 87.

[134]Ibid, p. 85.

> one loves suddenly became a feeling in which *all shared alike* and—together with fear—the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lay ahead.[135]

It is difficult to mistake the symbolism contained in Camus's phrase "in the same boat." As he revealed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, absurdity (and consequentially, exile) is the existential condition of all human beings, although they do not often realize this. Through fiction, Camus was able to create a more tangible representation of absurdity that clearly affects everyone, pestilence.

Camus clearly intended to present the sentiment of exile as a collective experience in *The Plague*. Rieux comments that the feeling of exile, which is closely related to the human nostalgia for unity and understanding, was the first hardship that the plague brought to the town. "It was undoubtedly the feeling of exile—that sensation of a void within, which never left us, that irrational longing to hark back to the past or else to speed up the march of time, and those keen shafts of memory that stung like fire."[136] Indeed, by the beginning of Part III, the feeling of exile has fully solidified into a communal consciousness. "No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotions was the sense of exile and of deprivation, with all the crosscurrents of revolt and fear set up by these."[137]

When assessing the bleak "collective destiny" of Oran, one cannot ignore the added sense of exile for "strangers" like Rambert. The townspeople ironically experience "exile in one's own home," but Rambert faces this destiny while being simultaneously exiled spatially from his own

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[135] Ibid, p. 67. Emphasis added.

[136] Ibid, p. 71.

[137] Ibid, p. 167.

home.[138] These unfortunate souls, separated from loved ones and their actual home at the same time were "the most exiled."[139] Their longing was double as was the absurdity they had to endure. However, there is a revealing phrase from *The Myth of Sisyphus* that epitomizes Rambert's reaction: "There is thus a metaphysical honor in enduring the world's absurdity."[140] Rambert does endure the absurdity, and just like Meursault, he does so despite being offered a way out. Rambert's only escape is through the underhanded method of smuggling, a seemingly dishonest escape from the town. However, when his escape is finally secured, he admits that he would be embarrassed to abandon the town in which, up until that moment, he had felt like a stranger. He expresses this decision to Dr. Rieux, "Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business."[141] This is Rambert's moment of lucidity; his awakening coincides with a sense of solidarity.

Awareness of the Absurd and the Desire to Understand

It is prudent here to remind the reader that this analysis of *The Plague* relates to Voegelin's structural taxonomy of Camus's meditation. This meditation takes the form of a *periagoge*, or turning around. The first stage of the meditation, absurdity, corresponds to the general theme of exile that Camus conveyed in *The Plague*. This sentiment of exile allowed Camus the ability to reach the depths of existence from where he could begin the ascent. In *The Plague*, the distress of the exiled triggers contemplation. "And it was then that fear, and with

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[138]Ibid, p. 73.

[139]Ibid, p. 74.

[140]Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 93.

[141]Camus, *The Plague*, pp. 209-10.

fear serious reflection, began."[142] Reflection, triggered by exile, allows one to recognize the existence of the absurd. Recognition of the absurd then leads to the turning around and the beginning of the ascent.

The human faculty for reflection is consistent with Camus's argument that human beings possess a nostalgia for unity or understanding. The characters in *The Plague* display this nostalgia in many forms once the plague sets in, but according to the conditions of the absurd, this nostalgia cannot be satisfied. Indeed, the force of nostalgia is so great that it causes the townspeople to deny that which they cannot understand. "[T]hey disbelieved in pestilences. A pestilence isn't a thing made to man's measure; therefore we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogy of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away."[143] Because they cannot understand it, these people reject the absurd until it crashes on to them.

Once the town is quarantined and the plague has become a clearly identifiable reality, the characters struggle to find meaning behind the absurd state of events. Many townspeople turn to Father Paneloux, "a learned and militant Jesuit."[144] Paneloux understands the plague as a sign of divine justice. He preaches to the assembled congregation, "Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserve it."[145] Unlike those who reject the plague, Paneloux

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[142]Ibid, p. 23.

[143]Ibid, p. 37.

[144]Ibid, p. 17.

[145]Ibid, p. 94.

fully accepts it and even tells the congregation to "rejoice."[146] By his understanding, there is no need of struggle. One need only pray "[a]nd God would see to the rest."[147]

Paneloux's view of the plague is a "leap" because he appeals to a source outside of lived experience. Camus insisted that one must ground reason in lucidity to avoid such leaps. In *The Plague*, lucidity is a faculty that accompanies lessons learned from lived experience. For example, Dr. Rieux's occupation provides him with concrete examples of physical suffering, and therefore, he cannot fathom the possibility that this constitutes some form of justice. Rieux comments to his friend Tarrou that, "the order of the world is shaped by death" while God remains silent. When Tarrou asks Rieux who taught him this lesson, Rieux replies, "Suffering."[148]

Paneloux and Rieux have radically different understandings of the world and of the plague. Paneloux sees the plague as a sign of God's love. He argues that the existence of suffering serves as a test to the faithful. "The sufferings of children were our bread of affliction, but without this bread our souls would die of spiritual hunger."[149] Rieux, on the other hand, sees the plague as a sign God's indifference. Their disagreement is centered on the problem of evil, and Camus used this paradox to reinforce the importance of lucidity. The evocative symbol that he used for this purpose is the death of an innocent child.

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[146]Ibid, p. 98.

[147]Ibid, p. 99.

[148]Ibid, pp. 128-29.

[149]Ibid, p. 226.

M. Othon, the police magistrate, is a supporter of Father Paneloux. He optimistically instructs Dr. Rieux, "one must never lose hope, the ways of Providence were inscrutable."[150] The inscrutable ways of Providence, however, result in the death of the magistrate's son. This contrast is already reflective of the absurd, but Camus depicted this episode with heart-wrenching detail. M. Othon's son suffers longer than most patients because of an experimental serum that allows him to fight death for an extended period of time. The group that attends the boy witnesses this entire episode. The description of the lucidity gained from this experience is remarkable:

> They had already seen children die . . . but they had never yet watched a child's agony minute by minute, as they had now been doing since daybreak. Needless to say, the pain inflicted on these innocent victims had always seemed to them to be what in fact it was: an abominable thing. But hitherto they had felt its abomination in, so to speak, an abstract way; they had never had to witness over so long a period the death throes of an innocent child.[151]

Rieux and Paneloux, who were present for this terrible episode, are both deeply affected by this experience of absurdity, but neither understands the reason for such an occurrence. Shortly after the event, Rieux, recalling Paneloux's sermon, lashes out at the Jesuit highlighting the fact that the child did not deserve this fate. Paneloux's reply is: "That sort of thing is revolting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand."[152] Again, Paneloux's reaction to the absurd is acceptance. Shortly after the death of M. Othon's son, Paneloux himself comes down with the plague and refuses to see a

[150]Ibid, p. 145.

[151]Ibid, p. 214.

[152]Ibid, p. 218.

doctor. Perhaps his own sense of guilt prevents him from resisting. Nevertheless, Paneloux's acceptance of the plague culminates in his lonely death.

Resistance to the Absurd in the Name of Life

According to Camus, resistance, the appropriate reaction to the absurd, is closely linked to formulating an accurate conception of reality. Those characters in *The Plague* that refuse to acknowledge the absurd obviously display delusional tendencies. The absurdity contained in this work is unavoidable. On the other hand, characters such as Father Paneloux, who recognize the absurd and repulsive nature of the plague, accept the absurd by giving into their desire for unity and by assuming that the tortuous events serve a divine purpose. Still others, such as Dr. Rieux, realize that the plague is beyond human comprehension, and because they recognize the absurdity of the plague, they resist. Indeed, Rieux limits his reflection to the immediacy of the situation refusing to try to understand the significance of the plague. He comments to his friend Tarrou,

> I have no idea what's awaiting me or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this; there are sick people and they need curing. Later on, perhaps, they'll think things over; and so shall I. But what's wanted now is to make them well.[153]

Rieux is an admirable character even though he insists that there are no heroics involved in his actions. The reason for this admiration is Camus's portrayal of the absurd in a realistic and intelligible manner. By employing the evocative symbol of pathos, he is able to give a sense of duty and obligation to the measured resistance against the absurd. Rieux resists the plague by alleviating as much suffering as possible without hoping to save the people from the inevitability of the absurd. His resistance, like Meursault and Sisyphus, proclaims the value of life as a struggle against death. Rieux, however, shows that the struggle for life goes beyond the

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[153]Ibid, p. 127.

individual, and most times, the absurd must be confronted with a measured expression of solidarity.

The idea of rebellion is treated in more detail in the following chapter, but for the present discussion of the absurd, rebellion serves as the result of lucid awareness. This awareness points to the abhorrent yet unavoidable nature of the absurd giving life the character of a permanent rebellion against death.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is necessary to revisit Camus's meditative ascent described by Eric Voegelin. He characterizes this meditation as a *periagoge* in which Camus undertook an analysis of existence that ultimately led to an appreciation of the here and now. The phase of absurdity, although it seems to be a pessimistic appraisal of existence, is absolutely essential to the meditative ascent. It is in this phase that serious reflection begins. During this reflective period, Camus discovered a logical progression that allowed him to resist the absurd and to proclaim the value of life. Awareness of the absurd, for Camus, was the equivalent of reaching "the depths of the turning around" described by Voegelin.[154] From these depths, the ascent from the metaphorical cave can begin.

Camus's depiction of the absurd in *The Plague* reinforces the usefulness of absurdist consciousness as a first step toward the ascent. The citizens of Oran experience the absurd manifestation of exile in solidarity. Those who are lucid, realize that the situation is inescapable and that all are imprisoned facing the same absurd. Once the impossibility of evading the absurd is established, the only logical reaction is to resist. In this case, the resistance is against death,

[154]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 369.

and therefore, resistance is synonymous with life. In the following chapter, the discussion turns to the idea of rebellion as a fundamental characteristic of human life.

CHAPTER 4. REBELLION

Introduction

The second phase of Camus's meditative ascent is characterized by rebellion against the absurd. Voegelin writes fondly of Camus's development in this phase. "In *L'Homme révolté* (1951) Camus masters the second phase of the ascent, as he accepts that the uncertainty concerning the meaning of existence has to be endured as the burden of existence, and as he seeks to keep the tension free from dogmatic substitute realities, be they of the theological, metaphysical, or ideological variety."[155] By emphasizing the role of lucidity, Camus was able to avoid the delusions of ideological or absolutist political stances. His concept of rebellion is necessarily limited in scope as the logic of absurdity reveals.

Rebellion, although it is treated as a separate phase of Camus's meditative ascent here, is best understood in the context of the absurd. To reiterate, the absurd arises from the confrontation between the rational human being and the irrational ordering of human life in the world. To the rational human being, the order of the world is incomprehensible and thus, absurd. In short, the absurd is an existential contradiction. This contradiction characterizes life itself, and Camus maintained that any lucid individual should realize that the absurd is inseparable from lived experience. There is no escape; there is no life without the absurd. This realization led Camus to equate life with a permanent struggle or revolution against the absurd and its most poignant manifestation, death.

Camus considered rebellion to be a logical reaction for anyone who possesses the lucidity to recognize the absurd, but after elucidating the doctrine of absurdity in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he noticed an ethical vacuum that was created by this absurdist consciousness. Seemingly, the

[155]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 369.

absurd provides no foundation for values that may guide action. Camus noted this danger in the opening pages of *The Rebel*:

> And the concept of the absurd leads only to contradiction as far as the problem of murder is concerned. Awareness of the absurd, when we first claim to deduce a rule of behavior from it, makes murder seem a matter of indifference . . . If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance. . . . Evil and virtue are mere chance or caprice.[156]

The danger that Camus recognized here is that of moral or ethical relativism. Such relativism arises from the realization that life is meaningless. Referring to mythical figures to reinforce this danger, Camus pointed to Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov who famously uttered "If God is dead, everything is permitted."[157] The utterly rational Ivan is driven mad by this unbearable freedom of action, but Camus insisted that there was a solution to this relativism. The solution to moral relativism was the purpose of his second major philosophical essay, *The Rebel*.

The Myth of Sisyphus approached the concept of absurdity by exploring the logic of suicide as a reaction to the absurd. Similarly, *The Rebel* examined logical crime or premeditated murder as a product of rebellion against the absurd. Camus's focus in *The Rebel* was not crimes of passion such as Meursault's crime in *The Stranger*, but "logical crime" that is premeditated and often justified by philosophy or ideology.[158] *The Rebel* was an attempt to examine the logic of political executions and forced human suffering in the name of abstract principles. Camus insisted that the concept of rebellion, the natural reaction to the absurd, held the key to these destructive impulses. By examining the history of rebellious movements, Camus discovered that

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[156]Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 5.

[157]Ibid, pp. 55-60.

[158]Ibid, p. 3.

rebellions often gain excessive momentum and zeal that leads to the destruction of life and the principles on which the rebellion was founded. The logic of rebellion is where the discussion now turns.

The Concept of Rebellion

In *The Rebel*, Camus insisted that the concept of rebellion held the explanation for the destructive political movements of the Twentieth Century. Every rebellion is a form of protest and, interestingly, reveals a desire for order. Camus wrote,

> Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition. But its blind impulse is to demand order in the midst of chaos and unity in the very heart of the ephemeral. It protests, it demands, it insists that the outrage be brought to an end, and that what up to now has been built on shifting sands should henceforth be founded on rock.[159]

Camus considered this protest to be evidence of the absurdity of existence, but rebellion also serves as evidence for the existence of values. If one rebels against the absurd, obviously there is something of value—presumably something that is not absurd—for which to fight. "Not every value entails rebellion, but every act of rebellion tacitly invokes a value."[160] Reason appears to be the faculty of human consciousness that compels one to affirm values such as order and purpose. However, reason has limits, and the values that correspond to the rational human being's nostalgia for unity should not be absolute.

The destructive form of rebellion, for which Camus designates the term "revolution," does not result from an absence of values but from an uncompromising adherence to absolute values.[161] The Rebel becomes aware of a value such as freedom or order, and demands that this

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[159]Ibid, p. 10.

[160]Ibid, p. 14.

[161]Ibid, pp. 246-52.

value be respected at all cost. Camus referred to this outlook as “All or Nothing” mentality. “The rebel himself wants to be ‘all’—to identify himself completely with this good of which he has suddenly become aware and by which he wants to be personally recognized and acknowledged—or ‘nothing’; in other words, to be completely destroyed by the force that dominates him.”[162]

The value for which the rebel fights is something that transcends the individual, and in time, the abstract value at the root of the rebellion supersedes appreciation of the here and now. This is why Camus insisted that the instinct to rebel is metaphysical in origin. If one lives in an irrevocably disordered world and still demands order, this amounts to a protest against one’s very condition as a man. “Metaphysical rebellion,” Camus wrote, “is the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation. It is metaphysical because it contests the ends of man and of creation.”[163] The metaphysical instinct to rebel is manifested in historical rebellions that sanction the destruction of human beings, but this impulse to rebel can also be channeled into a healthy form of political action. Authentic rebellion, that which is consistent with its origins, is characterized by attentiveness and an intense focus on the immediate situation. Historical rebellion, on the other hand, tends to focus on absolute values to be attained in the distant future. Authentic rebels, such as Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*, exhibit a sense of existential immediacy in the act of rebellion that is consistent with an appreciation of present reality. In other words, the authentic rebel remains lucid enough to recognize that the metaphysical impulse to rebel is a product of the absurd, and the absurd cannot be settled. This lucidity prevents the authentic rebel from being consumed by his rebellious impulses.

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[162]Ibid, p. 15.

[163]Ibid, p. 23.

The community of men in which the rebel lives provides yet another metaphysical element to rebellion. The rebel eventually expands individually held values to the whole of mankind; therefore, the rebellion is conducted in the name of mankind and human solidarity rather than for the purpose of addressing an individual grievance.

> [The rebel] is acting in the name of certain values which are still indeterminate but which he feels are common to himself and to all men. . . . [T]he affirmation implicit in every act of rebellion is extended to something that transcends the individual in so far as it withdraws him from his supposed solitude and provides him with a reason to act.[164]

Camus continued, "When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical."[165] The solidarity of mankind supplies the rebel with a cause that transcends the individual, the collective suffering of mankind. This is yet another reason why *The Plague* corresponds nicely to Camus's meditative ascent. The symbol of pathos that pervades the novel triggers a sense of rebellion that is metaphysical, but in most cases, limited.

Such metaphysical rebellion, however, results in destructive revolution when the rebel is consumed by the "All or Nothing" mentality. The absence of God leaves the rebel with absolute freedom, but in the name of human solidarity freedom translates into "a prison of absolute duties."[166] "From the moment that man believes neither in God nor immortal life, he becomes 'responsible for everything alive, for everything that, born of suffering, is condemned to suffer from life.'"[167] In this state of exile the search for meaning begins, and the rebel's responsibility

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[164]Ibid, p. 16.

[165]Ibid, p. 17.

[166]Ibid, p. 103

[167]Ibid, p. 70.

is to remake the world itself so that it adheres to the values that are considered important. When the rebel attempts to remake the world, the rebellion goes beyond the realm of ethics into the realm of politics. Camus despaired at the historical outcomes of rebels who attempt to "annex all creation. Every time it experiences a setback, we have already seen that the political solution, the solution of conquest, is formulated."[168]

Political dominance is the logical outcome of revolutions that adhere to the "All or Nothing" mentality. Such absolutism treats abstract values as ultimate ends to be achieved at all costs, even at the cost of murder. Thus, the true danger of rebellion is revealed, the danger of nihilism. Clarifying this concept, Camus wrote, "A nihilist is not one who believes in nothing, but one who does not believe in what exists."[169] He went on to say that nihilism is the logical conclusion of "superior values" that are built on the foundation of an illusion.[170] These superior values are prized above life itself when the rebel has a lapse in lucidity and fails to recognize the value of human life. The historical examples of nihilism are prolific, ranging from the French Revolution to modern day Islamic terrorism. Voegelin refers to these movements founded upon "superior values" as "second realities" that distort the faculty of reasoned judgment.[171] The absolute values of the revolutionary become the ultimate ends of mankind, and nihilism ensues when the experience of the here and now is devalued at the expense of a utopian dream.

Despite the danger of nihilism, Camus insisted that rebellion was natural to mankind and that it could even be fruitful. After all, rebellion is often conceived as a pejorative term that

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[168]Ibid, p. 103.

[169]Ibid, p. 69.

[170]Ibid, p. 70.

[171]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, pp. 368-9.

usually connotes violence and destruction. Camus, on the other hand, argued that the logic of rebellion dictates limits for human action and in turn, prevents absolute destruction. Again, Camus revisited the logic of absurdity to prove his point:

> The final solution of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe. . . . [A]bsurdism hereby admits that *human life is the only necessary good* since it is precisely life that makes this encounter possible and since, without life, the absurdist wager would have no basis. . . . From the moment that life is recognized as good, it becomes good for all men.[172]

This realization that life is "the only necessary good" is a triumph of lucidity. Indifference to life, however, is the triumph of nihilism because in this case, one forgets that life and human solidarity are the foundations of rebellion. Rebellion is a protest against the absurdity of death and only a lapse in lucidity, a deviation from logic, will allow rebellion to embrace death. "Man's solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and rebellion in its turn, can only find its justification in this solidarity. . . . [A]ny rebellion which claims the right to deny or destroy this solidarity loses simultaneously its right to be called rebellion and becomes in reality an acquiescence in murder."[173]

Camus concluded in *The Rebel* that true rebellion always acknowledges its own origins and establishes limits that prevent it from contradicting these origins. Only absolute values and unlimited means lead to these contradictions. For this reason, Camus asserted, "If . . . rebellion could found a philosophy it would be one of limits, of calculated ignorance, and of risk."[174] The rebel must realize that no value can be attained in an absolute sense and he must limit the means

[172]Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 6. Emphasis added.

[173]Ibid, p. 22.

[174] Ibid, p. 289.

of achieving that value accordingly. Camus wrote, “Rebellion itself only aspires to the relative and can only promise an assured dignity coupled with relative justice. It supposes a limit at which the community of man is established. Its universe is the universe of relative values.”[175] Again, lucidity is necessary to inform the rebel that the absurdity of existence cannot be settled. Rebellion is the natural reaction to the absurd, but in Camus’s doctrine of rebellion, values are meant to serve as guides for action rather than future goals to be pursued in totality. It is only when lucidity falters that the rebel forgets the reason for his protest and destroys life in pursuit of absolute values. This danger of total revolution was obviously a concern for Camus when he wrote his play, *The Just Assassins*.

The Just Assassins

In *The Just Assassins*, Camus presented the story of Russian socialist terrorists who assassinated the Grand Duke Serge. Breathing life into this historical account, Camus portrayed the complexity involved in rebellion and the necessity of lucidity and limits. The most militant character, Stephen Fedorov, is recently released from prison. Humiliated during his time in prison, Stephen zealously advocates violence and destruction in the name of absolute justice. On the other hand, the poet Ivan Kaliayev and his girlfriend Dora pursue a form of rebellion that is enthusiastic yet limited. In the competing dialogue between these characters, Camus portrayed the ethical tension of rebellion with remarkable style.

Ivan and Dora, whom Camus considered heroes, are willing to kill for the sake of an ideal that they refer to as “justice.” However, these characters retain the lucidity that is necessary to remain faithful to the true cause of the rebellion. Indeed, Ivan comments that he sees much

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[175]Ibid, p. 290.

beauty and joy in the world, and that he joined the revolution because he loves life.[176] His attitude toward life is congruent with absurdist logic which informs one that life is precious. He intones, "Only, I'm still convinced that life is a glorious thing, I'm in love with beauty, happiness. That's why I hate despotism."[177] When Ivan is poised to throw a bomb under the carriage of the Grand Duke, he hesitates and retreats after seeing the faces of two children in the carriage. Remembering the origins of his rebellion, Ivan cannot bring himself to do violence to innocent children. Again, Camus used the symbol of innocent children to illustrate the often overlooked value of life. Dora emphatically defends Ivan's decision when the militant Stephen protests. "Open your eyes, Stephen, and try to realize that the group would lose all its driving force, were it to tolerate, even for a moment, the idea of children's being blown to pieces by our bombs."[178]

Stephen is the embodiment of nihilism in the play because he considers justice to be an absolute value that is more important than human life. He admits to this with conviction, "I do not love life; I love something higher—and that is justice."[179] Stephen wants the revolution to succeed at all costs. When Dora argues that one must acknowledge limits, Stephen replies angrily, "There are no limits!"[180] Stephen has been mistreated in prison; he is disgusted with the world itself, and he would gladly destroy it in the name of absolute justice. Stephen has fully

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[176]Albert Camus, *The Just Assassins* in *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), pp. 241-43.

[177]Ibid, p. 245.

[178]Ibid, p. 256.

[179]Ibid, p. 244.

[180]Ibid, p. 258.

succumbed to nihilism and his metaphysical revolt becomes fanatical and even hateful as a result of his "All or Nothing" mentality. As the Grand Duke is about to be assassinated, he comments to Dora, "There's so much still to do; we must smash this world we live in, blast it to smithereens!"[181]

Stephen's destructive nihilistic attitude is meant to establish the fact that rebellion itself amounts to a rejection of absolutism. The ringleader, Boris Annenkov, chastises Stephen, "I can't allow you to say that everything's permissible. Thousands of our brothers have died to make it known that everything is *not* allowed."[182] The rebel joins the revolution because he feels that a limit has been breached; he will tolerate no more injustice. Therefore, it is illogical for the rebellion itself to abolish all limits in the pursuit of setting a limit on injustice. Camus commented upon the ethic of his play in the introduction, "I merely wanted to show that action itself had limits. There is no good and just action but what recognizes those limits and, if it must go beyond them, at least accepts death."[183] Although Ivan eventually succeeds in killing the Grand Duke, he affirms that there are limits to action, and he is completely willing to pay for the act with his life.

The rebellion depicted in "The Just Assassins" is historical and concrete; however, Camus's concept of rebellion is also somewhat metaphorical in nature. One need not join the Revolutionary Socialist Party, as the terrorists in the play did, to experience metaphysical rebellion. In an absurd existence, life itself is a form of rebellion and must acknowledge limits.

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[181]Ibid, p. 273.

[182]Ibid, p. 257.

[183]Ibid, p. x.

The following section examines rebellion, a characteristic of daily life, as Camus presented it in *The Plague*.

The Plague

As previously stated, Camus thought that the human faculty for rebellion was a logical reaction to the absurd. By exploring the concept of rebellion he discovered a faulty logic that leads to nihilism and calculated murder. The human being is compelled by the absurdity of existence to rebel against the manifestations of absurdity in the name of life, happiness, and dignity. This rebellion is natural. It is only when the values of the rebellion become absolute that the rebel forgets the origins of the rebellion and succumbs to nihilistic destruction. For this reason, Camus praised lucidity, the capacity to recognize the essential values of present reality, as a primary virtue. In *The Plague*, lucidity is much more important than heroism. The reason for this is an overabundance of the latter and an alarming absence of the former in human relations. Camus suggested in *The Plague* that heroism often leads to overzealous rebellion although the rebellion is conducted originally with good intentions. There is a moving passage from the novel in which Dr. Rieux indicates that "callousness and apathy" in society are less problematic than misguided heroism.

> The evil that is in the world always comes from ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding. On the whole, men are more good than bad; that, however, isn't the real point. But they are more or less ignorant and that is what we call vice or virtue; the most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance that fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill. The soul of the murderer is blind; and there can be no true goodness nor true love without the utmost clear-sightedness.[184]

In this passage, Camus revealed his conviction that human beings, on average, are more inclined to good than evil, a theme he would reiterate throughout the novel. Destructive revolutions,

[184]Camus, *The Plague*, p. 131.

according to Camus, are not a product of man's fallen nature, but a result of metaphysical rebellion that is well-intended but poorly thought out.

The depiction of rebellion in *The Plague* is meant to highlight the usefulness of rebellion against the absurd. In fact, the entire novel can be read as a myth concerning the nostalgic human being's never-ending battle against the absurd. Because of the variety of characters, Camus was able to illustrate many possible forms of rebellion, but the following discussion is limited to four characters in particular that represent the full spectrum of rebellious behavior. All four characters love life in their own way, but the difference in their outlooks can be explained by their varying capacities for lucidity and their sensitivities to the solidarity of mankind.

Rambert—Happiness to Solidarity

The lonely unfortunate position of the journalist, Rambert, has been mentioned before. Rambert's attempt to escape from Oran once the town is quarantined is ostensibly a cowardly attempt to avoid the absurd. Perhaps it is cowardly, but Camus did not portray Rambert as a coward. For instance, Rambert mentions to Dr. Rieux that his attempt to escape is not motivated by self preservation, and his justification for this is his participation in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Republicans. The Spanish Civil War, for Camus, marked a despicable failure of Western Europe to defend the rights and dignity of human beings. Defending the choice of Spain as the setting for his play, *State of Siege*, Camus wrote, "You have forgotten that in 1936 a rebellious general, in the name of Christ, raised up an army of Moors, hurled them against the legally constituted government of the Spanish Republic, won victory for an unjust cause after the massacres that can never be expiated, and initiated a frightful repression that has lasted ten years

and is not yet over."[185] This stinging indictment of Franco's regime reveals the overwhelming importance of this symbol for Camus. Rambert, by fighting against Franco, serves as the embodiment of resistance to tyranny, and can hardly be labeled a coward.

Indeed, Dr. Rieux is sympathetic to Rambert's cause because he acknowledges the necessity of happiness and love. These are values of the present, and although they are individual, and maybe even selfish, Camus indicated that man is entitled to opt for love and happiness. In a world characterized as absurd, the struggle for love and happiness amounts to rebellion. Camus described the "heartrendingly monotonous struggle put up by some obstinate people like Rambert to recover their lost happiness . . . [W]hile their resistance lacked the active virtues of the other . . . it bore witness, even in its futility and incoherences, to a salutary pride."[186] Rambert's reaction to the absurd is an individual rebellion in the name of happiness, and Camus suggested that this reaction is justified. Of course, Rambert comes to realize that the existence of happiness and love for the entire town of Oran is in jeopardy, and he decides to remain in Oran to work on Dr. Rieux's sanitary squads. Originally fighting his own absurd condition in the name of happiness, Rambert decides to fight for the collective happiness of the townspeople. Through solidarity, Rambert discovers a cause that transcends him as an individual, and by choosing to fight for the community rather than for his own happiness, he discovers a productive outlet for his metaphysical impulse to rebel.

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[185]Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1995), pp. 79-80.

[186]Camus, *The Plague*, p.139.

Dr. Rieux—The Authentic Rebel

The narrator, Dr. Rieux serves as a perfect representation of authentic rebellion that is lucid and limited. As a physician, Rieux is uniquely exposed to the realities of human suffering, and the ordering of the universe is clearly repulsive to him. Camus wrote, "Rieux believed himself to be on the right road—in fighting against creation as he found it."[187] He witnesses death and suffering regularly through his occupation, and these forces shape the world in which he lives. God, for Rieux, is the embodiment of an unjust, irrational ordering of existence. He poses a rhetorical question to his friend, Jean Tarrou, "[S]ince the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence?"[188] Rieux is somewhat similar to Ivan Karamazov in the sense that he blames God for the existence of evil. Both characters (not to mention, Camus himself) reveal some ambiguity in their religious beliefs; they are not certain that God does not exist, but they furiously refuse to believe in Him regardless.

Struggling against the incomprehensible absurdity of existence, Rieux is undoubtedly the quintessential rebel. The importance of Dr. Rieux for the concept of rebellion is not only the diligence of his rebellion, but the limited nature of his resistance. When the Jesuit, Father Paneloux tells Rieux that they are both fighting for man's salvation, Rieux corrects him, "Salvation's much too big a word for me. I don't aim so high. I'm concerned with man's health; and for me his health comes first."[189] Salvation is a value of the distant future; health is a value

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[187]Ibid, p. 127.

[188]Ibid, p. 128.

[189]Ibid, p. 219.

of the present. Rieux's lucidity grounds him to the immediacy of the situation, and although the absolute vigilance of the plague prevents him from healing absolutely, he doggedly persists. The seemingly futile duties of the "sanitary squads" reflect the necessity of rebellion in the name of present life. "The essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to separation. And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical."[190]

Rieux does not consider himself a hero or a saint. His chronicle of the plague merely represents the absurdity of existence and the logical reaction to that absurdity. "It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers."[191] Rieux's friend, Tarrou, is clearly one who strives to be a healer, but his aim is somewhat more absolute than Rieux's. Tarrou is more interested in eradicating the plague from the face of the earth.

Jean Tarrou—The Penitent Rebel

Camus presented Tarrou as an utterly decent man, albeit one who is susceptible to lapses in lucidity. He appreciates the everyday pleasures of life. "Good-humored, always ready with a smile, he seemed an addict of all normal pleasures without being their slave."[192] When Tarrou recognizes the onslaught of the plague, he takes it upon himself to assemble volunteers into sanitary squads. Tarrou's enthusiasm is admirable and his display of solidarity with the

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[190]Ibid, p. 133.

[191]Ibid, p. 308.

[192]Ibid, p. 24.

townspeople is unquestionable. Unlike Rieux, however, Tarrou's rebellion more closely resembles atonement than protest.

Tarrou admits to Dr. Rieux that he once had a form of plague. As a young man, appalled by the cruelty of capital punishment, Tarrou joined a revolutionary sect in Hungary with intentions of abolishing the death penalty. Tarrou admits that his metaphysical impulse to rebel crossed over into the political realm: "To my mind the social order around me was based on the death sentence, and by fighting the established order I'd be fighting against murder."[193] He was fighting against death and injustice the same as Rieux, but his absolutist stance against the death penalty led him to be complicit in the murders of political enemies. It should be noted that Camus himself advocated "justice without mercy" for the collaborators of the Vichy government until he became disgusted with the political executions of various intellectuals.[194] He would never speak in favor of the death penalty again. Tarrou admits that he acquiesced to the inevitability of some executions in the name of "building up a new world in which murder would cease to be."[195] This is a perfect example of the dangers involved with any rebellion that does not stay true to its origins. Tarrou's lapse in lucidity caused him to take part in the very injustice against which he set out to fight. He rebelled because he thought society was breaching a threshold of injustice, but in his rebellion, he breached the same limit. He compromised the present value of human life for the unattainable future value of a plague-free society. After witnessing an execution by firing squad, he regained his lucidity and spent the rest of his life trying to avoid the plague of rationally justified murder. He recounts his lesson learned to Rieux,

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[193]Ibid, p. 250.

[194]Bronner, *Albert Camus: The Thinker, the Artist, the Man*, p. 71.

[195]Camus, *The Plague*, p. 250.

"The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention."[196]

Thus, Tarrou spends the rest of his days trying to find peace and tirelessly avoiding murder. He asks Rieux. "Can one be a saint without God?—that's the problem, in fact the only problem, I'm up against today."[197] Tarrou finds no answer to this inquiry, and his life is one of the last claimed by the plague. Again, Camus suggested that heroics and saintliness are above the scope of human possibility. Dr. Rieux realized this. He answered Tarrou, "Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me, I imagine. What interests me is being a man."[198]

Cottard—Nihilist and Collaborator

M. Cottard, the final character examined here, represents the historical expression of metaphysical rebellion. The reader makes his acquaintance shortly after he tries to hang himself. Cottard is distressed because a crime from his past has been uncovered by the town officials, and he fears he will be arrested. When the plague sets in, Cottard's mood changes dramatically because the officials are preoccupied and because all the townspeople are similarly imperiled. Tarrou, who observes Cottard's behavior closely, discovers that Cottard values solidarity. "The thing he'd most detest is being cut off from others; he'd rather be one of a beleaguered crowd than a prisoner alone."[199] He relishes the fact that "everyone's in the same boat."[200]

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[196]Ibid, p. 253.

[197]Ibid, p. 255.

[198]Ibid.

[199]Ibid, p. 196.

[200]Ibid, p. 195.

Cottard takes advantage of the plague, and has no desire to see it end. If the plague represents the Nazi occupation of France, Cottard is undoubtedly a Vichy collaborator. Tarrou records in his journal, "In short, this epidemic has done him proud. Of a lonely man who hated loneliness it has made an accomplice. . . . and doesn't he relish his complicity!"[201] Lonely before the start of plague and quarantine, Cottard discovers a morbid solidarity in the town of Oran because the overwhelming absurdity of his own life is shared by all. What he fails to realize is that the plague which he welcomes can destroy the very solidarity that he values. For Camus, who clearly sympathizes with Cottard's unfortunate situation, his complicity in the plague is more despicable than the unmentioned crime of his past. "His only real crime is that of having in his heart approved of something that killed off men, women, and children."[202]

Why, then, is Cottard a nihilist? Simply, he prizes the miserable solidarity of the plague that is forced on the town of Oran, but he despises the community of men from which his imprisonment would exclude him. For example, once the quarantine is lifted, Cottard opens fire on the people as they are rejoicing in the streets.[203] His "All or Nothing" attitude is similar to that of Stephen Fedorov from "The Just Assassins." Like Stephen, Cottard would rather see the world destroyed than to be deprived of the solidarity that he values absolutely. This is the reason that he passionately relates to Dr. Rieux that what Oran really needs is "An earthquake! A big one!"[204]

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[201]Ibid, p. 197.

[202]Ibid, p. 302.

[203]Ibid, p. 304.

[204]Ibid, p. 59.

Conclusion

As Camus's showed in *The Plague*, rebellion takes many forms. However, he established in *The Rebel*, that only limited rebellion is logical. What, then, is the role of rebellion in the *periagoge*? The first phase of the ascent, absurdity, fosters an awareness of existence and informs man of his limits. In the phase of rebellion, Camus discovered that this awareness must be applied to the whole of human action. "Just as danger provided man with the unique opportunity of seizing awareness, so metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole of experience. . . . That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it."[205] Acknowledgement of the absurd is not enough; the rebel must live a life that is consistent with the absurd. Camus recognized the absurd and began his ascent in the first phase. In the second phase, he realized that extreme focus is needed for one to act and maintain one's lucid awareness of the absurd.

Voegelin mentions Camus's ability to resist the temptation of substitute realities as an essential feature of this phase. This is why Camus equated rebellion with "the certainty of a crushing fate." The rebel must never forget that the absurd is an irrevocable characteristic of life. Second realities tempt one to deny the certainty of this "crushing fate," and this false optimism leads to foolish heroism and destruction in the name of absolute values. Camus refers to lucidity as the faculty that allows one to avoid such dangerous perversions. Lucidity guides the authentic rebel on the correct path of the ascent toward the light. Inattentiveness, on the other hand, leads to deviations from the appropriate path as the rebel pursues absolute values. A common thread

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[205]Although Camus uses the term "revolt" in this passage, he is referring to an authentic form of rebellion. He did not make the distinction between rebellion and revolution until he wrote *The Rebel*, and therefore he frequently employed the term "revolt" in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to describe what he would later label "rebellion." Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 54.

in the writings of both Camus and Voegelin is their focus on present reality and the values of human beings who occupy that reality. Both writers frequently dismiss attempts to alter reality in the name of a future that remains uncertain.

Camus remained faithful to the logic of absurdity in his treatment of rebellion. His portrayal of rebellion in *The Plague* was meant to show that the absurdity of existence can be overwhelming, but it is essential for one to remain within the scope of human possibility. Perhaps one may criticize the fact that Camus's concept of rebellion is futile since it is impossible to mitigate the absurd. There is some validity to this criticism; however, there is also hope for brief moments of satisfaction that contain a world of significance for Camus. The possibility of attaining that fulfillment is the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5. FULFILLMENT

Introduction

The third phase of Camus's meditative ascent is very ambiguous. He wrote no philosophical essay outlining the concept of fulfillment as he did for the phases of absurdity and rebellion. Voegelin writes, "The third phase of this meditative progress, from which he hoped to gain the freedom to create . . . was interrupted by his untimely death."[206] Camus was never able to articulate clearly his progression after *The Rebel* partially because he suffered intense writer's block after he was awarded the Nobel Prize. Voegelin speculates that Camus had indeed begun to move past the phase of rebellion into "not morality, but fulfillment. And there is no fulfillment other than that of love, meaning the renunciation of self and dying to the world."[207] This cryptic remark indicates that fulfillment, which is closely associated with love, involves a slightly altruistic impulse and a form of communal consciousness that eclipses the concerns of the individual.

Voegelin suggests that Camus's "new insight gained through love" coincided with the formulation of an ethic. This ethic which Voegelin refers to as a "vision of a cure" emerges after the temptations of revolt have subsided. "Revolt," he writes, "has reached its . . . meridian of thought . . . men deny themselves the right to become gods and thus relinquish the unlimited power to inflict death. The new rule of ethics, the only one . . . which is original today: to learn to live and die, and, in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god."[208] Voegelin's description of this ethic is very similar to Camus's discussion of limits. The "meridian of thought" that Voegelin

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[206]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, pp. 369-70.

[207]Ibid, p. 371.

[208]Ibid, p. 370.

refers to is Camus's discovery that the logic of rebellion necessitates limits. Voegelin ultimately concludes that Camus's meditation was leading him in the direction of "an active life ordered by a loving tension toward the divine ground, a tension in which the autonomous self dissolves."[209]

Voegelin may have been somewhat hasty to argue that Camus moved past rebellion on his way to fulfillment. Camus was careful to distinguish between authentic and historical rebellion; the former is an essential characteristic of life, defining man's relation to the absurd. Because the absurd cannot be reconciled, neither can rebellion. Therefore, it is safe to assume that if Camus achieved a sense of fulfillment, he did so in the process of rebellion. The following discussion considers what exactly fulfillment means for Camus.

Camus and Fulfillment

It is important to establish at the outset that fulfillment for Camus can only signify a worldly type of fulfillment rather than a transcendent appeal for salvation. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he revealed that the absurd is not eternal, but wedded to "man's universe."[210] Fulfillment cannot be reached by any "leaps" because this would amount to evading the absurd. Instead, man must "forge a unity for himself" in the secular world.[211] Camus did not accept the possibility of salvation, and he wrote for those that had to face the absurd without any appeal to grace. In an interview entitled "No, I am not an existentialist," he stated emphatically that he did not believe in God. He continued, "After all, I don't see why I should apologize for being

[209]Ibid, p. 371.

[210]Ibid, p. 35.

[211]Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 41.

interested in those who live outside Grace. It is high time we began concerning ourselves with them, since they are most numerous."[212]

Camus was an atheist; although, he was fascinated with Judeo-Christian symbolism. His writings reveal a deep-seated affinity for the symbols of tradition as well as a deep-seated rejection of immorality and the notion of a higher power. In his notebooks he wrote, "Secret of my universe: imagining God without human immortality."[213] When he was later asked to clarify the meaning of this statement, he replied, "I have a sense of the sacred and I don't believe in a future life, that is all."[214] This comment suggests that Camus considered a spiritual bond with present reality to be more important than faith in God and heaven. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes the ability of art or myth to foster this spiritual bond with the present.

> All that remains is a fate whose outcome alone is fatal. Outside of that single fatality of death, everything, joy or happiness, is liberty. A world remains of which man is the sole master. What bound him was the illusion of another world. The outcome of his thought . . . flowers in images. It frolics—in myths, to be sure, but myths with no other depth than that of human suffering and, like it, inexhaustible. Not the divine fable that amuses and blinds, but the terrestrial face, gesture, and drama in which are summed up a difficult wisdom and an ephemeral passion.[215]

Camus's sensibilities more closely resemble those of paganism than the Christian tradition.

A few passages from Camus's *Notebooks* reveal that he was spiritually disenchanted with the prevailing notions of salvation: faith and reason. Camus considered neither option satisfactory. "We are asked to choose between God and history. Whence this dreadful longing to choose the earth, the world, and trees, if I were not absolutely sure that all mankind does not

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[212]Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, pp. 345-46.

[213]Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 12.

[214]Canus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 364.

[215]Ibid, pp. 117-18.

coincide with history."[216] Refusing to appeal to religious or historical salvation, Camus was inclined to deify the earth itself as the pagans had once done. He clearly thought that Christianity detracted from the importance and beauty of the immanent world. He wrote, "If, to outgrow nihilism, one must turn to Christianity, one may well follow the impulse and outgrow Christianity in Hellenism."[217] Growing up on the Mediterranean rather than on the continent of Europe, Camus idolized the natural beauty of the world. This was a disposition that he held even as a young man. In an essay published in 1938, he wrote, "The world is beautiful, and outside it there is no salvation."[218]

How, then, does one achieve "salvation" inside the world, if at all? For Camus, any worldly salvation from the absurd must be temporary, but that is not to say that these moments of fulfillment are not valuable. In *The Rebel*, Camus described human beings as "estranged citizens of the world, exiled from their own country. Except for vivid moments of *fulfillment*, all reality for them is incomplete."[219] Fulfillment, it seems, is that which completes one's picture of the world. As a young man, Camus recorded his own sense of fulfillment after spending time on the beach in the small village of Tipasa on the Mediterranean coast. "I had performed my task as a man, and the fact that I had known joy for one entire day seemed to me not an exceptional success but the intense fulfillment of a condition which, in certain circumstance, makes it our duty to be happy." [220] Continuing, he described this "intense fulfillment" as a "harmony"

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[216]Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, pp. 120-22.

[217]Ibid, p. 183.

[218]Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 103.

[219]Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 260. Emphasis added.

[220]Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 71.

between him and the world. "No, it was neither I nor the world that counted, but solely the harmony and silence that gave birth to the love between us. A love I was not foolish enough to claim for myself alone, proudly aware that I shared it with a whole human race born of the sun and sea alive and spirited."[221] This harmony which gives rise to fulfillment is not based solely upon the individual's relation to the world, but on the whole of humanity's relation to the world. Perhaps the possibility of this communal harmony can serve as the foundation of an ethic, but before considering this, it is essential to address the relationship between fulfillment and the absurd.

"One does not discover the absurd," Camus wrote, "without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. . . . There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable."[222] Indeed, the brief instances of fulfillment can actually reinforce the absurd because fulfillment is not meant to last. Rather than obfuscate the absurd, fulfillment reminds human beings of their nostalgia for unity, and lucidity informs them that this nostalgia cannot be satisfied. In an essay entitled "Summer in Algiers," Camus wrote, "Everything that exalts life at the same time increases its absurdity. In the Algerian summer I learn that only one thing is more tragic than suffering, and that is the life of a happy man."[223] Once these instances of fulfillment subside, man is drawn again headlong into the absurdity of existence. The "harmony" between man and the world is replaced by the "divorce" that characterizes their interaction as absurd.

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[221]Ibid, p. 72.

[222]Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 122.

[223]Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 91.

The Possibility of an Ethic

Given the ephemeral nature of fulfillment and the frequent reemergence of the absurd, Camus had trouble developing an ethic. Voegelin argues that his insight gained through "love" placed him closer to an understanding of ethics. Love is a recurring theme near the end of his *Notebooks*. He wrote, "One must encounter love before having encountered ethics. Or else one is torn."[224] Camus had developed a loving bond with the human race and the physical world. His purpose in *The Rebel* was to build an ethic based on his insights gained through this love. This entry in his *Notebooks* reveals his intentions:

> My effort: show that the logic of revolt rejects blood and selfish motives. And that the dialogue carried through the absurd gives a chance to purity.—Through compassion? (suffer together)."[225]

Camus's compassion and respect for the common dignity of mankind serve as the foundation of his ethic which he elucidates in the concluding pages of *The Rebel*. "I alone, in one sense, support the common dignity that I cannot allow either myself or others to debase. This individualism is in no sense pleasure; it is perpetual struggle, and sometimes, unparalleled joy when it reaches the height of proud compassion."[226] There is joy, but it always emerges from a struggle. In this sense, Camus's ethic recommends that we share in the struggles of mankind, while being careful not to exacerbate any existing suffering, in an attempt to achieve fulfillment. A passage from the final page of *The Rebel* reinforces this point.

> At this meridian of thought, the rebel thus rejects divinity in order to share in the struggles and destiny of all men. . . . In the light of the earth remains our first and our

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[224]Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 199.

[225]Ibid, p. 125.

[226]Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 297.

> last love. Our brothers are breathing under the same sky as we; justice is a living thing. Now is born a strange joy which helps one live and die, and which we shall never again postpone to a later time.[227]

If there is a divine ground for Camus, it is the community of men that are born from the same earth. This is the light to which he ascends, and it is the foundation of his ethic.

The ethic that Camus formulates at the conclusion of *The Rebel* may not be satisfactory to some because it rests upon relative values, and therefore, it is not certain. In other words, Camus offered no monologue, or propositions to establish a code of ethics. A comment from his *Notebooks* explains his restraint.

> Progress and true nobility lie in the dialogue from man to man and not in the Gospel, a monologue and dictated from the top of a solitary mountain. That's where I stand. What balances the absurd is the community of men fighting against it. And if we choose to serve that community, we choose to serve the dialogue carried to the absurd against any policy of falsehood or of silence.[228]

John Krapp has argued that Camus's aesthetic talents allowed him to pursue ethical questions by establishing a dialogue between competing ethical voices.[229] Camus did indeed develop his ethic in an aesthetic manner.

Fulfillment and Art

Camus's admiration for artistic creation is unmistakable. What is interesting, however, in terms of fulfillment, is the source of the artistic impulse. The desire for unity, that persistent human impulse which longs for solace, is the source of art.

> This passion which lifts the mind above the commonplaces of a dispersed world, from which it nevertheless cannot free itself, is the passion for unity. . . . Religion or crime, every human endeavor in fact, finally obeys this unreasonable desire and claims to give

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[227]Ibid, p. 306.

[228]Camus, *Notebooks*, pp. 125-26.

[229]Krapp, *An Aesthetics of Morality*, p. 73.

> life a form it does not have. The same impulse, which can lead to the adoration of the heavens or the destruction of man, also leads to creative literature, which derives its serious content from this source.[230]

Camus revealed in this passage that crime, religion, and artistic creation are all manifestations of same human impulse to find unity. Crime is an illogical reaction to this impulse; proving this was the purpose of *The Rebel*. Religion, however, satisfies the desire for unity if one is comfortable with the premises. Camus was not. He did not attempt to refute the existence of God in any systematic manner, but simply could not find truth in Christianity. Camus's aversion to religion was not based on political resentment or arrogance; he simply could not honestly accept the Christian form of salvation.

Camus channeled his own desire for unity into artistic creation. He seemed to indicate that artistic creation is a productive expression of the desire for unity because it is necessarily restrained. Speculating on "the advent of creative artists," Camus envisioned a situation in which "refusal and acceptance, the unique and the universal, the individual and history balance each other in a condition of acute tension."[231] This creative "tension" that Camus described is very similar to Voegelin's own metaphorical description of reality. Indeed, he speculates that Camus's progress was leading him to "an active life ordered by a *loving tension* toward the divine ground."[232] Camus thought art had the ability to preserve this tension.

Because Camus did consider art a more worthwhile endeavor than religious devotion or crime, it is prudent to consider the relationship between artistic creation and fulfillment. The criminal and the believer both seek a permanent form of fulfillment; the criminal pursues an

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[230]Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 262.

[231]Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 273.

[232]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 371. Emphasis added.

immanent world of perfect justice, while the believer pursues a transcendent world of eternal salvation. The artist, on the other hand, merely attempts to capture brief instances of fulfillment and recreates them in a meaningful way. Camus wrote, "Art thus leads us back to the origins of rebellion, to the extent that it tries to give its form to an elusive value which the future perpetually promises, but of which the artist has a presentiment and wished to snap from the grasp of history."[233] Art gives form to any hopes of fulfillment, although it does not presume to establish fulfillment in a permanent fashion.

Camus once described artistic creation as a "rejection of the world. But it rejects the world," he wrote, "on account of what it lacks and on account of what it sometimes is."[234] For Camus, the world lacks much indeed. It is devoid of meaning, order, and often, compassion. Nevertheless, the world is also full of value for Camus. He saw potential in individuals and never overlooked the beauty of the physical world. By examining the components of the world that Camus values and those that he rejects, one is in a better position to understand his conception of ethics. The following passage from *The Rebel* highlights the tension in which man exists and establishes the importance of aesthetic concerns in establishing an ethic:

> The procedure of beauty, which is to contest reality while endowing it with unity, is also the procedure of rebellion. Is it possible eternally to reject injustice without ceasing to acclaim the nature of man and the beauty of the world? Our answer is yes. This ethic, at once unsubmissive and loyal, is in any event the only one that lights the way to a truly realistic revolution. In upholding beauty, we prepare the way for the day of regeneration when civilization will give first place—far ahead of the formal principles and degraded values of history—to this living virtue on which is founded the common dignity of man and the world he lives in, and which we must now defend in the face of a world that insults it.[235]

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[233]Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 258.

[234]Ibid, p. 253.

[235]Ibid, pp. 276-77.

Given the emphasis that Camus placed on the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, the presentation of fulfillment in his fictional works is worthy of attention. An examination of these works will help reveal how he was able to establish this "living virtue" and found upon it the dignity of man.

Exile and the Kingdom

In his collection of short stories, *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus used symbols in the midst of narrative to explore the nature of the absurd and fulfillment. This much is evident in the title of the work. Exile is the sensation that corresponds to the absurdity of existence, and the kingdom is that which promises to conquer the absurd and put an end to exile. Each short story depicts a seemingly absurd situation ranging from imprisonment and torture to a simple failure in communication. In this work, Camus showed that the absurd takes many forms. The absurd is perhaps more noticeable in cases of calamity, such as in *The Plague*, but in *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus showed that the mundane interactions of everyday life are part of the absurd and can foster feelings of exile. In the first five stories of this work, exile coincides with a sensation of longing and impotence. For example, these stories depict a woman dissatisfied with her marriage, a schoolteacher who is unable to help a prisoner, an artist who is unable to paint, and a priest who is tortured and converted to worshipping a tribal Fetish. These characters are helpless to alleviate their own exile, although, they can conceive of a "kingdom" in which their suffering will cease. At the conclusion of the work, Camus hints that a kingdom may be attainable, but the nature of this kingdom, and the means of arriving there are the most interesting features.

In *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus showed that exile is often experienced solitarily, but that we are not alone in this sensation. There is a common level on which exile reaches all of

mankind. On this level communication is possible and the burden of exile can be shared. This was the lesson of the final short story in the collection, “The Growing Stone.” The primary character, D’Arrast, an engineer traveling to the Brazilian jungle town of Iguape to build a jetty, harbors a secret anguish and gives the impression that he has come to Brazil to distance himself from the past. While on his trip, he encounters a ship’s cook who would redeem him from his exile. The ship’s cook tells D’Arrast that he was once on a ship that caught fire, and he was stranded out at sea without a life boat. He made a promise to Jesus that if saved, he would carry a hundred-pound stone in a procession to the church during the Iguape celebration. However, on the day of the procession, the ship’s cook is weary, stumbling, and cannot carry the rock all the way to the church. He looks up to D’Arrast with a tear stained face, devastated that he could not keep his promise to Jesus. At this moment, D’Arrast lifts the stone himself and begins to carry it.

The stone is not D’Arrast’s burden; it was not he who promised. Indeed, D’Arrast is not a religious person. Still, he recognizes the suffering of the ship’s cook—a man he has only recently met—and shares it. After lifting the stone, D’Arrast proceeds to the church, but then turns in the direction of the huts where the poor live. He finally reaches the cook’s hut and throws the stone in the center of the fire. D’Arrast then rests in the hut where he felt somewhat unwelcome the previous night. The crowd of people arrives and the cook’s brother says, “Sit down with us.”[236] D’Arrast’s compassion earns him a place with the people of Iguape. He is no longer an exile, an outsider. As the cook’s family is sitting around the stone, D’Arrast experiences true fulfillment:

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[236]Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 213.

> They were squatting in a silent circle around the stone. No sound but the murmur of the river reached them through the heavy air. Standing in the darkness, D'Arrast listened without seeing anything, and the sound of the waters filled him with a tumultuous happiness. With eyes closed, he joyfully acclaimed his own strength; he acclaimed, once again, a fresh beginning in life.[237]

The "kingdom" that Camus presented in this story has identifiable qualities. D'Arrast experiences fulfillment in the knowledge that he is at one with his fellow man. He forges this bond by bearing the burden of another, and by doing so, gains the possibility of beginning life anew. Also, in a gesture of unmistakable symbolism, D'Arrast turns away from the church and towards the village of huts. He turns away from God and towards the people. Rather than drop the stone at the church, D'Arrast enters the cook's hut and drops it on the hearth. The growing stone that was to serve as a tribute to Christ is placed instead on the fire. D'Arrast uses it as a tribute to life.

The Struggle for Fulfillment in *The Plague*

In Camus's meditative journey, the stage of fulfillment is meant to show that some solace can be achieved by resisting the absurd. In *The Rebel*, Camus argued that rebellion is necessary because it is a logical reaction to the absurd, but can one form a rule of life based solely on consistent logic? In *The Plague*, Camus showed that rebellion is not completely futile, and there are instances of life that are worthy of resistance.

Throughout the entire novel, Dr. Rieux never ceases to struggle. Even at the end, once he has lost his wife and best friend, Rieux still must make his medical rounds. For Rieux, these rounds contain a "certitude" that gives him purpose.[238] In fact, Rieux finds solace at the end of his days when he returns home to see his mother. This moment is very similar to Sisyphus's

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[237]Ibid, p. 212.

[238]Camus, *The Plague*, p. 41.

sense of fulfillment when he descends from his mountain. Camus uses the symbol of a mother's love to communicate the usefulness of Rieux's struggle. "[S]omething always changed in his mother's face when he came in. The silent resignation that a laborious life had given it seemed to light up with a sudden glow."[239] The look of approval and adoration on his mother's face tells Rieux that there is some value in the world for which to fight.

The struggle for fulfillment in *The Plague* is not predominantly individual, but collective. Cottard is an example of one who struggles solely for his own fulfillment and finds no answer. His resistance is not only selfish, but lonely. Rieux, Tarrou, and the aspiring writer Joseph Grand, on the other hand, are concerned with helping others, and they do so together. They forge a sturdy friendship while working side by side in the sanitary squads. Tarrou and Rieux even begin to help Grand in his writing. "They began to take a genuine interest in the laborious literary task to which he was applying himself while the plague raged above him. Indeed, they, too, found it a relaxation of the strain."[240] These three friends do not undertake sanitation duties in order to cure, but in order to share in the struggle for life and against death. Rieux realizes this at the end of the novel: "[H]e has deliberately taken the victims' side and tried to share with his fellow citizens the only certitudes they had in common—love, exile, and suffering. Thus he can truly say there was not one of their anxieties in which he did not share, no predicament of theirs that was not his."[241]

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[239]Ibid, p. 122.

[240]Ibid, p. 134.

[241]Ibid, pp. 301-02.

The Substance of Fulfillment in *The Plague*

Camus suggested that rebellion against the absurd could lead to fulfillment, but he also gave hints as to the content of that fulfillment. It is not the actualization of total justice or the abolition of suffering; rather, fulfillment lies in small victories over suffering and the everyday joys of life that afford the opportunity of happiness. Tarrou is a character who appreciates the immediacy of these pleasures. Rieux observes that Tarrou is "fond of swimming," "good-humored," and "an addict of small pleasures without being their slave."[242] Having once been an advocate of absolute justice, Tarrou realizes that human happiness gives substance to the life for which he fights. For this reason, he suggests to Rieux that they go for a swim and take time away from the sanitary squads for the sake of friendship. "Of course, a man should fight for the victims," he comments to Rieux, "but if he ceases caring for anything outside that, what's the use of his fighting?"[243]

Tarrou reminds Rieux that their struggle is taken up in the name of present life. This is one message that Camus was trying to convey in *The Plague*. Voegelin's insight is particularly useful in this respect. He argues that Camus had begun to arrive at "the joy of the here and now."[244] This joy is not only the substance of fulfillment; it is the substance of life. It is in the name of this joy that one must resist the absurd. Rieux resists because he feels obligated to "the society of the living."[245] A "concrete illustration" of this, he reveals, is "sea-bathing"—one of Camus's favorite activities.

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[242]Ibid, p. 24.

[243]Ibid, p. 256.

[244]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 388.

[245]Camus, *The Plague*, p. 172.

The sanitary squads in *The Plague* could perhaps serve as a metaphor for any resistance movement that claims to fight in the name of human life, but Camus revealed that the cause of resistance should be more personal than abstract. For example, Rieux's duty as a doctor is to enforce the quarantine in order to minimize the transmission of the plague microbe. Still, he chooses to help Rambert escape. After warning Rambert to hurry, "Rieux noticed that for the first time since the outbreak of plague, he was smiling."[246] When Rambert asks the doctor why he has not tried to stop him, Rieux replies with a smile, "Perhaps because I, too, would like to do my bit for happiness."[247] Although Rieux has committed to fighting the plague, his allegiance to the resistance has not eclipsed his allegiance to mankind.

Besides happiness, human beings also have the potential for love. This is yet another element in *The Plague* that adds a personal or concrete component to the resistance. In one of the most heated exchanges of the novel, Rambert explains his initial decision to leave Oran: "Well, personally, I've seen enough of people who die for an idea. I don't believe in heroism; I know it's easy and I've learned it can be murderous. What interests me is living and dying for what one loves."[248] From Rambert's perspective, the sanitary squads treat people as abstract entities; in other words, they fight for an idea. In his own case, the bureaucracy has not considered his own special needs and the importance of love. Rieux reminds Rambet that man is not an idea, and Rambert retorts, "Man *is* an idea, and a precious small idea, once he turns his back on love."[249]

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[246]Ibid, p. 204.

[247]Ibid.

[248]Ibid, p. 162.

[249]Ibid, pp. 162-63.

Voegelin argues that Camus gained new insight through love. Taken in the context of fulfillment, this is quite accurate, and traces of this insight are present in *The Plague*. As Rieux walks through the streets of Oran after the quarantine has been lifted, he observes the celebration taking place and ponders its significance. This touching description is worth quoting at length.

> Yes, they had suffered together, in body no less than in soul, from a cruel leisure, exile without redress . . . [A]lways a great voice had been ringing in the ears of these forlorn, panicked people, a voice calling them back to the land of their desire, a homeland. It lay outside the walls of the stifled, strangled town, in the fragrant brushwood of the hills, in the waves of the sea, under the free skies, and in the custody of love. . . . As to what that exile and that longing for reunion meant, Rieux had no idea. . . . [H]e was thinking it has no importance whether such things have or have not a meaning; all we need consider is the answer given to men's hope.[250]

This is the fulfillment that Camus considered important. It is the fulfillment of hope, but hope, of course, must be realistic. Hoping for a world that is not absurd is fanciful; whereas, hoping for love is more realistic and within the realm of possibility. The citizens of Oran fully understand this lesson. "They knew that if there is one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes attain, it is human love. But for those who aspired beyond and above the human individual toward something they could not even imagine, there had been no answer."[251]

Dr. Rieux finds his own fulfillment at the conclusion of the novel, despite suffering terribly from the personal losses of Tarrou and his wife. Like D'Arrast in "The Growing Stone," Rieux alleviates his burden by sharing the burden of others. At the end of the novel, he observes the town from a rooftop terrace and feels completely at one with the townspeople with whom he had fought and suffered.

> The noises of the town were still beating like waves at the foot of the long line of terraces, but tonight they told not of revolt, but of deliverance. . . . [I]t was on this level,

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[250]Ibid, pp. 299-300.

[251]Ibid, p. 300.

> beyond all grief, that Rieux could feel himself at one with them. And it was in the midst of shouts rolling against the terrace wall . . . that Dr. Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who held his peace but should bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in times of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.[252]

Camus made it abundantly clear in *The Plague* that fulfillment is not only substantively limited, but also temporally limited. It is not meant to last. Another way of stating this is to say that the absurd cannot be abolished and will constantly reemerge. As Tarrou put it, "What's natural is the microbe."[253] The plague is a metaphor for the reoccurring absurdity of existence. Perhaps this is why Camus chose to end the novel in a tone that is somber but lucid:

> And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.[254]

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is necessary to establish the significance of fulfillment for Camus's meditative ascent. Voegelin argues that toward the end of the meditation, Camus's "existential mood" changes. "When the futuristic alienation from the present subsides, the joy of the here and now of existence begins stirring again."[255] When taken in comparison to the phases of absurdity and rebellion, the phase of fulfillment does seem more positive in nature. Rather than

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[252]Ibid, p. 308.

[253]Ibid, p. 253.

[254]Ibid, p. 308.

[255]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 388.

establishing what is missing from life, Camus realized in this phase that there is an answer to men's hope. The love and happiness that one experiences—even if only briefly—is enough to derive some hope from a life of rebellion against the absurd.

Hope, as a sensation, is parallel to the human desire for unity. Camus did not consider religion to be a satisfactory answer to hope, and therefore, it is not a viable path to fulfillment. Art, on the other hand, is a fruitful source of fulfillment because the artist can capture, symbolize, and create intelligible instances of fulfillment. By describing a beautiful landscape, or the love between a young couple, the artist implicitly glorifies the "here and now of existence." In *The Plague*, Camus gave significance to the loving bond between human beings by placing them in a situation of mutual suffering and resistance. Moreover, by creating a story of mutual suffering and love, Camus acclaimed the common dignity of mankind. *The Plague* is particularly inspiring in this respect. It would be fair to conclude that affirming the common dignity of man was the main purpose of the novel. Camus achieved this purpose by using his special gifts as an artist, and showing that a common bond between men is a beautiful, harmonious thing. This is at once an ethic and an aesthetic construction. In *The Plague*, these two dimensions complement each other seamlessly.

Essentially, fulfillment is not a final destination of Camus's meditative journey. It is, more appropriately, a convenient stopping point. Fulfillment may offer some respite, but the true nature of existence for Camus is a struggle against the absurd. For this reason, fulfillment reinforces the absurd. The experience of love makes abandonment more acute, for example. The absurd, likewise, reinforces the fulfillment to be gained from everyday life. This is the reason that Camus considers Sisyphus to be happy. The knowledge that he could never evade his punishment causes Sisyphus to be more appreciative of the seemingly insignificant details of

his life. Absurdity and fulfillment are inextricably linked in terms of Camus's meditation, and rebellion is the act that mediates between them.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

The Structure of the *Periagoge*

The preceding discussion of Camus's meditation shows that Voegelin's taxonomy is significant, but perhaps in a different sense than Voegelin intended. Voegelin describes Camus's meditation as a linear ascent in which he turns away from the depths of existence and ascends to the heights of truth. That higher truth is an appreciation of present reality. In Camus's works, however, the progressive turn is not linear, but cyclical. Camus did not explain this cycle in any systematic manner, but he did address it aesthetically.

Despite the remarkable insight into the thought of Camus that Voegelin offers, the structural description of Camus's meditation is somewhat limited. Voegelin implies that Camus systematically progressed through three mutually exclusive "phases" in a linear fashion. He also argues that Camus had a "goal toward which he was moving."[256] Unlike the philosopher in Plato's cave, however, Camus could not ascend beyond the experience of absurdity, "the depths of reality."[257] He actually made a conscious effort to remain within those depths and share the burden of others. A fundamental aspect of Camus's thought, however, is the assumption that the absurd cannot be reconciled. Therefore, Camus did not truly ascend from the depths of existence to a vision of the Agathon. Instead, he remained within the depths of the absurd and sought a foundation of values within these depths.

Voegelin admires Camus's development in the second phase, especially because of his ability to steer clear of "substitute realities," but Voegelin overlooks the passion that lies at the heart of rebellion. He writes that Camus "accepts that the uncertainty concerning the meaning of

[256]Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 370.

[257]Ibid, p. 369.

existence has to be endured."[258] This is a significant deviation from Camus's description of rebellion in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. Camus argues that the absurd is a fact, but an abhorrent fact. It cannot be accepted, only acknowledged. Once it is acknowledged, however, the absurd necessitates rebellion insofar as it is detestable to man. This, it must be mentioned, is a crucial distinction between Camus and Voegelin. Voegelin argues that if a person "rebels against the [divine] ground," that person "loses contact with reality."[259] Camus, on the other hand, insisted that human existence was fundamentally absurd, and therefore, one can be an authentic rebel without losing contact with reality. Dr. Rieux, from *The Plague* denies God's existence, but one can hardly accuse Rieux of being divorced from reality. His authentic rebellion is rather a sign of lucidity because he continuously recognizes the absurdity of existence. Only when lucidity fails, and the possibility of escaping the absurd is considered does the rebel lose contact with reality.

The third phase of Camus's meditation, fulfillment, is nicely approximated by Voegelin. However, this phase of Camus's meditation could not serve as a final stopping point or a goal, as Voegelin seems to suggest. He writes that Camus's progress was leading him toward a "loving tension toward the divine ground."[260] If the divine ground is taken to mean the community of men, this statement is quite accurate, but if the divine ground is taken as a metaphysical source of existence, the statement is misguided. Camus did reveal an appreciation of the present, but this does not mean that he could abandon the absurd in the name of a metaphysical foundation. Rather, the appreciation of the present that emerges during the phase of fulfillment is also a

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[258]Ibid.

[259]Ibid, p. 368.

[260]Ibid, p. 371.

symptom of the absurd. Camus considered life and existence to be absurd. In such an absurd existence, the act of living is a form of rebellion. Each moment, therefore, when one can appreciate the normal pleasures of everyday life, is a moment of fulfillment. This fulfillment is amplified with the advent of absurdist consciousness and the realization that present experience is the only value. Voegelin made a similar argument in *Anamnesis*: "There is no other reality than the one we experience."[261]

The purpose here is not to criticize Voegelin's examination of Camus. Voegelin's taxonomy is useful, but not entirely sufficient to understand Camus's meditation. The preceding sections have shown that absurdity is an irrevocable characteristic of human existence. Camus described the absurd as a "divorce" between the world and the nostalgic human.[262] This divorce is the common existential condition of all humans, and human life is a continuous rebellion against the divorce in the name of unity. Camus also speaks of "intense fulfillment" and a "harmony" between humans and the world.[263] This harmony exists along side the absurd; it does not obviate it. Camus realized that life moves in both directions: fulfillment and absurdity, harmony and divorce. This is the true structure of his meditation. It is not rigid and sequential, but fluid and spontaneous. The absurd can arise unexpectedly, as can the harmony of fulfillment. This is clearly evident in *The Plague*; the joy and compassion experienced in the struggle is perhaps more surprising than the onset of the plague.

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[261]Ibid, p. 368.

[262]Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 100.

[263]Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, pp. 71-72.

The Substance and Foundation of Values

Finally the discussion reverts back to the original question posed in this study. Does Camus clearly identify life affirming values to combat the destructive influence of nihilism? The argument here is that he did identify these values and their foundation, but he did so with an aesthetic approach using symbols in the context of narrative. Near the conclusion of *The Rebel*, Camus mentions an ethic while claiming that he wanted to establish "the common dignity of man and the world he lives in." This common dignity is to be founded upon the "living virtue" of "beauty."[264] Writing on Plotinus in his doctoral dissertation, he observed, "If things are intelligible, it is because things are beautiful."[265] Taking a lesson from Plotinus, Camus was attempting to use aesthetics rather than reason, art rather than philosophy, in order to establish the common dignity of man. Voegelin's structural taxonomy helps one to understand how. If one views Camus's meditation as a constant flux between harmony and divorce, one is in a better position to understand the aesthetic nature of Camus's meditation. This imagery indicates that fulfillment, a harmonious bond between men and the world, is a vision of unity or beauty. Camus's meditation shows the path to recapturing this beauty while insisting that it cannot last forever. Camus achieved this delicate balance in his novels by giving human life a style. Eubanks and Petrakis argue that Camus's style is similar to the Greek concept of "*sophron*" or "moderation."[266] In his essay, "Helen's Exile," Camus praised the Greeks while criticizing Western European culture:

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[264]Camus, *The Rebel*, pp. 276-77.

[265]Joseph McBride, *Albert Camus: Philosopher and Litterateur* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 126.

[266]Eubanks and Petrakis, "Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," p. 307.

> We have exiled beauty; the Greeks took up arms for it. A basic difference—but one that goes far back. Greek thought was always based on the idea of limits. Nothing was carried to extremes, neither religion nor reason, because Greek thought denied nothing, neither reason nor religion. It gave everything its share, balancing light with shade.[267]

This style of moderation allowed Camus to imbue his novels with harmonious images of fulfillment without settling the divorce that accompanies the absurd.

Camus's meditation, as it is revealed in *The Plague*, allows one to trace his symbolic development of values. When the quarantine takes effect and town gates close, absurdity is established as the common condition of all. The image of death, which pervades the novel, is a poignant representation of the absurd. For example, the death of M. Othon's child in *The Plague* is nonsensical. Camus presented this image to illustrate, not to describe, the incomprehensible and absurd nature of death. Camus also used the symbol of pathos to communicate the anguish and exile that accompanies the absurd. As the citizens of Oran are faced with the absurd, they become aware that all are "in the same boat"[268] The awareness of the absurd coincides with a recognition that all must face the absurd collectively. Camus revealed that rebellion against the absurd must remain focused on the immediacy of the situation. The citizens of Oran learn that human action is fundamentally limited in its ability to alleviate the absurdity of existence. Dr. Rieux provides a lasting image of such limited rebellion. Petrakis and Eubanks argue that Rieux is a symbol of not only rebellion, but of "authentic political action. Dr. Rieux personifies the concrete, immanent struggle against human suffering, which is intuitive as well as rational and which, by awakening a community of resistance against injustice, transcends subjectivity."[269]

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[267] Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, pp. 148-49.

[268] Camus, *The Plague*, p. 195.

[269] Petrakis and Eubanks, *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns*, p. 178.

Rieux shows that any lucid acts of rebellion must be conducted in the name of present life that holds the promise of fulfillment. Such fulfillment arises from an appreciation of present reality that is reinforced by the existence of the absurd. In this sense, the absurd and fulfillment are not opposing forces, but complementary forces.

The absurd convinces us that nothing can substitute for lived experience, even if that experience is one of shared suffering. For some, Camus's philosophy of fulfillment is too limited, too pessimistic. This, however, is precisely the lesson to be gained from Camus's meditation. He realized that his contemporaries embraced values without considering the metaphysical constructs that support those values. Because Camus could not identify a metaphysical foundation outside of lived experience, he focused on small victories over the absurd. It is on this level of shared suffering that friendship, love and compassion—values that uphold life—can be fostered.

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