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**Camusian Thoughts About The Ultimate Question Of Life**

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## **Camusian Thoughts About The Ultimate Question Of Life**

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### **§1. Introduction**

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams, Deep Thought (a supercomputer) spends some time in deep thought about the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything. Indeed, after millions of years, Deep Thought finally provides the answer. The “answer” is 42. (This is reminiscent of Stephen Hawking’s “answer”: M-theory.)

Albert Camus (1913-1960) claims not to have definitive answers to the ultimate questions of life but instead wants to engage in genuine dialogue with the reader. (I use the present tense because his time, “an age of absurdity”, remains our time, as I will explain below.) In his view, one may choose to attempt to learn and advance – instead of dangerously leaping to premature certainty. (In an age of absurdity, leaping to premature certainty or engaging in other irrational behavior is a great temptation.) He says that for him the reasonable approach is to admit uncertainty while simultaneously attempting to live his life with integrity (authenticity). Camus admits uncertainty about ultimate questions – but also notes that at a given point in time some things will seem to him more reasonable or less reasonable than other things. Camus argues for, or paints pictures of, what seems reasonable to him; the reader may look at the pictures and agree or disagree.

Although Camus saw himself primarily as a creative artist in the form of writer, rather than professional philosopher, I will in

this paper focus primarily on what are generally recognized as his two major philosophical works: *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. According to Camus, these two works may be identified with the two stages of his intellectual development. Unfortunately, he died (“absurdly”) at the age of 46 (after only two years as a young Nobel Laureate), so we have no stage three in his development. At the age of 17, however, he had already encountered one of his numerous bouts of tuberculosis; at the time there was little treatment available and he thought he was then going to die.

## §2. Our Absurd Time <sup>1</sup>

Camus said he lived in a time of absurdity. Above I claimed we still live there. Before exploring Camus further, I will now defend the notion that our age – the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond – is (continues to be) a time of absurdity. (Indeed, our attempts at problem solving sometimes cause absurdity.) As explained below, the following sets of historical events suggest to me that our age is both absurd and unprecedented:

- World Wars One And Two
- Events Between The Wars And After The Wars
- 20<sup>th</sup> Century Developments In Science
- 20<sup>th</sup> Century Developments In Mathematics
- 20<sup>th</sup> Century Developments In Psychology
- The Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Modernist Movement
- 20<sup>th</sup> Century Existential Literature And Absurd Drama
- The 20<sup>th</sup> And 21<sup>st</sup> Century Postmodernist Movements

### World Wars One And Two

Many of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century believed that human progress was inevitable. This included, for example, belief that, over time, wars would decrease in intensity, scope, and duration. Indeed, perhaps western civilization had already devised a continental system guaranteeing nothing more severe than limited battles or small wars between European nations.

## [World War One (1914-1918)]

The war that began in 1914 only gradually turned into a great “World War.” The war started in an almost careless mood with full-dress parades. But World War One proved to be larger than any previous war in European history.

Approximately 74 million were mobilized by all sides in the “Great War.” The war was also unprecedented in another respect: This war involved entire societies, not merely soldiers. The concept of “total war” was born.

World War One resulted in the collapse of traditional empires, and, from the wreckage, new nations arose. Moreover, to Europe’s further embarrassment, it appeared Europe had been unable to settle its own affairs (end the long war) without intervention from the New World (the USA). Europe and the west no longer seemed worthy as the leading edge of world progress, leadership, and perfection.

## [World War Two (1939-1945)]

“The war to end all wars” failed too in that a Second World War began in 1939. The war of 1939, far more than the war of 1914, was a **world** war. (Thus, it seems progress is **not** inevitable.)

## Events Between The Wars And After The Wars

The “**Roaring Twenties**” (1920s) were called “roaring” because of the exuberant, freewheeling popular culture of the decade following World War One. The Roaring Twenties were a time when many people indulged in new or illegal styles of dancing, dressing, and behavior, and rejected many traditional moral standards. This decade is also known in the United States as the “**Jazz Age**,” marked by increased popularity of (“wild”) jazz (music), and by attacks on convention in many areas of American life. Many Americans defied Prohibition (the outlawing of alcoholic beverages nationwide from 1920 to 1933). The

nickname “flappers” was given to young women in the 1920s who defied convention by their dress and by such behavior as drinking and smoking in public.

Throughout the 1930s there was a “**Great Depression**,” a worldwide economic crisis that continued into World War Two. Indeed, World War Two and its aftermath left the world in an unprecedented crisis situation. The attempted genocide of the Jews, the large scale death camps (gas chambers), and the use of the atomic bomb in World War Two raised terrifying questions about the extreme possibilities of human inhumanity.

There were Germans who listened to their Bach or read their Goethe after a day's work at the gas chambers (death camps). The Americans not only initiated development of the Manhattan Project, but actually authorized use of the atomic bomb – using atomic mass death and destruction not against military targets, but against cities of civilians. Indeed, the possibility of instant extermination through nuclear war or weapons of mass death and destruction makes many traditional values and conventions seem obsolete.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century Developments In Science

In addition to nuclear weapons, additional science related developments radically altered our views of the universe and of ourselves. The atomic bomb was a kind of “test” (so to speak) of some of the ideas of Albert Einstein. With Einstein’s new physics the dividing line between mass and energy was now far from clear. His theory of relativity says that space, time, and motion are not absolute (as Newton had assumed), but relative to the observer.

Previously, the intelligent layperson could read and understand the great thinkers like Newton and Darwin. But the thoughts of Einstein and other scientists were now only available to specialized experts. Moreover, the new physics seemed to postulate a world without continuity or absolutes, a world in which nothing was certain. A world in which scientific laws are given names like “relativity” (Einstein) or "indeterminacy"/“uncertainty”

(Werner Heisenberg) is a world in which nothing is as it appears to be to the human senses.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century Developments In Mathematics

If physical reality itself is inherently "relative" and "indeterminate" or "uncertain," then surely we can at least depend on mathematics ("the language of the sciences") to give us nonabsurdity and certainty? But the work of Kurt Gödel and others in the 20<sup>th</sup> century showed that even mathematics is less secure and dependable than had been assumed. Gödel, often cited as the greatest logician of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is credited with proving two theorems that must be bad news for anyone wanting to construct a theory that will tell the whole truth.

Gödel's First Incompleteness Theorem states that for any consistent logical system able to express arithmetic, there must be true sentences within the system that are undecidable (cannot be proved true) within the system. Gödel's Second Incompleteness Theorem states that no such (consistent) system can prove its own consistency. The moral of the two incompleteness theorems would seem to be that truth inevitably outstrips formal provability.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century Developments In Psychology

Foremost in upsetting traditional notions about human nature was the work of Sigmund Freud. The new psychology proclaimed that it is not unusual for humans to engage in **self-deception**. Freud's theories that our actions and behavior are rooted in our **unconscious**, rather than in our conscious mind, seemed to many a highly **pessimistic** view of human nature. Freudian influences, including the idea of sexual repression, can be found throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century art and literature. Human nature, reason, and logic are apparently far more dark and fallible than had been thought possible.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century west experienced a radical questioning of past traditions. For example, the western cultural roots of Greek-Roman "Reason", Hebrew-Christian "Religion", and Modern-Progressive "Science" were no longer believable

traditions or were of highly uncertain value. It seems neither Reason nor Religion nor Science provided a sure path out of the absurd wilderness.

### The Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Modernist Movement

Even in the very early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it seemed to a number of western artists and intellectuals that the 20<sup>th</sup> century had broken, in a new and radical way, with previous tradition. A radical break in the western arts became evident with a series of new styles that can all be loosely grouped under the name “**modernism.**” (Many “isms” may be grouped under “modernism.” Modernism is the philosophy and practices of “modern art” – especially a self-conscious break with the past and a search for new forms of expression.)

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century west we find:

- Desire for sexual freedom
- Demand for greater freedom for women
- Motion pictures
- Jazz music expressed the fast, frantic, free way of life of the “Roaring Twenties” (1920s)
- Life was speeding up and changing
- The city of Paris (France) was the place to go to exchange ideas and create the new

Almost every serious artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century felt the necessity either to react against modernism or to build on its innovations. Most of the great “modernist” writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century spent some time living in Paris (France). A few of the “modernist” literary/artistic “isms” include:

- **Dadaism** is based on deliberate irrationality and negation of traditional artistic values; seeks the fantastic and absurd; life is random and uncontrolled.
- **Surrealism** is related to dadaism; heightened awareness of the conflict between the rational and irrational; produces dreamlike, fantastic, or incongruous imagery or effects. (Two

artistic examples: Salvador Dali, painter; Jean Cocteau, filmmaker.)

- **Expressionism** seeks to depict the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse in the artist; German expressionists expressed the deep, hidden drives of human beings – modern society alienates the individual.
- **Futurism**, initiated in Italy about 1909, sought to give formal expression to the dynamic energy and movement of mechanical processes.

In some ways the popular American writer Ernest Hemingway was an "atypical" modernist. In general, modernist writers and artists experienced a rift between artist and public. The lack of contact with a public, except for a small group of fellow intellectuals, gives the writer or artist greater freedom to experiment but also encourages esotericism.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century Existential Literature And Absurd Drama

The temper of our time is a mixture of anticipation and anxiety, optimism and pessimism. The philosophy of existentialism illustrates this blend of hope and despair. "Existentialism" is said to have been "founded" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – but its popularity dates from the period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's World Wars. The Theater of the Absurd represents an extension of existentialist philosophy and literature into drama in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Also note that we identify utopian literature with the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, back to Thomas More – while we identify dystopian literature and dystopian movies with the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.)

[Existentialism]

For the existentialist, it is the individual person, not the abstract concept of person or humanity, that constitutes true reality. The individual is a **stranger** or an **outsider** in an alien, hostile world. Such loneliness is seen as a call to action and free choice. Two of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's leading existentialists were Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960). (Please note that many or most such intellectuals we call existentialists



today claimed not to be existentialists. This “no” includes Camus but not the existentialist Sartre.)

In his novel **The Stranger** (or **The Outsider**), and in his philosophic essay **The Myth of Sisyphus**, Camus demonstrates his concept of the “absurd” – the fundamental meaninglessness of human life and traditional beliefs. As Camus said in **The Myth of Sisyphus**: “A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.” [pp.4-5] Thus individuals must create their own morality, their own way of resisting or rebelling against the “absurd.”

[The Theater of the Absurd]

Beginning in the 1950s, some dramatists came to experience, as had the dramatist Albert Camus, a profound sense of absurdity. For example, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and others shared a pessimistic vision of humanity struggling to find a purpose and to control its fate. Absurdist playwrights did away with the logical structures of traditional theater. The busyness of the characters underscores the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. The ridiculous purposeless behavior and talk of the characters give the plays a sometimes dazzling comic surface, but there is an underlying serious message of metaphysical distress.

### The 20<sup>th</sup> And 21<sup>st</sup> Century Postmodernist Movements

The contemporary historical period I have called “an age of absurdity” is sometimes characterized as “a time of discontinuities, pluralities/diversities, absurdities, and uncertainties”. Sometimes it is called “post-modernist” or “postmodern.” But there are at least two additional ways these terms (“post-modernist”; “postmodern”) are sometimes used: In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, two drastically different sets of artistic-literary movements were each given the same name: “post-

modernist” or “postmodern.” One of the two sets of movements may be characterized as a reaction against the Modernist artistic-literary movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Post-modernist or postmodern in this case means revival of traditional artistic-literary elements and techniques.

But the second set of artistic-literary movements may be seen as an intensification or yet further evolution of Modernism. In this case the post-modernist or postmodern perspective goes beyond Modernism’s aspiration to (a new) unity. The search for unity has been abandoned in favor of pluralities/diversities of styles and interpretations.

Thus no single cultural tradition or mode of thought can serve as a **metanarrative** (a universal voice, or totalizing story, for all human experience). Jean-Francois Lyotard defines **The Postmodern Condition** as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” Incredulity does not mean disbelief – it means **inability** to believe.

The Modernists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century felt exiled, like outsiders or strangers, and sought a new unity that they, and perhaps all persons, could believe in. But today many postmodernists **celebrate** incredulity as a liberating, humanizing force. They hear a new key: For them, pluralities of voice are beautiful, not terrifying.

Does this great celebration celebrate uncertainty? According to my Camusian-inspired interpretation, it **does**. Does this great celebration celebrate absurdity? According to my Camusian-inspired interpretation, it does **not**. Does the great celebration embrace anti-absurdity? According to my Camusian-inspired interpretation, it embraces absurdity for the purpose of rebelling against it and giving each person their due. A life of celebration and multiple flourishing is not without its values. Its values are those associated with celebration or flourishing and with resisting or rebelling against the “absurdity” of anti-celebration and anti-flourishing. Arguably, the celebratory kind of incredulity involved here is neither totalizing, absolute, nor nihilistic.

### §3. Camus And Absurdity: *The Myth Of Sisyphus* ("Is my life worth living?")

So how do we make the transition from an absurd here and an uncertain now – to a vital world of celebration and multiple flourishing? Perhaps nourishing a certain kind of uncertainty and of celebration may help transform an absurd uncertain universe into a flourishing uncertain multiverse. Voltaire wrote to Frederick the Great in 1767: "Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is an absurd one."

In our history of learning to advance toward dialogue and friendship, we should know by now that one's fundamental beliefs should be held tentatively rather than absolutely. Socrates is said to have been the world's wisest person because he knew that he did not know with certainty, whereas everyone else was certain. Yet Socrates was committed to dialogue and friendship even at the risk of his very life.

Let us now proceed to dialogue with our friend Albert Camus. We will begin at the beginning by asking with Camus, in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "Is my life worth living?" If one convincingly feels that neither Reason nor Religion nor Science are traditions that provide a sure path out of the absurd wilderness, then must one conclude that one's life has no meaning and is not worth living?

In a 1955 Preface to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus tells us that he wrote it in 1940 (during World War Two) and that he has "progressed beyond several of the positions which are set down here;" [perhaps referring to *The Rebel?*]. He continues: "but I have remained faithful, it seems to me, to the exigency [absurdity?] which prompted them."

#### Part One Of Five Parts Is Entitled: An Absurd Reasoning

I gather that Camus is suggesting that Reason (as in philosophy), Religion (as in Christianity), and Science (as in physics or psychology) are but games compared to the more serious question: "Judging whether life is or not worth living."

[p.1] Accordingly, judging “whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards.” [p.2]

The man who committed suicide had lost his daughter years earlier and had never gotten over it. Her loss had “‘undermined’ him. A more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined.” [p.3] On the other hand, the non-suicides “continue making gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit.” [p.4] (Camus notes that humans learn to breathe before they learn to think.)

Can one live without the eternal or certain values sponsored by Tradition/Authority (Reason; Religion; Science)? Contrary to what authority/tradition (the philosopher or theologian or scientist) may say, an autonomous Camus is able to begin with absurdity without ending there. Camus says that choosing for or against suicide forgets the third option: One can choose to continue questioning instead of ending it with a premature YES or NO. Instead of taking an “either-or” or “all or nothing” approach, why not choose the middle ground of autonomy? Camus fights passionately against the absurdity of death from the (“Mediterranean”) position of cool moderation instead of extreme certainty. (Camus’ Algeria, as had Golden Greece, bordered on the Mediterranean sea.)

Thus perpetual questioning leads one [Camus] to say NO to mortality. Many of those who say NO to suicide, however, act as if they said YES. Instead of choosing the anti-death moderation of autonomy, they choose the supposed immortality or certainty of a Tradition/Authority (Reason or Religion or Science as an ideology or way of life). They are the living dead.

So there are the dead and there are the living dead. Camus takes the third way, that of individual autonomy. One does not have to know that The Ultimate Answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything is “63” or “42” (here the living dead have their lively, sometimes deadly, disagreements) in order to value autonomous living. (As for the literal dead, it seems that those of the dead who took an autonomous or anti-death stance were not entirely successful in that they are dead. <sup>2</sup>) The living dead includes those

who have not given much thought to the life-death question, including those who consciously or unconsciously avoid the topic. The living dead also includes those who have made a leap of faith to some eternal or absolutist ideology (religious or secular).

If I may speak in a technical rather than everyday way, we can say that Camus is a moderate in that he is both anti-death and anti-immortality. Unless one joins the living dead and gives up one's autonomy, it would seem to take an infinite amount of time to achieve immortality. Instead of fantasizing, one can attempt (in one's finite presentness in an age of absurdity) to take steps against both literal death and living death. Here is the book's epigram:

O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but  
exhaust the limits of the possible.  
-- PINDAR, Pythian iii

Anti-death autonomy is the middle way between the extremes of literal suicide and the immortal life supposed by the living dead. Recovering the certainty of knowledge is a fantasy of the living dead. Camus is unwilling to give up his anti-death autonomy in favor of such dangerous nostalgia.

I can feel a heart within me and I can touch a world: "There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction." [p.17] "In psychology as in logic, there are truths but no truth." [p.18] There are three characters in the mortal drama: the irrationality of the world; the human heart's desire for meaning; and the encounter between the two (absurdity). First comes the feeling of absurdity or meaninglessness, then comes the notion or concept. The perpetual struggle has meaning (!) "only in so far as it [the absurd] is not agreed to." [p.30]

So what are the consequences of the absurd? Some pretend to forget or ignore it. Some leap to premature suicide. Others leap to unevicenced certainty in Tradition/Authority (one or another ideology of Reason or Religion or Science). Thus there are many ways to escape from the Sisyphusian struggle. Some, however,

freely choose autonomy (integrity; authenticity) and continue to continue to continue the struggle against death.

But the Camusian rejection of Tradition or Authority or Ideology is a partial one. Sisyphus finds it natural to use experience or tools associated with reason or religion or science to the extent they are helpful in his unending battle against literal death and living death. For example, one can use reason in a piecemeal way to counter both Ideology and Mortality. Camusian moderation maneuvers between the extreme paths of triumphal reason and humiliated reason.

“The laws of nature may be operative up to a certain limit [prior to individual autonomy], beyond which they turn against themselves to give birth to the absurd [individual autonomy]. Or else, they may justify themselves on the level of description without for that reason being true on the level of explanation.” [p.35] But whatever the case may be, Sisyphus will not give up his autonomous anti-death struggle against the universe.

Sisyphus chooses integrity rather subterfuge. Without appealing to eternal or absolute values, he removes Reason and Religion and Science from their pedestals but does not commit them to annihilation. This is the middle way between the extremes of hubris and humiliation. Autonomous rebellion against death and absurdity is a meaningful and moderate way to perpetually search for meaning.

“By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death.” [p.62] Reasoning about the absurd leads Camus to infer three natural consequences for Sisyphus:

1. **My Life** (my rebellion): “It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one’s own free will.” [p.53]
2. **My Liberty** (my autonomy): inner authenticity (free self-legislation with integrity) instead of external rules (eternal or absolute values) with respect to thought and action.
3. **My Pursuit of Happiness** (my passion): diversity of experience, “But the point is to live.” [p.63]

## Part Two Of Five Parts Is Entitled: The Absurd Man

Camus then attempts to present a few cameos of persons (the seducer-lover; the actor; the adventurer-conqueror) as each might live their very own individual lives of my-rebellion, my-freedom, and my-passion. The Absurd Man does not claim to know about eternal or absolute values; indeed, he has no need of rules to justify his behavior. The Absurd Man finds it difficult to believe that anyone deserves a death sentence, whether from the universe or from other men. Such Absurd Persons live their lives rather than obey someone else's rules.

## Part Three Of Five Parts Is Entitled: Absurd Creation

According to Camus, the creator-artist is "the most absurd character." [p.89] Camus may be referring to an artist-writer such as himself. If the world is clear and certain, we get description rather than (absurd) art. Artists prefer images over arguments. Camus wants to create without appeal to eternal or absolute values and thus "liberate my [literary] universe of its phantoms and to people it solely with flesh and blood truths whose presence I cannot deny." Even the great writers such as Dostoevsky and Kafka do not altogether succeed in this respect. One of the truly absurd works, Camus says, is Melville's *Moby Dick*.

## Part Four Of Five Parts Is Entitled: The Myth Of Sisyphus

Sisyphus was a wise and clever mortal accused of lacking proper respect for the gods. Indeed, he succeeded in putting Death in chains. However the gods then unchained Death and condemned Sisyphus. His punishment was severe: Forever rolling a stone up a mountain only to have the boulder fall back again and again and again. His situation is tragic because he is without hope, forever doomed to failure. YET: "If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. The word is not too much." [p.117] "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." [p.119]

Part Five Of Five Parts Is An Appendix Entitled:  
Hope And The Absurd In The Work Of Franz Kafka

Kafka writes in such a way that it forces the reader to re-read and re-interpret. We find that Samsa has “a ‘slight annoyance’” – “his boss will be angry at his absence.” [p.125] Samsa otherwise seems unconcerned – that his body has metamorphosed into that of a huge insect!

Camus opines that truth is contrary to conventional morality. Sometimes Kafka seems to almost realize that it is fatal to give God what does not belong to him. But then Kafka will sneak in hope, unaware that hope “is not his business. His business is to turn away from subterfuge.” [p.134]

**§4. Camus And Anti-Absurdity: *The Rebel*  
 (“How do I live a meaningful life?”)**

Camus, in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, had asked “Is my life worth living?” We have seen that his conclusion was affirmative. Now we will ask with Camus, in his *The Rebel*, “How do I live a meaningful life?” Here we will find some evolution in his thought.

Indeed, if you have read only *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and no other work by Camus, you may declare my interpretation above severely distorted. You may be correct, for I read *The Rebel* before reading *The Myth of Sisyphus*. I have read the two volumes as if they were one. Moreover, in my anachronistic fusion of the two, I am **not** attempting to articulate a definitive Camus interpretation of Camus. That is why this chapter’s title says (**not** “The Thoughts Of Camus”, but) “Camusian Thoughts” – thoughts inspired “About The Ultimate Question Of Life” upon reading these two works by Camus. With this caveat in mind, I now present to you my Camusian Thoughts about *The Rebel*.

In the introduction, Camus says that in our peculiar time, good-will (“innocence”) is suspect. It seems these days we have to explain why we want to do good. Camus wants to do good simply because it is the good thing to do. Yet in our complex world, is it even possible to do good without directly or indirectly killing or



harming someone? In the face of the absurd, Camus chose to live. But given this, and given our age of ideologies (Reason; Religion; Science), is it possible to live without killing others? Simply by living in an age of ideologies, do we not participate in the literal death or living death of others?

Yet is it not the case that: “From the moment that life is recognized as good, it becomes good for all men”? [p.6] Not only should one not kill oneself, but likewise one should not kill others. My autonomous or natural rights imply your rights too. My rights and your rights “must be accepted or rejected together.” [p.6]

Choosing to live is a value judgment, a standard or limit with implications for one’s relation to others. When I rebel against absurdity, my action is on behalf of all. My individualistic act is an act of solidarity or unity.

#### Part One Of Five Parts Is Entitled: The Rebel

A rebel is one “who says no, but ... who [also] says yes. ... there are limits.” [p.13] By rebelling, we are saying that there are limits or standards or values or rights which we all should respect. Thus there is a sense in which we are all naturally equal and “a human nature does exist.” [p.16] Humans have metaphysical solidarity – they are a natural community: My rebellion “is for the sake of everyone in the world.” [p.16]

The spirit of rebellion tends not to be expressed in societies of either extreme inequality or extreme equality. But over time we humans experience absurdity, and humanity’s self-awareness grows. Yet we are tempted to forget either the basis of rebellion or that there are limits. We tend to ideologically leap into a living death – either groveling before God or intoxicating on power.

I, Camus, rebel against both servitude and tyranny. I, Camus, refuse to give in to either metaphysical other-worldliness or to Caesaristic historicism. In order to exist, we humans must rebel: “Man’s solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and rebellion, in its turn, can only find its justification in this solidarity.” [p.22]

Thus we have gone beyond individualistic absurdity. Descartes had said: “**I think – therefore I am.**” But in rebellious solidarity, “suffering is [now] seen as a collective experience. ... **I rebel – therefore we exist.**” [p.22]

### Part Two Of Five Parts Is Entitled: Metaphysical Rebellion

The Man refuses to give in to metaphysical other-worldliness. The Man refuses to ideologically leap into a living death, groveling before God. To the “I rebel, therefore we exist,” the Man adds: “**And we are alone.**”

### Part Three Of Five Parts Is Entitled: Historical Rebellion

The Man refuses to give in to Caesaristic historicism. The Man refuses to ideologically leap into a living death, intoxicating on tyrannical power. To the “I rebel, therefore we exist,” and the “We are alone,” the Man adds: “**Live and let live.**” “Instead of killing and dying in order to produce the being that we are not, we have to live and let live in order to create what we are.” [p.252] Thus the key importance of creativity or art:

### Part Four Of Five Parts Is Entitled: Rebellion And Art

Creation or art is pure rebellion – it demands unity while partially rejecting the world. The world is used by the artist in order to attempt to create a better world that meaningfully unites everyone and everything. The Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, Russian nihilism, and German ideology are all examples of artistic banishment. Should we not choose morality or usefulness or progress (take your pick) over beauty?

The artist rebels against these stark, narrow worlds – by constructing alternatives to such prisons. The artist believes in life and living, not death and chains. “Rebellion ... is a fabricator of universes.” [p.255] The artist finds both absurdity and beauty in the world. This suggests construction of a less absurd, more beautiful universe. Thus the artist becomes part of the process of evolution.

The modern novel “competes with creation and, provisionally, conquers death.” [p.264] Proust’s *Time Regained* “appears to be one of the most ambitious and most significant of man’s enterprises against his mortal condition. ... this art consists in choosing the creature in preference to his creator.” [p.267] But even more, it supports “the beauty of the world and its inhabitants against the powers of death and oblivion. It is in this way that his rebellion is creative.” [p.268]

Real creation attempts neither to escape from reality nor to accept it as it is. The moderation and passion of the Meridian Rebel or true artist “simply adds something that transfigures reality.” [p.269] Thus both “formal” art and “realist” art must be seen as extremes. Much “modern” art unwisely attempts to replace one totalitarian “unity” with another. The Meridian artist intervenes to make the world more beautiful, between the extremes of leaving the world as it is either by pure description or by pure escapism.

Real literary creation is not to be identified with commentary or criticism. Terror and tyranny contradict creativity and art. Perhaps a renaissance of creativity and civilization is possible. Often movements proclaiming a new world are actually the extreme opposite or climaxing contradiction of the old one. Today this extreme, in one form or another, is bent on industrial production. But: “The society based on production is only productive, not creative.” [p.273]

Every creative act of love denies the world of master-slave. Yet today it seems our leaders have no time for love. “But the fact that creation is necessary does not perforce imply that it is possible.” [p.274] Of every ten potential artists, maybe one or none will become artists if all that counts is industrial competition in a hellish world.

Even if history has an end, it is not our task to end it. Those who choose to ignore nature or the sea or the stars or beauty are constructing a world devoid of freedom and dignity. We, the Meridian rebels, must uphold beauty and creativity if we are to live in a beautiful and creative world with freedom and dignity.

## Part Five Of Five Parts Is Entitled: Thought At The Meridian

Forgetting its Meridian roots (I rebel – therefore, we are), rebellion too easily oscillates between murder and sacrifice. If a “single human being is missing in the irreplaceable world of fraternity, then this world is immediately depopulated. ... On the level of history, as in individual life, murder is thus a desperate exception or it is nothing.” [p.282] Killing and rebellion are contradictions; death and life are contradictions.

“Rebellion is in no way the demand for total freedom. On the contrary, ... the rebel wants it to be recognized that freedom has its limits everywhere that a human being is to be found ... The more aware rebellion is of demanding a just limit, the more inflexible it becomes. ... The freedom he claims, he claims for all; the freedom he refuses, he forbids everyone to enjoy. He is not only the slave against the master, but also man against the world of master and slave.” [p.284] Indeed, “rebellion, in principle, is a protest against death.” [p.285]

But in the real, absurd world in which we live, the rebel is confronted with hard choices. Violence versus non-violence. Justice versus freedom. And: Not to choose is itself a choice or risk. “In so far as it is a risk it cannot be used to justify any excess or any ruthless and absolutist position.” [p.289]

Rebellion with limits changes everything: We all have a common nature and individual rights. But technology, without proper guidance from the rebel, does not know this. Science has forgotten that it originated in rebellion with limits. Science and technology may yet return from deadly extremes to their origins and serve “individual rebellion. This terrible necessity [against terrorism, destruction, and enslavement] will mark the decisive turning-point” in history. [p.295]

The value that gives historical development meaning is not unknown: I rebel – therefore, we are. Thus: “Virtue cannot separate itself from reality without becoming a principle of evil. Nor can it identify itself completely with reality without denying itself.” [p.296] We have here a new form of virtue and a new kind

of individualism. “I have need of others who have need of me and of each other. ... the individual, without this discipline, is only a stranger ... 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 heights of proud compassion.” [p.297]

The moderation of the rebel, Meridian Man, is a perpetual tension and never-ending task. Contradictions ensue if we try to exist either above or below the meridian. History and the future must be viewed as opportunities, not as objects of worship. Passionate rebellion with limits is Meridian Man’s approach to such opportunities. “Even by his greatest effort man can only propose to diminish arithmetically the sufferings of the world. But ... no matter how limited they are, they will not cease to be an outrage. ... confronted with death, man from the very depths of his soul cries out for justice.” [p.303] This applies not only to literal death, but also to living death: “Thus Catholic prisoners, in the prison cells of Spain, refuse communion today because the priests of the regime have made it obligatory in certain prisons.” [p.304] Thus moderation and life perpetually struggle against extremity and death.

Now to the final paragraph of *The Rebel* [p.306]: Meridian Man refuses the temptation of Caesaristic intoxication “in order to share in the struggles and destiny of all men,” birthing a strange joy; happily “we shall remake the soul of our time ... which will exclude nothing.” Following the intoxicating “pride of a contemptible period”: “All may indeed live again, ... but on condition that it is understood that they correct one another, and that a limit, under the sun, shall curb them all. ... it is time to forsake our age and its adolescent furies.” At “this moment ... at last ... [the first] man is born.”

### §5. Camus As The First Man

Camus, age 46, died absurdly as a passenger in an automobile accident in 1960. With him was his uncompleted manuscript, *The First Man*. I suggest that it is only by **each one of us learning to**

**become the first man** that each one of us can become the first man – neither slave nor tyrant. With Camus, we may yet learn to become Meridians – passionate, moderate rebels. If Camus is right, our common task – the struggle against death and the birthing of Mankind or Meridiankind – is an occasion of strange joy.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This section is based on pages 374-381 of Tandy (2004).

<sup>2</sup> But see below: “§4. Camus And Anti-Absurdity: *The Rebel*” (see specifically the subsection: “Part Five Of Five Parts Is Entitled: Thought At The Meridian”).

## ABSTRACT

Albert Camus (1913-1960) saw himself primarily as a creative literary artist (not as a professional philosopher), but here I focus on his philosophical works. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus asks “Is my life worth living?”; in *The Rebel*, Camus asks “How do I live a meaningful life?” Choosing to live is a value judgment, a standard or limit with implications for one’s relation to others. When I rebel against absurdity, my action is on behalf of all. My individualistic act is an act of solidarity or unity. Descartes had said: “**I think – therefore I am.**” But for Camus, suffering is a collective experience: “**I rebel – therefore we exist.**”