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Meaningful Meaninglessness: Albert Camus' Presentation of Absurdism as a Foundation for Goodness

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In 1957, Albert Camus won the Nobel Prize for Literature. By that time he had written such magnificently important works such as *Caligula* (1938), *The Stranger* (1942), *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), *The Rebel* (1951), and *The Fall* (1956). Camus was a proponent of Absurdism, a philosophy that realizes the workings of the world are inherently meaningless and indifferent to the human struggle to create meaning. Absurdism, however, is not a nihilistic philosophy. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Rebel*, and *Caligula*, Camus offers a foundation of optimism and morality.

Albert Camus was born in Algeria on November 7, 1913. His father was killed in World War I in 1914. In 1930, Camus was diagnosed with tuberculosis, thus ending his football (soccer) career and forcing him to complete his studies part-time. He would eventually write his equivalent of an MA thesis on the philosopher Plotinus. In 1935, Camus joined the Communist party in response to conflict between Europeans and natives in Algeria. Camus was disappointed by Communism and Marxism; writes William Duvall, “Camus acknowledges the strong ethical impulse in Marx’s project...but the impulse leads Marx to utopianism and to an identification of the future with that ethic. Only at the end of history can exploitation and man’s alienation from man and nature be overcome” (141). Camus found communism inadequate; as such, he was expelled from the party and developed an affiliation with the anarchist movement. During World War II, Camus joined the French Resistance group and newspaper called *Combat*. In the 1950s, he devoted himself to human rights effort, pacifism, and resistance of capital punishment. His wise moral and philosophical contributions are preserved in his literature, for which (as is mentioned above) he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1957. Camus died in a car accident three years later – with a train ticket in his pocket.

By the early to mid twentieth century, humanity had witnessed the repeated failure of traditional religious, governmental, and social institutions. World Wars I and II along with other conflicts such as the one that occurred between Europeans and natives in Algeria contributed to a growing sense of confusion. In his works, Camus fulfills the need to acknowledge and develop the implications of the unpredictability of the universe. Confusion has not ceased; contemporary issues regarding religion, the environment, economics, warfare, etc. prove as much. Thus, Absurdism and Camus' insight into the subject will always be relevant. Fortunately, Camus presents Absurdism as society's most effective channel through which to achieve all things good, even in an inherently meaningless world.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus proves that Absurdism is an optimistic philosophy that invites people to redefine their values and seek justice. Absurdism maintains that there is no inherent meaning in the universe; there is no supernatural force that guides the Earth. This lack of inherent meaning invites people to question the validity of every social construct, as such constructs are potentially composed of arbitrary thoughts and obsolete, life-threatening values. If, on the largest conceivable scale, the meaning of human thought is arbitrary, sensory experience becomes the most trustworthy indicator of a "real" existence. Says Camus, "The body's judgment is as good as the mind's, and the body shrinks from annihilation. [Humans] get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking" (8). Sensory experiences— those that are life-promoting rather than life-threatening – should drive the creation of values. To act in a way that will benefit another, then, means prohibiting the denial of another's right to the interpretation of sensory experience. Enhancing another's interpretation of sensory experience, generating acceptance of the absurd, for example, is moral and just. For "Camus believed that, despite the limitations in perspective and the absurdity of life, humans can make decisions that

lead to less suffering. This is not the eradication of evil...it is instead the work of humans to reduce suffering when they can, to act with the acceptance that all cannot be healed, resolved, or explained on this earth” (White 557). Letting go of such ideal allows people to focus on present, temporal existence where other humans need to be – and can be – helped.

The Absurd is the result of the dissonance between human and non-human beings and workings in the world. Humans can never succeed in their efforts to understand the non-human, nor can they reject the unknown or non-human. However, that dissonance serves to connect the human and non-human (Camus uses the word “world” as opposed to “man” to refer to the non-human) in the single possible way, for “the Absurd is not in man...nor in the world, but in their presence together...it is the only bond uniting them” (30). So there is solidarity between the human and non-human because they are dependent upon one another for definition. Camus identifies the implications of Absurdism as “a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest)” (31). Hope becomes useless because it is concerned with the future rather than the present, and the future is nonexistent. In fact, it is only through Absurdism that one may fulfill her/his greatest potential for optimism, passion, and insight.

Absurdism, then, is an active and freeing philosophy. The world is no longer a puppet; the strings wrapped around the fingers of a higher power are snipped. “The absurd, which is the metaphysical state of the conscious man, does not lead to God” (40). In an absurd world, God is no longer available to provide order or comfort. Humans must interpret their sensory experiences, make decisions, live with both the consequences and limiting nature of those decisions, and accept the impossibility of understanding non-human ways of being. Thus

Absurdism is an active philosophy; it does not relinquish everything to meaninglessness. On the contrary; its goal "...is to shed light upon the step taken by the mind when, starting from a philosophy of the world's lack of meaning, it ends up by finding a meaning and depth in it" (42). Meaning can be assigned to things, but should that transitory meaning replace the awareness of absurdity (as in the case of religion) it destroys itself by trading truths for absolutes.

In *The Rebel*, Camus locates social implications of the absurd. A just society will look favorably upon – and participate in – rebellion when it serves a just cause. Camus' "*The Rebel* is an extended meditation on the difference between revolt for the sake of something – a sort of social cogito, as Camus has it – and the meaningless and destructive violence that Camus feels characterizes fascism and other forms of nihilism" (Duran 365). Rebellion and revolt entail the deep questioning and, wherever necessary, the demolition and reconstruction of traditional power dynamics and social structures. These structures range from Aristotelian dualism to white privilege to capitalism; everything needs to be questioned. Potential lies within that questioning – the potential for awareness and positive change. Write Camus, "Awareness...develops from every act of rebellion: the sudden, dazzling perception that there is something in man with which he can identify himself" (14). That something is a value, an affirmation, a sense that the way things are is not as good as the way things could be.

Camus presents solidarity as one of the loveliest and most important elements of Absurdism. Humans coexist, and every human is engaged in the struggle to create meaning out of meaninglessness. Because humans are conscious of their coexistence, rebellion is unavoidably a social movement. In rebellion, it is important to remember that "...the individual is not, in himself alone, the embodiment of the values he wishes to defend. It needs all humanity, at least, to comprise them. When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men

and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical” (17).

Self-transcendence is crucial to generating social change in an absurd world. For self-transcendence to happen, however, one must possess a strong sense of self. Thus the self-centeredness that has become so ingrained in American society is damaging, but so is the extreme collectivism of some Asian and Middle-Eastern societies – so society should rebel against both selfishness and extreme collectivism. Revolt must never stop; “...rebellion is ongoing, a continuous, expanding cycle of affirmation and rejection that returns attention to the present where beautiful things begin. It is rebellion that is creative” (White 558). Rebellion need not be violent; in fact, violent rebellion or revolt contradicts itself by killing the human right to live in the physical world. As du Plock points out, “Camus argues that one of the tenets of revolt is respect for the dignity of all men, since it is the failure of the ruler to do so which leads his (or her) subjects to rebel” (21). As soon as that respect is lost, rebellion becomes ineffective because it is impossible to build meaning upon a life-demoting foundation.

Social action that upholds both human solidarity and the right to interpretation of sensory experience is utterly life-affirming. The freedom to interpret the perceivable world is the most efficient tool with which to cultivate truth. This freedom belongs to every living being. So solidarity lies not only in struggle but in potential – as long as humans preserve that potential. For “...any 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” (22). This statement equates solidarity with life itself; the word murder implies that there is something alive or at least life-promoting in solidarity that can be killed. Solidarity is certainly life-promoting; if one human knows that the human next to her is engaged in the same struggle to create a meaningful existence in an inherently meaningless world, she will naturally view that

human as an equal. If two humans are equal, it means they deserve the same access to basic needs. There is friendship in solidarity; “Camus, through the rough working class streets of Algeria and through the crisis of World War II, witnessed that friendships deepen through common struggle” (White 560). Friendship goes a step farther than solidarity. In true friendship, one human wants more for her friend than she wants for herself. Thus out of sensory experience, the struggle to create meaning, and solidarity grow equality, compassion, and love.

One of Camus’ works that best communicates his philosophy is *Caligula*, a play that was written in 1938 and published in 1944. The play centers on the historical Roman Emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus – or Caligula – who reigned from AD 37 until his assassination in AD 41. Based on the historical Caligula, Camus’ *Caligula* engages his city in a senseless frenzy of violence after the death of his sister and mistress, Drusilla. He attempts to cope with the unpredictability of his world by exercising absolute power and a malevolent brand of freedom while failing to realize that to destroy others is to destroy himself. Despite repeated warnings, Caligula refuses to acknowledge his subjects’ plan to eliminate him, and ultimately he is assassinated. *Caligula* presents an innovative way of addressing communication and time that has since been taken up by playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Maria Genovese. More importantly, the play is an observant commentary on the human ability to accept the absurd, on revolt, on solidarity, on art, on happiness. *Caligula* is an engaging dramatic representation of Camus’ absurdist philosophy.

Caligula is a man who is aware of but cannot accept the absurd. His awareness is good; “the motives of his revolt – a desire for lucidity and a readiness to act in accordance with the truth he finds – would have Camus’ approval, but the methods of his revolt are utterly wrong”

(Cruikshank 197). Caligula responds to Drusilla's death by leaving the palace for three days without explanation. At the outset of the play, his attendants are still awaiting his return. One man recalls that before Caligula left, the emperor said "Nothing" when asked what was wrong (3). This is a first indication of Caligula's inability to accept the absurd. He is unable to accept Drusilla's seemingly untimely death, unable to comprehend his emotions, unable to find language with which to speak honestly about the situation...so he says "nothing." Once Caligula does return from his strange escapade, he speaks not of Drusilla but of his desire for the moon, saying "really, this world of ours...is quite intolerable. That's why I want the moon, or happiness, or eternal life – something, in fact, that may sound crazy, but which isn't of this world" (8). Rather than attempting to coexist with the absurd, Caligula attempts to overcome it by leaving the world behind.

Caligula resorts to a number of destructive measures in attempt to gain control over the absurd. First, he does so administratively by ordering his subjects to disinherit their children and leave their money to the State. He then explains that the State will periodically kill its subjects, and thus their wealth will accumulate in the Treasury (12). He proceeds to kill a number of his subjects, including family members of men in his court. In doing so, Caligula attempts to control the absurd by using senseless violence to orchestrate it. Thus after turning himself into a tyrant, Caligula turns himself into a god. One day at the palace, his attendant, Helicon, introduces Caligula as a god, saying "the gods have come to earth...the secrets of the gods will be revealed to you" (39). The emperor proceeds to demand worship and almsgiving. He continues to use random acts of violence in effort to display godlike power and control. Once it is no longer enough to be a god, he claims the role of fate, exclaiming "there's no understanding fate; therefore I choose to play the part of fate" (44). Caligula exhibits the weakness of seeking to

subvert the unknown to human power and control. He does not realize that seemingly powerful dictatorship, divine power, and fate are human constructions that are false and incapable of controlling the absurd. Instead, such constructs merely generate ignorance and unaccountability; they render freedom impossible.

As such, Caligula's actions lead to his own demise. His violence incites a rebellion led by Cherea, one of his former supporters. However, the rebellion takes over three years to carry out. Caligula refuses to heed repeated warning about Cherea's plans. For example, when a patrician attempts to warn Caligula of the plot, the emperor, though surely aware of the gravity of his situation, writes the warning off as a joke (48). Later, during a conversation with Caligula, Cherea admits his hatred for and compulsion to eliminate the emperor. Cherea is surprised when Caligula does not kill him. Instead, Caligula produces a tablet that incriminates Cherea...and melts it with a torch (54). Caligula is rendered immobile by his own nihilism. Because he responds to the absurd by forgoing all morals, all motivation to create meaning, all solidarity, all appreciation for life and its sensory experience, Caligula passively accepts his failure. Through Caligula, Camus condemns Nihilism as a passive, weak, destructive way of coping with the absurd.

Like Caligula, Cherea is aware of the absurd. Cherea, however, rebels against Caligula's nihilistic way of coping with it. At a meeting in his house, Cherea states "what's intolerable is to see one's life being drained of meaning, to be told there's no reason for existing. A man can't live without some reason for living" (21). Cherea understands that even in an incomprehensible universe, humans can assign meaning to things. He sees the need to assign greater value to life-promoting choices and actions than to life-threatening ones, saying "I believe that some actions are – shall I say? – more praiseworthy than others" (52). While Cherea does not offer any

concrete ways to judge the praiseworthiness of an action, his statement reveals the moral potential in an accepting, active response to the absurd. Cherea is against the caprice, violence, and destruction caused by Caligula's nihilistic response. However, he says of Caligula "he forces one to think. There's nothing like insecurity for stimulating the brain" (58). Cherea sees the value of the absurd; the potential for awareness and change. He sees potentially positive moral implications; "In *Caligula*, Camus asks whether the absurd leads inexorably to nihilism, and through the character of Cherea he suggests that it does not. Despite being, like Caligula, conscious of the absurd, Cherea appears to discern a communal ethic of human solidarity in the face of the absurd..." (Foley 25). It is this sense of solidarity and Cherea's refusal to relinquish everything to meaninglessness that makes him a more praiseworthy character than Caligula.

Caligula contains many dramatic elements that, utilized by playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and others, have grown to characterize a dramatic genre called Theater of the Absurd. As is the case in *Caligula*, absurdist plays tend to focus on the human reaction to meaninglessness. Comedy is often mixed with horrific or tragic images. In *Caligula*, for example, the emperor calls one of his oldest subjects "darling," which is quite comical, but goes on to explain his plans to kill a knight named Rufius for no reason (24). This juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy – tragicomedy – has become a trademark of Theater of the Absurd. Characters in Absurdist drama often feel hopeless and repeat meaningless actions and dialogue. For example, Helicon repeats "it's a matter of time and patience," first with regard to the deaths of all of Caligula's subjects and secondly with regard to fetching the moon for Caligula (29, 45). Of course neither phenomenon is truly achievable, so Helicon's words become meaningless. With regard to language, Absurdist dialogue contains clichés, wordplay, and nonsense. During the opening pages of *Caligula*, the patricians use a number of clichés; one of them says "time

smoothes everything out” (4). The patricians’ clichés help communicate their unoriginality and lack of insight. Absurdist playwrights often point out the fact that time is a human construct. So in the above quotations concerning time, characters are depending on something beyond their control to solve their problems; concepts such as time, fate, and religion allow people to continue Caligula’s trend of passivity. In Absurd theater, plot is either nonexistent or cyclical in nature. In *Caligula*, Cherea and Scipio continue Caligula’s violence by stabbing the emperor in the face. The audience is struck by the fact that Cherea and Scipio should not have done so, for the men render their rebellion destructive by being violent. By striking the audience in such a way, Camus is advocating peaceful rebellion.

Eugene Ionesco is a popular playwright whose innovative works such as *The Bald Soprano* showcase the dramatic elements and provocative philosophy behind Absurdist Theater. The Theater of the Absurd as perpetuated by playwrights like Ionesco has come to possess its own set of vital organs, organs that differ in exact size or shape or color but perform the same basic function nonetheless. The heart of these organs lies in the ambiguity of time, place, and identity. “When causality is unpredictable,” writes critic Allan Lewis, “any event may be the result of any other event regardless of time and space, and all events are equally insignificant” (13). Even a character’s identity may be indistinct, which allows an individual to be symbolic of humankind. One way I keep the identity of my characters ambiguous is denying them exact ages. As critic Hugh Dickinson observes, “Ionesco believes that the surest way to achieve the universal is to concentrate to an extreme degree on the individual” (105). Ambiguity of time, place, and identity lend themselves seamlessly to a meaningless plot where the implications of events are more important than the events themselves (or their sequence). In his article “*The Bald Soprano and The Lesson: An Inquiry into Play Structure*,” Richard Schechner uses a direct

quote to examine the motivation behind Ionesco's style. "The aim," said Ionesco, "is to release dramatic tension without the help of any proper plot or any special subject. But it still leads, in the end, to the revelation of something monstrous: this is essential, moreover, for in the last resort drama is a revelation of the monstrosity or of some monstrous forms that we carry in ourselves" (qtd. in Schechner 21). There is a devaluation of obsolete, conventional ideas that is manifested as words lose their denotative function, resulting in nonsense dialogue. After all, "If what is experienced is determined by an inherited way of seeing, then the method of perception has to be altered. Emotions and experiences, love and hate and anguish, cannot be communicated when communication is regulated by rational rules." (Lewis 19). All of these organs do, in fact, compose a larger body: an incomprehensible universe. No one is capable of predicting precisely how any event will unfold, or what the repercussions of an event will be. Time, space, identity, and even truth, then, do become arbitrary and thus the traditional methods of exchanging such ideas become arbitrary. Ionesco is able to capture this phenomenon and still reach his audience. By breaking traditional boundaries, he achieves a new level of interaction with his audience. The audience is presented with the way things *could very well be*, and is able to observe and react the way it wishes to.

After reading plays by Camus, Beckett, Sartre, Ionesco, Stoppard, and others, I have developed a passion for Theater of the Absurd. I have written two Absurdist one-act plays, including *A Net with a Hole in it* (performed at Salve Regina in 2009) and *Persona Non Grata*, which I am presenting alongside this thesis. *Persona Non Grata* is a commentary on the human desire to create meaning that contains many of the dramatic elements described above. The characters in the play are the Jester, who embodies the absurd, Manix (a writer), Clarence, Prudence, Mildred, and Judd. The characters represent different aspects of and attitudes within

humanity, including sentimentality, matter-of-factness, liberalism, religion, conservatism, sexuality, and the drive to know and to classify. Comedy is juxtaposed with tragedy, as when Judd physically holds his eyelids open so he can cry. Almost every line in the play has a philosophical notion behind it, but much of the dialogue consists of clichés, sometimes mixed with wordplay (“You can lead them to water but you can’t make them think,” page 13), and nonsense (“Everyone would be everything if you wanted them to be perfect,” page 3). There is no concrete sense of time or space, nor is there a linear plot. It is my hope that by undergoing an unfamiliar dramatic experience my audience will consider the different roles that fiction assumes within society and the human weaknesses that hinder open-mindedness and progress.

Existence is strange and beautiful. Every day new possibilities arise; a flower blooms, two people meet, a play is performed. Every day, every moment, everything wavers between sameness and change, life and death, unity and fragmentation. Every day, humans struggle. They struggle to create meaning out of meaninglessness and to accept it when they simply cannot do so. They struggle with their autonomy, with the weight of responsibility, of freedom, of choice. Humans struggle together, and out of their constant and common struggle, out of informed, life-affirming rebellion against failing social constructs, grows positive change. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Rebel*, and *Caligula*, Albert Camus derives freedom, justice, optimism, friendship, even love from the Absurd. His philosophy is a foundation not only for goodness but also for the Theater of the Absurd. Theater of the Absurd has offered audiences innovative and insightful ways to experience and interpret reality. Unpredictability, repetition, nonsense, the fallibility of language, and the juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy are present in works by writers such as Camus, Ionesco, and myself and are also present in life. To deny such elements, to relentlessly subvert them to order, or to refuse to coexist with them is to choose

ignorance, nihilism, even death. For how is one to live fully and freely without knowledge and appreciation of the glorious unknown! In fact it is the unknown that generates freedom, wildness, opportunity, choice, and solidarity. The unknown must be the source of the known if the known is to be Good.

“Absurd, perhaps, but so it is” (*Caligula* 29).

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