

1 | THE ABSURD

At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.

(MS: 31–2; E: 117–18)

The Myth of Sisyphus

Written in 1940 amidst the French and European disaster, this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to proceed beyond nihilism. In all the books I have written since, I have attempted to pursue this direction. Although *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* poses moral problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert.

(MS: 7; E: 97)

Not without reason, the term “absurd” rarely now makes an appearance in academic discourse, even academic discourse on existentialist philosophy, with which the term is usually associated. However, the importance of the concept to Camus’s intellectual trajectory cannot be overstated, and a detailed account of what he means by the absurd would be necessary for any serious discussion of his ideas. A convenient way of introducing this analysis is to contrast Camus’s concept of the absurd with those versions articulated by the existentialists Kierkegaard and Sartre. Such a contrast will further serve to highlight the extent to which Camus was not an existentialist. For Sartre, with whom the idea is perhaps most usually associated, the term “absurd” denoted the contingent nature of human existence, the realization of which brings what he called *nausea*. In Hazel Barnes’s translation of *Being and Nothingness*, the Sartrean absurd is defined as “That which is meaningless. Thus man’s existence is absurd because his contingency finds no external justification” (Sartre 1956: 628). In marked contrast, for Kierkegaard, the absurd refers to that quality of Christian faith that runs counter to all mundane human experience or, in

Kierkegaard's terms, "The absurd, precisely by reason of its objective repulsion, is the dynamometer of the inwardness of faith" (Lowrie 1938: 336; cf. Kierkegaard 1941: 189). In his *Journals*, Kierkegaard asserts that "The absurd, or to act by virtue of the absurd, is to act upon faith, trusting in God" (Kierkegaard 1938: 291). As we shall see, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus explicitly rejects this faith proposed by Kierkegaard, calling it "philosophical suicide". Furthermore, while Camus's conception of the absurd can be said to correspond to a significant extent with that of Sartre, it should also be noted that Camus was inclined to criticize Sartre for the implications he construed from the absurd. Reviewing Sartre's *Nausea* in 1938, as we have seen, Camus criticizes the author for "thinking that life is tragic because it is wretched", and argues that "the realisation that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself but only a beginning". "It is not the discovery which is interesting," argues Camus, "but the consequences and rules for actions which can be drawn from it."¹

For reasons such as these, it is important to examine Camus's ideas regarding the absurd carefully, and in order to understand his conception of the absurd accurately it is necessary to examine his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Here Camus claims that the absurd arises out of the "confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (*MS*: 32; *E*: 117–18). Human beings are naturally inclined to want and expect the world to be intelligible "in the full and familiar ways that religious and philosophical systems have portrayed it". This kind of intelligibility purports to be comprehensive, to explain the world as a whole, and crucially, it purports to explain the world "in terms that human beings care about", in ways that make sense "with respect to human values". In Camus's view, neither human existence nor the world are themselves absurd. Instead the absurd arises because the world is resistant to this kind of intelligibility: "we want the world to make sense, but it does not make sense. To see this conflict is to see the absurd" (Kamber 2002: 52). "If there is an absurd," Camus says at one point, "it is in man's universe" (*MS*: 38; *E*: 124). What normally brings the individual into confrontation with his absurd condition, suggests Camus, is the awareness not of human mortality per se, but of his own personal mortality.² In the case of Camus himself, this awareness came with his first attack of tuberculosis, in 1930 or 1931, at the age of seventeen. For someone whose juvenile writing displayed a profound bond with the natural world, the sudden visceral awareness of his own mortality, the imperviousness of nature to the private traumas of humankind, the feeling of dying slowly *from the inside*, the painfully asphyxiating experience of the pneumothorax treatments that denied him even the pantheistic prayer of uninhibited respiration, left clear fissures in the latent pantheism of his earliest, mainly lyrical, writing.³ However, this is not to say that the absurd is born of an irrational response to the realization of human mortality. While feelings of the absurd may thus be awoken, awareness of the absurd, Camus insists, is specifically a rational, intellectual discovery, deduced from the recognition of the division between our expectations of the world and the world itself, unresponsive to those expectations (*MS*: 26; *E*: 112). Camus finds the strongest evidence for this concept of the absurd in what seems the unimpeachably empirical domain of the

physical sciences. He argues that science ultimately relies on poetry, metaphor or art to explain itself. To illustrate, he mentions atomic theory, and its description of the building blocks of physical reality:

At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multicoloured [*bariolé*] universe can be reduced to the atom. . . . But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realise then that you have been reduced to poetry . . . that science that was to teach me everything ends up in hypothesis, that lucidity founders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art. (MS: 25; E: 112)

In a review of *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1946, the logical-positivist A. J. Ayer characterizes Camus's assertions as "what modern Cambridge philosophers would call a 'pointless lament'", and argued that the kind of intelligibility demanded by Camus is impossible. Of course, this is precisely the point being made by Camus.⁴ In his estimation, then, even the so-called hard sciences ultimately rely on the language of poetry to explain the physical make-up of the world. Camus is here not simply concerned by the fact that the world remains unintelligible, but more importantly he is concerned by the fact that it remains unintelligible in ways meaningful to humankind. "The mind's deepest desire", he says, "is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal" (MS: 22–3; E: 110). It is Camus's contention that ordinary human existence tends to take this level of perfect coherence for granted, but that occasionally, or perhaps inevitably, "the stage-sets collapse", and one is wrenched from one's ontological complacency and forced to confront the radical incoherence perceived to be at the heart of the relation between the self and the world, that sense of absurdity which a recent critic has characterized as "the *feeling* of radical divorce, of living in a once familiar but now suddenly radically alien homeland, of being adrift between past and future and unable to rely on either to give meaning to the present, of being a stranger to the world and to oneself" (Carroll 2007b: 56–7).

While Camus is convinced of the world's unintelligibility in the sense described, he nevertheless believes that there are certain claims about which one can be reasonably confident: my existence as a conscious being and the existence of the world I can touch. "This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge and the rest is construction" (MS: 25; E: 111). Camus insists that no other knowledge is available to him, that beyond these claims regarding his own existence and the existence of an external reality, all is invention and speculation, in logic and science as much as in psychology and philosophy. Despite this view, Camus's absurd is not a prelude to nihilism, to a rejection of all value-claims, and he himself compares it (with a due sense of proportion) to Descartes's systematic doubt, in so far as it is a sceptical deconstruction of ingrained assumptions about our knowledge of the world, designed to identify what grounds, if any, can be found on which to construct

a positive ethics. He asserts repeatedly that it is the implications of the absurd that interest him: "I was looking for a method and not a doctrine. I was practicing methodical doubt. I was trying to make a *tabula rasa*, on the basis of which it would be possible to construct something."⁵ The absurd, then, as conceived by Camus is fundamentally an epistemological claim addressing an ontological need; that is, a claim regarding the knowledge we can have of the world. From this premise, Camus progressively extends the absurd perspective to a critique of all transcendental truths or values: "No code of ethics and no effort are justifiable *a priori* in the face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition."⁶ Within the context of this critique and without in any way "overcoming" its ontological implications, Camus begins to investigate ways in which, he argues, it may be possible to respond positively to the absurd. This creative capacity eventually becomes the core of his theory of revolt, which I will discuss in detail in later chapters.

The Myth of Sisyphus itself is concerned primarily with an examination of other responses to the absurd, and in the essay Camus argues that hitherto philosophers concerned with the absurd have sought ultimately to overcome or transcend it. For example, he accuses Kierkegaard of reducing the problem of the absurd to the hubris of the human desire to reduce the world to clarity and coherence. For Kierkegaard this desire for truth and clarity "is a sin against a creature's finitude."⁷ The absurd, the "very thing that led to despair of the meaning and depth of this life", becomes for Kierkegaard "its truth and its clarity". He calls, says Camus, quite plainly for "the third sacrifice required by St Ignatius Loyola, the one in which God most rejoices: 'The sacrifice of the intellect'." In doing this Kierkegaard makes of the absurd "the criterion of the other world", whereas for Camus the absurd "is simply the residue of the experience of this world". Substituting "for his cry of revolt a frantic adherence", Kierkegaard is led at once "to blind himself to the absurd which hitherto enlightened him" and "to deify the only certainty he henceforth possesses, the irrational". Kierkegaard, put simply, advocates a "leap" of faith which expressed the individual's nothingness without God, but for Camus this leap constitutes a suppression of the very tension that is at the heart of the human condition, the absurd, "the metaphysical state of the conscious man" (*MS*: 40, 42; *E*: 125–6, 128).

Similarly, although he considers Husserl's concept of intentionality (the idea that consciousness was always consciousness *of something*) entirely consistent with the absurd, since intentionality made no claims regarding the object beyond the perception of it, Camus is less convinced by the introduction of the concept of eidetic intuition, which allows Husserl to claim that the universal can be *seen* in the individual, and which permits him to speak of "extra-temporal essences". To discover "the point where thought leaves the path of evidence", says Camus, one needs only to consider Husserl's

reasoning . . . regarding the mind: "If our insight extended to the exact laws of mental process, these too would be eternal and unchangeable, as are the laws of theoretical natural science; they would therefore hold even if there were no mental processes at all." Even if the mind were not, its laws would be! I see

then that of a psychological truth Husserl aims to make a rational rule: after having denied the integrating power of human reason, he leaps by this expedient to eternal Reason.⁸

Husserl's effort to import a quasi-scientific discourse into talk of basic human experience would inevitably fall out of favour with Camus, for we have already seen his caustic attitude to the pretensions of the hard sciences, accusing them of sophistry in their resort to poetic language in order to describe physical reality.⁹

Camus somewhat hastily concludes that what lies at the heart of these ideas in Husserl and Kierkegaard (and in existentialism generally) is in fact what he calls "philosophical suicide".¹⁰ This occurs when, starting from the premise that nothing in the world has meaning or depth, they proceed to find meaning and depth in it. He thus criticizes the existentialists for "deify[ing] what crushes them".¹¹ Camus insists that his reasoning will not permit "such an abdication", and must begin and end with the absurd:

My reasoning wants to be faithful to the evidence that aroused it. That evidence is the absurd. It is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together. Kierkegaard suppresses my nostalgia and Husserl gathers together that universe. That is not what I was expecting. It was a matter of living and thinking with those dislocations, of knowing whether one had to accept or refuse. There can be no question of masking the evidence, of suppressing the absurd by denying one of the terms of its equation. It is essential to know whether one can live with it or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die from it.¹² (*MS*: 50; *E*: 134–5)

Having posited and accepted the absurd as an epistemic principle, Camus quickly poses what he considers to be the most important and urgent philosophical question to emerge from it: is life worth living? Or more accurately, if human existence is governed by the absurd, does the absurd dictate that we respond in one way or in another? Although it might seem that the absurdity of life is sufficient reason to deem it unworthy of effort, on the other hand, assuming that there is as little perfect coherence in death as there is in life, there is no clear choice between the two. Camus argues that we should keep the absurd alive rather than attempt to suppress it through philosophical suicide, or destroy it through physical suicide. He explains his reasoning as follows:

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 life by consciousness. Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution¹³ is thus carried into individual experience. Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping

it alive is above all contemplating it. . . . One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second. Just as danger provided man with the unique opportunity of seizing awareness, so metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole experience. It is that constant presence of man in his own eyes. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it. (MS: 53–4; E: 138)

Suicide, he says, is a “repudiation”, an acquiescence to the absurd, while Camus would have us accept it without acquiescing to it.¹⁴ Like the Kierkegaardian leap, such abdication is acceptance in the extreme. Suicide is not, therefore, for Camus an ultimate act of hubris, but is in fact a renunciation of all human values and indeed the possibility of human values. It is not the ultimate act of human freedom, but the renunciation of human freedom.¹⁵ For Camus the absurd describes “a tension, born of a discrepancy between external reality and the human desire for familiarity”, but this does not discount such things as the existence of beauty, friendship, health, satisfying work and creativity. While these values are contingent, a relative happiness remains possible, and “to commit suicide because of their relativity is to surrender all that is possible. . . . The *doxa* of life are a weave of beauty and ugliness, friendship and understanding, health and sickness, insight and opacity. It is a question of living with the mix and not succumbing to the temptation” to make an absolute value out of either hope or despair.¹⁶

Camus characterizes the struggle for human values in the light of the decision to affirm the ontological implications of the absurd as a struggle implying

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). Everything that destroys, conjures away, or exorcises these requirements (and, to begin with, consent which overthrows divorce) ruins the absurd and devalues the attitude that may then be proposed.

The absurd has meaning, he says, “only in so far as it is not agreed to”.¹⁷ Already, Camus appears to be advocating a form of revolt in the face of the condition that seems to render life meaningless. Revolt here is an acceptance of the fact of the absurd (this, after all, is only to acknowledge the character of the human condition), but it is not a meek acceptance. Instead it is an acceptance filled with scorn, defiance and suffering. The incarnation of these responses is the mythical Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to “ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight”: “Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition . . . the

lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.”¹⁸

However, we are still not clear on how we can move from the image of the solitary rebel to the concept of solidarity, which is necessary for revolt to have any political or social significance.¹⁹ Ultimately, in fact, the only ethic possible at this point is a quantitative ethic, since in the absence of moral values the intensity and frequency of enjoyable experiences appears to be the only available determining standard with which to ascribe value to experience.²⁰ Accordingly, Camus suggests as illustrations or archetypes of absurd life Don Juan, the Actor and the Conqueror. Importantly, Camus makes it clear that these are not models to be emulated, but illustrations of an idea. Furthermore, these illustrations are not what they at first seem.²¹ In Camus’s account, Don Juan is a sexually omnivorous hero, but he ends his days contemplating nature from a secluded monastic cell, the Actor represents eternal liveliness (preferred to eternal life) and the Conqueror’s greatest achievement is the overcoming of the self.²² Indeed, the chief characteristic of the individual conscious of the absurd is his ability “to live in harmony with a universe without future and without weakness. This absurd, godless world is then peopled with men who think clearly and have ceased to hope” (*MS*: 85; *E*: 170). Camus even suggests that these absurd archetypes are united by “a metaphysical joy in enduring the world’s absurdity”.²³ It is never a question of overcoming the absurd, but only of “being faithful to the rules of the battle”. “Conquest or play-acting, multiple loves, absurd revolt”, says Camus, “are tributes that man pays to his dignity in a campaign in which he is defeated in advance” (*MS*: 86; *E*: 173). Significantly, as David Carroll points out, if “the awareness of the limitations of the human condition is characteristic of those who ‘think clearly,’” then it is not Don Juan, the Actor or the Conqueror but the Creator (who Carroll calls “the artist-writer”) who is presented by Camus “as the figure who ‘thinks’ the most clearly of all”.²⁴ “The absurd joy *par excellence*”, says Camus, “is creation”. Although artistic creation ultimately “has no more significance than the continual and imperceptible creation in which the actor, the conqueror and all absurd men indulge every day of their lives”, these absurd archetypes know this in advance, and “their whole effort is to examine, to enlarge, and to enrich the ephemeral island on which they have just landed”. It is in the context of this “absurd joy” derived from lucidity that we should consider the paradoxical statement with which *The Myth of Sisyphus* concludes, that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy”. Although Camus tells us that Sisyphus’s scorn of the gods and his fruitless task accomplish “nothing”, “the ‘nothing’ he accomplishes each time he pushes his rock up to the very top of the hill”, suggests Carroll, “is in fact the ‘something’ of art”.²⁵

This determination to reject suicide, to hold jealously to the absurd condition, to imagine Sisyphus happy, may seem to have brought us to the conclusion of our investigation of the absurd. It has, after all, answered the question with which *The Myth of Sisyphus* was ostensibly concerned – “does the absurd dictate death?” – by positing the “absurd hero” of a smiling Sisyphus filled with scorn for the gods, and

committed to his fate. However, there remain at least two outstanding questions. First, notwithstanding Camus's own insistence that the absurd "does not liberate; it binds", that it "does not authorise all actions", that "everything is permitted" does not mean that 'nothing is forbidden', it is not at all clear that he has established any basis on which to insist upon limits to the so-called "ethic of quantity" realized by the absurd archetypes (*MS*: 16, 108, 65, 69, 75; *E*: 103, 196, 149–50, 154, 159). As "ridiculous" as Camus may have thought such suggestions, it is unclear what legitimate grounds can be found in *The Myth of Sisyphus* for rejecting Don Juan, the Conqueror or the Actor as models worthy of emulation.²⁶ Despite his protestations to the contrary, it seems that consequent on the absurd the task of the lucid individual, free of "all feeling of responsibility", "is not to live well in a moral sense – for the absence of moral values renders this meaningless – but *vivre à plus*, replacing the quality of experience by their quantity" (Thody 1961: 52–3). Second, we are still not clear on how we can progress from the image of Sisyphus as a solitary rebel towards some form of solidarity, necessary for revolt to have any political or social significance. One might even say that if we cannot rescue Sisyphus from his solipsistic exile, his revolt against the gods is of no real significance whatever.

In attempting to respond to these important questions it is necessary to pay close attention to a brief note appearing at the beginning of the published version of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (but absent from the manuscript).²⁷ Prompted, says Camus, by "certain personal experiences", he feels it necessary to explain that the absurd, "hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered in this essay as a starting point". Accordingly, he suggests that "it may be said that there is something provisional in my commentary" and that the position the essay entails cannot be "prejudged". "There will be found here", Camus insists, "merely the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady" in which "no belief is involved" even "for a moment" (*MS*: 10; *E*: 97). In 1951, shortly before the publication of *The Rebel*, Camus made much the same point more clearly:

This word "absurd" has had an unhappy history, and I confess that now it rather annoys me. When I analyzed the feeling of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, I was looking for a method and not a doctrine. I was practising methodical doubt. I was trying to make a "tabula rasa", on the basis of which it would be then possible to construct something. If we assume that nothing has any meaning, then we must conclude that the world is absurd. But does nothing have a meaning? I have never believed that we could remain at this point. Even as I was writing *The Myth of Sisyphus* I was thinking about the essay on revolt that I would write later on, in which I would attempt, after having described the different aspects of the feeling of the absurd, to describe the different attitudes of the man in revolt. (This is the title of the book I am completing.) And then there are new events that enrich or correct what has come to one through observation, the continual lessons life offers, which you have to reconcile with those of your earlier experiences. This is what I have tried to do . . . though, naturally, I still do not claim to be in possession of truth.²⁸

It is important to note that this does not constitute a refutation of the idea of the absurd as developed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Although dismissive of the idea that “nothing has any meaning” (which, properly speaking, is nihilism), it reaffirms the absurd as a “method”, as a methodological deconstruction of commonplace assumptions, including those regarding morality and politics. In *The Rebel* Camus states that although “considered as a rule of life” the absurd is contradictory, the “greatness” of those philosophers and artists concerned with the absurd “is measured by the extent to which they have rejected the complacencies of absurdism in order to accept its exigencies”.²⁹ The absurd is a method and not a doctrine, but its recognition remains a first necessary step in the development of properly human values.

However, although his antipathy to nihilism (the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known) is evident from even a cursory glance at Camus’s writing in the period (notably, as we shall see in later chapters, in his political journalism), it was not until the publication of *The Rebel* in 1951 that Camus presented a theoretical response to some of the unanswered questions in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Certainly in Camus’s other works contemporary with *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*The Outsider*, *Caligula* and *Cross Purpose*) there is no theoretical attempt to respond to these questions, and instead he seems to concentrate in these works on certain implications of the absurd. Nevertheless, as David Carroll has shown, Camus’s depiction of Sisyphus betrays a distinct awareness of precisely what Camus’s absurd reasoning cannot yet permit: political solidarity. For although Sisyphus’s conscious lucidity may be that of the absurd artist (and his happiness the absurd artist’s “absurd joy”), “the physical effort necessary to accomplish his task resembles more closely the labour of the worker”, a subject on which Camus will reflect in *The Rebel* (Carroll 2007b: 64). Explaining the gods’ punishment of Sisyphus, whom he calls the “proletarian of the gods”, Camus notes: “they had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour”. Indeed, Camus interrupts his retelling of the myth of Sisyphus to make the comparison explicit: “The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks and this fate is no less absurd” than that of Sisyphus (*MS*: 107–9; *E*: 195–6). As Carroll suggests, whereas Camus “says nothing more as to where such a proletarian consciousness could lead in the case of the worker . . . especially if he were to join with others in active protest and then resistance”, the reason for this can be seen in the image of the solitary Sisyphus, who has no awareness of “class or collectivity”. But of course, as Camus himself insists, his version of the myth of Sisyphus “is only a starting point – a possible origin for another form of history (or histories)”. Although Sisyphus is the “absurd hero” of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and “Camus makes Sisyphus’s lucidity about his condition and his scorn for his tormentors indications of his ‘victory’ over both”, Sisyphus’s victory remains “individual and psychological, not collective and historical”. Sisyphus’s happiness “is a sublime joy . . . but no sense is given in the essay that he is anticipating joining with others” (Carroll 2007b: 65). Nevertheless, Camus’s own personal political commitments (his joining of the French Resistance in 1943, quickly becoming editor-in-chief of the clandestine

Resistance newspaper *Combat*), clearly suggest that his account of Sisyphus's scorn-filled revolt against the gods can be read as a first definite step towards a more general conception of political and social commitment and resistance.³⁰

The Outsider

Lying is not only saying what isn't true. It is also, in fact especially, saying more than is true and, in the case of the human heart, saying more than one feels.

(TO: 118; TRN: 1928)

Published, like *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in 1942 in Nazi-occupied Paris, *The Outsider* is a first-person narrative describing the life of a young *pied-noir* or European Algerian named Meursault. The novel is based around three important events: the funeral of Meursault's mother, during which he displays a disconcerting lack of emotion; his killing of an unnamed Arab under fairly obscure circumstances; and Meursault's trial and impending execution. The story culminates in the hero being condemned to death, and concludes with him confronting his fate at the guillotine. The first thing to note in approaching this frequently obscure novel is that *The Outsider*, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Caligula* (the last of which is discussed below) have an unusual mutual intimacy. Indeed, Camus had originally intended to have them published together in a single volume.³¹ Accordingly, although we do not of course read them as a single text, if we are to read *The Outsider* as a novel of ideas, then the severe limits imposed on the meaning of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* need to be taken into account.

For Camus, Meursault is the absurd hero *par excellence*. His impending execution has nothing whatever to do with his killing of the forever-unnamed Arab. He was killed because of his social non-conformity, exemplified by his failure to express conventional grief after the death of his mother. Camus insists that at the heart of this non-conformity is a refusal to lie, noting that "lying is not only saying what isn't true. It is also, in fact especially, saying more than is true and, in the case of the human heart, saying more than one feels".³² This affirmation of Meursault's exemplary honesty is the focus of my consideration of the novel, not only because it is affirmed in the context of the absurd, but also because it is central to one of the most influential critiques of *The Outsider*, that of Conor Cruise O'Brien.

For Cruise O'Brien, far from portraying any kind of philosophical or political truth, the novel in fact promotes a nefarious fiction about colonial Algeria: "What appears to the casual reader as a contemptuous attack on the court is not in fact an attack at all: on the contrary, by suggesting that the court is impartial between Arab and Frenchman, it implicitly denies the colonial reality and sustains the colonial fiction", the "fiction" being that a Frenchman in Algeria who had killed an Arab would be convicted in a court, a fiction that Cruise O'Brien argues is "vital to the status quo", to the legitimacy of the French colonial domination of Algeria.³³ The allegation of dishonesty in this depiction of "impartial" justice in Algeria places

Cruise O'Brien in the company of critics such as Henri Kréa and Pierre Nora, for whom Meursault's act is "the subconscious realisation of the obscure and puerile dream of the 'poor white' Camus never ceased to be", and for whom Camus was, like other *pieds-noirs*, "consciously frozen in historical immobility", "unable to confront", adds Cruise O'Brien, "the problem of the European-Arab relation".³⁴

However, there is a far greater weight of evidence to support the inclination of his "casual reader" than Cruise O'Brien admits. I hope to show that a very strong case can be made, by a careful reader, in favour of the view that Meursault was indeed convicted and executed for failing to behave in a socially conventional fashion at the funeral of his mother. This becomes immediately clear when Meursault is first arrested after the killing: initially, in fact, "nobody seemed very interested in my case", and it was only later on, once they discovered his behaviour at a time when convention dictated Meursault should be publicly mourning his mother's death, that people began to "eye [him] with curiosity" (*TO*: 63; *TRN*: 1171). Later still, when, in bewilderment at the way that his trial is being conducted, Meursault's lawyer asks whether his client is being accused of burying his mother or killing a man, the prosecution replies that the two cannot be dissociated: "Yes . . . I accuse this man of burying his mother like a heartless criminal."³⁵ According to this interpretation, an interpretation supported, as we shall see, by the character of much of his contemporary political journalism, Camus was actually suggesting that a European Algerian was more likely to be condemned to death for failing to express himself according to social convention than he would be for killing an Arab. It is in this context, too, that we must consider the Arab's continued anonymity.

Cruise O'Brien suggests that it is Meursault's dishonesty rather than his honesty that is proved by close reading of the novel: he argues, for example, that Camus's hero lies when he writes a letter for his neighbour Raymond, designed to "deceive" his Arab girlfriend "and expose her to humiliation".³⁶ The only thing that Meursault refuses to lie about, Cruise O'Brien insists, is his own feelings. While this observation is in many respects correct, as Joseph McBride has argued, Cruise O'Brien's judgement is undermined by his failure to appreciate the context in which Camus affirms Meursault's honesty (McBride n.d.: 55). Meursault is honest within the context of the absurd; he is as honest as the absurd will allow. He is honest when he feels he can speak in honesty – that is, ultimately, in relation to his own feelings.³⁷ The absurd disallows him the possibility of constructing criteria for determining good and bad, right and wrong, in other more inclusive or social contexts. Meursault's perceived dishonesty amounts only to his refusal to accept that there are objective criteria for determining a scale of moral values. When Camus spoke of Meursault's honesty, it was this kind of honesty that he had in mind. Furthermore, while Meursault is no more an exemplar of moral behaviour than Sisyphus or Don Juan, he does exhibit a kind of honesty that, as we shall see, is conspicuously absent from most of the other, ostensibly reputable, characters in the novel.

Cruise O'Brien's failure to take Meursault's reasoning into account is exemplified in the very episode in which he argues that Meursault's dishonesty is most apparent: the writing of a letter for his neighbour Raymond, a letter designed to trick

Raymond's girlfriend into a humiliating trap. Meursault states: "I wrote the letter. I did it rather haphazardly, but I did my best to please Raymond because I had *no reason not to please him*."³⁸ He lacked the moral grounds required for him to refuse Raymond's request. Clearly then, had he refused, he would have done so on the grounds of moral beliefs he didn't actually possess. Such a refusal, Camus implies, would have been dishonest, since lying is "in fact especially, saying more than is true and, in the case of the human heart, saying more than one feels".³⁹ Once we situate Meursault within the context of the absurd we can begin to see that the "lies" he tells are less a consequence of dishonesty than a consequence of stubborn honesty in the midst of the moral equivalence apparently consequent on the absurd.

Other, more direct, examples of Meursault's honesty can be seen early in the second part of the novel. For example, he notes that when he was first arrested, "I was put in a room with several other prisoners, most of them Arabs. They laughed when they saw me. Then they asked me what I'd done. I told them that I'd killed an Arab and there was silence."⁴⁰ Indeed, Meursault expresses a strong (albeit potentially pathological) sense of honesty when he reads on a piece of paper discovered in his cell of the murder of a man by his mother and sister. The man had been in disguise; his mother and sister killed themselves when they discovered what they had done. Meursault's response is intriguing: "I decided that the traveller had deserved it really and that you should never play around."⁴¹ For Camus, Meursault represents the modern Sisyphus, the authentic man in a world bereft of transcendent meaning.⁴² He is the one who lives the absurd in revolt, a revolt that demands not only that he live with a jealous love for physical, sensory existence, but also that he take all actions as morally equivalent (McBride n.d.: 58).

This interpretation of *The Outsider* is further endorsed if we shift our attention from the often obscure psychology of Meursault and consider the novel's depiction of Meursault's confrontation with society as a whole in the context of the absurd (the "absurd" understood primarily as an epistemological claim, a claim regarding the sorts of things we can say we know). Adjusting the focus of our reading of the novel in this way, away from Meursault (whose status as Sisyphusian absurd hero Camus affirms⁴³) and onto the depiction of his relationship with society in general, our attention is drawn to events surrounding two central points in the novel: the wake and funeral of Meursault's mother and, especially, Meursault's trial (the wake itself at one point seems to take the form of a trial, Meursault noting that "at one point I had the ridiculous impression that [the other mourners] were there to judge me") (*TO*: 15; *TRN*: 1130). In both of these cases, Meursault's lucidity and honesty are seen to come into conflict with the dishonesty of society in general. From the perspective of the absurd, these two events, paradoxically, could be said to have greater significance than the killing of the unnamed Arab. The killing of the unnamed Arab, I suggest, serves both as a formal necessity, so that Meursault *could* stand trial, and as a powerful criticism of the inherent racism of French-Algerian justice, where an individual kills an Arab but is executed for failing to cry at his mother's funeral.

The opening lines of *The Outsider*, “Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know”, are probably among the most famous in modern literature, and tend to be interpreted as evidence of Meursault’s jaded indifference, stoic or not, to normal emotional and moral behaviour. However, although there is certainly some justification to this interpretation, what tends to be overlooked is that Meursault’s jarring statement is a direct result of the perfunctory telegram sent by the retirement home where Mme Meursault had lived for the previous several years: “Mother passed away, Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.” As Meursault explains, “That doesn’t mean anything. It might have been yesterday” (TO: 9; TRN: 1125). This subtly constructed passage should make us wary of arriving too quickly at conclusions regarding the character of Meursault. It should also make us wary of arriving too quickly at conclusions regarding those characters with whom Meursault comes into contact. Indeed, if we are to accept Camus’s claims regarding Meursault’s martyrdom for the truth, then we cannot ignore the degree to which the society that condemns Meursault is constructed upon deceit and lies. This dishonesty, and the extent to which, for Camus, it is associated with religious belief, becomes apparent early in the novel when Meursault arrives at the retirement home, and the home’s director tells Meursault that his mother “apparently often mentioned to her friends that she wished to have a religious funeral. I’ve taken it upon myself to make the necessary arrangements. But I thought I should let you know.” Meursault notes, “I thanked him. Though she wasn’t an atheist, mother never had given a thought to religion in her life” (TO: 11–12; TRN: 1127).

This form of dishonesty, and Meursault’s confrontation with it, become far more pronounced after his arrest. If we regard the absurd as primarily a claim regarding the severe limits on human knowledge, we shall see that from the perspective of the absurd perhaps the most interesting episode in the novel is that of the judicial process, culminating in Meursault’s trial. Heroically absurd, Meursault comes into conflict with the false positivism of both the state and its proxy, the court.⁴⁴ The trial stages a confrontation between the simple and direct language of Meursault, who regularly admits to uncertainty and never admits to more than he knows, and the false and bombastic language of the state.⁴⁵ As a confrontation between, on the one hand, conventional and institutional law and morality, and, on the other, the absurd, where law and morality rather than the absurd appear to embody injustice, it is worth looking at more closely.

Meursault’s claims during his trial that he “hadn’t intended to kill the Arab” and that “it was because of the sun” will provoke only laughter in the courtroom, but for the investigating magistrate, who questions Meursault before the trial commences, only one aspect of his confession “didn’t make sense” (TO: 99, 68; TRN: 1196, 1173). Why, he wanted to know, after shooting the Arab once, did Meursault pause and then shoot the lifeless body four more times? It quickly becomes clear that this interests the magistrate (as, indeed, it will interest the state’s prosecution) far more than why Meursault shot the Arab the first time. Indeed, it seems to interest them far more than the fact *that* he shot the never-named Arab at all. (Meursault himself

seems to hint that these four gratuitous shots, rather than the killing of the Arab itself, are the reason for his own impending execution.⁴⁶) When Meursault replies that the magistrate was wrong to insist on this point, that it didn't matter that much, the magistrate immediately interrupts him and his real concern is exposed. He is clearly not interested in the crime of which Meursault has been accused, but in his non-conformism, his atheism and, especially, his lack of religiously inspired remorse and guilt:

he interrupted me and pleaded with me one last time, drawing himself up to his full height and asking me if I believed in God. I said no. He sat down indignantly. He told me that it was impossible, that all men believed in God, even those who wouldn't face up to Him. That was his belief, and if he should ever doubt it, his life would become meaningless. "Do you want my life to become meaningless?" he cried.

For the magistrate, who at one point brandishes a crucifix in Meursault's face, exclaiming "I am a Christian. I ask him to forgive your sins. How can you not believe that he suffered for your sake?" Meursault becomes "Mr Antichrist". For Camus, he represents "the only Christ we deserve".⁴⁷

The state prosecutor, similarly, ignores the actual killing for which Meursault supposedly stands accused, and instead accuses him of being "morally responsible for his mother's death".⁴⁸ This compounds the growing sense that Meursault will be condemned to death because of his social non-conformism, and further highlights the sense that the actual killing for which Meursault is supposedly standing trial is of no consequence whatever to the court. Claiming to have "peered into" Meursault's soul, "he said the truth was that I didn't have one, a soul, and that I had no access to any humanity nor to any of the moral principles which protect the human heart". The prosecutor insists that in the case of Meursault "the wholly negative ethic of tolerance must give way to the stricter but loftier ethic of justice. Especially when we encounter a man whose heart is so empty that it forms a chasm which threatens to engulf society." He declares that Meursault had "no place in a society whose most fundamental rules [he] ignored" and calls "with a sense of urgent and sacred duty", with a feeling of "horror . . . at the sight of a man in whom I see nothing but a monster" and with "an easy mind", "for this man's head".⁴⁹ This febrile reasoning, grounded in "horror at [his] insensitivity", further permits the prosecutor to accuse Meursault of being "guilty of the murder which this court is to judge tomorrow" (a case of alleged parricide), while, it should be noted, neglecting all mention of the actual killing of the Arab for which Meursault was arrested.⁵⁰ Certainly whatever the prosecutor may have thought of Meursault's killing of the Arab, it was clearly not *that* crime to which he was referring when he accused Meursault of a crime equivalent to "parricide". As the trial scene progresses, the reader becomes increasingly aware that the prosecutor, sated with his own self-righteousness, represents a society with the power to send Meursault to his death

for his non-conformity, for his refusal to lie, to say “more than is true”, and indeed that it will.

Meursault's defence lawyer articulates an attitude essentially identical to that of the prosecution. This becomes evident from their first meeting, in Meursault's prison cell:

“Let's get straight on with it.” He sat down on the bed and explained that some investigation had been made into my private life. It had been discovered that my mother had died recently in a home . . . the magistrates had learned that I'd “displayed a lack of emotion” on the day of my mother's funeral . . . “it matters a great deal. And the prosecution will have a strong case if I can't find anything to reply.” (TO: 64; TRN: 1172)

Initially he is concerned by Meursault's unwillingness to recite conventional platitudes of grief and sorrow, but his attitude quickly turns to contempt when Meursault refuses to lie: “he asked me if he could say that I'd controlled my natural feelings” on the day of his mother's funeral. “I said, ‘No. because it's not true.’ He looked at me in a particular way, as if he found me slightly disgusting.”⁵¹ The lawyer's disgust seems motivated less by Meursault's behaviour at his mother's funeral than by his apparent unwillingness to lie, to follow his lawyer's implicit advice and say what he knew to be untrue in order to improve his chances in court. This sense that the defence is playing the same “game”, which Meursault alone refuses to play, is confirmed when, rather than object to it, his lawyer apes the spurious reasoning of the prosecution, claiming that he too had peered into Meursault's soul, and indeed claiming for himself greater talent in metaphysical divination than his colleague: “in fact I read it like an open book”. Meursault himself comments at this point: “with all these long sentences and the endless days and hours that people had been talking about my soul, I just had the impression that I was drowning in some sort of colourless liquid” (TO: 118, 100–101; TRN: 1920, 1197).

In the testimony of the warden from the nursing home where Mme Meursault died we begin to see a more explicit form of dishonesty: “He was asked whether mother used to complain about me and he said yes but that his inmates had rather a habit of complaining about their relatives. The judge asked him to specify whether she used to reproach me for having sent her to a home and the warden again said yes. But this time he didn't add anything.”⁵² The significance of Meursault's last comment becomes clear when we remember the warden's words of consolation at the beginning of the novel:

You've no need to justify yourself, my dear boy. I've read your mother's file. You weren't able to look after her properly. She needed a nurse. You only have a modest income. And all things considered, she was happier here . . . you're a young man, a different generation, and she must have been bored living with you. (TO: 10–11; TRN: 1126)

The warden's testimony in court is clearly motivated by a desire to be seen to be on the side of the society that condemns Meursault, just as his desire to satisfy social convention motivates him to arrange a religious funeral for Mme Meursault, who, as we have seen, "had never given a thought to religion in her life" (*TO*: 12; *TRN*: 1127). Stating that he had been surprised by Meursault's "calmness", the warden goes on to explain that Meursault "hadn't wanted to see [his] mother", that he "hadn't cried once", that he had "left straight after the funeral without paying [his] respects at her grave" and that he did not know his mother's age. This testimony is sufficiently effective for the state's prosecutor to deem it unnecessary to add to it through cross-examination (*TO*: 86–7; *TRN*: 1186–7). However, as effective as it may have been in condemning Meursault in the eyes of the jury, the warden's testimony is false in at least one critical respect. Whereas he claims that Meursault did not wish to see his mother, the careful reader will have noticed that in fact immediately upon his arrival at the home, Meursault makes exactly this request and that, crucially, his request is denied on the grounds that he must first see the warden.⁵³

Perhaps the most dramatic of these encounters is with the prison chaplain, who tells Meursault, towards the end of the novel, of his "certainty" regarding the success of his appeal against his sentence (curiously, he also admits to Meursault on the same occasion that he "knows nothing about" his appeal) (*TO*: 113, 111; *TRN*: 1206, 1205). The chaplain informs Meursault that he is "burdened with a sin from which [he] must free [himself]". Meursault replies that he "didn't know what a sin was", that he had "simply been told that [he] was guilty": "I was guilty and I was paying for it and there was nothing more that could be asked of me" (*TO*: 113; *TRN*: 1206–7). Meursault's blank refusal of the chaplain's proffered consolations prompt the priest to add: "I'm on your side. But you can't see that because your heart is blind. I shall pray for you." Meursault responds with an explosion of anger, insulting the priest and telling him that he did not want his prayers: "I was pouring everything out at him from the bottom of my heart in a paroxysm of joy and anger." What Meursault objects to, far more than the religious platitudes themselves, is the certainty they imply: "He seemed so certain of everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head" (*TO*: 115; *TRN*: 1208). Here too, more than ever before, Meursault clearly represents the absurd hero, exhibiting the same wild courage and rebellious scorn in accepting his fate that we saw in Sisyphus.

What is increasingly apparent in each of these cases, from the magistrate to the chaplain, is that beyond their religiously inspired and often violent indignation, beyond even the fact that the actual crime for which Meursault stands accused is almost completely ignored, is a level of certainty that Meursault finds incomprehensible and Camus evidently finds, in the context of the absurd, unjustifiable. This analysis may then lead us to reflect on the differences between the crime that the state commits in executing a man for non-conformity and the crime Meursault commits in killing the unnamed Arab. It seems that the chief difference is that although Meursault is certainly responsible for the death of the Arab, his was a totally unpremeditated act, whereas, in stark contrast, the execution of Meursault is committed by the machinery of the state, by culturally specific mores dressed up as

objective moral principles. Nevertheless, although Meursault was executed by the state for not crying at his mother's funeral, Camus nowhere suggests that Meursault was not *responsible* for the death of the Arab.⁵⁴ Several critics appear to suggest that the killing of the unnamed Arab was in some way "excusable", and more generally, there frequently appears to be a temptation to interpret Camus's claim that Meursault was killed for failing to cry at his mother's funeral as itself implying that the court had no good reason to try Meursault for killing an Arab.⁵⁵ Meursault was condemned to death for not crying at his mother's funeral, but this clearly does not itself imply that he should not have been tried in a court for the killing of the Arab. This point should become clearer when we consider the suggestion in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that to "a mind imbued with the absurd . . . there may be responsible persons but there are no guilty ones, in its opinion".⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, then, Meursault's understanding of "guilt" is associated explicitly with the judgement of society, which suggests that for Meursault guilt itself is socially constructed. We note that it is only after the warden and caretaker testify against him, citing his failure to cry at the funeral, his failure to pay respects at his mother's grave, the fact that he slept, smoked and drank coffee during her wake, that Meursault comments, "I stupidly felt like crying because I could tell how much all these people hated me", and "for the first time I realised that I was guilty".⁵⁷ Later, during the prosecution's summing-up – a summing-up in which the actual killing continues to be largely overlooked in favour of the events surrounding his mother's funeral – Meursault complains that he cannot understand "how the qualities of an ordinary man could be used as damning evidence of guilt".⁵⁸ In contrast, on several occasions Meursault does indicate an understanding of the concept of responsibility. Although his understanding of responsibility (or fault) is evoked in association with his mother's death, and while he admits to feeling "a certain kind of annoyance" rather than regret for what he had done, I also think that Meursault would have recognized his responsibility for the death of the unnamed Arab (*TO*: 9, 10, 15, 23, 24, 69; *TRN*: 1125, 1126, 1130, 1136, 1137, 1174).

Whereas many critics, such as Conor Cruise O'Brien, perceive a distinct indifference in the character of Meursault, the novel itself repeatedly reminds us of the simple pleasures in which he found joy: "I was assailed by memories of a life which was no longer mine, but in which I had found my simplest pleasures: the smells of summer, the part of town that I loved, the sky on certain evenings, Maria's dresses and the way she laughed."⁵⁹ Indeed, far from proclaiming an ethic of indifference, Camus believed that *The Outsider* had, as well as the obvious "metaphysical" or absurd meaning, a "social" meaning.⁶⁰ The "social" meaning Camus claimed for the novel relates to its comment on the forces of social conformity, on the death penalty, but also, as I have argued, on the judicial system in Algeria, which he suggests was more concerned with a *pied-noir* not crying at his mother's funeral than with his killing of an Arab. Nevertheless, it seems that to a large extent this social sense was obscured, though perhaps not suffocated, by the sheer metaphysical weight of the novel's pervasive absurdity. This is not to agree with Cruise O'Brien, who claims that the novel may posit Meursault as a metaphysical rebel – a rebel against Christian cosmogony

or indeed any idea of the supernatural – but that this “is in no sense a revolt against the values of Camus’ culture” (Cruise O’Brien 1970: 31). Quite to the contrary, the novel is about how a fundamentally sincere and honest man becomes a mortal victim of the state judicial system not because he refused to tell the truth, but because he refused to lie. *The Outsider* is a plea for the rights of the individual against social conformity and against the state – in a very profound way, despite its status as absurd novel *par excellence*, it can be seen as a restatement of classical liberalism. *The Outsider* is concerned almost exclusively with constructing a model of what the confrontation with the absurd may look like in a social or political context. Camus is concerned with developing a fictional image of the ontological position dictated by the absurd.⁶¹ Accordingly, although there is a clear dimension of social criticism in the novel, there is no *positive* ethic, no ethic beyond the basic principle of sincerity. The austere dignity of Meursault confronting his death, his complete refusal of hope and despair, is Camus’s negative ethic. The question remains, however, whether there is anything to stop Meursault, as the absurd hero *par excellence*, unflinching in the face of the apparent meaninglessness of human existence, from becoming a nihilist. This is the question that is pursued in *Caligula*.

Caligula

And yet – since this world is the only one we have, why not plead its cause?
(COP: 46; TRN: 25)

Camus seeks to create in *Caligula* the historical *Homo absurdus*, not simply to complement the fictional and mythical absurd heroes of *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, but also to represent the very real implications that may result from the absurd once it has left the rarefied air of fiction or myth to firmly take its place in history.⁶² Whereas the novel and essay, which precede by two years the play in its published form, tend to focus on the radical uncertainty consequent on the absurd, in *Caligula* the focus is firmly on its possible social and political implications. The paradox of Meursault, as both absurd hero and assassin, is pursued in greater detail in the play, through the exchanges between the Emperor Caligula and his chief adversary, Cherea, exchanges in which we see conscious awareness of the absurd leading to both a nihilistic penchant for murder and a will to resist precisely that tendency. It is in this context that a politics of revolt is seen to emerge from the exigencies of the absurd.

The play opens at the apex of a political crisis precipitated by the death of the emperor’s sister and mistress, Drusilla. Caligula has been emperor for about one year, and we are told that, as an emperor, “he was perfection itself” (COP: 36; TRN: 10). The young poet Scipio, who will take part in the assassination of Caligula at the play’s end, notes that the emperor had “been very good to me . . . I shall never forget some of the things he said. He told me life isn’t easy, but it has consolations: religion, art, and the love one inspires in others. He often told me that the only mistake one

makes in life is to cause others suffering. He tried to be a just man" (COP: 42; TRN: 19). However, Caligula's character appears transformed by the death of Drusilla. In fact, Caligula claimed to be less affected by her death itself than by "the truth" her death revealed: a "childishly simple, obvious, almost silly truth, but one that's hard to come by and heavy to endure", the truth that "men die, and they are not happy" (COP: 40; TRN: 16). Drusilla's death, and his irrational desire to recover her, provokes in Caligula a sudden awareness of the absurd, "that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints" (MS: 40; E: 135).

Alone among Camus's absurd works, *Caligula* directly addresses the question of whether or not the absurd necessarily results in nihilism.⁶³ We see in *Caligula* all the characteristics of the absurd rebel – he exhibits the same courage and lucidity as Sisyphus or Meursault. But we also see, apparently derived from the same reasoning, an unquenchable thirst for murder and tyranny. Camus's awareness that the absurd (specifically, the moral indifference apparently consequent on the absurd) may force itself onto the stage of history with more sinister and bloody consequences than might have been imagined in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is clearly in evidence here. Caligula's authority as Roman Emperor gives him unique privileges. When he exclaims, "I'm surrounded by lies and self-deception. But I've had enough of that; I wish men to live by the light of truth. And I've the power to make them do so", he has the power to "make" the whole world "discover" the absurd (COP: 41; TRN: 16). However, while Caligula may be "a lunatic absolutist", Camus makes it clear that the emperor is also an idealist (Freeman 1971: 38). He is like Meursault, absolved of hope and brutally honest. He is like Sisyphus, whose scorn defies the gods. But he is also Caesar, with a veto on the lives of all of his people.⁶⁴ Camus has made considerable effort to enlist our sympathy for Caligula, but ultimately, he wants us to react, like Cherea, who leads the eventual assassination of Caligula, by believing what the emperor says to be *true* but *wrong*.⁶⁵

Reflections on the meaning and significance of the absurd in the play are confined primarily to the lines of its anti-hero Caligula and his main antagonist Cherea. Crucially, although Cherea alone confronts the reasoning behind Caligula's nihilism, it is clear that he too understands, or recognizes, the absurd. A moderate, an advocate of compromise, his significance to the meaning of the text grows as the need for action grows. He claims that what he wants is to live and to be happy, and that neither "is possible if one pushes the absurd to its logical conclusions". Accordingly, although he finds Caligula's murderous philosophy "logical from start to finish", he rejects both the philosophical and political implications that Caligula draws from the absurd (COP: 82–3, 53; TRN: 78, 35). In a key exchange in the play, Cherea confronts Caligula's nihilistic assertion that "I believe that all [actions] are equivalent" with a qualitative ethic: "I believe that some actions are more admirable [*plus belles*] than others."⁶⁶ This assertion marks a clear departure from the "ethic of quantity" posited in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.⁶⁷ Although Cherea does not say (or cannot say) that some actions are simply "better" than others, although he discriminates between actions using a primarily aesthetic term, this does not mean that the distinction is *merely* aesthetic.

Although only Caligula and the ineffectual patricians actually pretend to talk about morality itself, it is clear that Cherea's objection to Caligula is based on his objection to the nihilistic implications the emperor has drawn from the absurd.⁶⁸ Whether or not this objection is "moral" is moot. Cherea makes it clear that what he objects to in Caligula is not his tyranny over the patricians (his taking of their money, even their lives) but his nihilism. If he takes part in the assassination of Caligula, he does so "to combat a big idea – an ideal, if you like – whose triumph would mean the end of everything". "What's intolerable", he says, "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 . . . all I wish is to regain some peace of mind in a world that has regained a meaning. What spurs me on is not ambition but fear, my very reasonable fear of that inhuman vision in which my life means no more than a speck of dust." Cherea's rejection of Caligula's nihilism clearly implies the recognition of a value to human life. This ability to distinguish qualitatively becomes more evident when Cherea asks Scipio to join the conspiracy: "this killing", he says, "needs honourable men to sponsor it" (*COP*: 53–4, 86*; *TRN*: 34–5, 82). Indeed, when Scipio (whose father Caligula has tortured and killed) protests that he feels too close to Caligula to partake in the assassination, Cherea's sense of scandal becomes even more apparent: "[Caligula] has taught you to despair. And to have instilled despair into a young heart is fouler than the foulest crimes he has committed up to now. I assure you, *that* alone would justify me in killing him out of hand" (*COP*: 87; *TRN*: 84). At the heart of the play is a dialogue between Cherea and Caligula, in which the former tells the emperor both that "I understand you far too well", and that he regards him as "noxious and cruel, vain and selfish . . . a constant menace". He explains his objection to Caligula's nihilism thus:

I like, and need, to feel secure. So do most men. They resent living in a world where the most preposterous fancy may at any moment become a reality, and the absurd transfixes their lives, like a dagger in the heart. I feel as they do. I refuse to live in a topsy-turvy world. I want to know where I stand, and to stand secure . . . my plan may not be logical but at least it's sound . . . I'll be no party to your logic. I've a very different notion of my duties as a man.

He tells Caligula, "I understand, and to a point, agree with you," but he adds, "but you're pernicious, and you've got to go" (*COP*: 82, 83; *TRN*: 77–8, 79).

In a recent essay, Colin Davis (2007) claims that in this confrontation Caligula and Cherea "articulate the ethical impasse at the heart of the philosophy of the Absurd" and suggests that several of Camus's subsequent works "can be seen as repeatedly re-staging" the same quarrel.⁶⁹ While I think the observation that this confrontation echoes across Camus's works is astute, it seems something of an exaggeration to consider the confrontation an "impasse". The ethical subtext of *Caligula* is not as ambiguous as Davis suggests, for while Cherea may eschew specifically moral language, this does not mean that his objection to Caligula is without any moral content. Although the ethic Cherea defends has yet to be defined in

anything like a satisfactory way, this does not mean that there is no ethic at all in Cherea's objection to the implications Caligula has derived from the absurd. In any event, whether or not we want to call this objection a moral objection is less significant than the fact that Cherea clearly rejects the conclusions Caligula has drawn from the absurd. This same exaggeration also leads Davis to the view that the assassination of Caligula "continues the sequence of murders that it is intended to terminate". When Caligula himself may be killed at the end of the play, says Davis, "the principle of senseless violence which he embodies is implemented again in the very moment of his death" (Davis 2007: 115–16). However, it is clear that the killing of Caligula is markedly different from those senseless murders perpetrated by or on behalf of the emperor that precede it. Indeed, as I show in a later chapter, the details of the assassination of Caligula in Camus's play, and the ways in which they differ from the account in Suetonius, indicate that although he placed severe limits on what he considered to be justifiable violence, he nonetheless considered the killing of the emperor morally legitimate. In marked contrast with the numerous killings perpetrated or sanctioned by Caligula on the basis of the absurd, this particular act constitutes explicit evidence that Camus rejects some potential implications of the absurd (and also that he would advocate violent struggle against such implications). Indeed, the assassination of Caligula marks an extremely significant point in the development of Camus's thinking – both with respect to what can be considered a legitimate response to the absurd and with respect to the idea of legitimate revolt, which he will examine in detail in *The Rebel*.

Although it is clear, especially in his killing of Caligula, that Cherea rejects the ethic of quantity tentatively posited in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and embraced by the emperor, he does not yet posit, at least in any recognizable way, an alternative.⁷⁰ Instead, what we find articulated here is a negative reaction to the implications derived from the absurd by Caligula, a negative reaction similar to the refusal Camus will identify in *The Rebel* as being at the beginning of all revolt. By replacing the "benign indifference of the universe" suggested in *The Outsider* with the tyrannical excesses of Caligula as a dramatic backdrop, Camus forces a confrontation between the absurd and nihilism. To the extent to which the characters in *Caligula* rebel against Caligula's ethic of destruction, the ethic implicit in the assassination can be said to be qualitative: Caligula's "freedom", as he himself appears to suggest at the play's end, wasn't "the right one". One may suggest that this ethic seems inadequate, and Cherea's revolt against Caligula, based on an objection that he himself admits may not be "logical", seems to leave a great deal to be desired (*COP*: 103, 82; *TRN*: 108, 78). However, it can be argued that the scope of the absurd trilogy was more limited than this, and that the primary concern of these texts has been to examine the absurd and discover its exigencies. In *Caligula* Camus asks whether the absurd leads inexorably to nihilism, and through the character of Cherea (and, to a lesser extent, Scipio) 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, which Camus will examine in greater detail in *The Plague* and, especially, *The Rebel*.⁷¹ However, although *Caligula* suggests there is a

need for an affirmative ethic to match the epistemological deconstruction wrought by the absurd method, the play itself makes little if any progress towards defining such an ethic, and suggests only, as a first step, that the absurd does not itself “dictate death” (*MS*: 16; *E*: 103).

Between nihilism and hope

Where lay the difference? Simply that you readily accepted despair and I never yielded to it. (*RRD*: 27; *E*: 240)

In 1942, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus had already asserted that he was interested “not so much in absurd discoveries as in their consequences”, and he asks whether the absurd requires that one “die voluntarily” or that one “hope in spite of everything” (*MS*: 22; *E*: 109). We have seen that he rejects the idea that the absurd itself leads to suicide, and accordingly, we can say that he rejects the idea that the absurd may require that one “die voluntarily”. However, his attitude to the possibility of hope seems far from optimistic. In “Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka”, originally written as part of *The Myth of Sisyphus* but not published until 1948, Camus claims that Kafka reintroduces hope into a world where hope is absent, and identifies this hope with Kierkegaard’s “philosophical suicide” (for Kierkegaard, Camus notes, “earthly hope must be killed; only then can we be saved by true hope”).⁷² Kafka “refuses his god moral nobility, evidence, virtue, coherence”, Camus says, “but only the better to fall into his arms”. In Kafka’s works, “the absurd is recognized, accepted and man is resigned to it, but from then on we know that it has ceased to be the absurd. Within the limits of the human condition, what greater hope than the hope that allows an escape from that condition? As I see once more, existential thought in this regard (and contrary to current opinion) is steeped in a vast hope.” But in that leap that characterizes all existential thought, Camus asks, “how can one fail to see the mark of a lucidity that repudiates itself?” In this way, Camus sees Kafka as guilty of the same philosophical suicide he diagnosed in the works of the existentialists discussed elsewhere in the essay. He identifies in Kafka, as he had already identified in the existentialists, “an attempt to recapture God through what negates Him, to recognize Him not through the categories of goodness or beauty, but behind the empty and hideous aspect of His indifference, of His injustice and of His hatred” (*MS*: 121, 119–20; *E*: 209, 207).

All of this seems to warn us against seeking, or claiming to have found, hope in the absurd works of Camus, for here hope seems to imply a quest for or a belief in the eternal in which lucidity repudiates itself. However, although Camus states that lucid awareness of the absurd “implies a total absence of hope”, he also insists that this total absence of hope “has nothing to do with despair”, and as such, his approach to the possibility of hope in the context of the absurd should be looked at carefully.⁷³ Hope that is “an attempt to recapture God” is, it seems, a very specific type of hope, and repudiation of such hope does not seem to involve a repudiation of what could

be called “finite” hope, a type of hope that I will suggest is present in all of Camus’s works (with the possible exception of *The Misunderstanding*).⁷⁴ Certainly Camus rejected the religiously inspired “infinite” hope he identified in Kafka and Kierkegaard. But we must consider what lucidity reveals to him in relation to “finite” hope, and what ethic, if any, this might prescribe. On several occasions, Camus spoke of his pessimism in relation to “the human condition” and of his optimism in relation to “man”.⁷⁵ Similarly, while we can say that neither Meursault nor Cherea finds a reason to hope in their absurd condition, we can also find in Camus’s absurd works evidence to suggest that hope may be found, or nurtured, in the relations between men – as is suggested in the actions of the conspirators in *Caligula* and, as we shall see, in *The Plague*. Already, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus had suggested a distinction:

There is hope and hope. To me the optimistic work of Henri Bordeaux seems peculiarly discouraging. This is because it has nothing for the discriminating. Malraux’s thought on the other hand is always bracing. But in these two cases neither the same hope nor the same despair is at issue. (MS: 120; E: 208)

Here, Camus is explicitly calling for a distinction between two forms of hope. Whereas he associates certain expressions of hope with Kierkegaardian philosophical suicide, a type of hope we could perhaps call “infinite” hope, it seems clear that Camus had in mind the possibility of there being another type of hope – a kind of hope that, although not permitting an escape from the absurd confrontation between the individual and his world, nevertheless has philosophical or ethical significance for “finite” humankind living in lucid awareness of the absurd. This, by necessity, is a finite hope, a mundane hope in an unsponsored universe. Absurd hope is lucid hope, a hope tempered by an awareness of the limits to human comprehension and by a stubborn refusal to transgress the limits discerned through conscious awareness. From this perspective, when Camus states that “the absurd is the contrary of hope” or that the struggle with the absurd “implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair)”, he is referring to “infinite” hope (MS: 37, 34; E: 124, 121). For Camus, what I have called “finite” hope seems to emerge out of the resistance to both “infinite” hope, which he finds in Kierkegaard, and nihilism, exemplified by *Caligula*. Furthermore, it allows for the lucid understanding of the absurd human condition. Such “finite” hope maintains Sisyphian scorn (later to become rebellion) and keeps both “infinite” hope and despair at bay.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, the questions prompted by Camus’s absurd analysis remain. Are the cruelties of *Caligula* no less justified than acts of kindness or justice in an absurd world? Is there any intelligible difference between the lucidity of the absurd vision and the horror of the nihilistic proclamation? Is the absurd nihilistic? Camus certainly attempts to set a *limit* to the implications of the absurd, and had claimed as early as 1938, reviewing Sartre’s novel *Nausea*, that the “realisation that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself but only a beginning” (SEN: 167–9; E: 1417–19). Where “nihilism is not only despair and negation but, above all, the desire to despair and

negate", the absurd, in contrast, we are told, "does not liberate, it binds. It does not authorize all actions"; it "merely confers an equivalence on the consequences of those actions". It "does not recommend crime, for this would be childish, but it restores to remorse its futility" (R: 57–8; E: 467; MS: 65; E: 149–50. Cf. R: 57–61, 100–104; E: 467–71, 508–11). Although Camus may have insisted upon the conceptual integrity of the absurd, and its distinction from nihilism, his success in this endeavour may seem questionable. Ultimately, "everything is permitted" may indeed seem to imply that "nothing is forbidden". However, whereas nihilism is the deliberate and eternal negation of all values, the absurd is seen at least to admit the possibility of value. Camus objects to the transcendent truth that Kierkegaard, for example, embraces in order to escape the absurd, but this objection does not preclude the possibility of the creation of human or mundane values. The actions of the conspirators in *Caligula*, especially, seem to suggest that nihilism is not a necessary consequence of the absurd.⁷⁷ In this play in particular, Camus certainly does seem to suggest that *relative* values may well be defensible. But on what grounds could such a non-absolutist ethics be based?⁷⁸

That principle, as we have seen in *Caligula* and will see more clearly in *The Plague* and elsewhere, is the principle of human solidarity. "I have no concern with ideas or with the eternal", Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus*; "the truth that comes within my scope can be touched with the hand". The nexus of this mundane truth is, for Camus, in human relationships: there is, he says, "but one luxury for [the absurd hero] – that of human relations". Human solidarity is for Camus the fundamental link between the absurd and revolt.⁷⁹ Because awareness of the absurd is based on the individual consciousness and its relation to the world in which it finds itself, Camus's absurd hero is, at least initially, a necessarily solitary figure: consider the solitary exile of Meursault, *Caligula* and *Sisyphus*. Furthermore, it is this apparent solipsism, rather than the rejection of transcendence, that appears to present a major obstacle to the development of an ethic based upon the absurd (which Camus terms "revolt"). However, in Camus's analysis, the absurd subject, meditating on his condition, realizes at last that his condition is the common human condition, and crucially, this recognition gives rise to a solidarity that saves the individual conscious of the absurd from both solipsism and the temptation towards nihilism. "In absurdist experience", Camus says at the beginning of *The Rebel*,

suffering is individual. But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience. Therefore the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realise that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe . . . this evidence lures the individual from his solitude. It finds its first value on the whole human race. I rebel – therefore we exist.

(R: 22; E: 431–2)