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# Albert Camus's Ethics of Revolution as a Model for Ethical Thinking on Violent Revolutions for Catholics

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I propose an account of Camus's ethics in which violent revolutions are never morally permissible but nonetheless acceptable or necessary. My main thesis in this paper is that Camus's ethics of revolution and my defence of it, particularly the non-moral account of the permissibility of violent revolutions it comprises, can shed light on the reasonableness of participating in and supporting violent revolutions to some Catholics and the broader Christian community. My account of Camus's ethics of revolution and argument for its tenability will be compelling to some Catholics because they affirm their intuition that violent revolutions are morally untenable and show why it is nevertheless reasonable.

**Keywords:** revolution; violence; Camus; Catholic morality; ethics

## 1. Introduction

In the face of persistent and widespread socio-political oppression and poverty, revolution is a tempting proposition due to its potential to bring about free and just societies. Can violent revolutions be justifiable from the perspective of Catholic morality? Supposing that the answer to that question is an unqualified no, is there an alternative or non-moral normative framework by which Catholics may reasonably view violent revolutions as tenable? These are the questions I set out to answer in this paper. First, I contend that there are reasonable grounds for thinking that Catholic morality prohibits violent revolutions. Second, I argue that, nonetheless, there is a sensible, non-moral ground on which Catholics may violate, albeit regretfully, their morality and participate in or support violent revolutions.

By revolution, I mean any extra-constitutional attempt to transform societies by rapidly replacing old political systems, which are typically tyrannical and unjust, with new ones to ensure freedom and justice (Camus 1991, p. 104; Buchanan and Motchoulski 2023). They can be classified as either spontaneous or planned (Tiruneh 2014, p. 5). "By spontaneous, I mean revolution occurring without deliberate planning but with rapid speed" (Tiruneh 2014, p. 5). Examples include the French Revolution (1789), the Russian Revolution (1917), and the different revolutions that made up the Arab Spring (2010–2013). In contrast, planned revolutions are attempts to establish new political orders launched and carried out under the instructions and guidance of small groups, typically guerrilla forces (Tiruneh 2014, p. 5). It includes revolutions such as those in Japan (1867), China (1949), Cuba (1959), Venezuela (1962–1963), and Algeria (1954–1968). Planned revolutions always involve the use of violence, while spontaneous revolutions may be violent or non-violent.

Basically, Catholic morality is the idea that the right way to live involves a disposition of love towards humanity (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB 2006, p. 318)). And this especially means that the dignity of all persons must be respected and protected from violation (ibid.). From this point of view, violent revolutions are, at least prima facie, morally untenable since violence constitutes an assault on human dignity (Cahill 2019, p. 9).

Similarly, in his second and last philosophical treatise, *The Rebel*, Albert Camus (1991, p. 25) proposes an ethics which affirms love for humankind and involves the idea that the

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morally right way to live comprises devotion to protecting everyone from the violation or assault of "a dignity common to all".[1] Based on this moral perspective, Camus (1991, pp. 267–68) contends that violence is never morally justifiable and, by implication, that violent revolutions are never morally permissible. Nonetheless, his ethics includes a non-moral normative framework, namely, care, that makes him view violence as permissible and, thus, violent revolutions as permissible, despite its moral unjustifiability. Precisely, Camus (1991) seems to contend that by virtue of our care or wholehearted concern for mitigating or ending servitude and oppression, we can act violently and participate in violent revolutions insofar as they are likely to succeed, even though these acts are morally untenable. In his words, "Necessary and inexcusable" is how violence should appear to us (Camus 1991, p. 162).

Caring is a certain kind of volitional attitude. It involves wanting or desiring and liking something. Nevertheless, it is a special kind of desire and liking for something. According to Frankfurt (2006, pp. 18–19), "When we do care about something, we go beyond wanting it. We want to go on wanting it, at least until the goal has been reached. . . . We are disposed to take steps to refresh the desire if it should tend to fade. The caring entails, in other words, a commitment to the desire". There is thus a certain kind of wholehearted, serious attention or commitment to maintaining a certain attitude, whether it be a desire, want, or fondness for a thing when we care about it. What we care about and the requirements for its well-being or actualisation are not necessarily the same as the demands placed on us by morality. If one acts for the sake of an end while believing (1) that the means taken to achieve it is morally impermissible and (2) that the nobility or desirability of that end does not morally legitimise any action necessary for attaining it, then it is not the morality of that end nor the authority of morality that impels one's action. My account of Camus's ethics of revolution will show how both Camus's morality and Catholic morality at times clash with the commitment to promoting freedom and justice, forcing the faithful to side with either his care or any of these moral frameworks.

My main thesis in this paper is that Camus's ethics of revolution and my defence of it, particularly the non-moral account of the permissibility of violent revolutions it comprises, can shed light on the reasonableness of participating in and supporting violent revolutions to some Catholics and the broader Christian community. I believe that Camus's ethics of revolution and my defence of it will be attractive or compelling to some Catholics because they affirm their intuition that violent revolutions are morally untenable and show why it is nonetheless acceptable.

Perhaps it is important to state from the outset that the scope of this work does not involve critiquing the moral point of view of either Catholics or Camus. I only set out to show that it may be reasonable to consider violent revolutions acceptable from a non-moral vantage, even if one thinks this line of action is morally unjustifiable. Particularly, I argue that if one, in this case, Catholics, cares more about establishing a free and just society or an approximation of this end than being morally pure, then one has good reasons for participating in or supporting violent revolutions that one considers likely to promote this cause.

In Section 2, I offer an outline of Catholic morality and discuss how it could be reasonably taken to prohibit violent revolutions. There, I argue that although there is a tradition in Catholicism, the just war tradition, that attempts to show how violence may be morally justifiable under certain special circumstances and thus that violent revolutions may be morally tenable, some Catholics do and will still plausibly believe that it is never morally permissible.

In Section 3, I present an outline of Camus's ethics and the account of morality it involves. The parallels between Camus's morality and Catholic morality will be obvious to the reader. In this section, I argue that for Camus, the normative authority of morality or the degree to which it counts as a reasonable basis of action is not absolute. I then show how that leads him to ground the permissibility of violent revolutions on care, precisely our commitment to establishing freer and more just societies. Lastly, I demonstrate why Camus is justified in taking this stand.

In Section 4, I explore in detail Camus's account of the necessity or instrumentality of (violent) revolutions for establishing a free and just society or an approximation of this ideal. Here, I note that for Camus, only spontaneous revolutions can be useful to the causes of freedom and justice.

In Section 5, I explore some criticisms against Camus's claim that only spontaneous revolutions can be useful for constituting free and just societies, noting the extent of their justifiability. I contend that Camus is wrong for totally condemning planned revolutions, and I point to a historical case of a truly transformative one, namely, the Meiji Restoration (1868) in Japan. I then note that despite this shortcoming, his approach to grounding violent revolutions can shed light on its acceptability to Catholics and the broader Christian community.

## 2. Catholic Morality and the Question of Armed Resistance

According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) (2006, p. 310), "The most basic principle of the Christian moral life is awareness that every person bears the dignity of being made in the image of God. ... Human life, as a profound unity of physical and spiritual dimensions, is sacred". Similarly, Scheid (2015, p. x) states that "At its best, Christian theological ethics [or morality] insists that the dignity of the human person, created in the image of God, be respected with as much care as possible, even in the midst of situations of social and political conflict, including warfare". Furthermore, this principle of regard for the dignity of others fits into a greater injunction to love one another, including one's enemies, which is the core of Jesus's teachings. In Mathew 22: 37-40 (The Holy Bible, New King James Version 1982), Jesus said,

> 'You shall love you're the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

In Matthew 5:43-44 (NKJV), Jesus remarks, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. ..." Based on the foregoing, the USCCB (2006, p. 318) writes, "Love has to be the essential foundation of the moral life".

Furthermore, the Catholic Bishops or USCCB (2006, p. 311) opine that "Every moral act consists of three elements: the objective act (what we do), the subjective goal or intention (why we do the act), and the concrete situation or circumstances in which we perform the act (where, when, how, with whom, the consequences, etc.)". They take this idea of moral acts to be representative of the Christian tradition in general. On this account, "For an individual act to be morally good, the object, or what we are doing, must be objectively good. Some acts, apart from the intention or reason for doing them, are always wrong because they go against a fundamental or basic human good" we should never compromise (ibid.). Acts such as directly killing an innocent person or rape belong to this category—they "are always wrong" and "intrinsically evil" no matter why and the circumstances in which they occur (ibid). This means "that a good intention cannot make a bad action (something intrinsically evil) good" (USCCB 2006, p. 312). It is, in other words, the idea that "The end does not justify the means" (United States Catholic Conference, Inc. 1994, p. 434).

What does the foregoing outline of Catholic morality mean for the moral justifiability of violent revolutions or revolutions when they become violent?[2] On the one hand, a tradition of Catholic thought involves the argument that violent revolutions can be morally justifiable. On the other hand, there is a tradition in which it is never morally permissible. Let me offer a cursory account of them, beginning with the former.

A Pastoral Letter of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1983, p. 2) states, "Catholic teaching begins in every case with a presumption against war and for peaceful settlement of disputes". Nevertheless, "In exceptional cases, determined by the moral principles of the just-war tradition, some uses of force are permitted" (ibid.). The just war tradition develops a moral framework for legitimising and restraining war and violence more generally in special circumstances (Cahill 2019, p. 8). The just war approach contends that even if violence is not the most desirable line of conduct, it is sometimes morally permissible. According to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1983, p. 19), "While the legitimacy of revolution in some circumstances cannot be denied [since oppressive regimes may lose their legitimacy], just-war teachings must be applied to revolutionary-counterrevolutionary conflicts". In consonance with the preceding idea, Scheid (2015, p. xi), for example, presents "a new understanding of the traditional just war criteria" to show that "under certain circumstances revolutionaries may legitimately take up arms against an oppressive regime".

In contrast to the just war tradition, there is an enduring intuition and argument in Catholic ethics and the larger Christian moral tradition that violent action, especially killing, is always morally untenable (Cahill 2019, p. 1). Violent revolutions can never be morally justifiable on this account of Catholic morality. This view is well founded in the Catholic moral framework noted above. Although she does not support absolute non-violence, Cahill (2019, p. viii) contends that "Killing is never unambiguously right because, even in self-defence, killing violates the inalienable dignity of another human being". Furthermore, she argues,

> To kill even an unjust aggressor involves an assault on the dignity of human life, even if killing accomplishes the greater good of protecting innocent lives, and may be considered just in view of the total constellation of circumstances in which it occurs. The basic and universal wrongness of killing, no matter what the circumstances, can be based on religious teaching, such as the New Testament love command or the idea that all persons are created in God's image. . . . Therefore, even in the rare instance in which killing may be seen as just and necessary, it is properly accompanied not only by regret but remorse and compensatory efforts (Cahill 2019, p. 33–34).

The anti-just war conception of the morality of violent revolutions is highly consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus, the greatest model of the Christian or Catholic way of life. It therefore seems as though moral justifications of violent revolutions, such as those provided by Catholic just war thinkers, rest on ad hoc principles that are not consistent with an understanding of Catholic morality in which the fundamental moral principle is the idea that we should have regard for the dignity of all humans, both the sinful and righteous. Whatever the case may be, the basic outline of Catholic morality suffices as a plausible reason for maintaining the idea that violent revolutions are impermissible. Is there a non-moral reason for which Catholics may nonetheless consider violent revolutions to be potentially justifiable or reasonable? Does Camus's ethics of revolution include this non-moral yet reasonable ground for the acceptability of violent revolutions?

## 3. Camus's Ethics

In *The Rebel*, Camus (1991) argues that rebellion or revolt embodies an ethics that he believes is a legitimate basis of action.[3] He characterises revolt as a protestation against a condition considered evil and unjust that does not involve an appeal to a higher authority. "The rebel is a man who is. . . . determined on laying claim to a human situation in which all the answers are human—in other words, formulated in reasonable terms", he writes (Camus 1991, p. 27). The Greek slave insurrection in antiquity, trade unionism, and the literary denunciation of God due to his responsibility for humanity's futile suffering and mortality by writers such as Marquis de Sade, the Romantics, and the surrealists are all instances of rebellion. Here, I offer an outline of his conception of the slave revolt to tease out the ethics Camus contends revolt embodies. This ethical perspective informs his account of the permissibility of violent revolutions.

The slave ranges themself against their master; they say no to the master's command based on a complete loyalty to something in themself that they consider dignified and a common basis on which they and their master "have a natural community" (Camus 1991, pp. 20–23). They contend that they have a right to be free and "to be treated as an equal" (Camus 1991, p. 21). The slave totally identifies with the newly grasped aspect of themself in that they uncompromisingly proclaim, "Better to die on one's feet than to live on one's knees" (Camus 1991, p. 22). They place this part of themself above everything, even life; it is "for him the supreme good" (Camus 1991, p. 21).

Furthermore, Camus (1991, p. 22) argues that although the slave's rebellion involves the insistence that the slave's right be respected, the revolt is not primarily or only a revolt for the self. It is fundamentally an expression of love for humanity. "Rebellion cannot exist without. . . . love", Camus (1991, p. 285) maintains. It is pertinent to specify what he means by love for humankind. Camus (1991, p. 25) writes:

> Man's love for man can be born of other things than a mathematical calculation of the resultant rewards or a theoretical confidence in human nature. . . . We insist that the part of man which cannot be reduced to mere ideas should be taken into consideration—the passionate side of his nature that serves no other purpose than to be part of the act of living.

Based on the foregoing, I think that by love for humankind, Camus means a passionate and disinterested care for humans. Disinterestedness here means a disposition towards a thing devoid of self-serving considerations and instrumentalising perception; it comprises taking the thing as an end in itself independent of its perceived inherent value or valuelessness. Hence, to disinterestedly care for a thing is to be wholeheartedly concerned about its well-being as an end in itself in a way that is not grounded in an appreciation of its inherent or instrumental value. It is to care in a way that is unmotivated primarily by self-serving considerations or any other goals besides the well-being of humankind. Recall that for Camus (1991, p. 25), "Man's love for man can be born of other things than a mathematical calculation of the resultant rewards or a theoretical confidence in human nature". Someone may care for the well-being of humanity only because a flourishing human world would be useful to them or because they want to avoid the disturbances associated with inequality and suffering in the world, such as violence. On the contrary, for the rebel, the well-being of humankind is important in itself, independent of any effect it may have on their personal existence and other matters.[4]

Camus contends that the slave revolt is not simply about the slave but rather an expression of love for humankind because of the slave's willingness to die. And he sees the slave rebel's readiness to die as entailing sacrificing themself for the sake of a good that transcends them. In Camus's (1991, pp. 22–23) words:

> The sudden appearance of the concept of "All or Nothing" demonstrates that rebellion, contrary to current opinion, and though it springs from everything that is most strictly individualistic in man, questions the very idea of the individual. If the individual, in fact, accepts death and happens to die as a consequence of his act of rebellion, he demonstrates by doing so that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a common good which he considers more important than his own destiny. If he prefers the risk of death to the negation of the rights that he defends, it is because he considers these rights more important than himself. . . . It is for the sake of everyone in the world that the slave asserts himself when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something in him which does not belong to him alone, but which is common ground where all men—even the man who insults and oppresses him—have a natural community.

"Every act of rebellion thus. . . . [involves] a concretely universal concern for mutual recognition of the freedom and equality of others. Rebellion is an appeal for reciprocal recognition of a common right not to be subjected to conditions of exploitation and oppression" (Hayden 2016, p. 48). The slave rebellion thus aspires to the eradication of the institution of slavery—"He [the rebel] is not only the slave against the master, but also man against the world of master and slave" (Camus 1991, p. 266).

According to Camus (1991, p. 20), "Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow, one is right". This explains the indignation that rebellion involves. Since the slave rebel feels justified in their willingness to risk their life and die "for the sake of everyone", the rebel, Camus (1991, pp. 22–23) argues, demonstrates that they consider protecting everyone from the violation of our shared dignity to constitute the morally legitimate way to live. Sherman (2009, p. 144) calls this idea the "principle of solidarity" which states that the morality of rebellion involves the notion that we should be committed to defending all humans.

Furthermore, Camus suggests that it is not simply a decision or desire to adhere to morality that makes the slave involved in a rebellion that affirms human dignity. For him, revolt is born of love or a passionate and disinterested care for humanity that is independent of appreciation of the desideratum of morality or a desire to act morally. To be sure, the rebel takes their morality seriously, and it guides their conduct to the extent that they attempt to align their actions to it and judges their rightness by appealing to that moral perspective. Nevertheless, it is not that which most fundamentally moves him. To make the preceding idea clearer, we can consider that acting out of love or from inclination is different from acting from duty or a desire to be morally upright. In this vein, Camus (1991, p. 25) writes:

> In the act of rebellion as we have envisaged it up to now, an abstract ideal is not chosen through lack of feeling and in pursuit of a sterile demand. We insist that the part of man which cannot be reduced to mere ideas should be taken into consideration—the passionate side of his nature that serves no other purpose than to be part of the act of living (Camus 1991, p. 25).[5]

The foregoing implies that rebellion is born out of both the rebel's love for humanity and the consequent inclination to end slavery as much as it is born of a sense of morality. In other words, revolt is born of two forms of normativity or sources of reasons for acting one way or another, namely, love and morality. This means that the rebel's aspiration to establish a free and just society or to end slavery, for example, is both a matter of what they believe morality demands of them and their love for humanity.

The two sources of normativity undergirding revolt largely coincide in terms of what they require of the rebel. Nevertheless, the requirements of these normative frameworks come into conflict in some circumstances. This is evident in Camus's recounting of the disposition of the majority of the military wing of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, a political organisation active between the 1905 and 1917 Russian revolutions, respectively. They considered violence, especially murder, to be evil; nevertheless, they believed it was necessary. Their sense of the moral wrongness of killing, even killing an oppressor, was such that they adopted a policy of submitting themselves to the authorities to be murdered as a means of compensating for taking the life of another. They were "fastidious assassins" (Camus 1991, p. 157). Thus, Camus (1991, p. 162) asserts, "It is possible to believe that they too, while recognising the inevitability of violence, nevertheless admitted to themselves that it is unjustifiable. Necessary and inexcusable—that is how murder appeared to them". If these rebels considered violence morally unjustifiable but regretfully decided to act violently, then it appears that their care or fervent, wholehearted commitment to mitigating oppression made them act in that way.[6] That is because they did not see their actions as in any way supported by morality, even if they believed it was necessary.

One may wonder how love for humanity may lead one to murder those who oppress others. To address this issue, let us consider the fact that the immediate and overwhelming consequence of love for humanity is a profound compassion for the mass of the subjugated and oppressed people in the world and an urgent and compelling inclination to dismantle structures of domination. That is, the immediate and overriding consequence of love for humanity is a passionate identification with the downtrodden. In that case, love for humanity—because of the compassion it produces—makes the rebel vehemently oppose those who perpetuate domination at the risk of killing them. In this vein, Camus (1991, p. 285) writes, "Then we understand that rebellion cannot exist without a strange form of love. Those who find no rest in God or in history are condemned to live for those who, like themselves, cannot live: in fact, for the humiliated". Furthermore, he notes, concerning the Socialist Revolutionaries or fastidious assassins, that

> The love they bear for one another, . . . which extends to the great mass of their enslaved and silent fellow men, gives the measure of their distress and of their hopes. To serve this love, they must first kill; to inaugurate the reign of innocence, they must accept a certain culpability (Camus 1991, p. 163).

Camus (1991, p. 159) endorses the decision of the fastidious assassins to violate their morality on the grounds of their compassion for the oppressed and its necessity to make "absolutism totter". This is despite the fact that he believes "The positive [moral] value contained in the initial movement of rebellion supposes the renunciation of violence committed on principle" (Camus 1991, pp. 267–68). Rebellion renounces the idea of the moral justifiability of violence because "In assigning oppression a limit within which begins the dignity common to all men, rebellion defined a primary value" (Camus 1991, p. 262). In agreeing that violence is, in a sense, permissible even though it is morally unjustifiable, Camus implicitly contends that something other than morality makes the rebel's violence somewhat acceptable. This seems to be the rebel's care for promoting freedom and justice. This is suggested by Camus's contention that the rebel cannot

> absolutely claim not to kill or lie, without renouncing his rebellion and accepting, once and for all, evil and murder. But no more can he agree to kill and lie, since the inverse reasoning which would justify murder and violence would also destroy the reasons for his insurrection. Thus, the rebel can never find peace. He knows what is good and, despite himself, does evil. The value that supports him is never given to him once and for all; he must fight to uphold it, unceasingly. Again the existence he achieves collapses if rebellion does not support it (Camus 1991, p. 267).

Above, we can see, first, that it is the rebel's aspiration, concern, or care for mitigating or eradicating oppression that Camus views as grounds for the rebel's violation of the morality that justifies the onset of their revolt.[7] Second, Camus is pointing to the fact that a society of mutual recognition, which the rebel aspires to, cannot exist if the rebel does not support it by some measure of violence. Are these legitimate grounds for tolerating or accepting violence even when one believes it is morally untenable?

Before addressing the question of the tenability of Camus's reasoning, let me note its implicit conception of the normative authority of morality. The reasoning presupposes the idea that morality does not have a pre-emptive or absolute normative authority, which is to say that there are instances in which it would be sensible to violate the dictates of morality or when it is important to consider something other than the moral law to be a legitimate ground for acting one way or another. Camus (1991, p. 120) repudiates "formal morality", that is, the conception of morality as inviolable or the idea that it needs to be adhered to strictly, irrespective of circumstances and the exigencies of our lives. Sherman (2009, p. 144) agrees with this reading as he states that the "principle of solidarity [that defines Camus's morality] is only [a] guiding [principle], and, therefore, not inviolable".

Now, the justifiability of Camus's contention that violence and, thus, violent revolution is permissible based on our care for mitigating slavery and oppression can be demonstrated with a consideration of the importance of what we care about in how one may reasonably lead one's life. According to Frankfurt (2004), things only matter to us if we care about them or if they are necessary for the well-being or realisation of what we care about. "Insofar as we care about anything, we make various things important to us—namely, the things that we care about, together with whatever may be indispensable as a means to them", Frankfurt (2004, p. 52) argues. Further, he writes the following: "The most basic and essential question for a person to raise concerning the conduct of his life cannot be the *normative* question of how he *should* live. That question can sensibly be asked only on the basis of a prior answer to the *factual* question of what he actually *does* care about" (Frankfurt 2004, p. 26).

It seems to me that Frankfurt's account of the relationship between what we care about and what is important to us is sound. A thing may have whatever function it plays in the world or be necessary to the existence of certain things independent of our wishes and interests. Nevertheless, this function would make no difference to an individual if it does not constitute what they care about or is somehow instrumental to the realisation or well-being of what they care about. Even if we could show that something has intrinsic value, that value would legitimately make no difference to an individual insofar as it has no positive bearing on what they care about. On this account of importance, morality does not necessarily have "overriding precedence over all other interests and claims" that may constitute a reason for conduct or a standard of judgement of the propriety of action (Frankfurt 2004, p. 7). Hence, when one cares more about promoting freedom and justice than absolute moral rectitude, it is reasonable to pursue that end even when it sometimes involves violating the dictates of morality. That is to say that Camus's endorsement of the conception of violence as necessary, even though it is morally unjustifiable, is reasonable.

It seems to me that for many people, including Catholics, actualising or bringing about a freer and more just world is something they care more about than being morally pure or perfect. These ends seem to matter more to us than strictly adhering to the dictates of the moral law.

Before proceeding to delineate how Camus grounds violent revolutions on his ethics as characterised here, it is apt to note briefly that although he thinks that violence may be permissible on non-moral grounds, he does not think that all kinds of violence are tenable. This, as shall be clear in the following section, determines his account of the kind of revolution that may be defensible. Camus (1991, p. 270) characterises political violence as either "systematic" or, for want of a better word, rebellious or anti-systematic. He does not define these two forms of violence; however, I hazard a rough definition consistent with his examples of both forms of violence. Systematic violence refers to violent action that occurs as the primary or one of the central means of achieving political goals in the sense that its scope transcends defending oneself or a group from an immediate danger of violence (Camus 1991, p. 270). Orchestrating wars to achieve a revolution or using terror to ensure widespread adherence to one's vision of the ideal society (instead of persuasion and consensus) are notable kinds of systematic violence—they do not ensue as countermeasures to immediate threats of violence (Camus 1991, pp. 274, 278). In contrast, rebellious violence refers to defensive acts of violence, particularly violence in response to an immediate threat of violence (Camus 1991, p. 272). Camus (1991, p. 272) maintains that violence "must therefore preserve, for the rebel, its provisional character of effraction and must always be bound, if it cannot be avoided, to a personal responsibility and to an immediate risk". An outburst of violence during a spontaneous insurrection against the repressive violence of state forces would be an instance of rebellious or anti-systematic violence (Camus 1991, p. 272). Camus contends that only rebellious violence is permissible since it is the only form of violence capable of mitigating injustice.[8] What bearing does Camus's (1991) ethics, as outlined above, have on the justifiability of violent revolutions?

## 4. Camus on the Necessity of Revolution

Camus (1991) uses the term revolution in different ways throughout *The Rebel*. This has been a source of confusion, misleading some into believing that he condemns revolution unqualified. Cruickshank (1960, p. 93), for example, argues that Camus (1991) advocates revolt as a means of resisting and mitigating the evil in the world but denounces revolution. At times in *The Rebel*, by revolution, Camus means a transformative socio-political event involving the substitution of a prevailing form of government with another that radically violates the ethics of rebellion. For example, Camus (1991) opines that "revolution destroys both men and principles", suggesting that revolution in this sense is an illegitimate endeavour. On the contrary, at other times in *The Rebel*, by revolution, he means something positive, namely, an extra-constitutional attempt to replace one form of government with another, which is carried out in the spirit of the ethics of rebellion. His prime example of such a revolution is the 18 March 1871 overthrow of the French despotic government of Napoleon III in Paris by the Parisian working class and the establishment of a democratic government in its stead. This event is typically known as the Paris Commune. The Commune lasted for barely over two months before it was crushed by the government, from 18 March 1871 to 28 May 1871.

Nevertheless, there is a common idea in Camus's respective usage of the term revolution. By revolution, he always means any attempt to transform societies by rapidly replacing old political systems with new ones. In his words,

> A change of regulations concerning property without a corresponding change of government is not a revolution but a reform. There is no kind of economic revolution, whether its methods are violent or pacific, which is not, at the same time, manifestly political. Revolution can already be distinguished, in this way, from rebellion. The warning given to Louis XVI: "No, sire, this is not a rebellion, it is a revolution," accents the essential difference. It means precisely that "it is the absolute certainty of a new form of government" (Camus 1991, p. 105).

Camus's conception of the justifiability of revolutions is connected to his understanding of the limitations of rebellion. He asserts that one of the key differences between rebellion and revolution is that the former lacks any coherent plan or method for realising its ideals, while the latter involves a stage of serious planning and the adoption of a methodical mechanism for changing the world, such as establishing a new form of government (Camus 1991, p. 105). This means that revolt merely consists of an uncompromising denouncement of servitude and injustice and an attendant demand for universal freedom and justice but never proceeds beyond this protestation and demands. The slave revolt, for example, only involves demands that slavery be put to an end and that freedom should reign in its stead—it does not involve any attempt to constitute a new society and government to enforce its ideal of freedom.

Will the protestation and demands of the rebel transform the world if the unjust refuse to heed the rebel's call? If one or some masters are defeated, would a free society automatically emerge? Will existence become whole simply because humans wholeheartedly utter their judgements and preference for a different order? The answer is no. For this reason, Camus (1991, p. 105) views rebellion as "limited in scope" and "a fruitless struggle with facts". This grounds his belief that, at times, a revolutionary movement is needed to actualise, as much as is possible within reasonable limits, the ideals and aspirations of revolt.

Camus argues that in order for the rebel to make their ideals incarnate in the world, they must also become a revolutionary. This means that, for him, the rebel must go beyond the boundaries of rebellion and, when possible, attempt to make a revolution in order to promote freedom and justice. In "In Defence of The Rebel", Camus (2004, p. 212) states, "Revolt... needs a revolutionary development in order to find substance and truth". This entails that the rebel needs a revolutionary movement in order for them to make substantive changes in the world. It also means that one can only be sure that the rebel is truly interested in promoting freedom and justice if they become involved in a revolutionary project. Otherwise, the rebel is engaged in a "romanticism of failure and impotence" (Camus 2004, p. 211). Rebellion is, thus, for Camus, "a vain yearning if it does not give birth to a revolutionary development in which the structures of exploitation are transformed" (Sprintzen 2004, p. 18).

Beyond the foregoing, Camus contends that the rebel needs to become revolutionary under conditions of extreme oppression and servitude so as to avoid lust for destruction. In his words, "Revolt without revolution ends logically in a delirium of destruction"

(Camus 2004, p. 210). For Camus, this would occur if the rebel does not go on to become a revolutionary because the impotence of their rebellion leads to extreme despair, resentment of life, and a deep feeling of powerlessness that makes the rebel become intoxicated with a desire to destroy, thereby forgetting the reasons for their revolt. In this vein, Sprintzen (1988, p. 46) remarks that in the absence of "a practically available alternative" and when the scope of their demands is large, the rebel is tempted "to exaggerate one side of its experience at the expense of the rest". And the exaggerated side of the rebel's experience is the injustice, suffering, and ugliness of the world. The result is that the rebel engages in an unlimited negation, now having forgotten the positive aspects of existence for which their revolt was inspired.

Based on the preceding, Camus seems to be contending that revolution can be justifiable because of its potential to create free and just societies. Revolution is warranted due to the impotence of rebellion to actualise the ideals of freedom, justice, and a community defined by mutual respect.

Despite the impotence of rebellion in terms of bringing about the order that it affirms and aspires to, Camus (2004, pp. 212–13) contends that it is the measure or limit of revolution and vice versa. On the one hand, this means that rebellion, insofar as it is the embodiment of a legitimate ethic, defines the limits of appropriateness for revolution. The implication is that the organisation of revolution should not be carried out without great care for or subjecting oneself to the ethics of rebellion. On the other hand, as has been noted, the rebel ought to acknowledge the transformative power of revolution. In Camus's (2004, pp. 212–13) words,

> Revolution needs to keep intact the spirit of revolt that has given it birth, just as revolt itself needs a revolutionary development in order to find substance and truth. Each, finally, is the limit of the other. . . . Yes, rebellion is the measure of revolution, and vice versa.

"Revolt and revolution therefore function as mutually implicative limit conditions, and each stands in a constitutive relation of critique to the other by posing the question: Which limits are necessary and which may be transgressed?" (Hayden 2016, p. 58). What does the preceding mean in practise? What kind of revolution may be justifiable based on the ethics of rebellion?

Camus only alludes to the ethical justifiability of spontaneous revolution. He writes of the need for trust "in working-class freedom and spontaneity" as a means of promoting justice (Camus 1991, p. 205). The Paris Commune, which was the result of the spontaneous uprising of Parisian workers, is Camus's model of legitimate revolution. This attitude is informed by his ethics of violence in which only anti-systematic acts of violence are permitted because of their potential utility as opposed to the allegedly destructive effects of systematic violence. From Camus's perspective, planned revolutions necessarily go beyond the limits of permissible or practically justifiable violence; thus, he thinks they cannot be justifiable.

Furthermore, Camus contends that when a spontaneous revolution fails or appears to be an inefficacious way of mitigating oppression and injustice, we should only attempt to work within the prevailing system to improve the condition of humanity through gradual reforms. This involves channelling our efforts towards the establishment of institutions that promote the causes of freedom and justice (Camus 1991, pp. 272–73). For Camus (1991, p. 273), we possess some control over institutions "since we can define them, choose the ones for which we will fight, and thus bend our efforts toward their establishment". Further, he writes:

> As for knowing if such an attitude can find political expression in the contemporary world, it is easy to evoke—and this is only an example—what is traditionally called revolutionary trade-unionism. Cannot it be said that even this trade-unionism is ineffectual? The answer is simple: it is this movement alone that, in

> one century, is responsible for the enormously improved condition of the workers from the sixteen-hour day to the forty-hour week (Camus 1991, p. 278).

According to Camus, the foregoing piecemeal or gradualist approach to changing society must not be shunned when spontaneous revolutions fail or seem inefficacious in certain circumstances. Despite the slowness of this approach, Camus notes that it has led to significant changes or the approximation of a just society in some parts of the world, such as in Scandinavian societies. There, "The most fruitful form of trade-unionism is reconciled with constitutional monarchy and achieves an approximation of a just society" (Camus 1991, p. 282). A similar gradualist or reformist approach took place in England, seeing the country change completely within three centuries, from 1688 to the late 20th century. "A country run by a small landed elite became a democracy in which the large majority of inhabitants, male and female, rich and poor, well educated or not, got the right to vote. It was transformed from an overwhelmingly agrarian society into a mostly urban industrial one" (Chirot 2020, p. 125).

The foregoing points to the fact that societies can be transformed without a revolution. Nevertheless, according to Chirot (2020, p. 119), this is subject to the willingness of elites to countenance reform demands. In his words,

> Given flexible institutions and mostly reasonable elites willing to countenance change, industrialisation [and the establishment of a fairly free and just society] can be managed gradually without a revolutionary break at all. But as we have seen, lacking such good fortune, adapting to modernising change is difficult and often leads to disastrous upheavals (Chirot 2020, p. 119).

## 5. A Critical Look at Camus's Ethics of Revolution

Jeanson (2004, p. 93) argues that although Camus pretends to affirm revolutions as potentially legitimate ways of transforming societies, he effectively condemns them. He argues that this is the case because the only kind of revolution Camus supports are those doomed to fail, such as the Paris Commune. The implicit idea here is that revolutions that only employ rebellious violence are doomed to fail. In Jeanson's (2004, p. 93) words, Camus's position on revolution "comes down to saying that only revolutionary syndicalism [or trade-unionism] is efficacious". Furthermore, he writes, "Oh! How beautiful revolutionary syndicalism is when it doesn't have to be revolutionary (for example, in Scandinavia), and how authentic were the revolutions when they failed!" (Jeanson 2004, p. 94).

Jeanson's argument that Camus's philosophy of rebellion comes down to not supporting revolutions or supporting revolutions only insofar as they are doomed to immediate failure is untenable. At times, spontaneous revolutions involving little or no violence work. The virtually non-violent spontaneous revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989 are cases in point. "Entire [communist and repressive] economic and political regimes ended abruptly and were replaced by liberal, capitalist democracies" in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania (Chirot 2020, p. 119).

Nonetheless, a powerful, recalcitrant, and entrenched oppressive socio-political structure is unlikely to be defeated by a spontaneous revolution that only employs anti-systematic violence. Furthermore, in certain circumstances, planned revolutions or simply revolutions that go beyond the limits of anti-systematic violence can truly bring lasting and positive changes to society. An example is the planned revolution that occurred in Japan in the second half of the 17th century. In 1867, a coup was successfully carried out against the Tokugawa Shogunate (military government), which had ruled Japan since the early 17th century (Chirot 2020, p. 120). This coup and the series of political transformations that followed in 1868 is known as the Meiji Restoration (Meiji Restoration 2024). Those who carried out this coup pretended to restore the old imperial power, which had been sidelined for centuries in place of the Tokugawa Shogunate (Chirot 2020, pp. 120–21). However, what really took place was a major political change involving the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, with the emperor only having nominal powers. Feudal privileges were abolished, as described below:

> The early goals of the new government were expressed in the Charter Oath (April 1868), which committed the government to establishing "deliberative assemblies" and "public discussion," to a worldwide search for knowledge, to the abrogation of past customs, and to the pursuit by all Japanese of their individual callings (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d., Meiji).

The programme set by the revolutionary government put Japan on the course of its radical change into a modern state and power, with its citizens enjoying liberal rights.

Furthermore, as noted above, the potential for gradualist mechanisms such as revolutionary trade unionism to effect changes depends on elites' willingness to countenance reform demands. Based on this, revolutions that go beyond the boundaries of rebellious violence may, in certain situations, be necessary for establishing free and just societies.

Despite the shortcomings of Camus's ethics of revolution, which are derived from his inaccurate assessment of what kind of violence can be useful, his basic move to justify violence and, thus, violent revolution outside the framework of morality is plausible. For Catholics and Christians, who reasonably maintain that violent revolutions can never be morally justifiable from their point of view, Camus's account of the justifiability of revolutions and my defence of it sheds light on why it may still be reasonable for them to participate in or support violent revolutions.

## 6. Conclusions

I began this paper by outlining the basic principle of Catholic morality, showing why it, prima facie, implies that violent revolutions are never permissible. I then argued that Camus's ethics affirms the same basic moral principle as Catholic morality as well as a non-moral normative framework—care—which can sometimes ground a violation of morality. As argued above, this non-moral normative framework, particularly the rebel's wholehearted commitment to mitigating servitude and oppression which proceeds out of his love for humanity, grounds Camus's acceptance of violent revolutions as a possible line of conduct. I then appealed to Frankfurt's account of the connection between care and the importance of things to us to show why Camus's account of the permissibility of revolution is reasonable. Based on the foregoing, I argued that those Catholics who care about promoting freedom and justice more than moral purity have good grounds for participating in or supporting violent revolutions, even though it appears morally untenable to them. That is to say that there is a non-moral basis on which a Catholic can legitimately participate in or support violent revolutions.

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## Notes

[1] In this paper, I characterise ethics and morality as two different but related kinds of accounts of how to live. Here, by ethics, I mean a theory of how one should live or orient oneself in all areas of one's life, whether it be about one's personal development, ideals, or duties to others. Ethics aims to determine what manner of living counts as a good life or a life lived well. By morality, I mean "a set of norms and principles that govern our actions with respect to each other" (Driver 2022). Ethics is a broader account of how to live; it typically involves a conception of morality and an account of the extent to which morality may count as a legitimate or reasonable basis of action. On the one hand, an ethical theory may comprise the idea that living a good life requires conceiving moral principles as sometimes violable. On the other hand, an ethical perspective may contend that morality is absolute or always inviolable. I can ask how I should live, taking only economic, political, moral, and family considerations into account. But there is a more general question I can ask: how should I live, all things considered? This latter question is the

starting point of ethics (Williams 1985, pp. 6–7). The account of Camus's (1991) ethics I offer here is one that involves the idea that morality may be violated in some circumstances.

[2] Popular revolutionary insurrections may begin non-violently and may only become violent in response to the aggression of state actors. There are at least two kinds of answers to the preceding question.

[3] Some personal experiences explain Camus's turn to revolt as a source of legitimate ethics. He was once a moral nihilist. Nevertheless, he and others in his cultural milieu who shared his nihilist belief later found themselves inescapably feeling morally obligated to rebel against the onslaught of the Nazis in France and the other oppressive political practises across Europe that they felt were gravely unjust and absurd. Camus partook in the French Resistance against Nazi Occupation of France (1940–1944), serving as an editorialist and editor-in-chief of the underground newspaper, Combat, that helped in affirming the resistance efforts. In his 1946 lecture, "The Crisis of Man", Camus (2021, pp. 29–32) reports that despite being self-consciously identifying as moral nihilists, he and his comrades were dumfounded by and indignant at the cruelty and indifference towards evil that was prevalent in Europe in the 20th century. He states, "Naturally, that was a contradiction which could not fail to make us reflect. We thought that the world was living and struggling without real values. But all the same we were struggling against Germany" (Camus 2021, p. 35). How could they justify their sense of obligation, their rebellion, their indignation, given their belief that there are no legitimate moral values or that Hitler is as right as the charitable person engaged in missionary work? Camus states that these concerns led them to investigate their rebellion or revolt to determine if the values it presupposes are tenable. They wanted to know if they were right to oppose "the beasts emerging in every corner of Europe". This inquiry led him to conclude that rebellion embodies legitimate ethics.

[4] I decided to clearly specify what I think Camus means by the term love due to the fact that it is a word that enjoys many different meanings. For example, one philosophical usage of this word characterises it as a disinterested care that is directed at or about entities in their individuality as opposed to its object being a group, such as humankind (see Frankfurt 2004, pp. 52–53).

[5] Sagi (2002, p. 170) offers an alternative account of Camus's (1991) ethics. For him, Camus proposes an "ethics of justice" as opposed to one of compassion. His point is that the ethics of justice is "concerned with general solutions", which is to say that it "disengages from private suffering, and seeks to regulate social life through the law and not through compassion" (Sagi 2002, p. 170). Prima facie, this is wrong, as Camus offers a rebuttal against this particular understanding of the ethics of revolt in the first chapter of *The Rebel*. Camus (1991, p. 25) repudiates the idea that in the act of revolt, as characterised by him, "Humanity is loved in general in order to avoid having to love anybody in particular".

[6] See Tabensky (2023, pp. 143–46) for more on the attitude of regret that needs to accompany all acts of violence and its moderating effect on the practise of violence.

[7] Camus scholars, such as Woelfel (1975, p. 102), Caraway (1992, pp. 133–34), and Aronson (2004, pp. 117, 124), agree with my reading of Camus's (1991) ethics of violence as the position that violence is morally unjustifiable althout it is necessary for mitigating injustice. There are other alternative accounts of Camus's position on violence. For example, Foley (2008, p. 89) thinks Camus considers violence morally justifiable in some rare circumstances. It is hard to reconcile this idea with Camus's explicit remarks in *The Rebel* against violence and his positive appraisal of the Socialist Revolutionaries considered above.

[8] I take issue with Camus's idea that only rebellious violence may be useful for the causes of freedom and justice. My problem with this and the untenability of this idea will be clear in Section 5, in which I make some critical remarks on Camus's ethics of violence.

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