

**To Remake Man and the World...*comme si*?  
Camus's "Ethics" *contra* Nihilism**

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**ABSTRACT**

Whether Albert Camus's "existentialist" thought expresses an "ethics" is a subject of disagreement among commentators. Yet, there can be no reading of Camus's philosophical and literary works without recognizing that he was engaged in the post-WW2 period with two basic questions: How must we think? What must we do? If his thought presents us with an ethics, even if not systematic, it seems to be present in his ideas of "remaking" both man and world that are central to his *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. Curiously, however, this apparent recommendation is ambiguous for the fact that while Camus proposes as much he does so "*comme si*," i.e., from a perspective of "as if." A clarification of this qualification is presented here in the light of the fact that Camus rejects any nihilist project that countenances either suicide or murder. Thereby one may argue that Camus indeed has an ethics that remains pertinent to today.

Keywords: Camus; philosophical suicide; nihilism; ethics

Camus's Two Basic Questions

Nietzsche's late 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-metaphysics informs the philosophy of Albert Camus, especially because Camus's philosophical impetus was to counter nihilism and its perceived onset politically in the fascism of twentieth century Europe. For Camus, appeals to the authority of transcendent values—i.e., belief in the God of Abrahamic religion, belief in the classical ideas of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful—have lost what was believed to be an "indubitable" and "unshakeable" foundation. We are suspended (as it were) over an abyss, having lost our false innocence, and this without "lamentation" or "glorification."<sup>2</sup> Accepting these assumptions, then, Camus takes center stage in a 21<sup>st</sup> century interrogation having two questions: *How must we think? What must we do?*

These questions translate to Camus's philosophically fundamental question of suicide. Whether we live or die, those questions presuppose a *practical* rationality. If "what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying," and vice versa, then one may ask whether Camus presents us with an "ethics" that issues from his encounter with the absurd. Of course, Camus expresses his perception of his time, believing as he did after the Second World War that "we have to hasten to create in the interval between [the "frenzied

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. P. Thody, trans. E.C. Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 245. Camus, writing in February 1947, uses these words in reference to Jules Roy's *La Vallée Heureuse*.

embraces" of] war and revolution,"<sup>3</sup> i.e., after a war that promised total destruction. Critics have written little on this aspect of Camus's thought

Lana Starkey comments that Camus is neglected as a moral philosopher.<sup>4</sup> Herbert Hochberg, however, remains notably severe in his assessment.<sup>5</sup> Hochberg argued that Camus sought, but failed, to derive an ethics from the absurdity of the human condition. Situating Camus among empiricists in epistemological outlook, Hochberg interprets Camus as accepting the factuality of his existence and of the world as disclosed in ordinary experience. Our task is to live in the world as we find it. Camus thus counters the nihilist "who does not believe in what exists." For Camus, however, Hochberg comments, "man cannot grasp rationally an explanation of his and the world's existence," hence the absurdity of the human condition. This condition is expressed in the "polarity" of the human desire to know and the world's silence about the foundations and promises of human existence. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* and in *The Rebel*, Camus refuses the nihilist option: "The final conclusion of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe."<sup>6</sup> Hochberg complains,

Camus has leaped from the factual premise that the juxtaposition of man and the universe is absurd, to the evaluative conclusion that this state ought to be preserved...For this transition we have no justification. Without such justification, Camus has not, in the least way, made his point. To produce such a justification would obviously involve the construction of an ethic. But it is precisely on this point that Camus builds his ethical view. Hence all that follows leans on a hollow argument.<sup>7</sup>

Hochberg requires a logic of "justification." But, there is ample reason to argue that Hochberg misses Camus's point.

Does Camus's refusal render his "ethics" hollow and inadequate? I propose Camus's questions remain central to a postmodern ethics such as he anticipated would have to be thought differently from the philosophy of Nietzsche, Marx, and Kierkegaard and differently from existentialists such as Jaspers and Sartre. If, upon confronting the absurd, the act of suicide is not a legitimate choice while not believing in God or in the authority of transcendent

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>4</sup> Those writing on Camus's ethics are few. See, e.g., Michael Mohrt and Warren Ramsey, "Ethic and Poetry in the Work of Camus," *Yale French Studies* 1 (1948): 113-118; Serge Doubrovsky, "The Ethics of Albert Camus," in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Germaine Brée, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 71-84; Harold A. Durfee, "Albert Camus and the Ethics of Rebellion," *Foundational Reflections: American University Publications in Philosophy*, 29, (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 147-177; Lana Starkey, "Albert Camus and the Ethics of Moderation," *Parrhesia* 21 (2014): 144-160. Starkey's use of 'virtue ethics' is not to say that Camus seeks to warrant an Aristotelian eudaimonistic ethics, since, as Starkey (p. 7) opines, for Camus "virtues are unintelligible in modernity." She does, however, want to identify Camus's notion of *la mesure* as equivalent in meaning to the Aristotelian virtue of temperance or moderation (*sophrosunē*).

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Hochberg, "Albert Camus and the Ethic of Absurdity," *Ethics* 75(2), (1965): 87-102.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Brower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Hochberg, 92.

values, then we have some thinking to do. We have to perform our deeds with reference to a thinking that finds “the means to proceed beyond nihilism.”<sup>8</sup> Camus discloses to us “reasons for living and for creating” beyond the “mortal problems” he has engaged *by way of illustration* (deliberately not to say here, *by way of justification*). Camus does not propose we live haphazardly or in aimless wandering about, but (echoing Nietzsche) instead to live *as creators*.

Camus desires that we proceed beyond nihilism, appropriating Pindar’s counsel—to aspire not to immortal life but, rather, to exhaust the limits of the possible.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging human mortality, we require a sense of what is possible. Despite the absurdity of the human condition, our mortal life is still worth living. Hence, our specifically human task is to work to exhaust the limits of the possible through creative acts. The question, then, is: *How far* shall we go in exhausting the limits of the possible? This question is entirely salient in postmodern context. Camus reminded that Nazism was a movement born of rebellion, but it had an impetus toward irrationality. Nazis were free to act with irrational terror, and thus with impunity. Theirs was a movement of “nihilist revolution,” establishing “a *mystique* beyond the bounds of any ethical considerations,” its consequences of suicide and murder thereby “neither efficacious nor exemplary.”<sup>10</sup>

Camus writes, “Those who rush blindly to history in the name of the irrational, proclaiming that it is meaningless, encounter servitude and terror and finally emerge into the universe of concentration camps.”<sup>11</sup> Mussolini’s fascism, Hitler’s Nazism, Russian Communism betrayed the origin of the revolution, politically cynical in their drawing from “moral nihilism.” They offered “private and public techniques of annihilation,” suicide and murder: “If men kill one another, it is because they reject mortality and desire immortality for all men. Therefore, in one sense, they commit suicide.”<sup>12</sup> These revolutionaries went too far in their turn to history. Camus would have us be rebels “at grips with history,” but moving beyond moral nihilism: “instead of killing and dying in order to produce the being that we are not, we have to live and let live in order to create what we are.”<sup>13</sup> Contrary to moral nihilism’s refrain that “everything is permitted,” Camus prefers Van Gogh’s “admirable complaint”—“I can very well, in life and in painting, too, do without God. But I cannot, suffering as I do, do without something that is greater than I am, that is my life—the power to create.”<sup>14</sup>

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus opined, “There is but one useful action, that of remaking man and the earth.”<sup>15</sup> We can take the statement as comprised of two interdependent assertions: (1) It is *useful* to remake humankind; (2) It is

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<sup>8</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), “Preface.”

<sup>9</sup> Camus cites Pindar, *Pythian*, iii.

<sup>10</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 184.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>15</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 64.

*useful* to remake the earth. For Camus, then, there is some utility to remaking humankind and the earth. ‘Remaking’ is to be understood with reference to destiny: “It is not sufficient to live, there must be a destiny that does not have to wait for death,” he says. “It is therefore justifiable to say that man has an idea of a better world than this.”<sup>16</sup> The task is to make one’s life a work of art, thus to complete what reality lacks, as lucidity informs us that, “suffering has no more meaning than happiness.”<sup>17</sup> With this observation, Camus offers a tragic sense of life: life “can be magnificent and overwhelming—that is the whole tragedy.”<sup>18</sup> But this recognition of the tragedy of human life elicits the essential comportment: “The realization that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning.”<sup>19</sup>

When Camus says ‘earth’ we are to interpret him to mean ‘world’, the latter understood to be *the locus of meaning and understanding in relation to our disclosure of meaning* (what, as Heidegger put it, is ‘world’ in the sense of “the referential context of signification,” *Bedeutsamkeit*<sup>20</sup>). Yet, in the moment of stating as much, Camus also demurs—“I shall never remake man. But one must do ‘as if.’” ‘...as if...’, he says.<sup>21</sup> The statement is enigmatic. In the French, one says ‘...comme si...’. It seems this statement speaks to two actions Camus will not himself undertake. We must clarify the interpretive problem presented in this assertion. There are multiple implicatures present in the statement:

- *Implicature 1: ‘I shall never remake man.’ (reference to self)*
- *Implicature 2: ‘I **shall** never remake man.’ (reference to an imperative)*
- *Implicature 3: ‘I shall **never** remake man.’ (reference to time frame)*
- *Implicature 4: ‘I shall never **remake** man.’ (reference to action)*
- *Implicature 5: ‘I shall never remake **man**.’ (reference to object of action)*

The questions following from these implicatures are obvious. Are we to accent ‘I’, to say ‘Camus means *he himself* will not do so’, but that he leaves it open to *others, to us*, to do so? Or, are we to accent ‘shall’, Camus meaning that *he gives to himself an imperative* not to do so, even though he might have an inclination (whether of emotion or appetite) to remake humankind and the world? Etc., etc., the questions follow each implicature. Howsoever we interpret Camus’s

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<sup>16</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 262.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>18</sup> Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 201.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 19??) Heidegger (BT, III. “The Worldliness of the World,” 59), clarified ‘world’ to be understood in several ways, including “the totality of being which can be objectively present within the world,” also “as that ‘in which’ a factual Dasein ‘lives’.” Later, in section 17 “Reference and Signs” (71 ff.) he writes, “reference and the referential totality were in some sense constitutive of worldliness itself.” Thus Heidegger says (80-81): “As that for which one lets beings be encountered in the kind of being of relevance, the wherein of self-referential understanding is the phenomenon of world.”

<sup>21</sup> Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (Editions Gallimard, 1942), writes: “Les conquérants savent que l’action est en elle-même inutile. Il n’y a qu’une action utile, celle qui referait l’homme et la terre. Je ne referai jamais les hommes. Mais il faut faire ‘comme si.’”

meaning, we cannot ignore the subsequent statement complicating the interpretation. Despite saying he shall never remake humankind, Camus utters a *general imperative* that seemingly excludes him but not us: “One” *must* do this, he says; “one” must remake both humankind and the world, but ... *as if...*, *comme si*.

Who is this “one” who *must* do so? What does Camus mean here? What does it mean to say, ‘*as if*’, ‘*comme si*’? Is this the logic of the subjunctive—to say, ‘*as it were*’, thus to say, ‘One must remake humankind and the world...*as it were*’? Or, is it the word of the epistemological and moral skeptic—‘*as if*’ alike to saying, ‘*well, not quite*’; ‘*well, not really*’; ‘*No, I don’t really mean that*’; ‘*No, I don’t really believe that*’; ‘*I mean, as if that were true...but not really*’; and so on? Does Camus mean that one must act to remake humankind and the world *as if it were true* that one *could* remake humankind, even *as if it were true* that one *should* remake humankind and the world, thus to take up the imperative *as if it were* an imperative, even if, were we pressed, we would answer ‘*Really, truly speaking, it is not an imperative*’? Camus uses ‘one’ to denote what is impersonal and anonymous. But, this ‘one’ he expects to be made personal when a given person “enters in with his revolt and his lucidity.” Indeed, relative to morality, Camus tells us, “Man can allow himself to denounce the total injustice of the world and then demand a total justice that he alone will create.”<sup>22</sup>

But one must clarify Camus’s ‘*comme si*’ here. Consider examples of common usage:<sup>23</sup>

*Usage 1 means:* “in such a way that something seems to be true,” e.g.,

- a) ‘It looks as if it’s going to rain.’
- b) ‘Jack smiled as though [*as if*] he was [*were*] enjoying a private joke.’

*Usage 2 means:* “used when you are describing something and you imagine an explanation for it that you know is not the real one,” e.g.,

- a) ‘The house was in such a mess—it looked as though [*as if*] a bomb had dropped on it.’

*Usage 3 means:* “spoken used for emphasizing that something is not true or is not important,” e.g.,

- a) ‘Don’t get lost or anything, will you?’ [*One answers:*] ‘As if I would [get lost]—I’m not stupid.’
- b) ‘Why was he worrying about the interview?—As if it mattered anyway!’
- c) ‘*As if*. . . ‘*comme si*. . .’ Does Camus utter an imperative such that he *really, truly*, does mean that you and I must remake humankind and remake the world, our freedom countering nihilism?

Camus, informing us of his epistemological comportment, admits he does not *know* “whether this world has a meaning that transcends it.”<sup>24</sup> He also asserts it

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<sup>22</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 258.

<sup>23</sup> *Macmillan Dictionary*, “as if”, <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/as-if>, accessed 18 July 2019.

is *impossible* for him “just now to know it,” thus possibly *later* knowing so. His sense of the human condition, such as he experienced it in post-WW2 Europe after the Holocaust, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the failure of communist revolution, etc., did not provide him the knowledge he desired. For him, action integrates human and world and works to alter it without moral nihilism. Where there is no absolute negation there is yet reason to live: “I proclaim that I believe in nothing and that everything is absurd, but I cannot doubt the validity of my proclamation and I must at least believe in my protest.”<sup>25</sup> Cautious of excess, of transgressing the limit, Camus hopes “for a new creation.”

One must answer what one means by ‘world’. It is not merely the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) conceptualized by Husserl and Heidegger or the enviroing physical world that is “the planet Earth.” There is a temporal element involved in living. One can (a) merely *await* the future, passively present, surrendered to the dominion of the past as it governs the present; or (b) one can engage the future in anticipatory resolve, attentive to individual and collective potentiality-for-being, the future governing the present through that resolve. Camus seems not to appreciate this distinction, however. He says: “Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present.”<sup>26</sup> Does this mean, therefore, that—in view of contemporary concerns—there can be no reasonable appeal to a broad principle of morality such as asserts “duties to future generations,” or a principle of “responsibility to protect” the present, including persons, the environment, etc.?

The answers are unclear in Camus’s texts. He allows “for those who, without concluding, continue questioning.”<sup>27</sup> *We* must continue questioning—such is his imperative countering the unjust act of suicide. Camus does not appeal to “an eternal idea of justice.” On the contrary, “If injustice is bad for the rebel”—for Camus, it is—“it is [bad]...because it...kills the small part of existence that can be realized on this earth through the mutual understanding of men. In the same way, since the man who lies shuts himself off from the other man, falsehood is therefore proscribed and, on a slightly lower level, murder and violence, which impose definitive silence.”<sup>28</sup> Camus sides with Plato and dialectic to clarify moral rectitude: “Plato is right and not Moses and Nietzsche. Dialogue on the level of mankind is less costly than the gospel preached by totalitarian regimes in the form of a monologue dictated from the top of a lonely mountain.” To refuse Moses is to refuse the transcendent as source of an *a priori* morality; to refuse Nietzsche is to refuse moral nihilism and master-slave morality. Thus, “The logic of the rebel is to want to serve justice so as not to add to the injustice of the human condition...and to wager, in spite of human misery, for happiness.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>27</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 283.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

Through dialectic one attains mutual understanding, keeping the future remains open and disclosing meaningful possibilities. Camus gives all to the present, *intentionally* being generous, giving all, to the future. One does not, therefore, ignore the demands of the future. One accounts for them by giving all to the present.<sup>30</sup> The problem of suicide is faced directly, as foil to the threat of nihilism.<sup>31</sup> Early in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus remarks that there are those who say 'no' to suicide but who "act as if they thought 'yes'." Here the 'as if' relates thought and deed: One *thinks* the answer to the problem of suicide is 'yes', suicide thus permitted, if not obligatory; but, one *says* 'no', in which case one does not commit suicide. Perhaps one says 'no' impulsively; for, Camus reminds, "We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking." The earlier habit of living, countervailing the latter, is potent. To continue questioning is to assure oneself of a tomorrow. One anticipates the eventuality of an answer while doubting reason's potency. We recognize our longing for tomorrow as a sign of "the revolt of the flesh" against the absurd.

The fact of revolt is itself a sign of deference to the claim the future makes on us when one *feels* the world in all its estrangement, where the True, the Good, and the Beautiful seem to be without meaning. Rejecting a formal ethics, Camus opines: "No code of ethics and no effort are justifiable a priori in the face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition."<sup>32</sup> Thus Camus rejects moral justification *a priori*, leaving room for an *a posteriori* warrant in ordinary experience. If we are to remake humankind and the world, then we must attend to *consequences*. To attend to the consequences of our deeds is to attend to the claim of the future upon the present. That is why Camus would give all to the present. One gives all to the present in view of consequences, accounting for what tomorrow *can* bring beyond the "successive regrets and impotences" that the history of human thought has delivered us.

The world is not reasonable relative to Camus's interrogation of the conditions of life experienced in the first half of the twentieth century. But, reason persists, insisting on its "adventure." Even if reason lacks apodictic efficacy it nonetheless possesses and manifests an intensity of hopes. With this hope we may see the way forward to "revolt against the irremediable,"<sup>33</sup> finding small consolation against the absurd, even if with a limited efficacy. Camus counsels: "But he who dedicates himself to the duration of his life, to the house he builds, to the dignity of mankind, dedicates himself to the earth and reaps from it the harvest that sows its seed and sustains the world again and again."<sup>34</sup> Camus, in a quintessentially Nietzschean move, may ask too much of humankind

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<sup>30</sup> Despite his rejection of the Christian gospel, it is as if Camus appropriates the adage that counsels taking care of today so that thereby tomorrow will take care of itself.

<sup>31</sup> Ingrid L. Anderson, "Absurd Dignity: The Rebel and His Cause in Améry and Camus," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy—Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française* 24(3), (2016): 74-94, at 77, observes: "Camus argues convincingly that the revolutionary desire for a perfected, inevitable future, when coupled with ethical and philosophical bankruptcy, not only rationalizes the suspension of morality, but also ultimately necessitates it. The rejection of what *is* eventually requires the elaboration of what *ought* to be..."

<sup>32</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 302.

and the world; for, he desires “everything to be explained” to him or, failing that, then “nothing.”

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche asks a set of questions about God: “Why atheism today? . . . ‘the father’ in God has been thoroughly refuted; ditto, ‘the judge’, ‘the rewarder’. Also his ‘free will’: he does not hear—and if he heard he still would not know how to help. Worst of all: he seems incapable of clear communication; is he unclear?”<sup>35</sup> Not surprising then that Camus asserts, “The world itself, whose single meaning [he does] not understand, is but a vast irrational.” He asserts his belief: “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”<sup>36</sup> This belief *qua* fact must not be forgotten, hence his imperative: If one must not forget, then one must continue the adventure of thought. That adventure calls forth the deeds that *would*, if they *could*, if they *should*—*comme si*—remake humankind and the world. The three strands of the subjunctive, the indicative, and the imperative are engaged, directing both deliberation and choice.

What are the conclusions of philosophy such as Camus articulates them in his interrogation of the absurd? To say ‘*x is absurd*’ is to say that one faces an apparent material impossibility, or a contradiction of belief concerning some presumed fact of experience. What happens, then, if one says, e.g., ‘It is absurd to *think* one must remake humankind and the world,’ and then to say further ‘it is, *therefore*, absurd in the extreme to *attempt* to remake both humankind and world?’ Or, returning to our initial question: If one cannot remove the absurdity at all, are we then to give place to reason’s intensity of hope, in particular when one says the foregoing but adds, perhaps reluctantly, ‘*as if*’, ‘*comme si*’? Must one not consider one’s *aim* and one’s *strength*, thus to dispose an act proportionate to the aim in view? Camus sets up a *logical* reality, i.e., a logical possibility. He would have us think of a *material* reality, not to leave the aim “impotent.” The transition between logical and material reality is itself a creative act, an act of remaking, *if one could*, if one thinks one *should*.

For Camus the absurd is present in the conjunction of the human mind and the world. Any attempt to solve a problem works with experience of both. Hence, Camus the man understands himself to have deep feelings concerning the absurd. This depth of feeling means he cannot fully fathom what he is conscious of saying. Hence, when he speaks his seeming imperative to remake humankind and the world, one may argue, on his own position Camus is not entirely conscious of what remaking humankind and the world entails. He hesitates in the very moment he utters the imperative, hence the ‘*comme si*’. He does not know—we do not know—whether to take the imperative seriously and grant it practical veracity.

For Camus, ‘world’ references both a *metaphysic* (for Europe since Plato, that means all Nietzsche sought to overturn and transvalue) and *an attitude of mind*—since Plato and Aristotle, an ontological commitment that is essentialist

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<sup>35</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 66.

<sup>36</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.



and archeological-teleological, and since the Church Fathers all that is eschatological. But, there is more here. Camus asserts, “a man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses.”<sup>37</sup> To utter a proposition and add ‘*as if*, ‘*comme si*’, as Camus does, is to introduce a move in thought from the sincere to the make-believe—to, what offers itself as logical possibility, but *perhaps also* as material possibility. Camus claims that methods disclose unconsciously present conclusions, though one claims not to know them yet. Camus’s quasi-existentialist method of analysis, his sense of the moral in the linkage of the sincere and the make-believe, moves him unconsciously to entertain the make-believe—not in some pejorative sense of installing oneself in fantasy, but in the positive sense of intuiting a logical reality that has some promise of material possibility, hence of “remaking” the present of humanity and the world. If his method “acknowledges the feeling that all true knowledge is impossible,” then we are left with the task of navigating appearances, including the totality of the manifest irrationality of human existence and the world. Camus counsels “an active consent to the relative” as one’s lucid fidelity to the human condition.<sup>38</sup> One’s aims are always approximate, never realized completely. The first rule of conduct, then, Camus articulates thus: “To conquer existence, we must start from the small amount of existence we find in ourselves and not deny it from the very beginning.”<sup>39</sup> This rule insists on the consequent imperative of absolute self-expression; in the dialectic one speaks against the overbearing silence of the world.

To acknowledge the absurd is a positive moment in human existence; one’s consciousness awakened to irrationality in human experience. When that happens it “provokes what follows.” An awakened consciousness of the absurdity of human existence is a provocation that dismisses the option of suicide and raises to the individual his or her conscience: *One must remake humankind and the world*, even if one utters the seemingly necessary refrain—‘*as if*, ‘*comme si*’. This imperative is the requisite response to the fact of the absurd. This is not to say that one identifies objects that incite our fear. Instead, Camus means here what Heidegger calls *dread (Angst)*, understood ontologically, thus without specific object. In the acknowledgement of dread, “one” must move to remake humankind and the world, even if we are to conclude that Camus himself cannot, or shall not, do so.<sup>40</sup>

Why should we defer to this seeming imperative to remake humankind and world? That is a question of justification of an ethics, such as Hochberg demanded of Camus. Camus provides a pertinent insight, telling us that nature negates us, that “At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman...[but that indeed the] primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia”<sup>41</sup>—and it is an irrational hostility, despite the “images and designs” by which we have sought to make sense of it. These images and designs are signs of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>38</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 290.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>40</sup> Camus’s own involvement in the resistance movement and later journalistic activity attests to his inclination to act to remake the world as he encountered it during his day.

<sup>41</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 14.

human artifice, of how we have worked to make sense of, and otherwise construct, the world in which we have our being. However, in the provocation that is the consciousness of the absurd, such artifice becomes useless.

In that moment Camus would say that it is “useful” to us to remake both humankind and the world. This is the moment for the onset of a new artifice, the artifice that works with consciousness of the absurd that was felt before but was not admitted as such into daily discourse. Camus will not stand passively before Nietzsche’s “nay-saying,” or Kierkegaard’s sickness unto death, or Sartre’s nausea and *mauvaise foi*, not even Heidegger’s enigmatic *Angst*. He is prepared to ask: “how far is one to go to elude nothing?”<sup>42</sup> With this question, consciousness of the absurd invokes the *conscience* that would, if it could, if it should, respond to the call to remake both humankind and the world. One does not remake with caprice. Rather, “When the throne of God is overturned, the rebel realizes that it is now his own responsibility to create the justice, order, and unity that he sought in vain within his own condition, and in this way to justify the fall of God.”<sup>43</sup> Here, perhaps, Camus appropriates the insight of Parain, realizing that “Our language is neither true nor false. It is simultaneously useful and dangerous, necessary and pointless.”<sup>44</sup>

Camus appreciates that the utterance issuing from conscience is not a matter of distinguishing the true and the false. Hence, such utterance does not place us before a possible contradiction, that effort at logic “in which the mind that studies itself gets lost in a giddy whirling.”<sup>45</sup> The intensity of hope that one may feel is not grounded in apodictic knowledge; hence, no justification *qua* demonstration of certitude can be given. All creative acts produce constructions, images and designs of the human mind. The present task that is *conscientious*, while being *conscious* of the absurd, is to recognize that these images and designs, while not certain have their utility. To remake humankind and the world is a task to be undertaken without the illusion of certainty, and without the pretense to knowledge. But, the question remains: How far shall we go?

### The “Ethics” of the Absurd

For Camus there must be a logic of which human existence is capable, i.e., that conduces to human existence, not to suicide. He allows that the absurd has its own “commandments” calling forth our action, without escapism into the transcendent. There are two commands in dilemma: (1) *Live* (aware of the absurd); (2) *Die* (lucid of one’s mortality). While doubting the authority of apodictic reason Camus nonetheless concedes: “It is useless to negate the reason absolutely. It has its order in which it is efficacious.”<sup>46</sup> To that degree, one need not, e.g., yield to the absurd in the Kierkegaardian sense that, Camus says, follows Ignatius of Loyola in sacrificing the intellect in favor of divine superintendence. Camus sets his standard: “I want to know whether I can live *with what I know*

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<sup>42</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 237.

<sup>45</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 17.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

and *with that alone*.”<sup>47</sup> Not willing to sacrifice the intellect, Camus concedes: “But if I recognize the limits of the reason, I do not therefore negate it, recognizing its relative powers.”<sup>48</sup> Rather than seek the rationalist aim of apodictic truth, Camus seeks what is *desirable* within the limits of *relative* truths. “Ethics” would have to be articulated within those parameters.

One who despairs of life yields to the nihilist temptation and commits suicide. Camus, however, recognizing the limit of human reason, presses against that limit, asking how far one will go. Life is lived all the better if it has no meaning, i.e., no meaning such as provided by the metaphysics appealing to the transcendent. He clarifies his aim: “In fact, our aim is to shed light upon the step taken by the mind when, starting from a philosophy of the world’s lack of meaning, it ends up by finding a meaning and depth in it.”<sup>49</sup> That meaning is not the leap to faith that installs religious meaning. Neither is it found in the phenomenologist’s intentionality that enumerates and describes phenomena without explaining them. So, Camus is left to his own rational devices, allowing what he knows and that alone. This is a function of belief that admits of very limited evidence. Thus, Camus says: “What I believe to be true I must therefore preserve.”<sup>50</sup> This is sign of his “conscious revolt.” Insisting on an ethics of revolt rather than renounce life in the face of the absurd, he will not suffer to have his and our freedom of rebellion abolished.

At this point one aware of the absurd takes up the charge of conscious revolt, acting according to an ‘as if’... ‘*comme si*.’ For, Camus asserts that it is then that one “thinks that something in his life can be directed. In truth, he acts *as if* he were free, even if all the facts make a point of contradicting that liberty.”<sup>51</sup> We have here, then, a specific understanding of Camus’s sense of the ‘as if’ that concerned us at the outset. If one is to remake humankind and the world, one does so *not knowing* that one is free (in the metaphysical sense). Notwithstanding, one can engage the present with a view to the future, acting *as if one is free* to do so, giving all to the present thereby in generosity to the future. Camus will say here ‘as if’ because, as he again concedes: “But at the moment I am well aware that the higher liberty, that freedom *to be*, which alone can serve as basis for a truth, does not exist.”<sup>52</sup> That awareness does not preclude one’s action in which one believes and pronounces: ‘I do so *as if* I were free...’

Problematic in our effort to glean an *ethos* from Camus that accounts for the future, however, is his declaration: “The absurd enlightens me on this point: *there is no future*.”<sup>53</sup> What is the implication here? Is one to say: ‘If there is no future, then there is only the present,’ in which case one commits one’s actions entirely to the present? If that is what Camus intends—such that one can, hence, have an attitude of *indifference* to the future—then (a) there is no obvious *duty* to

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 40; italics added.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 57; emphasis added.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 58; emphasis added.

future generations of humanity and (b) there is no *responsibility* to protect the present in view of ostensible duty. There seems to be no imperative to remake humankind or the world; for, that is “non-sensical” in the face of a claim that there is no future. But, one must be cautious here, since, in Camus’s sense, ‘future’ has onto-theo-logical connotations that include teleology and eschatology, both of which Camus rejected as part of Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical position.

Where does this put us in our effort to articulate a coherent ethics? Camus opines: “I see, then, that the individual character of a common code of ethics lies not so much in the ideal importance of its basic principles as in the norm of an experience that it is possible to measure.”<sup>54</sup> Entirely salient and informing his ethics, Camus contraposes *ideal principles* and *norms of experience*. *Experience* provides the norm, not the *a priori*, not the *prima facie*, not *abstract* principles. Further, one must mean here an experience one can *measure*. Hence, if one asserts a responsibility to the present, then this must be warranted by lived experience. A measure must be given. It seems, therefore, (a) if the condition *sine qua non* is experience (consistent with empiricist epistemology), and logically (b) one has no experience of the future (one can have only hopes), clearly the future does not dispose itself in the present to claim us by way of an *a priori* moral imperative. Hence, one cannot find it meaningful to assert such an imperative to remake humankind and to remake the world thereby. The imperative cannot be “truly, really, so”; it can be an imperative only ‘*as if*’ true... ‘*comme si c’était vrai*.’

But we get ahead of ourselves. We must ask: Which “man” is to be remade? Is it “man” who appeals to the transcendent, “ideal man” who has hope of eternity and victory over individual death that is otherwise absurd? Is it “absurd man” in the flesh, lucid enough to be aware of his absurd existence, who therefore takes on (because he gives to himself) the task of conscious revolt? Following Nietzsche, Camus *would* have us remake the former as “type.” But, to speak of the latter type is also to allow for a remaking—because, the absurd man, Camus claims, is “[a]ssured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness;” in that case “he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime.” This seems problematic, however, if one is to speak of an ethics in the classical sense of concern for alterity. Camus thinks a man in revolt shields his action “from any judgment but his own”—the rebel is indifferent to any claim from alterity, even seemingly indifferent to any claim from posterity. Camus asserts starkly:

There can be no holding forth on ethics. I have seen people behave badly with great morality and I note every day that integrity has no need of rules. There is *but one moral code* that the absurd man *can accept*, the one that is not separated from God: the one that is dictated. But it so happens that he lives outside that God. As for the others (I mean also

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 61.

immoralism), the absurd man sees nothing in them but justifications and he has nothing to justify.<sup>55</sup>

Camus identifies here a contradiction. Those who posit ethical codes but whose practice is contrary are hence without truth or efficacy. But, his experience informs him of individuals having moral integrity without ground in obvious maxims of conduct (whether subjectively or objectively valid). Further, Camus is aware of those who insist on 'immoralism', asserting 'Everything is permitted'. Camus is quick to clarify: What matters is to understand this assertion as "a bitter acknowledgment of a fact," viz., a person possesses "the ability to behave badly with impunity," such evil conduct part of ordinary experience.

Camus, however, does not accept this vulgar sense that, e.g., Dostoevsky seems to express through Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Camus is quite definitive: "The absurd does not liberate; it binds. *It does not authorize all actions.*"<sup>56</sup> This is so because of the consequences of actions, not in any *a priori* or *prima facie* justification such given in Western moral philosophy. Camus is a consequentialist (not to say utilitarian) in his moral demeanor; for, he assesses that, "All systems of morality are based on the idea that an action has consequences that legitimize it or cancel it."<sup>57</sup> He does not subscribe to eudaemonist, utilitarian, or deontological systems of morality, since, "if all experiences are indifferent, that of duty is as legitimate as any other. One can be virtuous through a whim."<sup>58</sup> That opinion will not satisfy an Aristotelian or a Kantian, obviously, since it asserts that one can be indifferent to moral virtue or duty but perform according to duty as a matter of inclination or self-interest. This, of course, is not the "strict motive" of respect for universal law or appeal to the "second nature" of habitual praxis.

Camus recognizes a practical link between past, present, and future relative to moral consequence, without privileging the authority of the past or the claim of the future: "At very most, such a mind [that of a responsible person] will consent to use past experience as a basis for its future actions."<sup>59</sup> That consent is merely a matter of fact in a situation of judgment. One may be indifferent, but one has the freedom to consent or dissent. No apodictically warranted imperative of action is presupposed; for, Camus asks (and not rhetorically): "What rule, then, could emanate from that unreasonable order? The only truth that might seem instructive to him is not formal: it comes to life and unfolds in men. The absurd mind cannot so much expect ethical rules at the end of its reasoning..."<sup>60</sup> It can expect only "illustrations," "images," "constructs," from lived experience, where, because no one is "guilty"—e.g., in reference to some objectively valid maxim that warrants moral judgment—there are no singular exemplars *per se*.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67, italics added.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 67. italics added.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

It seems Camus insists, then, that one's lived experience is sufficient to the deed that unfolds. All that matters is its efficacy in relation to the aim and the strength invested. One may *choose* to be someone or something, even as, conscious of one's mortality, one trembles. One can be, as Camus presents these two images, an unrepentant Don Juan or a rebellious lady of the stage such as Adrienne Lecouvreur, who had no problem presenting herself as "an unblushing face to the world"—Voltaire, in poetic verse, writing at her death: "Should she then, breathless, criminal be thought, And is it then to charm the world a fault?"<sup>61</sup> In choosing thus, each plays a game; and, he and she consent to the rules of the particular game. One may, of course, decline to play, choose a different game, or choose no game at all (which is, in effect, the choice of suicide). It is thus that one chooses a moral code, an ethics in which one is ever conscious of one's mortality. One subscribes to a maxim (the rule of the game) but only *'as if, 'comme si'*, taking it *as if true in the moment of living one's experience*, knowing it may not be true. This is a "logical" comportment" Camus argues.

Hence, not committing to an inductive logic of probable consequence, Camus is nonetheless consequentialist in the lucidity of his comportment. He appropriates the moment as lived experience, committing to living what unfolds without pretense of *telos* or *eschaton*. That is why he speaks of Don Juan as one who "achieves a knowledge without illusions which negates everything [men of God] profess," even if such men call down punishment upon his head for the excesses of his interminable devotion to the flesh, his unbridled carnality and debauchery. Similarly, Camus commends Adrienne who, he reminds, "on her deathbed was willing to confess and receive communion"—thus as a good and convicted Catholic Christian is expected to do—but who, Camus observes, "refused to abjure her profession."<sup>62</sup> Is one to judge her guilty thereby, as Voltaire asked, thus to condemn her for her choice, such as the Church did in refusing her a Christian burial? Camus says otherwise:

She thereby lost the benefit of the confession. Did this not amount, in effect, to choosing her absorbing passion in preference to God? And that woman in the death throes refusing in tears to repudiate what she called her art gave evidence of a greatness that she never achieved behind the footlights. This was her finest role and the hardest one to play. Choosing between heaven and a ridiculous fidelity, preferring oneself to eternity or losing oneself in God is the age-old tragedy in which each must play his part.<sup>63</sup>

Is her choice absurd? Nay; not for Camus. It *would* have been absurd had she repudiated her art upon confession and communion. That maxim she declined to accept, even as Don Juan declined to say he had loved "at last" and said, instead, that always he loved "once more." As actor in his game and as actress in her

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<sup>61</sup> Voltaire (Francois Marie Arouet), "On the Death of Adrienne LeCouvreur, A Celebrated Actress," [https://www.poetry-archive.com/v/on\\_the\\_death\\_of\\_adrienne\\_lecouvreur.html](https://www.poetry-archive.com/v/on_the_death_of_adrienne_lecouvreur.html), accessed 25 July 2019).

<sup>62</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 83.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

game, both Don Juan and Adrienne *remade* themselves—*comme si*—at least in the *persona* they presented to others.<sup>64</sup>

### The “Ethics” of Conquest?

We return to the question that engages the conquerer’s claim that one must remake humankind and the world as the only meaningfully useful action. This conquerer who would act so no longer conquers territories, not a conquest of “the earth”. Camus speaks of conquest that “lies in protest and the blind-alley sacrifice.”<sup>65</sup> The modern conquerer seeks victory in rebellion as *l’homme révolté*—“revolution...accomplished against the gods” as with Prometheus, “the first of modern conquerers.” One can *choose* to be a modern conquerer: “The conquerers are merely those among men who are conscious enough of their strength to be sure of living constantly on those heights and fully aware of that grandeur.”<sup>66</sup> Yet, they admit of death: “In the rebel’s universe, death exalts injustice. It is the supreme abuse.”<sup>67</sup> But, the rebel chooses so rather than choose the eternal that is mere illusion—for him, one must conquer illusion and appropriate one’s lucidity, even at the point of death.

Camus presented us with the images of Don Juan, Adrienne, and the conquerer, clear that, “these images do not propose moral codes and involve no judgments: they are sketches. They merely represent a style of life. The lover, the actor, or the adventurer plays the absurd. But equally well, if he wishes, the chaste man, the civil servant, or the president of the Republic.”<sup>68</sup> Each remakes him/herself involving neither the absolute negation of suicide nor the surrender to the illusion that appeals to eternal values. Above all one must choose to be lucid, whichever game one chooses to make life possible and meaningful for oneself. There is, for Camus, no *formal* ethics of judgment, of good and bad, no “right side” or “wrong side” (*l’enverse et l’endroit*). There is only the logic of the absurd that modern conquerers know: “They are not striving to be *better*; they are attempting to be *consistent*. If the term ‘wise man’ can be applied to the man who lives on what he *has* without speculating on what he *has not*, then they are wise men.”<sup>69</sup> Hence, one hesitates to speak of ethics, of morality, in the classical or modern sense. One does not speak of virtue or duty, except as whim. One does not speak of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful and thus assert a *correspondence* between one’s lived experience and postulated transcendent realities. One has only one’s absurd logic, one’s adventure, being consistent in the game one chooses to play, including the game one plays with oneself to remake oneself and to “be” what one will, but “*as if*,” “*comme si*.” One can ask no more of the man or woman who has found his or her lucidity, thereby conscious of the human condition.

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<sup>64</sup> Camus says that although he shall have seen an actor a hundred times he shall not for that have known the man. If all of us present ourselves in images, then there is never any certainty that one has a basis for judging any person as if one knows (certainly) with an indisputable truth or even a truth beyond a reasonable doubt.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 91, italics added.

The ethics of conquest in Camus's sense thus alters what it is "to be" a Don Juan or an Adrienne: One must be conqueror "in the realm of the mind, a Don Juan but of knowledge, an actor but of the intelligence..."<sup>70</sup> One must be even more than conqueror of the mind. This Camus identifies with s/he who creates beyond the absurd present as a matter of "metaphysical honor," despite being lucid about the fact that s/he is defeated in advance by the inevitable enemy that is death.

### From Ethics to Aesthetics

If Camus acknowledges a rank of virtues the highest is that of metaphysical honor, revolt the means to its accomplishment. The rebel's directive in action, however, is *aesthetic*—not moral in the classical sense but nonetheless finding morality *in* the aesthetic. The problem of life is aesthetic, as he says: "The problem for the absurd artist is to acquire this *savoir-vivre* which transcends *savoir-faire*."<sup>71</sup> With this comportment the absurd artist renounces whatever "prestige" thought has commanded hitherto. S/he is resigned to the fact that "the intelligence...works up appearances and covers with images what has no reason." Asserting *savoir-vivre* one lives without apodictic reason as ground of one's choice of action, hence living *comme si*. Camus realizes the appropriation of *savoir-vivre* must be viewed relative to "fictional creation," which he characterizes as "a work in which the temptation to explain remains greatest, in which illusion offers itself automatically, in which conclusion is almost inevitable."<sup>72</sup>

Art, as in the creation of a novel, Camus asserts, "has its logic, its reasonings, its intuition, and its postulates," its "intellectualization." In this context Camus expresses his principal concern: "I want to know whether, accepting a life *without appeal*, one can also agree to work and create *without appeal* and what is the way leading to these liberties."<sup>73</sup> This situates Camus's imperatives of the absurd he confronts: "If the commandments of the absurd are not respected, if the work does not illustrate divorce and revolt, if it sacrifices to illusions and arouses hope, it ceases to be gratuitous."<sup>74</sup> If the work of art is no longer gratuitous, then, Camus decries the consequence: "I can no longer detach myself from it. My life may find a meaning in it, but that is trifling. It ceases to be that exercise in detachment and passion which crowns the splendor and futility of a man's life."<sup>75</sup> This tendency to attachment is, for Camus, entirely problematic if the commandment of the absurd is rebellion, for it leads to resentment and consequentially permits both suicide and murder.

Hence, Camus asks: "In the fictional world in which awareness of the real world is keenest, can I remain faithful to the absurd without sacrificing to the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 102.



desire to judge?”<sup>76</sup> Camus would have us be careful of the “final illusion” that we are capable of judging the True, the Good, and the Beautiful through such works of art. The prospect of final illusion has its source in “stubborn hope.” Rather than commit himself to moral “judgment” or theoretical “justification”—thus to avoid appeal to the authority of apodictic reason—Camus engages such works not morally but aesthetically, all by way of “illustration.” He is quick to assert this does not lead to absolute negation. Adhering to the commandments of the absurd, Camus commits himself to denying the moral validity of both suicide (as articulated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*) and murder (as articulated in *The Rebel*). Despite the absurdity of human existence, *relative* truths such as we experience suffice to prohibit both suicide and murder—in the former case, in “the age of negation,” so as to affirm *human liberty*; in the latter case, in “the age of ideologies,” to affirm *human solidarity* against tyranny and servitude, against any master-slave morality, and even against nationalism.<sup>77</sup> Camus rejects the appeal to absolute freedom, which “is achieved by the suppression of all contradiction: therefore it destroys freedom.”<sup>78</sup> There can be no dialectic without contradiction, whether in the assertion that becomes an elenchus or that delivers a provisional truth.

For Camus there is no novelist more *apropós* to his point about stubborn hope than Dostoevsky, whose works of art represent heroes of “modern sensibility,” who “question themselves as to the meaning of life.”<sup>79</sup> In Dostoevsky’s art Camus finds the problem of logical suicide engaged, therein the existential problem of the ground of modernity’s ethics. If indeed man has killed “God” (humanity’s “metaphysical crime”), then Camus asks (with reference to Kirilov in Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*): “But if this metaphysical crime is enough for man’s fulfillment, why add suicide? Why kill oneself and leave this world after having won freedom? That is contradictory.”<sup>80</sup> There, squarely, is Camus’s problem of *philosophical* suicide, his facing squarely the *logic* of suicide. In the transition from the classical to the modern sensibility, Camus understands the problematic comportment: “As in the time of Prometheus, they entertain blind hopes.”<sup>81</sup> The modern sensibility, if it is to be lucid of absurdity, must dismiss such illusion. It must dismiss the final illusion that may be promised in works of art, such as the novel. It is precisely there that one can discern the essential commandment of the absurd, such as Camus clarifies with the foregoing question: *Why kill oneself and leave this world after having won freedom?*

One cannot answer this question without admitting to the absence of “justification” such as a universal rationality prefers. One dismisses the right of “judgment,” there being no ground for practical rationality. From the outset and in the end of his philosophical elucidation, Camus champions relative freedom,

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>77</sup> Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 190. Camus opines: “Nationalisms always make their appearance in history as signs of decadence.”

<sup>78</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 288.

<sup>79</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 104. Camus clarifies: “What distinguishes modern sensibility from classical sensibility is that the latter thrives on moral problems and the former on metaphysical problems.”

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

relative justice, and relative truth, all on the basis of ordinary experience that is, in his purview, tragic. Hence, he asserts, "Instead of saying, with Hegel and Marx, that all is necessary, [rebellion] only repeats that all is possible and that...it is worth making the supreme sacrifice for the sake of the possible."<sup>82</sup> Camus's above question has force, challenging Kirilov's attitude of dismay and disappointment when he says, "I am unhappy because I am *obliged* to assert my freedom."<sup>83</sup> *Unhappily* obliged to assert his freedom? Indeed. Yet, even Nietzsche—"the most famous of God's assassins"—did not wince before that task. He did not commit to the act of suicide though he felt obliged to give himself a new tablet of commandments that would inaugurate a transvaluation of past values. Suicide is not the answer that *savoir-vivre* calls into the forefront of the present moment of lucidity. One must remake both the individual "man" and the "world"—without asking the question (that is "the essential impulse of the absurd mind" when faced with its survey of a given act (such as an act of suicide) or a mind that succumbs to madness), viz., "What does that *prove*?" Camus does not consent to Dostoevsky's stance in *The Brothers Karamazov*, i.e., to assert in the end that "existence is illusory *and* it is eternal."<sup>84</sup>

In the end, Camus offers his alternative to the creative act undertaken by one such as Dostoevsky. Camus's confession is not that of the philosophical artist such as Dostoevsky is philosophical in his creative work. Camus is the absurd artist: "If something brings creation to an end," he argues, "it is not the victorious and illusory cry of the blinded artist: 'I have said everything,' but the death of the creator which closes his experience and the book of his genius."<sup>85</sup> Can one, *as artist*, "prove" oneself victorious, in the end of the work of art? In the shift from the classical *metaphysical* sensibility to the modern *moral* sensibility, then from the latter to an *aesthetic* sensibility, Camus insists on strict adherence to the commandments of the absurd: An absurd artist *shall not*, in the end of his or her work of art, be blinded to the absurd and *shall not* utter an illusory cry that seeks to sustain the bitter hopes of the human heart.

In the shift from the modern moral sensibility to the aesthetic, the absurd artist's metaphysical honor insists on seeing clearly, on persisting in the lucidity that permits no appeal to the eternal or to an absolute rationality that may govern the human condition. Most important, in being confronted with the question, 'Why kill oneself and leave this world after having won freedom?', the absurd artist *shall not* answer that s/he has the incontrovertible answer to that question. Instead, s/he will insist that one ought not kill oneself and leave this world after having won one's liberty, admitting to one's relative freedom. Camus utters his yet salient warning in his insistence on the limit of freedom, on the law of moderation: "Either this value of limitation will be realized, or contemporary excesses will only find their principle and peace in universal destruction."<sup>86</sup> A sense of the tragic in human existence requires this sense of limit. After all, Camus asserts, there are those among men who arrive at "the limits of their

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<sup>82</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 290.

<sup>83</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 108.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>86</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 295.

selves, stumbling over an absurdity they cannot overcome,” and this the consequence of “an excess of liberty.”<sup>87</sup>

Hence, if one will undertake the challenge of remaking humanity and the world, beginning with remaking oneself as absurd artist, one must do so “as if,” “*comme si*,” thereby not presuming to “demonstrate the truth you feel sure of possessing” (as happens in “thesis-novels”). The absurd novelist does what Camus understands himself to do in his own literary work—to *prove* nothing, but “to raise up images,” his works of art “like the obvious symbols of a limited, mortal, and rebellious thought.”<sup>88</sup> After all, Camus remarked once, “Comfortable optimism surely seems like a bad joke in today’s world.”<sup>89</sup> One who, like Camus, is lucid, asserts: “All that remains is a fate whose outcome alone is fatal. Outside of that single fatality of death, everything, joy or happiness, is liberty. A world remains of which man is the sole master. What bound him was the illusion of another world.”<sup>90</sup> That is a lesson learned from Nietzsche and from his life experience. Admitting to one’s mortality, living without the illusory appeal to eternity, *one appropriates one’s liberty to insist on one’s dignity*. No “proofs” are available to us to establish any apodictic, formal, moral truth. We have only a *savoir-vivre*, thus a will to live creatively, “as if...*comme si*.” That style of life may turn out to be both efficacious and exemplary. As Camus says in interview, “An analysis of the idea of revolt could help us to discover ideas capable of restoring a relative meaning to existence, although a meaning that would always be in danger.”<sup>91</sup> Camus’s literary work, as the work of an absurd artist in the act of rebellion and resistance to the totalitarian impulses of the twentieth century, contributes to that aim.

What matters in creative rebellion, Camus declared, is “to create in history what Shakespeare, Cervantes, Moliere, and Tolstoy knew how to create: a world always ready to satisfy the hunger for freedom and dignity which every man carries in his heart.”<sup>92</sup> Such acts of creation are at the center of Camus’s *ethos*:

Is it possible eternally to reject injustice without ceasing to acclaim the nature of man and the beauty of the world? Our answer is yes. This ethic at once unsubmitive and loyal, is in any event the only one that lights the way to a truly realistic revolution. In upholding beauty, we prepare the way for the day of regenerating when civilization will give first place—far ahead of the formal principles and degraded values of history—to this living virtue on which is founded the common dignity of man and the world he lives in...<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 204.

<sup>88</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 116.

<sup>89</sup> Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 351. The statement is given in interview with Gabriel d’Aubarede in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 10 May 1951.

<sup>90</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 117.

<sup>91</sup> Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 346. The statement is given in interview with Jeanine Delpech, in *Les Nouvelles littératures*, 15 November 1945.

<sup>92</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 276.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 276-277.

One asserts thereby the dignity of all humanity in its solidarity, hence Camus's imperative to one and all to commit neither suicide nor murder.<sup>94</sup> In the end, Camus *would*, if he *could*, because he *should*, die his mortal death. But, in that moment that discloses his finitude, he would do so uttering in song the words of Epicurus: "Ah, with what dignity we have lived."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> There remains the question, if not a complaint, that Camus would, if he must, when spirit and intelligence are in accord, permit killing in defense of justice. Such was his position expressed in his letters to a German friend in 1943 and 1944. See here, Albert Camus, *Lettres à un ami allemande*, ed. Jean-Marie Tremblay (Paris: Les Editions Gallimard, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 1948; Revised edition 1972; Electronic edition, 2008).

<sup>95</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 30.