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Ethical Anxiety: Establishing Morals in an Amoral World

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Ethical Anxiety: Establishing Morals in an Amoral World

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

This is a project founded on uncertainty. How can we ever judge anyone else when we can never know them as we do ourselves? How can we say that someone does wrong when they believe themselves to be doing right? Since at least the nineteenth century ethics, and philosophy as a whole, carved a new path without the aid of stabilizing pillars of objective, eternal truths. The following work demonstrates how a sense of vertigo descends on one who is forced to question the existence of those objective truths and how that fearful confusion can lead to dangerous refuges, yet also how this uncertainty may be surmounted by a reorientation, not abandonment, of truth. In brief, we can only judge one another when we acknowledge that we can only judge imperfectly and by a standard invented for a certain utility.

The first chapter, “An Exorcism of Fear and Trembling”, I lay out, alongside Kierkegaard, the profound internal tensions that emerge from the clash between an objective standard of ethics and personal desires. This conflict slowly breaks apart the integrity of one’s selfhood. When one does not act as they believe is right because they are considered unethical by an external measure then one ceases to behave as oneself. This tension is either resolved by self-destructive, “demonic”, behaviors or by abandoning the objective standard of ethics altogether. I agree with Kierkegaard that objective ethics causes suffering great enough to exceed whatever it could provide and so I follow along to apply a brand of subjective ethics Kierkegaard provides. Yet in applying this model we see that everywhere objective ethics solves a problem a new one springs forth from subjective ethics. This new form of ethics closes us off from the world and creates a terrifying sense of anarchy wherein no one but oneself can be said to act rightly or wrongly. Kierkegaard himself includes that to have a sense of meaning by which to gird oneself in this cold and unfriendly world one must make the absurd leap to have absolute

faith in God. For me this is an unacceptable conclusion. It neither sounds as though it makes the world a better place to live nor does absolute faith seem like something that one is actually capable of choosing. Kierkegaard showed how objective ethics were untenable, yet it led him to abandon ethics altogether and embrace an absurd absolute in order to get away from the terrifying specter of nihilism his revolt raised.

In chapter two, “Reconciling with the Absurd”, I consider, alongside Camus, how one might choose to live without an absolute. The principles of the absurd man show how absurdity is inescapable and yet not fatal, there is a life to be lived in the contradiction of humanity. In that way, both the need for an absolute and the threat of nihilism are overcome, yet Camus still calls on us to abolish ethics. *The Stranger* shows how the act of sitting in judgment itself is doomed to fail to act on anything higher than one's own projections. This criticism prompts me to consider how we might have to change our conception of ethics, truth as a whole, to be able to exist in a world which refuses to ever give itself to us.

My third chapter, “Pragmatic Truth”, is a stab at a solution that needs no absolute, that affirms meaning to us, and that calls on us to behave ethically. My summary of Pragmatism as it relates to ethics, drawn from James and Dewey, demonstrates how we can develop a sense of truth based not on a free floating absolute abstraction but upon practical aims reached through our material perceptions and life experiences. In doing so we now say that something is true “in so far”, true to the best of our ability to know for this or that purpose. This view, combined with the principle of human sociability, leads to a view of ethics which is based on how one acts for the general good to the best of their ability. I proceed from these principles to reexamine the literary examples provided to me by Kierkegaard and Camus in my previous chapters and draw out how internal tensions and the problems of ethical judgment can be resolved through this

alternative pragmatic lens. In doing so I feel we can be confident that pragmatic morality could serve to address all our criteria and help to remove some of the sense of coldness one feels from my first two interlocutors.

The thread of my argument essentially concludes that the best way we can try to behave ethically is to do as best we can for the benefit of all. This may seem like a simplistic answer. One might have come up with that response on the first try, and though I support it with a great deal of nuance I cannot deny that it is not obviously challenging. Yet I would posit that this is not the case when one thinks not from the perspective of the citizen and friend, but from that of the stranger, the fearful trembler. For the trembler the world is unwelcoming, the other is a source of danger, the only guaranteed thing is suffering. In this I admit that to believe in the general good is itself a leap of faith. However, this leap of faith is not absurd and it is not towards any absolute, it is supported by all the tools of understanding a human has access to. Only in trusting that our best effort to do right is good enough can we ever say that we are no longer anxious.

Chapter 1: An Exorcism of Fear and Trembling

Two sorts of people hide from the world. One is exemplified by the Knight of Infinite Faith, following the incommunicable commands of God. The Knight of Infinite Faith fully gives themselves over to complete faith, a faith impossible to explain to another. The other sort, exemplified by the Knight of Infinite Resignation, obeys a darker, demonic force. They do not take the step into faith that reconciles them to all suffering in the world. Kierkegaard's personas leave us with just a single path for escaping the endless internal spiritual struggle: the way of the Knight of Infinite Faith. That path is a radical and frightening one; it asks us to sacrifice our rationality and certainties in exchange for the "absurd" belief in God. If we are unwilling to accept absolute faith as the answer then we must ask whether Kirkegaard's personas change from objective ethics to pure subjective ethics makes progress in alleviating suffering.

Johannes De Silentio, a Kierkegaardian persona, understands the demonic at the very least, the result of the breakdown of the efficacy of ethics. We will see how De Silentio's strict objective ethics seem to cause unnecessary suffering. We will use the subjective ethics espoused by other Kierkegaardian personas, as opposed to the more objective ethics given by De Silentio, to resolve some of the most provocative tensions within De Silentio's demons. This substitution, however, unmask new and dangerous problems as subjective ethics costs us the ability to relate to one another. The dilemma Kierkegaard's personas present leads us to think that in order to overcome our spiritual struggles, such as the demonic, we must become Knights of Infinite Faith. This is not a simple step. De Silentio described the Knights of Infinite fate as terrifying to outsiders, appearing insane. If an observer can't distinguish the insane from the Knights of Infinite Faith, then how can we be sure that any true Knights of Infinite Faith exist? That

uncertainty might make one suspicious of the radical restructuring of ethics that Kierkegaard's personas guide us to. Furthermore, we should consider that even if such a shift would succeed in releasing us from the particular spiritual conflict Kierkegaard describes, it may exacerbate other sorts of suffering.

A Note on Kierkegaardian Authorship

Before we engage in an analysis of Kierkegaardian writing, and especially because we will refer to multiple pseudonymous works, we ought first to note the fact that most of the authors discussed in this essay will in fact be personas of the original author, Kierkegaard. Of the Kierkegaardian works we will be using, in order of publication date, *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, and *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, only *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Point of View* have writing directly attributed Kierkegaard himself.

Many of Kierkegaard's works are written through personas which we are to consider as essentially independent of Kierkegaard's personal beliefs and thought processes. In "A First and Last Declaration" Kierkegaard declares the beliefs of his personas are wholly independent of him. "In a legal and in a literary sense, then, the responsibility is mine, but understood purely dialectically in the poet-actuality of ideality, the relation must be accurately defined in such a way that the utterances are not my words, but that it is I who by producing the poetically actual author who speaks have occasioned the audibility of the utterances in the world of actuality" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 114). So Kierkegaard admits that he had an artistic hand in crafting the personas, he does not claim either authorship or ownership of their actual thoughts. However, for the sake of this essay, we will lend credence to Kierkegaard's alternate declaration, found in his posthumous work, *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*.

There he stated that his pseudonymous works were intentionally structured in such a way as to lead one to become a “Christian”.¹ The second point of view appears to betray the first.

Kierkegaard cannot be as much a reader as we are if the personas were crafted with a particular purpose in mind. Were one to try to reconcile the pseudonymous works while remaining loyal to the idea that Kierkegaard had no narrative or hidden agenda in mind for his personas to pursue then they might very well reach a very different conclusion as to whether or not Kierkegaard personally advocates a shift in our ethics.

Because we will operate from the understanding that Kierkegaard ultimately embraces faith as a way out of spiritual struggles, he identifies with ethics and selfhood. Albert Camus’s assessment of Kierkegaard will be useful to us. Camus views Kierkegaard as having skillfully captured how the absurd permeates our lives but ultimately buckles under the weight of it through his acceptance of faith. Like Camus, we will identify problems with Kierkegaard's embrace of faith as the answer to absurdity. But unlike Camus, we will approach this problem as one who is less eager to accept absurdism. Camus’s reading is a valuable counter-interpretation in that it occupies a middle ground between what will be our approach and Kierkegaard’s. Camus rejects Kierkegaard's adoption of absolute faith yet at the same time chooses to accept and celebrate the absurd Kierkegaard attempts to resolve. We in turn will hesitate to make the step of embracing Kierkegaard’s doubt.

In keeping with Kierkegaard’s expansive use of conflicting personas, we must also take into account that any definition we assign terms will be incomplete, as each persona has their own particular approach to any concept. Terms like ethics, aesthetics, and the demonic therefore

¹ While this is a debatable point, the chronological order of the pseudonymous works, starting with the scandalous aesthetics of *Either/Or* to the ethical dilemmas of faith in *Fear and Trembling* and finally onto the Christian ethical understanding presented in *Concluding Scientific Postscript* and *The Sickness unto Death* encourages the reader down a certain avenue of thinking which compellingly lines up with Kierkegaard’s self-explanation in *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*.

cannot be given tidy Kierkegaardian definitions. For this reason, we will define these terms for the most part as De Silentio did in *Fear and Trembling*, though we will address alternative definitions as necessary as we bring in other personas. Additionally, De Silentio's definitions tend to be made in the context of story-telling and drama. He represents concepts in terms of characters and narrative aesthetics as opposed to real-life situations, therefore one should assess these definitions with even more flexibility. While there is some comity with Kantian terminology that relationship is not direct and so we must be reluctant to draw direct comparisons.

De Silentio's Ethical and the Aesthetic, Universal and Individual

“The ethical as such is the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed.” Here De Silentio posits the most basic definition of his version of ethics. The ethical is that which is understood by all, ethical action is that which discloses oneself to others. If being ethical is to expose the internal to the universal then we have a clear guideline for judging the actions of others. “The single individual, qualified as immediate, sensate, and psychical, is the hidden. Thus his ethical task is to work himself out of his hiddenness and to become disclosed in the universal” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 82). To act ethically is to reveal your internal character to others. The converse is also true: concealing and enclosing oneself within one's interiority is unethical. Just as one is responsible for speech or silence, speaking out is a direct ethical obligation that you fail to uphold by remaining hidden.² This is the vantage point from which De Silentio evaluates the actions of tragic heroes and the “demonically silent.” We will examine these two archetypes but here the reader should immediately understand the tragic hero

² “Hiddenness and disclosure, then, are the hero's free act, for which he is responsible.” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 84)

as one who reveals painful truths and the demonically silent as those who keep them hidden. From this, one easily places them within De Silentio's basic ethical framework.

If one must reveal oneself to be ethical, what does it mean when that revelation harms another? According to De Silentio, staying silent is falling back into the aesthetic, preserving something that would be destroyed if the full truth were divulged. "Ethics has no room for coincidence; consequently there is no room for eventual explanation. It does not trifle with dignities, it places a heavy responsibility on the hero's frail shoulders, it denounces as arrogant his wanting to play providence with his act, but it also denounces his wanting to do that with his suffering" (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 86). Being ethical tolerates no silence whatsoever; this is why De Silentio describes the universal as being an absolute authority to which we may relate ourselves. It is due to its uncompromising, rational nature that De Silentio regards ethics, with admiration, as "purely human" (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 88). Without such an absolute authority to which we must justify ourselves, we are beset by destructive self-doubt.

While we can think of the aesthetic as the opposite of the ethical, that which is concealed within the individual, the aesthetic is not necessarily always silent. The aesthetic in drama can demand or reject hiddenness depending on the circumstances. The aesthetic also does not require a direct action of the agent to be fulfilled, e.g. keeping a secret but allowing the knowledge to get out. Any circumstance when one does not act to reveal themselves but is nevertheless revealed as an aesthetic revelation. Here De Silentio makes it clear that he is working in terms of drama. Frankly, Kierkegaard fails to provide a succinct explanation of what the aesthetic exactly means to De Silentio. We know that the aesthetic is the opposite of the external, and that there is a sort of beauty that can be found in it but otherwise things are quite vague. The best general definition we might use is that the aesthetic is that which is concerned with exclusively individual

experience and sensation. When De Silentio talks about the aesthetic being “fulfilled” one can best understand him as talking about a character feeling deeply private emotion. Despite the vagueness of definitions we must wrestle with, what is clear is that we are being provided the objective standard of revealing oneself as the foundation of ethics and concealing oneself as that of the aesthetic.

Silence in Kierkegaard and the Nature of the Demonic

Now that we are equipped with provisional definitions of the ethical and aesthetic, we ought to ask about one of the most provocative characteristics of these definitions i.e., unethical silence maintained for the greater good. De Silentio delineates two sorts of silence: the religious and the aesthetic. The first is justified by a belief in an absurdity, God. Albert Camus describes the radical absurdity of the absolute commitment to God entailed by things such as religious silence, “For him, too, antinomy and paradox become criteria of the religious. Thus, the very thing that led to despair of the meaning and depth of this life now gives it its truth and its clarity. Christianity is the scandal, and what Kierkegaard calls for quite plainly is the third sacrifice ... the one in which God most rejoices: ‘The sacrifice of the intellect.’ ... He makes of the absurd the criterion of the other world, whereas it is simply a residue of the experience of this world.” (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* 38). Here Camus explains the way Kierkegaard’s personas view the leap of religious faith as based upon beliefs which are self-contradictory.³ So when Kierkegaard calls for the “sacrifice of the intellect” he is telling us that our rationality holds us

³The absurd nature of faith is not our subject here. However, to understand the sort of self contradiction meant here we can consider Abraham’s aborted sacrifice of Isaac. When Abraham obeyed God and tried to sacrifice Isaac he fully believed he would kill Isaac. However, at the same time, Abraham “knew it was God the Almighty who was testing him” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 22) and so believed God would never truly let the sacrifice come to pass. Abraham believes at the same time that he really will sacrifice Isaac and also that God would not let him sacrifice Isaac, hence he believes something absurd. This is a complicated idea. One might think that Abraham’s belief that Isaac would be returned to him would supersede his belief that he will kill Isaac but it cannot be stressed enough that each belief is equal in strength.

back from having real faith. Without having sacrificed rationality one will be incapable of true faith. This sacrifice is equally as terrifying as the aesthetic silence we will be discussing. We will further discuss Kierkegaard's treatment of faith later on.

An aesthetic silence is not motivated by the same sort of incomprehensible faith as the religious silence. An aesthetic silence cannot be divine because it can be coherently explained and is therefore a creation of personal choice.⁴ Since religious silence is divine and ethics is a uniquely human pursuit, then by the process of elimination it must be that aesthetic silence is demonic.

Demonic silence is inherently unpleasant as it forces us to act against that which is human without the sort of absolute justifying authority we would act under in a religious silence. Where the religiously silent person can remain silent without self-doubt, the demonically silent person suffers from constantly self-doubt.. De Silentio links the extent of the demon's silence to the severity of its nature. "Silence is the demon's trap, and the more that is silenced, the more terrible the demon" (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 88). This is to say that the more we hide from ourselves the more we suffer in doing so. The demonically silent person wishes to reveal themselves, but feels that they cannot, and so the conflicting desires they feel cause them to suffer. One should also keep in mind that the sort of demonic we speak of here is not something that would necessarily make the silent person villainous by any means, as their attachment to the demonic might suggest. Instead, one should understand that the condition that they have been placed in is demonic.

⁴ Religious silence, as a product of communication with God or otherwise absolute faith, will be incomprehensible for one who does not feel the same divine connection and is therefore effectively silent. This is sort of silence De Silentio supposes Abraham experienced as he led Isaac to be sacrificed.

De Silentio's Demons

Of De Silentio's three examples of the demonic, two are particularly interesting for our purposes: the Merman and Sarah.⁵ Both operate under the aesthetic "illusion of magnanimity", the circumstance when one acts for an outcome which they believe is "good" but is not actually ethical and therefore not justified by something absolute. Having one's silence unjustified by some absolute standard creates an internal spiritual conflict between the desire to speak and the fear of what speech will create. Because Sarah and the Merman willingly suffer the moral vertigo of the demonic silence, hiding themselves out of care for others, they are both self-sacrificial. These stories are modified from their original narratives in the Book of Tobit, Goethe's *Faust*, and Danish Folklore, by De Silentio for the sake of emphasizing their demonic characteristics. We will describe the details of these two cases so as to understand the dilemma which each faces.

The Merman is a demon turned human upon seducing an innocent woman and falling in love with her. Even though the Merman becomes capable of ethics as a human, his desire to repent his sins as a demon keeps him from revealing himself to his love because he believes he must suffer for his wrongdoing. "Now the Demonic in repentance will probably explain that this is indeed his punishment, and the more it torments him the better" (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 96). This story demonstrates that demonic silence, like God in religious silence, serves as an absolute that can authorize one's actions yet that absolute must be suffering itself.⁶

Sarah's silence differs from that of Merman examples. While the Merman is literally silent, Sarah is silent in that she does not perform the actions she should. Sarah is coerced into falling short of her ethical compulsion (and personal desire) to get married. Sarah is afflicted

⁵ The third, *Faust*, has his demonic silence effectively resolved by the shift in ethical perspective made later, making it less relevant when describing the problems of that shift.

⁶ In an interesting foreshadowing of things to come De Silentio argues that if the Merman were to accept God, a gentler absolute, he could resolve the whole situation and happily marry his love.

with the “love” of a demon who will kill anyone she marries on her wedding night. In marriage one is supposed to fully reveal themselves to their partner and so it is profoundly ethical.

Therefore Sarah’s case is a cruel twist on the ethical. Revealing herself dooms the person to whom she reveals herself. De Silentio presents her as the true hero of her story, rather than the man who dares to marry her, because she possesses the courage to break through her demonic restrictions and marry her love.⁷ While Sarah’s demonic silence is resolved by her putting “absurd” faith in the protection of God we should still note her original dilemma, that is that her acting ethically would hurt others and benefit no one but in not acting she suffers the pain of being unable to marry, which is her ethical obligation and personal desire.

De Silentio imagines that if Sarah were a man and subject to social norms demanding that a man protect his pride, he might act differently.⁸ This is because the ethical burden felt more heavily by men than women in this instance is the shame of being pitied by others. De Silentio affirms that for a naturally prideful man it is far worse to be born flawed and therefore universally pitied than to sin and receive punishment, “it demands guilt one moment and refuses it the next,” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 104). Such a paradox corrupts. It makes a man immediately feel the allure of the demonic and in the place of Sarah “He might possibly choose the demonic, inclose himself up in himself, and speak the way a demonic nature speaks in secret: ‘Thanks, I’m no friend of ceremonies and complexities; I do not demand the delight of love at

⁷ It is this fact that makes Sarah the demoniac hero who comes closest to experiencing a religious epiphany, putting her faith in the absurd hope that by the grace of God she will marry her love without causing his death.

⁸ Kierkegaard was influenced by the patriarchal society in which he lived. Misogyny underlies particular notions in regards to how De Silentio applies ethics. He essentially states that men, as represented by Tobias and a male version of Sarah, have a greater investment in or obligation to ethical behavior than women do. This premise creates a paradox: it creates a class of people for whom it is acceptable to retain interiority yet at the same time maintains that the definition of the ethical is universal and that avoiding the universal creates suffering. This implies that women are inherently unethical or perhaps even demonic. However, the text could be rewritten such that men and women are assigned the same ethical responsibilities and the argument made within this essay would remain essentially the same.

all, for I can in fact be a Bluebeard and have my delight in seeing maidens die on their wedding night.” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 105). De Silentio argues that, for the demonic person, it is better for a man to be a monster than a faultless wretch; at least a monstrous person assumes responsibility for their suffering.

A Closer Look at the Demonic across Kierkegaard

We have our demons and we will now move to look at how their problems could be resolved. Consider a broader meaning of the demonic across the Kierkegaardian authorship. While the Kierkegaardian personas are separate identities and the definitions found outside De Silentio’s works cannot be directly ascribed to him, there are significant similarities between the definition found in De Silentio’s *Fear and Trembling* and Anti-Climacus’s *The Sickness Unto Death*. Synthesizing these definitions allows a satisfactory root meaning of the demonic.

In Anti-Climacus’s *The Sickness Unto Death*, the demonic is the willful human rejection of God. Anti-Climacus describes that without God as an absolute to relate oneself to, one will fall into despair over the incompleteness and transience of existence. Only in sacrificing one’s selfhood to the absolute through absolute faith can one alleviate this form of suffering. For our purposes, the most significant form of this despair is that of the person who chooses to despair in defiance of the absolute i.e., God. Defiant despair is caused when one recognizes that they are suffering, why they are suffering, and the action that would dispel this suffering yet refuses to accept help. It is the will to suffer that produces the demonic. “The more consciousness there is in such a sufferer who in despair wills to be himself, the more his despair intensifies and becomes demonic” (Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* 71). This “demonic rage” intensifies to the point that “even if God in heaven and all the angels offered to help him out of it - no, he

does not want that, it is too late now.” (Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* 72). The demonic jealously holds onto its pain, placing it as the thing that it most values.

There is a clear similarity between Anti-Climacus’ demonic and De Silentio’s demonic. Both arise from knowing the action that would lift them from their painful existence yet being unwilling to take that action and leave their interiority behind. But they differ in that De Silentio and Anti-Climacus focus on two different spheres of relations. For De Silentio, the demonic is to be found in relation to the ethical, where the demoniac is unable to make themselves reveal interiority to another. Anti-Climacus finds it in the defiance of the religious, the only absolute that could purge the despair from the demoniac. Why does this difference exist? They differ because ethics is not universal for Anti-Climacus.⁹

Subjective Ethics in Kierkegaard

De Silentio works from a fundamentally different system of ethics than the other Kierkegaardian personas. We have established that De Silentio finds ethics in revealing the interior to universal, radical candidness. His counterparts take a different approach. They see ethics not in the results of one's action but in the purity of intentions that motivate the action. “When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the truth, the individual is in the truth, even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true” (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 211). This is to say, what is significant in assessing a choice is the passion with which one makes the choice. One who has chosen an action with the conviction that it is correct is acting more truly than one who does the correct thing half-heartedly. We can only process the external world through our internal minds. Since we cannot take ourselves out of ourselves, we can never know another and never have an objective view of anything. Therefore truth is found in the interior and the universal is beyond

⁹ The significance of the particular shift to God as absolute will be addressed later

our cognitive reach: “there is only one kind of ethical contemplation, namely, self-contemplation. Ethics closes immediately about the individual.” (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 226). Therefore ethics is something just as personal as aesthetics. Only the passion of action matters because absolute standards are unavailable to us.

This view of ethics is irreconcilable with De Silentio’s. De Silentio’s system is based entirely upon the judgment of others in the universal, yet for the other Kierkegaardian authors “One human being cannot judge another ethically, because he cannot understand him except as a possibility.” (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 227). Another persona, Judge William, uses a system of ethics that might be closest in spirit to De Silentio’s in that he speaks of specific moral virtues, yet it is still diametrically opposed: “there is only one situation in which either/or has absolute significance, namely when truth, righteousness, and holiness are lined up on one side, and lust and base propensities and obscure passions and perdition are on the other.” (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* 97). This is to say that the only circumstances where a hard choice is necessary is when one chooses between things that are right and wrong. To make this decision Judge William instructs that one should make choices based on that understanding of good versus evil and most passionately choose the good. Besides its interior approach, this system also differs from De Silentio’s in that it allows for self-reproach as a positive good: “It is important to test oneself, lest one day one might have to beat a retreat to the point from which one started.” (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* 97). Here Judge William tells us that his ethics require self-evaluation, making sure that one is always passionate for their action. If one stays passionate then they are more likely to be doing the right thing. By abolishing universality, the tensions that cause De Silentio’s “demonic silence” dissipate. We must remember that the suffering the demonic silence creates is really caused by self doubt. That self doubt exists because the silent

person refuses to speak for individual, subjective, reasons while an objective ethical standard tells them to speak. If there is no ethical standard then there is no reason to doubt oneself for staying silent.

Why should the Merman feel an overwhelming need to repent and shut himself off when he has the opportunity to return to his starting point and, with newfound consciousness, start seeking the just path? Judge William argues that being mistaken in the past does not impede acting rightly in the future. The Merman can change his ways if he summons the courage and passion to atone rather than torment himself in private. There is no longer any ethical obligation for him to speak, so at very least his internal conflict between speech and silence in that regard is solved.

Sarah's circumstances are noticeably different as she is coerced into silence, but without an objective ethical standard to compel her she faces a much easier decision. Her decision to allow Tobias to attempt to marry her is now without the pressure of the universal. She can allow Tobias to marry her and have faith in God that he will survive, or she can, without shame, remain unwed.

The male version of Sarah could perhaps be most changed. Seen through the lens of subjectivist ethics then it may be that social shame will disappear. Why should he feel the need to lash out at the universal to protect his pride if he can set aside the importance of the perspectives of others? He could be confident in the fact that others do not know him and so their gaze does not define him. In this circumstance, the male Sarah is much more like the female Sarah. Both have their universalist expectations lifted and the only question is whether they should take a blind leap into love despite the looming threat. Before there was pressure to take that leap regardless of their faith that things would turn out well. They had to marry because to refrain was

improperly hiding; now they need only decide to leap if they have genuine faith that doing so will succeed. De Silentio led us to understand the demonic silence as the tension between the outside demand to expose oneself in conflict and the internal compulsion to keep something inside, but if there is no such pressure there is no reason that such silence should be harmful.

Chaos

This shift from objectivist to subjectivist ethics creates new problems. Those issues with subjectivism are precisely the same as its strengths: uncertainty and distance. I argue that we would struggle to have any shared definition of virtues and vices and we would have no way of really having access to each other.

If it is up to the individual to interpret the truth then it is perfectly reasonable to expect that everyone will have their particular version of right and wrong. Furthermore, that version need not align with any other version. If someone descends into a fanaticism that compels them to commit acts of cruelty in the name of righteousness, then how are we to condemn them as unethical? If they passionately believed in the justifications for their actions, are we able to censure them? Do good and bad even mean anything in particular in this system? It could be since the Kierkegaardian writings are Christian in nature, that there is a presumption that God has imparted some sort of instinctive right and wrong on humanity, but given that humans still do find their way into unrighteousness it can't be that these are clear inclinations. Therefore it seems that the only compelling force is faith; there is no truth to be found outside of fiercely held belief. The only moral judgments we can make are impotent, in judging others we only compare our inevitably incomplete impression of others to ourselves.

With this subjectivity we become isolated from each other. We cannot judge each other's actions at even the most basic level. Even if the other was not making choices with the passion

that would qualify them as ethical, we would have no way of knowing they were doing so.

Passion is an internal phenomenon and so we cannot assess whether someone has it.

Furthermore, even if we could be certain that someone is acting without passion we have no right to say if the thing they are doing is in itself unethical because ethics are a personal thing. Is it not a terrifying prospect to say that humans cannot make ethical judgements about each other? A shutter has come over our window into others and we have no assurance that there is a way we can make ourselves safe from the danger another might present. After all, there could be no justified punishments beyond what people feel internally or through an act of God.

Suddenly our unfortunate demoniacs have nothing with which to compare themselves! The Merman receives human consciousness, but what is he to do with it? He has no solid ethical principles to follow. Either he decides to establish ethical principles through reason and ends up in the same universalist ethics that produced the demonic silence, or he rejects objectivist ethics meaning there would be nothing keeping him from coming to think that it would be righteous to indulge in self-torment. Furthermore, if the Merman were to personally subscribe to subjectivism would he even love the girl in the same way, no longer being able to truly understand her? Sarah does not feel the ethical pressure to give herself to another and can now do so freely. But in this subjectivist system it is much harder to relate ourselves to each other. But now that universal ethics is abolished would Sarah not be even more susceptible to demonic blackmail? She no longer has reason to get married beyond a personal desire, something no more powerful than her personal desire to not have her groom be killed. If the social shame persists despite the shift to subjectivism then the male Sarah will not experience any fundamental change in circumstances. Merely changing the lens through which the demons' problems are viewed has not in fact truly

resolved their issues, but only the specific trouble of the internal conflict between ethical and aesthetic.

The God Problem

All of a sudden we see the damage the shift has done. In switching absolutes from the ethical to divine we have jettisoned what De Silentio described as the human. We now need to rely on the absurd, i.e., faith in God. Kierkegaard's subjectivist personas are encouraging us toward a way of thinking that requires God or chaos. In a way, this was already self-evident. De Silentio already suggests that both the Merman and Sarah finding God would already solve their dilemmas. Anti-Climacus describes absolute faith as the be-all and end-all to the self, the only way to avoid setting one against oneself. But here we need to bring in De Silentio's very justified doubt. If God does not exist then all these prophets are insane.

This may be where many of us leap away from Kierkegaard's project. If we reject the idea of God and faith in the absurd then we are locked out of reaching Kierkegaardian internal peace. Kierkegaard himself presents the terror of faith through De Silentio and his arguments in favor of faith feel as though they are based on blind hope, the writings of someone desperate for an answer to the unpleasant individualism they have worked themselves into. It should not be enough to convince us to have faith in God merely by being told that by having such an absolute we will feel more rooted in ourselves, especially when the cost is so incredibly great.

This may be among Kierkegaard's greatest failings. Kierkegaard looks into the face of the terrifying things both objective and subjective ethics can create and at the absurdities which are demanded of us, and he cannot live with it. Kierkegaard chooses to put his faith into the absurd, to make it God. Camus describes this feverish need for an absolute well: "Between the irrationality of the world and the insurgent nostalgia of the absurd, he does not maintain the

equilibrium. ... Sure of being unable to escape the irrational, he wants at least to save himself from that desperate nostalgia that seems to him sterile and devoid of implication.” (Camus). The “desperate nostalgia” Camus speaks of here is the desire humans feel for a meaning to life, absurdity threatens to destroy the possibility of purpose. Camus’s meaning is that Kierkegaard wants to avoid the meaninglessness absurdity suggests. Kierkegaard figures that if we are without God we see that at the very core of things there would be nothing but contradiction and self-isolation, and he assumes we simply cannot bear it.¹⁰ Kierkegaard uses God as a way of neutralizing the absurd by having God authorize its existence as an absolute authority. Therefore, his attempts to use God as an escape from the ailments of reality seem to fall short if we merely say back to him that we cannot believe and that we will live with our absurdity.

¹⁰ A paraphrase of a *Fear and Trembling* quote in *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Chapter 2: Reconciling with the Absurd

In our first inquiry we came to a problem with three dimensions. Kierkegaard laid out these issues: God, moral anarchy, and the absurdity which arises from abolishing a universal ethics. In order to resolve the spiritual struggle between personal aims and ethical standards it so far appears that we must accept an unpleasant compromise. Kierkegaard himself alludes to faith in a divine absolute as an anchor one can use to turn away from the absurd and be able to accept the abolition of ethics. We have also briefly considered Camus's analysis of the issue of absurdity in regards to Kierkegaard and the value of his approach to understanding Kierkegaard's flight to faith. Where we left Camus in the first chapter his ideas seem to align well with our goal. Camus neutralizes the need for God and accepts the absurd as an unavoidable element of life, yet finds a way to prevent the self-destruction Kierkegaard fears would arise from doing so. However, his conclusions make a compromise just as unpalatable as Kierkegaard's. I wrote that we approach our issue from the perspective of a reader hesitant to accept Camus's absurdism. We hesitate because even if the absurd man can keep his will to live alive in the absurd world, he must kill off his ethics in order to do so.

Before beginning an analysis of Camus's approach to absurdity I should address why I take the time to work with him when we already know he will not have our solution. Our goal is to avoid the need for God and absolutes generally, live with the absurd nature of the world, and still retain ethics. We will see that the absurdist has no pretension to preserve ethics or morality¹¹. However, Camus provides us with a useful set of criticisms of morality and with principles which will prove valuable to us as we think about how ethics would have to be rethought to persevere in our ultimate solution. The absurd exists, as do people who live by the absurd, that

¹¹ I do not suggest here that the absurdist is incapable of tender feelings and relationships one might associate with ethics, as the harshness of the literary example of this chapter might suggest. Rather it is that these relationships, and everything else, cannot be regulated through any socially defined structures.

much we accept. Camus shows us how ethics buckles when judging absurd men and thus reveals the pitfalls we must navigate when searching for a non-absolute justice. Furthermore, while we may oppose Camus's rejection of morality we can nonetheless use some of the principles which he argues can help us preserve our will to live in the face of absurdity.

The Absurd and the Absurdist

The Absurd

We must describe Camus's view on the absurd before we consider the absurdist and absurd man. The absurd is the ultimate de-romanticization of life. It is the recognition that life has no purpose of its own as we march toward death. In this estrangement we cannot embrace ourselves, the world we live in, or our fellow person.

We live with an unconscious expectation that we will go on, that we always have a place in the future. "Yet a day comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty. Thus he asserts his youth. But simultaneously he situates himself in relation to time. He takes his place in it." (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13) At this moment one recognizes that their life will end and that nothing can be done to change that fact. "He belongs to time, and by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it. That revolt of the flesh is the absurd." (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 14) Like someone watching a distant avalanche realizing all too late that they cannot escape its path, the person afflicted by absurd reasoning is seized by the terror of death. They are always out of place because they cannot get out of death's way.

Beyond alienation from one's own place in time, in this rebellion the individual is made a stranger to the world. The monolithic eternity of the outer world is inhuman, we only ever saw it otherwise "because for centuries we have understood in it solely the images and designs that we

had attributed to it beforehand”, an ability we will have lost by recognizing human powerlessness. “The world evades us because it becomes itself again. That stage scenery masked by habit becomes again what it is. It withdraws at a distance from us.”(*The Myth of Sisyphus*,14)

The world is a strange and irreducible place which we can never think to have real power over, it is not rational.

Disillusionment with the world is mirrored by alienation from others. The absurd person wonders why other people live just as they do about themselves. They find something inhuman in humanity. “At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of [others] gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them.” Recognition of the inhumanity in other people, the way in which they continue to behave as though they were not confronted with the absurd, leads the absurd person to not find special meaning in others. “This discomfort in the face of man’s own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this ‘nausea,’ as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd.” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*,14) We can make sense of nothing.

Human reason fails in the face of a reality that does not accept reduction. This resistance opposes the centermost human desire, to make things coherent, unified, solved. We wish to feel familiar with the world in which we live, yet this cannot truly be accomplished. All we can do is to reduce the universe to the human, not truly understand it. We can pretend that we are familiar with the world but the world will never be familiar with us. Once we recognize the absurd, “We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart.” The absurd person is essentially doomed to the profound discomfort of not being able to understand their existence. What they do know is that “This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*,16). From this most simple knowledge nothing

unifying can be defined, yet the desire to do so remains. The absurd depends on the contrast between human drives and their limited capacities, a clash of irreconcilable internal forces in the face of an inscrutable world.

The Absurdist

How does one accept the absurd and still go on living? Both the unstoppable desire for an absolute and the impossibility of having one are certainties. Camus's response is that a human must be as absurd as the world and choose to live the contradiction of their existence. "I should *be* this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity." The human being must embrace the strife between the irreconcilable facts of their being, to do so they must always live with the absurd, "what constitutes the basis of that conflict, of that break between the world and my mind, but the awareness of it? If therefore I want to preserve it, I can through a constant awareness, ever revived, ever alert." In embracing irrationality the absurdist is born. The absurdist who is ever in revolt, who does not hope, the one for whom the "hell of the present is his Kingdom at last." In this revelation the problems of life are transfigured, they are rethought in terms of the world as it is rather than one constructed by humanity. It is possible to resuscitate "the body, creation, action, [and] human nobility" (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 35) in an absurd world. The absurdist receives the revalued mad life.¹²

The absurdist is defined by their persistence in the face of their own contradiction, they persevere despite knowing that they have no certainty other than that nothing is certain. This absurd life is based on three principles: revolt, freedom, and passion. The absurd man revolts in the sense that he keeps on living despite his contradiction and thus "he gives proof of his only

¹² There are parallels between the absurdist and the defiantly demonic individual of *The Sickness Unto Death*. Both draw the strength to live from their embrace of their suffering and rejection of the leap of faith. I would suggest that a key difference between the two would be the fact the absurdist emphasizes a love of life while embracing suffering, the absurdist is joyous rather than spiteful.

truth, which is defiance” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 37) The absurd man is free, not in the sense of eternal freedom a God might pass down the spiritual totem pole, but free in terms of how he chooses his actions. Absurd freedom does away with its illusory counterpart, the sort of freedom where one really adapts themselves to the purpose they were handed down by that which gave them their “freedom”. Instead it abolishes the idea of a grand purpose altogether. “To the extent to which he imagined a purpose to his life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave of his liberty.” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 38) Abolishing the future allows the absurd man to dispose of that restrictive freedom, he now “catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given,” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 39) that is to say, he has escaped from the “everyday sleep”. The absurd man liberates himself from behavioral restrictions.

“He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 39) Having made the choice to accept the world, the absurd man can come to the final aspect of absurd living, passion for life. The absurd man lives in the present, as opposed to living for the future, and so he will be more conscious of his life as he lives it. “The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man.” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 41) How long that life lasts is a matter of chance, but the absurd man is able to intensely experience life and thus make the most of the time limit he has on existence.

The Stranger

Having now defined exactly what we mean when referring to the absurd and absurdist we may now address the clash between the absurd person and moral judgment. In *The Stranger* Meursault is a man completely alienated from the world and others. His every thought speaks to

the lack of meaning he finds in the world beyond immediate sensations and continuing his life. Meursault is himself not much of an absurdist, he is something more like a nihilist. However, while he is not an absurdist such as that Camus would praise, his life is a struggle with the absurd. Furthermore, up until his death Meursault fulfills many of the prerequisites Camus provided for absurd living¹³. He acknowledges no limit to his freedom of action and he revolts from the world through his indifference. His choices ultimately play out as they do because he comes to recognize and accept the absurd, what differentiates him from the proper absurdist is that in accepting the absurd he accepts his death. While this difference is telling – and we will expand upon it – Meursault still shows how ethics cannot account for the absurd person.

A Life of Annoyances

Meursault observes the meaningless at his center, his existence, and in his relation to all things. Meursault is limp, he does not care much about anything. He feels only in passing, none of his relationships truly matter to him. Even in his most intimate relationship he feels dim and ultimately insignificant affection. He always takes the path of least resistance in his decisions with the key expectation of the murder he commits.

Where others might blind themselves to the great burden of meaninglessness, as the magistrate does when he uses Christ to justify his justice, Meursault lacks the capacity to do so. Meursault is blunt such that whatever others furnish their lives with, whether they be love, God, professionalism, familiarity, or any other trappings of purpose, cannot be of use to him. Where a more sly person might try to make a performative showing of abiding by the social rules for their own purposes, Meursault doesn't even think to try, after all, he has no purpose.

¹³ It would not be unreasonable to say that Meursault is an absurd man even if he is not an absurdist. I avoid this language because Camus tends to use the terms fairly interchangeably in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

At his mother's funeral Meursault demonstrates his resignation to the absurdity of life "If you go slowly, you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too fast, you work up a sweat and then catch a chill inside the church.' She was right. There was no way out." (*The Stranger*, 17) This does not merely represent a pessimism about his ability to make a meaningful choice, but also to his impression of the significance of existence. "It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed." (*The Stranger*, 24) Meursault does not bother with mourning or with any other deep emotion because he does not feel that anything he does, or anything that happens, has great significance. There is suffering in every choice, so why worry about them?

Along these lines, Meursault's only goal is to minimize his annoyances. He does not do this in the way one might construct a theory for themselves to avoid suffering but in the way one swats at a circling mosquito or continues a conversation with someone unpleasant because breaking off would require too great an effort. He approaches life with an internal grimace. Furthermore, all of these grimaces are equal. They are almost all a product of his body or his irritation with others, and show what is a bizarre thought process to most. He is equally as uncomfortable at his mother's funeral as he is with anything else. In this way when he goes and shoots a man, when he thinks about his life in prison, when he buries his mother, his mood remains exactly the same. This is the characteristic which makes Meursault so alien, both to the reader and to the system in which he lives. He is completely unpredictable, he has no sentiments, no convictions. It is tempting to think of Meursault more along the lines of a venomous reptile than a human. He may be sedate and inoffensive most of the time, but when stressed he lashes out without warning or emotion.

Indifference

Meursault's relationship to the absurd evolves. He is emotionally stunted and "had lost the habit of analyzing" himself. Meursault is an enigma to himself and everyone else, because of this he has confused moments of positivity amid the tide of indifference that carries him along. In his affair with Marie, Meursault does feel happiness. However, even with her he remains a stranger, even if she resists that. Meursault does not love Marie and while he desires her, another woman would just as easily satisfy him. Meursault feels for Marie the way you might feel about a stranger with whom you strike up a conversation. You may have enjoyed the conversation, but could have had it with anyone. This does not make Meursault a manipulator or cruel, it is rather that he is deeply disconnected. He frequently describes the way that his judge or prison guards treat him cordially or become his friends. Because he does not ascribe meaning to his relationships, his years-long "friendships" don't mean much more than his guard being relatively pleasant to him.

I write of Meursault's experience of pleasure due to the way it mirrors his approach to negative emotions. He feels nothing about his mother's death. He feels more deeply about how others scorn his lack of emotion about his mother's death than he feels about the death itself. The displeasure he does feel is limited to annoyances. Even a long stay in a harsh prison was not terribly punishing to Meursault. "I often thought that if I had had to live in the trunk of a dead tree, with nothing to do but look up at the sky flowering overhead, little by little I would have gotten used to it." (*The Stranger*, 77) Only in anticipation of his execution does he experience profound feelings. "How had I not seen that there was nothing more important than an execution, and that when you come right down to it, it was the only thing a man could truly be interested in?" (*The Stranger*, 110) Meursault must come to terms with impending death, but he cannot

through conventional means, as he might have done by accepting God at the behest of the chaplain. Meursault already treats life with indifference, his natural path is to give death the same uncaring attitude.

A Nihilistic Epiphany

Therefore, Meursault arrives at nihilism as a defense mechanism. His death is not important to him if nothing matters.

What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me when we're all elected by the same fate, me and billions of privileged people like him who also called themselves my brothers? Couldn't he see, couldn't he see that? Everybody was privileged. There were only privileged people. The others would all be condemned one day. And he would be condemned, too. What would it matter if he were accused of murder and then executed because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral? (*The Stranger*, 110)

Meursault comes to terms with the absurd in his final moments, yet the contentment he finds is that of the absurdist. He relaxes by believing that his death means nothing rather than by accepting the absurd contradiction of life. He numbs himself to be able to look fate in the eye. The absurdist does not stop loving life, or the fulfillment of the struggle with meaninglessness, when they articulate the absurd. Meursault does. We will return to the difference between Meursault and the absurdist later, and elaborate what it might mean for Meursault were he an absurdist.

We should not forget that Meursault reaches this nihilistic epiphany only at the moment in which he truly recognizes that he has fully lost control of his fate. With life and death out of

his hands Meursault must make his peace with death and he does so by reducing everything, positive and negative, to grayness. Furthermore, while Meursault is a nihilist only in the end, for the entire story he is wrestling with the absurd and his alienation from the world in which everyone else lives. Due to this alienation we are able to see the absurd and the structured world clash against each other in Meursault's utter befuddlement with the court.

While Meursault's nihilistic epiphany is the climax of the development of his relationship to the absurd, it is his experience of being caught in the cogs of the justice system which show the tension between Meursault's absurd lifestyle and the rigid moral structure the court represents. Meursault's interaction with the legal system represents the way justice cannot account for the absurd and instead makes its judgements from social conventions and personal biases. There, placed into a machine in which social convention is heightened to criminal law, Meursault is completely out of his depth. When Meursault is put on trial for murder one could be forgiven for mistaking that he is on trial for not weeping for his mother's death. It is not merely that Meursault clearly committed the crime of which he is accused that makes him guilty, it is rather that he is incapable of fitting into the role which he is supposed to play. He does not shed a tear in pious remorse, he does not lie to improve his image, he does not disguise his absurd motives. Why is Meursault found guilty? Why does Meursault receive the thinly veiled enmity of his audience? Why does Meursault shoot a man for little to no reason? Because Meursault does not play the games that structure society. Just as in everything else, Meursault is an enigma. His two great errors, appearing to be a bad son on one hand and a murderer on the other are treated as equally important, and while for Meursault they are equal in the sense that all his discomforts are basically equal, the court must make false assumptions of Meursault's character

and motives in absence of his willingness to tell the lies that would fit him into the courts understanding.

Monsieur Antichrist

We should be clear, Meursault is guilty. Some might argue that he *should* be executed or at the very least separated from society. But Meursault is nothing like the man the court invents during his trial. That man, the one the jury convicts, is a projection. The projection comes from taking all of Meursault's mistakes, both legal and cultural, and stringing them together against the court's view of morality. If only he was the wily evil the court chose to imagine him to be then he would be free rather than staring into the lunette of the guillotine in the end.

Meursault's childlike innocence to the law is key to understanding how *The Stranger* shows the inability of the court to apply its time worn ethical model to the absurd man. Where Camus's true absurdist is perfectly willing to lie for their own fancy, Meursault steadfastly refuses to lie. This is not out of personal principle, he just doesn't see the point in doing so. Meursault bobs along through the judicial process, seemingly unaware that his passivity is leading him over the waterfall. When asked if he had an attorney of his own he expresses the view that his case was so simple he didn't know if he needed one. The Judge assigns him a public defender. "I thought it was very convenient that the court should take care of those details. I told him so. He agreed with me and concluded that it was a good law." (*The Stranger*, 63) These are not the thoughts of a man aware of the gravity of his circumstances. Meursault only confronts the seriousness of his situation when he realizes at his trial that he is "guilty".

Two conversations best exemplify Meursault's strange naivete toward the court: his first meeting with his lawyer and then his examination by his magistrate. From the beginning

Meursault is on trial more for not loving his mother than for murder and his lawyer immediately attempts to downplay Meursault's unemotional appearance at her funeral.

The investigators had learned that I had "shown insensitivity" the day of Maman's funeral. "You understand," my lawyer said, "it's a little embarrassing for me to have to ask you this. But it's very important. And it will be a strong argument for the prosecution if I can't come up with some answers." (*The Stranger*, 64)

We should not miss that Meursault's lawyer is perfectly open with him here that his mother will be a deciding factor in the case and yet Meursault only responds with the purest and most disturbing honesty. "I answered that I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself and that it was hard for me to tell him what he wanted to know. I probably did love Maman, but that didn't mean anything." Meursault is perhaps aware that a son loves his mother, but love is an empty concept to Meursault. He did not dislike his mother, but for the most part there is not much more Meursault is capable of feeling for another. Again, his lawyer gives him fair warning, "He made me promise I wouldn't say that at my hearing or in front of the examining magistrate." When Meursault tells him his funeral behavior came purely from "physical needs" but that he could say for certain "I would rather Maman hadn't died", a fairly strong statement for Meursault, his lawyer tells him "That's not enough". The lawyer goes so far as to even construct Meursault's lie for him, "He thought for a minute. He asked me if he could say that that day I had held back my natural feelings." But Meursault does not grasp the game being played. "I said, 'No, because it's not true.' He gave me a strange look, as if he found me slightly disgusting." (*The Stranger*, 65) Finally, when his lawyer complains to him that the impact of witnesses from the funeral will be severe, Meursault responds that he doesn't see what that has to do with the case.

For Meursault his behavior at the funeral and his murder of the Arab legitimately have absolutely nothing to do with each other. In this naive, childlike way he does not see the connection, obvious to everyone but him, being drawn between his crime and his lack of dolorous decorum. Nor can he see that the latter is in fact least excusable of his mistakes. Meursault has neither the emotional intelligence nor the deceitfulness to really grasp that the trial is not merely concerned with the physical truth of what happened, but rather with the image that said truth produces. This is why the case seemed so simple to Meursault that he did not see the need for a lawyer. He fully assumes that everything will be a smooth and objective accounting of the facts of the case rather than a rhetorical battle.

Projection as First Resort

In his conversation with his magistrate Meursault again demonstrates naivete toward the consequences of his words. After running through the timeline of events of the murder and unconvincingly telling the magistrate that he loved his mother just like anyone loves their mother, the magistrate confronts Meursault over why he shot the Arab more than once, one while he was standing and then four as he was slumped over. Meursault could have no answer, it was an inexplicable decision. In response to his silence the magistrate waves a crucifix in Meursault's face, confronting him with the symbol of the social conventions Meursault holds no stock in upholding. "I am a Christian. I ask Him to forgive you your sins. How can you not believe that He suffered for you?" Meursault first agrees with this religious pestering in an attempt to get the annoyance over with, before admitting he does not believe in God. Again, Meursault has no idea the behavior which is expected of him.

In a low voice he said, "I have never seen a soul as hardened as yours. The criminals who have come before me have always wept at the sight of this image

of suffering." I was about to say that that was precisely because they were criminals. But then I realized that I was one too. It was an idea I couldn't get used to. Then the judge stood up, as if to give me the signal that the examination was over. He simply asked, in the same weary tone, if I was sorry for what I had done. I thought about it for a minute and said that more than sorry I felt kind of annoyed. I got the impression he didn't understand.

There is something ironic in the fact that this officer of the court, who ends up sentencing Meursault to have his head chopped off, gives Meursault an out from his situation that any man with a little more sense of the function of the system, one who sees right and wrong and chooses wrong, could have exploited. But Meursault is not the villain his exterior suggests he *should* be. The magistrate starts referring to Meursault as "Monsieur Antichrist", something Meursault does not read into at all. For the magistrate to call Meursault the Antichrist shows the fundamental disconnect of the justice the court practices and the man Meursault is. Meursault is not evil in the sense of being immoral, he has no malicious *intent*. Instead Meursault is purely amoral, without any concept of right and wrong. Everything he does is based on his "physical needs" and his mood at any given moment. Meursault is more like a wild animal in that sense. The lack of meaning he finds in anything makes him incapable of following the rules, explicit and implicit, which structure society. This makes Meursault incapable of telling a lie, or at least he does not see the meaning in doing so. To construct a lie would be to take an agreed upon truth and invert it for one's own gain, but when "truth" is meaningless to you and the consequences of your actions are beyond the horizon of your understanding why would you ever make the effort of coming up with and passing off a lie?

What Have We Gained?

Is this not excruciating? On one hand we recognize that we have people like Meursault, absurd men, Kierkegaard's incomprehensible knights of infinite resignation, running wild in the world. People who place no value in the things which underline the most basic foundations of common decency, who are incapable of doing so, exist. Additionally, we are incapable of understanding these people and judging with moral authority higher than personal opinion. This reflects the anxiety expressed in my first chapter in regards to Kierkegaard's moral anarchy. There is a wrongness in Meursault that is difficult to express when one disposes of the language of justice and morality we know Meursault cannot meet on fair terms. So while there is something wrong with Meursault, there is also something wrong about the way Meursault is judged. It cannot be that a good court will convict someone for false reasons, even if that person ought to be pulled out of society like an impacted tooth. There is also an implacable urge to say that we cannot truly condone some of those behaviors coming out of the absurd. We might acknowledge that the standard against murder isn't something written in a divine law, but it is still deeply ingrained in us that it is wrong, and it does nothing for us to change that. One may even feel pressed back toward trying to formulate some universal standard for the sake of security, looking at a subjectivist model as immature and dangerous. If we were to do this we would circle back around to our same old problems and would not do anything to address the issue of the fact that the absurd and the absurd man will continue to exist whether or not it is resisted.

Borrowing a Trick

While we've done a very good job showing how nihilism is objectionable, we ought to remember that our goal is to think of *The Stranger* not only in terms of the absurd but of the true

absurd man as well. For this purpose we can borrow a rhetorical trick from De Silentio. We have established that the court cannot grasp the absurd person, and the nihilist running rampant is indeed a terrifying prospect, but what would it mean if Meursault were a true absurdist? This is a question that has to be answered three times. What would it mean if Meursault had been an absurdist from the beginning? If Meursault had become an absurdist in the moment after he murdered the Arab? If Meursault had become an absurdist as he awaited his execution?

A New Life

If Meursault had been an absurdist from the beginning then he would not have come across the inciting incidents of the story. He will be no more ethical, but he will be much more clever. “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.” The absurdist seeks to preserve their life and understands the rule of might even if they see no grand underpinning to it. He would not murder the Arab because doing so has consequences he is perfectly capable of anticipating, and the absurdist clings too defiantly to life to accept those consequences. “‘Everything is permitted’ does not mean that nothing is forbidden. The absurd merely confers an equivalence on the consequences of those actions. It does not recommend crime, for this would be childish, but it restores to remorse its futility.” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 42) Guilt and innocence may be on a whim, but not crime and punishment.

Beyond not committing his crime, the absurdist Meursault would not live his life in the same way. The original Meursault is free and thinks nothing of the future, but there is no passion to him. He is marked by his utter lack of consciousness, a vital characteristic of the absurdist. The absurdist Meursault would not be the sedate sociopath who allowed himself to be carried along by whatever flood of events rushed over him. He would be a man in permanent revolt,

permanently engrossed in the sensations of his life and not only in the inconsequential way he did before. Life remains ephemeral yet it sharpens. In this way he might even appear more like a normal person. The absurd man is capable of something like love, grief, and joy in a way that the original Meursault is not. Yet in spite of these details we should remember that the absurdist Meursault remains amoral, he avoids breaking the rules because he knows that others might punish him for it. If he was set in the same position of choosing whether or not to shoot the Arab but knew for certain that he would not be caught, what would he do then? There is no internal sense of morality at work in Meursault either way. It felt right in the moment to the original Meursault, it may or may not have felt the same to the absurdist Meursault. In that sense there remains something deeply frightening about him.

Wily Evil?

It is also concerning that were Meursault to become an absurdist as the police hauled him off to jail in the aftermath of his crime then he very may well have gotten away with it. The foremost principle of the absurdist is to preserve their life and we have seen that Meursault did have avenues he might have pursued for that goal. Meursault could have lied. The absurd Meursault would not be so naive as the original Meursault. He would calmly weigh his choices. His choice would be to lie as his lawyer suggests, or prostrate himself before the judge, and likely escape with minimal punishment. That is the most likely way that Meursault could have preserved himself at that point. That is to say, where the court could catch if not understand the original Meursault, it would not even convict an absurdist Meursault.

An Alternative Final Epiphany

Finally, what would it mean if Meursault had become an absurdist instead of a nihilist as he anticipated the guillotine? This question is perhaps of the least interest in terms of our ethical

goals, the time for judgment has passed in the present scenario. However, it helps to further elucidate something about the difference between the nihilist and the absurdist. In his situation there is nothing Meursault could do to change his circumstances, he will be executed or he will not. However, the nihilist and absurdist both recognize something. Meursault will die at some point no matter what. We have already discussed the peace the nihilist is able to find in this recognition. The absurdist absolutely does not. "It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will. Suicide is a repudiation. The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself." (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 37) To accept death would be to commit suicide in spirit. An absurdist Meursault would find no peace before his execution, he would struggle as he is led to death.

Remaining a Stranger

While Meursault as the true absurdist would behave differently, preserving his life and never accepting death, he is no more comforting a figure. It is a concerning possibility that he would merely shed his naivete, becoming a more clever monster. Just because he might evaluate his actions from the perspective of their consequences does not mean that he would not engage in repellant behavior if he reasons that there will be no serious consequences. Perhaps he would not murder, he would not end up in the courtroom. But the courtroom was only a heightened version of the world in which Meursault already lived. A world with which there could be no mutual understanding. He remains amoral, he remains a stranger.

Unresolved Anxiety and the Need for New Methods of Ethics

The issue of ethical anarchy has not been resolved; all that the absurdist Meursault respects are those external circumstances which compel him to act differently. Perhaps this is life-affirming to one plunged into the absurd, a way of managing the profound irrationality which

suffuses life. But this is still an answer which ignores the internal drive for ethics for the sake of freedom from absolutes, where our goal was to have both. The absurd feels no internal contradiction between desire and ethics because ethics is only ever to be worked around, not something by which one passionately abides. Passion is instead assigned to the stubborn will for life itself. While we should undoubtedly retain a passion for life and we should accept the imperfection of morality, this does not mean that morality - accepting of mistakes and based on something more human than divine commandments - is devoid of value and unapproachable. We recall our primary interest in reading Camus was to think about how Kierkegaard's dilemma might be addressed without making an unbearable compromise. Kierkegaard showed how the spiritual struggle emerging out of the conflict between ethical standards and personal aims could result in a sort of self-destruction that disintegrates the world into cold irrationality. Kierkegaard avoided this by locking the individual up inside themselves, in effect abolishing the ethics which caused the internal struggle, and by accepting a blind faith as an absolute to provide a stable source from which meaning might be derived if not exported. Camus has done nothing more than eliminate the second part of that solution. This is not acceptable to us. Camus's ideas have provided us with a new perspective, but did not give what we want. God is no longer at issue, Camus disposed of all absolutes. Camus has also shown a way that the alien, absurd world might be reconciled with, even if it cannot be conquered. Yet Camus has also abolished ethics, and we cannot abide by this. We will not be satisfied until there is some model by which we can reject nihilism, zealotry, *and* anarchy.

Let us consider for a moment if we could carve out any space within absurdity for some sort of new morality. While Camus was explicit that ethics and morality do not survive in the face of the absurd, it is worthwhile to consider the project of ethics in the context of the absurd

Sisyphian struggle. Camus's Sisyphus is able to be happy because he accepts his fate. He acknowledges the weight of the stone and keeps forcing it up the hill, he remains fully conscious of his activity. As a metaphor for the absurd man, he recognizes the suffering and struggle of life yet pushes on because he can be content accepting the absurdity of his situation.

The great struggle of the absurd man is the contradiction at his core. The desire for unity and coherence opposed by his knowledge of the irreducible nature of the world. In the closing words of "The Myth of Sisyphus" Camus tells us that it is the struggle itself which gives us what we can best think of as our purpose. "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 74) What struggle more greatly represents the drive to unity than the creation of ethics? It is the desire to make the other understandable. We can accept with Camus, as we already did with Kierkegaard, that it is impossible to devise a system of ethics which could perfectly align with "justice", which could reach peoples' internality. Yet can we redraw ethics in terms of passion?

In chapter one we discussed how Kierkegaard's Judge William wrote of a system of ethics in which one made decisions based upon what one passionately feels to be right. I cannot help but doubt Camus that when living amongst other people in a world full of joy and suffering that most will not develop a series of preferences in terms of good and bad. These preferences may not be moralistic or as strict as those imposed by the domination of Christian morality, but they could very well exist. Would it not align with the revolt of the absurd to keep trying to reach out at this passionate personal kind of truth? The absurdist is constantly conscious, does this not extend to the kind of self-evaluation of action that Judge William prescribes? This idea does not provide us with any universalizable system of ethics, as we might hope, but it does suggest that personal morals could exist to some extent, and that the absurdist might keep reaching toward

ethics even if it is a tantalean¹⁴ task wherein only their fingertips brush across the surface of justice.

To this end, what would a court working on this model of justice look like? It would still demand projection, it would still not be able to *understand* someone like Meursault. But what would it mean for the court to be conscious of that fact? If the court believes in judgment, at least for the sake of non-moral social efficiency, and remains conscious that it cannot craft narratives around its subjects, what sorts of verdicts would it reach?

It appears that there is something more ethically satisfying about this possibility. We can admit the existence of the absurd and that the court cannot really understand its subjects, but not have to say that this means morality must be cast aside. Were we to do this we would maintain all of the prerequisites we began with. We can avoid an absolute of blind faith in absolutes, the destructiveness of unreconciled absurdity, and abolition of ethics. We need only bend our idea of ethics around something which is substantive. We must reconsider how we conceive of ethics being formulated and practiced. If we can construct a more flexible, responsive version of ethics we might be able provide an alternative in which moral anarchy is restrained.

¹⁴ A resident of Tartarus, Tantalus is punished by standing in a pool of water with the branches of a fruit tree hanging overhead. The fruit of the tree is always just out of hand and the water always evades his efforts to take a drink.

Chapter 3: Pragmatic Morality

We concluded the last chapter on the note that a new ethics is needed to address the internal spiritual struggle of ethics against aims. By what principles would such a system of ethics need to be organized? The new system we are looking for needs to neutralize the need for absolutes, reconcile with the absurdity that might otherwise lead to nihilism, and at the same time not form a free-for-all ethics. This is a difficult task. The fact that one disposes of absolutes to some extent makes it impossible not to isolate the individual as the focal point of ethics thus making an anarchic person-by-person morality an intuitive consequence. That is certainly the conclusion Kierkegaard and Camus appear to have drawn. A system of ethics that is conscious of the irreducibility of the world must therefore find a way to use the perspectives of individuals, which are the only available building block, to move beyond the world of one to that of many. In the *Myth of Sisyphus* Camus says¹⁵ that he can touch the world, and so he acknowledges it exists, but he makes little use of his empirical perceptions beyond recognizing that the world presses back against us. What if we were to prioritize our empiricism? The value judgments we make to establish “right” and “wrong” would not then be based on the orders on high of a preordained structure, but rather on the interplay of our actions and self-analysis. Fortunately, there is a school of thought that advances from just the principles we need, Pragmatism.

Radical Empiricism

The pragmatists, of whom I will refer to William James and John Dewey, articulate the mind in a way altogether different from those we have seen thus far. The mind, for the pragmatist, is not a spring from which pure reason pours but is rather our most robust tool. Our

¹⁵ “This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists” (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pg. 18)

thoughts, our reasonings, are problem solvers. Our thoughts are aimed at ends, humans are results oriented beings. The shape those thoughts take is most importantly a product of two things, circumstances and experience.

The pragmatists therefore instruct us to oppose all absolutes. “The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences.” Our interpretations must not go beyond practical outcomes. “What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle.” (James, 136) Taking this line to heart, we would dispose of many dilemmas Kierkegaard authored as *De Silentio*. We will specifically address the interesting impacts of our pragmatist changes to Camus and Kierkegaard's characters later on¹⁶. Whether an action accords with an abstract standard is not significant when said standard effects have no consequences but for those one places upon themselves. Instead only the discernible practical consequences on either side of a choice which make it significant.¹⁷

As it is the results of our actions that concern us we must try to understand the meaning of our thoughts within the context of goals. “To develop a thought's meaning we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance.” Ergo when we consider how one might approach a choice we need to consider the aim of that thought, the value of the goal one attempts to achieve. “To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare.” (James, 136) As the only positive significance of an object is the consequences of one's conception of it

¹⁶ Pg. 56

¹⁷ “Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.” (James, 136)

and the accompanying actions, the thought does not need anything to justify itself, as it might otherwise be were an abstract system of thought imposed atop it. What we mean to say is that one's intentions are understandable in context of the action made towards the intended aim.

Thoughts as Tools

Pragmatism is therefore a strictly and radically empiricist approach. “[The pragmatist] turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins.” Barring the use of fixed principles we must resort to that which we do have, our perceptions of the world and the running record of those perceptions stored in our experience. This is a limited tool, as James admits, “Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest.” Nonetheless the senses, interpreted through experiences and the basic sensations, do leave one with practical impressions of the outcomes of actions even when they do not unlock any profound meanings. “You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience.” Indeed, thoughts bring the thinker no true conclusions. “It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*.” (James, 137) This is to say that thoughts provide ways by which humans make a world of their own in regards to that slice of reality they lay their hands upon.

In these principles there is both a synergy and discordance with the ideas we gathered from Camus. While the pragmatists agree with Camus as to the infeasibility of absolutes and the fact that world could never truly be brought down to the level of human reason, there is stark contrast in how the pragmatists emphasize that in spite of the absurdity of the world, wherein one might focus on having lost the absolute, there remains the practical world of action and

observation to be lived in¹⁸. But there is an immense difference in the willingness of the pragmatists to find meaning in the world that is not *of* the absurdity of the world. That meaning is instead found in the reinterpretation of the world into human variables. This is a bottom up meaning, constructed ramshackle from those immediately accessible human capacities, and so we must never presume to take the view from above. If it is the case that we lack absolutes, and that our ideas are rooted in experience, then it remains to be seen how we choose our aims in those conditions where there is a more complex set of consequences than an immediate pleasurable good or uncomfortable bad. One would have to think along these lines when constructing a practical conception of right and wrong.

How Our Ideas Arise

Accepting the notion that our thoughts are aimed towards ends, from where do those thoughts arise? Our ideas are not merely rooted in immediate sensory rewards. “Our ideas certainly have many sources. They are not all explicable as signifying corporeal pleasures to be gained, and pains to be escaped.” (James, 145) At the same time they are not merely projections of past into present, “the finished and done with is of import as affecting the future, not on its own account; in short, because it is not, really, done with” (Dewey, 341) They are instead an interplay. Our thoughts arise from life experience directed depending on the conditions perceived by the senses. In regards to those thoughts which are not associated with a direct pleasure-pain response, “Purely inward forces are certainly at work here... They present themselves far less in the guise of effects of past experience than in that of probable causes of future experience, factors to which the environment and the lessons it has so far taught us must learn to bend.

¹⁸ Camus does recognize this fact, indeed it is the world that the absurdist lives in, but the absurdist does not find meaning in that world of senses. They instead find it in their relationship with absurdity and the suffering thereby produced. The pragmatists instead deprioritize the focus on the absurd and instead strictly pay attention to the meaning they can gather from the world which they *are* able to reduce to human terms. In a sense it is the difference between a focus on the world beyond one's fingertips to one at the fingertips.

(James, 145) In this sense memory is distinct from experience as we regard it here. We regard experience not merely as past experiences but also the predictive capacity to draw on past experiences in order to make educated guesses on how one causes different future experiences.

As to how our predicted future experiences are evaluated in terms of goods, “the essence of good is simply to satisfy a demand.” There are an innumerable amount of demands we might want satisfied, nonetheless they are the marks by which we could try to extend a system of truth out into ethics beyond ourselves. It is up to us what demands we wish to satisfy. Still we are aware that these ends “have no common character apart from the fact they are ideals.” (James, 149) We need to be aware of the limitations of our system to produce sweeping answers.

Truth for the Moment

It may not have escaped my reader how presumptuous it sounds for me to have described a system of subjective value judgements as truth. However, as we shape an alternative view of ethics we also work with an altogether different kind of truth, truth for the moment. “This pragmatist talk about truths in the plural, about their utility and satisfactoriness, about the success with which they ‘world’ etc., suggests to the typical intellectualist mind a sort of coarse lame second-rate make-shift article of truth.” Indeed, if one views truth as being thoughts with absolute correspondence with an absolute reality, then the pragmatists could not be right. But of course we have disposed of absolutes already, and left ourselves in circumstances where the closest thing one could have to the truth is one's best judgment. In this context, the truth is, at – best – that which is practical for the moment. These truths are not freewheeling, they are responsive to the context and aim they are formed for, but are limited to circumstance. “As a good pragmatist, I myself ought to call the Absolute true ‘in so far forth’ then.” (James, 142) Our truths exist so far, and only so far, as those truths have practical utility toward ends. Therefore,

while those truths may depend on some materials which vary by perspective, they are not absolutely relative either.

Earlier I did not merely describe us extending truth beyond ourselves, but utilizing a system of truth. We have no opposition to the idea of forming a system, an abstraction of the facts, for so long as that abstraction possesses the same practical value we would obtain from any particular truth.¹⁹ However, we ought to now consider how these abstractions might grind up against each other. This is relevant not only for the conflicts within the self, but also in the interpersonal. In this examination we will incidentally take our first step in thinking how ethics itself will emerge for us.

Moral Holidays

We already established alongside James that “what is better for us to believe is true” let us now add that this is the only the case, “unless the belief incidentally clashes with some other vital benefit.” Take a moment and consider why one might cling to an absolute. It comes to mind that one embraces that faith because it is comfortable to do so. We desire reassuring stability over anxious uncertainty. This is certainly how Kierkegaard²⁰ approached faith. Put simply, absolutes can serve as a holiday away from responsibility. Not in the sense that one ceases to have a responsibility to do something, an absolute might prescribe action, but a holiday away from acknowledging the shifting sands on which one stands. With an absolute it feels like the ground beneath you is solid, the rationale by which you justify your actions all seem sensible. In so far as this absolute does not conflict with any other held truth, it is not a bad thing to have. Who has not enjoyed a break from responsibility? Certainly for us anxious ones it has an appeal. It is

¹⁹ “[Pragmatism] has no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere.” (James, 141)

²⁰ We can also recall how the faithful conviction of the legal professionals of *The Stranger* was a key component in their ill-examined projections. They too were on a moral holiday.

certainly comforting to have things taken out of one's hands, "to let the world wag in its own way, feeling that its issues are in better hands than ours and are none of our business." (James, 142) But of course, this moral holiday is unfortunately destined to be interrupted. Other truths call us back to work and force us to recognize that there cannot be a true absolute.

Perhaps when dealing only with oneself there is no harm in a moral vacation, but that is a step back from the world of the other, the world in which we live. It would be counter to the needs of most to avoid those truths which allow for a well structured society. Those social truths are, for most, key elements of satisfactory life. The truths one holds clash against each other when they are mutually incompatible, the pragmatist must mediate between those truths. Some must be cut away when their redeeming effects are insufficient to justify their paradoxes, some can live in a restricted place wherein they provide their comforts but keep out of the way of other, more belligerent truths. Yet among these warring truths the pragmatist must remain conscious of each truth, traced from perception to conception, and thereby keep oneself from becoming dogmatic. Dogmatism could lead to our truths to be static and decrepit²¹. "There is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance." (143)" Were we to make up ethical philosophy in advance we would develop a rigid system, uncaring toward the particulars of any situation, which would both command us and assign us our self worth. That dogma would be compelled to reject human experience when rendering judgements and therefore reject humanity. When we look inward and recognize our truths are discordant we must give up that which is less useful. This is to say that we must remain self-conscious.

Waiting on the Facts

Consciousness of one's truths, and the resultant actions of said truth, is one of the two principle pillars for what would support pragmatic morality. This concept is not new for us. We

²¹ We can be quite sure that all our subjects would agree on this point.

can recall from chapter one how Judge William, one of Kierkegaard's personas, described his model of ethics²², we can see that it is essentially the same principle we assert now. One turns inward and looks between choices for what seems best. This is the same process we took from James, a turn inward wherein one genuinely evaluates their potential actions for what they perceive as the best end. Just as Judge William adopted this approach to acknowledge the infeasibility of an ethical absolute, the pragmatists must do the same on account of their anti-absolute, empirical focus. "Everywhere the ethical philosopher must wait on the fact." (James, 152) The question as to which of one's conflicting ideals will give the best world can only be answered by aid of experience and circumstance. Therefore just like Judge William the pragmatic decision maker is aware that they could be mistaken, that they could lose sight of their ideals, and that thus there must always be reflection paid to how one acts. In this sense we could also call the ethical self-consciousness we describe moral sincerity. To behave ethically one must always ensure that they fully believe their action is the best thing to do for the outcome they desire.

We would have to admit our uncertainty to utilize this method. "We cannot create a unity of the world" (James, 144) We accept just the sentiment Camus laid out, that the world is fundamentally irreducible, impossible to fully understand in its own context and necessarily mediated through the limiters of human perception and reason. Yet we will always drive to do just that, to believe that we have the world as itself. That being said, where have we demanded that the world be a unity thus far? When we consider things by utility, something an absurdist could also do, we do not require that our ethics abide by any universal truth.

²² Pg. 15-16

Our self-consciousness does not merely need to extend to the abolition of absolutes and moral holidays, but also to be open to questioning those values we consider absolute in all but name.

If we follow the ideal which is conventionally highest, the others which we butcher either die and do not return to haunt us; or if they ever come back and accuse us of murder, everyone applauds us for turning them a deaf ear ... the philosopher however, cannot, so long as he clings to his own ideal of objectivity, rule out any ideal from being heard. James 150

Were we to depend on our socially conditioned inclinations we would mutilate our truths, they would no longer have basis in circumstances, only in memory and fantasized future. The philosopher must stay out of moralizing and dictating “if the philosopher is to keep his judicial position, he must never become one of the parties to the fray.” (James, 150) This is a fine sentiment for philosophers, but at times one must not be a philosopher. There is still something to this sentiment for one in the fray. One be conscious of whether or not they see their truth as the best truth in the circumstances at hand. This will not have everyone in the tangled mess of discourse be certain that their truth truly would lead them best, but it does mean that they can be sure that they have come to their truth through a process of sincere analysis separated as best as can be done from the writhing throng of other truths they happen to pick up.

There is a Right

That being said, we do not need to concede that our convictions are without depth. It is true that we cannot say that our aims are absolutely the best ones, they can nevertheless be the aim which appears right for the moment. In this we also do not need to concede to any

immediate punishment-reward mechanism²³. Right reasoning is reasoning conducive to one's ultimate aim, and our ultimate aim may very well be something quite indirect. As previously stated, despite Pragmatism's empiricism, abstracts remain possible. Therefore we could still abstract our way to something like justice on practical grounds.

Judge William described this concept in terms of passionately choosing right and wrong, we now think that one ought to passionately choose that truth which is more useful. In plainly stated terms it sounds as though the pragmatist wording lacks some of the nobility of Judge Williams' system. However, in this change we acknowledge what "right" and "wrong" are, a complex product of life experience, typically developed in one's upbringing, wherein the basic pleasure-pain mechanism is complicated along social lines. When a pragmatist decides what action is conducive for the best world, they do not merely rely upon themselves. One can only arrive at an answer "through the aid of the experience of other men." (James, 152). We must not only be conscious of ourselves when making a decision, but also of others.

Democratic Ethics

The subjectivist perspective of ethics we analyzed in the past two chapters had a distinctly anti-social character. Kierkegaard ignored the other due to their inaccessibility and Camus similarly described absurdity in such a way as to make us think that the other could not be our salvation from irrationality. Yet we live in a world of others, and most could not bear living in a world on their own. There is no practical value in thinking of ethics along the lines of a world of one when we inescapably live in a world of many. "For beings who observe and think, and whose ideas are absorbed by impulses and become sentiments and interests, 'we' is as

²³ "In the first place we will not be skeptics; we hold to it that there is a truth to be ascertained... truth cannot be a self-proclaiming set of laws, or an abstract 'moral reason,' but can only exist in act, or in the shape of an opinion held by some thinker really to be found." (James, 148) While we must not give up on the always fundamentally flawed morality we have to work with, we must also acknowledge that it can exist only in action and a living mind. This reasserts the pragmatist principle of rejecting absolutes while also affirming that we must not allow ourselves to reject the work without end that defines life.

inevitable as ‘I.’” (Dewey, 390) We must take it as a given that we live in a community of independent thinkers. The drive to form a unity remains, and so we imagine that others *ought* to yield to this or that system we happen to hold for ourselves. We already thoroughly established that unity would be impossible, yet we still wish to impose structure. The most practical approach would then try to produce the “best” society, the best society would be the one which provides the most utility, the one which satisfies the most demands of our ideals. How best would that structure be imposed to fulfill the greatest number of demands while minimizing the number that irreconcilably clash; in short, how do we construct the most inclusive possible society?

The best mode of organizing to this end would be a democracy, but not in a utopian sense of ever dignified and coherent communal decision making. “Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community itself.” Just as the individual can intend an outcome and choose wrongly to obtain it a community can make the wrong choices for itself. Yet again we must remain conscious of the fact that this democracy will never be perfected, “democracy in this sense is not a fact and never will be.” However, democracy in the sense in which it can be achieved can still “enhance its constituent elements,” (Dewey, 389) those principles which lead a community to function most effectively. This is the second principle underpinning a pragmatic conception of ethics. The most important criterion we have to grasp for this purpose is the transformation of a group of humans from merely engaging in associated actions into a social organism capable of recognizing joint aims. This would be the point at which interdependence is fostered and recognized, where “we” takes on the weight of “I”.

The essential development allowing such interdependence to form is the development of language. In doing so the first step towards joint meaning is taken. “The events of conjoint experiences are considered and transmitted. Events cannot be passed from one to another, but meanings may be shared by means of signs.” We translate our internal being into a medium which can be imperfectly transmitted to others. These communications “implicate a common or mutually understood meaning, present new ties, converting a conjoint activity into a community of interest and endeavor.” In conversation we are able to act *with* the other rather than only *upon* the other, and can therefore create what “might be termed a general will and social consciousness.” (Dewey, 390) This is to say that the joint meaning of language constructs a social reality. In this dimension the internal self detaches from the external self. The internal self remains the thing of thoughts accessible to only oneself. However, the external self emerges as the rhetorical impression put into the world as a product of one's actions interpreted by others. Only this external version of the self is relevant for when one works with others. We live in this social reality as one internal-external pair among a multiplicity of external others. We both draw closer to others through the invention of communication while drawing away as the only complete pair of selves we will ever know.

Dewey concluded his remarks on a pragmatist community with the note that the Great Community will be “a society in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of that word, is that an organized articulate Public comes into being” (399) This is to say that the community will be most ideal when its members are fully able to articulate the consequences of their actions from the perspective of what is best for the community. Thus things will be best when the individual is most able to think for the benefit of both themselves and the other. But how would the “Great

Community” respond when it finds that its truths have chafed too greatly against one another, or found that it has neglected too many new demands? “The cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy” (338, Dewey) Once again we do not necessarily mean democracy in the sense of a distinct political system, but rather in the sense of a community which strives for inclusion. Just as one must reevaluate their truths when they become too contradictory, so too must a community reorient itself when it finds the world turned upside down. When social tensions over mutually exclusive demands erupt and displace the previous structure it must be time to adopt a new paradigm.

Satisfying Our Criteria

Now that we have taken a close look at how pragmatist principles apply in an ethical context we should now recall each of our primary criteria and consider whether this framework fulfills them. We wish for a framework wherein we may reject the need for an absolute, fend off nihilism, and retain a space for ethics. It appears that through Pragmatism we are able to meet all three criteria. We have had to compromise in terms of accepting a *kind* of truth, but one which is flexible to the situation. We can certainly say that the kind of truth we acknowledge could not be called an absolute. In spite of the loss of absolutes we still find meaning. We find meaning in action and sensation, but we do not descend into something hedonistic. We find meaning in the world we are of and in the world of us. Finally, we have fulfilled our latter two criteria while maintaining the possibility of an appealing kind of ethics, one in which we take the self-interested judgements we might still have been able to make if we had sided with Camus and found a way that they might be extended to the community. In doing so a standard of ethics is possible. As it stands, we appear to have found everything we are looking for. But before saying that with certainty we should go over our literary examples from previous chapters to see how

we might think of a pragmatist system of ethics in action. In doing so we get a better handle on how pragmatism *feels* different from the philosophies they were originally presented alongside.

New Confidence

The ethical dilemmas presented in *Fear and Trembling* fall away quite easily when applying a pragmatic lens. We already addressed how the subjective ethics Kierkegaard provided in other works was able to overcome the initial dilemma of each of De Silentio's characters. Pragmatism would resolve those kinds of tensions in a similar way²⁴. Therefore, it would best help us to look at how pragmatist ethics would resolve the tensions which *arose* from deploying Kierkegaard's subjective ethics. Each of these analyses will help to show how a pragmatist approach could help to resolve internal struggles over picking the "right" decision.

The Merman

If we recall De Silentio's Merman from chapter one²⁵, the source of the Merman's suffering was his sudden miraculous transformation from a wrong doer by nature – by which we might interpret that he acted on something like animalistic instinct – to a being capable of reason, a human for all relevant purposes. His dilemma was that, having become human and operating under subjective ethics, the Merman loses direction on how to deal with the guilt he feels in regards to lying to his beloved before he had reason. While he would no longer have the guilt of remaining silent in spite of an absolute ethical duty to speak, he could continue to feel guilt in terms of having found love through deceit and thus might still choose to torment himself in repentance. He could also ignore ethics entirely if he happens to not possess a drive towards it²⁶.

²⁴ Most of the dilemmas which Kierkegaard's subjective ethics are able to effectively resolve have to do with rejecting a universal ethical absolute, which Pragmatism also does.

²⁵ Pg. 13

²⁶ Because the Merman emerges all at once as a fully developed person without connection to his past life as an inhuman monster. Therefore he is in a fairly unique position of having perceptions unmediated by experience. On account of having not gone through the sort of conditioning a typical person does he might not have the same drives as one. This is not particularly useful to think about for practical purposes, it is only possible for a character. However, it might be more useful to consider that there are some

If the Merman were a pragmatist, and assuming he is capable of prediction²⁷, there would be major changes in his thought process. We can immediately say he would continue to be subject to ethics. For the pragmatist others necessitate ethics. We speculated in chapter one that the Merman might have reconstructed objective ethics in order to make a decision on the matter or embraced God, as De Silentio suggests, leaving everything unresolved. This could no longer be the case, the pragmatist can have no absolutes. The Merman is invested with responsibility to the other, he will not take a holiday away from the facts merely because self-flagellation is more immediately comfortable for him. The Merman must decide in terms of what will create the best world, both for himself and for the other. This is the only way he could be pragmatically ethical toward his love. His decision will then have two dimensions. What will be best for both him and her at the same time? He embraces their community of two and acts for their general good. The romantics among us may say that he should tell her the truth and of the change she caused in him, but that is not really important to us. What is important is that the Merman will make a decision aiming towards the happiest outcome, not the most absolutely “just” decision. He will not feel the need to repent through his own suffering and rather prioritize the wellbeing of the other. In summation, the Merman will avoid self-destructive behavior and not succumb to the potentially troubling conclusions he might come to through amorality.

Sarah

De Silentio’s Sarah²⁸ is influenced both by personal desire and social expectation. She wishes to marry in spite of demonic threats toward any prospective suitor because there is an

individuals who choose to act against the public good for self-benefit. If we were to rewrite the story as such he would be transformed into a human capable of ethics, but not compelled to choose ethics.

²⁷ The Merman transformed into a human in an instant after falling in love, so it would be up to our interpretation whether or not he would have the sort of life experience a human draws on when making a decision. It does not seem very rewarding to investigate down the path wherein we assume that the Merman cannot draw on experience for decision making since the number of real people in that position is most likely extremely small.

²⁸ Pg. 13

ethical responsibility for her to do so. From a pragmatic perspective Sarah would have to say that it would be wisest if she were to remain unmarried. The pragmatist does not make absurd leaps of faith, they must try to reason towards the best possible outcome they are capable of conceiving. Sarah has no ethical responsibility to get married anymore, her responsibility is now to the best world. She has no practical reason to think the demon will not carry through its threats and one imagines she thinks the worst outcome would be for her newly-wed to be killed. Her husband did choose to try to marry in spite of the threat, and perhaps she would be willing to allow him to make that leap of faith himself given that he is informed of the consequences. But she would not put serious stock in absurd faith. Nonetheless, Sarah would never need to fear that her reluctance to get married would be unethical. Therefore, her decision-making is influenced exclusively by her concern for the happiest world.

Male Sarah

The male version of Sarah²⁹, resolves itself the most simply. The male version of Sarah felt the shame of the ethical failure which he could not even claim responsibility for thrust upon him and was thus driven to commit terrible crimes so that he might have sins he could claim as his own. We speculated that were a social shame to persist after the abolition of a universal ethics then the male Sarah could be totally unchanged. The male Sarah could still lash out against pity even if that pity were only based on his impotence to achieve his desires. He could still desire monstrosity over piteousness. However, if the male Sarah were an ethical pragmatist he would have to say that the world in which he is monstrous is a world worse than that where he is not. If the male Sarah is a pragmatist then he would have to acknowledge his responsibility to think for the community and could not decide that the best thing for the community is for him to be a murderer.

²⁹ Pg. 14

A Clear-Headed Court

Our last example may have given the impression that we are thinking in an overly utopian way. However, we only posited those examples to demonstrate how a *pragmatist* would think. We do not assume that everyone would be a pragmatist. There would be many male Sarahs for whom shame would be so intolerable that whatever capacity they have for following the general good would be clouded by rage. There would also be many for whom the good of the community is of no import. Our concern for pragmatist ethics is not merely in how we would use it to judge our own actions, but in how we would think to judge others.

When judging another person the pragmatist would have to admit that there is no perfect justice to rule by. The pragmatist instead thinks of justice in terms of protecting the public good. When one makes a judgment of another they then acknowledge that whatever they decide is a product of human will. This is a departure from the courtroom of *The Stranger*. The magistrate allowed himself the moral holiday of believing his rulings to be derived from God and was repulsed when Meursault did not abide by the implicit script that faith typically provided the magistrate. This is the primary fault of Meursault's court, it is not conscious of how it renders its own decisions. The court presumes that it can rule from the position of absolute justice and know Meursault's internal self from the mass of actions he undertakes. However, they only ever know his external self. They take his faux pas and make a whole host of assumptions such that they can produce a character whom they are able to understand. Meursault is a cold blooded murderer, but was not Meursault who they convicted.

Were the court to try Meursault pragmatically it would have to at every stage be aware of the limitations of its judgements. The court can still only judge Meursault by his actions, but that does not mean they need to invent someone to sit in his place. A pragmatic court would remain

close to the empirical particulars of the case. The court has a series of facts available to it. An absurd confession, compelling evidence that Meursault killed the Arab, and the testimony of those who know him. All the court needs to convict Meursault is the evidence and confession, the character evidence and explanation only serve to determine the sentence. The court of the original story ignored Meursault's explanation; it could not accept that one would kill so flippantly. A pragmatic court would have to acknowledge that this is the only explanation it has clear access to.

Ideally, at this stage there would be an attempt to have Meursault examined. Were that done the court would find that Meursault genuinely has no conception of right and wrong. With that in hand the court would render a decision in recognition of the fact that the man being tried is not unethical, but rather non-ethical. This is to say that Meursault did not choose to do a *wrong* thing. This sort of person is a threat to the public good, and so the court would do something to separate him from society. Whether or not the court would choose to execute him would have to do with the culture of the time. That being said, if the court believes criminality would have to be linked to immoral intent then it would have to say that Meursault is not a simple criminal, we might now say he is criminally insane. This could call for a different kind of judgment than one would pass on one who consciously chooses immoral behavior. This example shows how the court could make a judgment of Meursault which does not require them to overly speculate. In this way the court can make the socially constructed reality it must operate in have care for the internal selves it cannot access.

The court can make judgements for the good of the community while remaining conscious that it cannot extend its mandate beyond the particulars before it. We acknowledge that when we judge someone we do not have access to their internal self. We also still make our

judgements for the practical common good, as opposed to trying to follow an abstract absolute. Therefore we must carefully make our judgements using the available facts with the best account of others external selves as we can have. In this way we maintain that our judgements are not absolute, not arbitrary, and still in a framework. We would have to acknowledge that our judgments can never perfectly align with our ideals, but make them as best we can.

Conclusion

We left Kierkegaard attempting to avoid three things: zealotry, nihilism, and amorality. Kierkegaard could not bear the absurd meaninglessness of life so he made an equally absurd leap of faith so that he might keep hold of an absolute. In doing so he sacrificed not only reason but also ethics. These are troubling compromises to make, so we addressed that which Kierkegaard leapt away from, absurdity. Camus showed us how one might retain the will to live for oneself in spite of the loss of all absolutes, yet this solution was antisocial, it continued to ask us to surrender morality. Camus did show us how traditional ethics in the context of the absurd fails to achieve its own ends. Therefore, we saw that there was a need to alter ethics such that it could admit to absurdity. Pragmatism fills that space for us. By taking pragmatic decision making, choosing the decision which one predicts to give the best possible outcome, and making it social, as Dewey demonstrated was essential, we are able to redefine ethics. For us ethics would now mean making the decision which one predicts to be best for oneself and others. That decision will be complicated by one's circumstances and the whole host of ideals one has assimilated, but one could still say that one can choose rightly or wrongly. We also see that while one is still isolated from others to some extent, we can still make judgments of each other with justifications that need no absolute. In essence, Kierkegaard's internal struggle has been resolved by saying that one should not feel guilt when one tries with greatest integrity to do as best as they can for all.

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