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Existential Analyses: Freud and Camus on Suffering

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by

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For my parents

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Introduction: Two Perspectives on Suffering

> "The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering - don't you realize that up to this point it is only *this* suffering which has created every enhancement in man up to now?" - Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 225

Both Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* and Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* attempt to respond to the problem of human suffering. On the surface they take on different approaches in their examinations of the human condition, with Freud turning to the internal structures of repression and guilt, and Camus focused on the incommensurable relationship between the individual who seeks meaning and a meaningless world. This paper aims to examine points of contact and theoretical overlap between these two texts.

Why, despite all the progress of the 20th century, do we suffer? What is the nature of our suffering? Is there any hope to be had for suffering less? These are questions in which both Freud and Camus are deeply invested. Ultimately, I argue that Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* offers an existentialist interpretation of human suffering through the concept of the oceanic feeling. Likewise, I argue that Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* raises questions of psychoanalytic concern through the concepts of absurdity and philosophical suicide and poses the possibility of a therapeutic response to our suffering. I believe that in reading these texts through the lens of the other we are able to uncover nuances within the authors and their theories that bring us closer to an understanding of human suffering.

Freud's *Civilization* is a text that seeks to analyze the state of 20th century discontent, outwardly positing that the suffering of the era can be attributed to a domestication of the individual at the hands of society. Freud, however, prefaces this argument, and the book as a whole, with a discussion of a lost sense of primordial unity - the oceanic feeling. Never again is

this feeling mentioned by Freud, though its initial discussion feels undeniably purposeful. The loss of the oceanic feeling and the resulting sense of isolation that we experience is the unspoken thread that underscores Freud's explicit analysis of our discontent. I argue that Freud's entire argument within *Civilization* is really driven by an existential angst - an isolation that is born out of a shrinking sense of self. Everything we do is in an effort to quell our intense isolation and reclaim this feeling of oneness with the world, though it may be entirely unattainable.

Camus similarly touches on this sense of suffering at the hands of the unattainable in *Sisyphus*, particularly within his discussion of the individual's desire for purpose in a world inherently devoid of it. This fervent seeking of purpose is discussed by Camus as though it were a kind of pathology. This sets the tone for what becomes an unspoken evaluation and diagnosis of our desire for purpose. I argue that within Camus's *Sisyphus*, a therapeutic practice emerges in the vein of Freud's own psychoanalytic theory. Camus puts on the coat of the analyst and begins to dissect the framework of our desire for that which eludes us, concluding with a prescription of revolt. In reading this throughline within *Sisyphus*, we can come to navigate our own tendencies with a more concrete understanding, eventually reaching a point of rescripting our own narrative, i.e. learning how to take our suffering in stride and find joy within it.

When read alone, both of these texts seem to conclude on a stagnant note, leaving us with little more direction than where we began. Freud leaves us in a state of paralyzing contemplation, as the dawn of WWII approaches on the horizon, just as Camus provides something not far off from a fantasy for us to hang on to. I argue that in reading each of these texts through the lens of the other, we are brought face to face with our own suffering in a way that proves to be both philosophically orienting and therapeutically beneficial. In the end I hope

to show not just the similarities between these two philosophers, but also between existentialism and psychoanalysis as a whole. In understanding our condition of existential isolation and suffering through a psychoanalytic framework, we will be better able to navigate our own life and place within the world. We can learn to move with fluidity and pleasure, turning what was once a prison into a jungle gym upon which to climb and play, if only we read our lives as such.

Chapter I - Oceanic Feelings: Freud and Existentialism

> "That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama" - Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (17).

We begin as the whole world. A sensation of eternity, boundless and unified. Free from the confines of the physical realm, we are everything and everyone. The newborn does not distinguish anything beyond itself, for it has not yet formulated a conception of self to do so. Mother and child are one, as is the breast and even the chair upon which they sit. This sensation persists within the infant for some time, though the longer we linger outside of the womb, the once blurred boundary between the self and the world begins to sharpen.

Freud reflects on this infantile feeling of boundlessness in the opening chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). He names it the "Oceanic Feeling", and states that while he does not deny the existence of such a sensation, he himself has never felt it. Following this brief discussion, which spans only the first chapter, Freud leaves the oceanic feeling aside and turns to his critique of civilization and analysis of our present discontent. This decision feels particularly perplexing on behalf of Freud, as we might imagine that prefacing with the mention of such a sensation would suggest it might play a more significant role in his analysis of our discontent. I argue, however, that the role of the oceanic feeling and the sense of unity that it refers to is much more explicit in this text than may be assumed.

Freud's discussion of the oceanic feeling that prefaces *Civilization*, however brief it may be, sets the tone for a thematic throughline of lost unity that underscores much of the analysis within the text. This lost unity coincides with the perpetual sense of a shrinking self, a constant severance that begins with a feeling of eternity and eventually leaves the individual fractured into

a multitude of selves. It is in this phenomenon of severance that our discontent is rooted. Most all of what Freud discusses in this text, from the consideration of the causes of our discontent, to the "palliative measures" that we take to soothe our sense displeasure, to the renunciation of our drives at the hands of civilization, are haunted by the common feeling of disunity, not only with the world, but with our own selves. In addressing and closely analyzing this throughline of a continuously fragmenting self within *Civilization*, we can come to understand this text, which is so often read as a political commentary of its time, as a deeply existential work of longing and nostalgia.

The Oceanic Feeling

Freud's discussion of the oceanic feeling emerged following a correspondence with his acquaintance, Romain Rolland, a writer and mystic of the time. After having sent Rolland a copy of his text, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), in which Freud references religion as an illusory practice, Rolland wrote back that he "entirely agreed with [Freud's] judgment upon religion, but that he was sorry [Freud] had not properly appreciated the true source of religious sentiments", which he claims to be the oceanic feeling in itself (24). This feeling, Rolland felt, was one of utter mysticism, so deeply spiritual that "one may… rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion" (24). This sense of mysticism, of something beyond logic, seems to run contrary to the hyper-analytical image that is so often ascribed to Freud and his work. Freud himself confesses that it is no simple matter to deal scientifically with feelings, and while such a task may seem to be his specialty, there is an undeniable undertone of the spiritual that follows much of Freud's more scientific

writing. The oceanic feeling ironically informs much of the scientific and analytical work that Freud puts forth in *Civilization*, standing as the rather subtle crux of the text.

Freud defines the oceanic feeling as "a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded, as it were, 'oceanic'" (24). The womb provides the ideal conditions for such a feeling to manifest, and our time spent within it is perhaps the only point in our lives in which we are fully in touch with this sensation. In this dark chamber we float in stasis, totally protected and nourished by an armor of flesh. In this cave we are safe from any external threat; the responsibility of survival has not yet fallen to us. How could it? The physical world and all of its threats have yet to reveal itself to us. The very concept of us - of self - has not yet formed, for there is not yet need for it.[1] The oceanic feeling, by nature, is characterized by a lack of ego. It is a relinquishment of the self entirely - a dissolution of ego. It is, as Freud writes, "an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole" (25). Everything bleeds into itself to achieve true unity, boundaries dissolved entirely. Any sort of distinction delineating anything as separate from the whole becomes utterly absurd. The infant's inherent lack of ego allows the early life of every living entity to be characterized by a pure oceanic feeling. Only when individual survival becomes necessary does this feeling of unity begin to decay.

Upon birth, the ceremonial severance that casts us from our cave of total harmony and into the beginnings of an inevitable sense of isolation, the feeling of eternity persists, though a bit differently. Birth is the first instance of our shrinking self. What was once eternity, safeguarded by the shield of our mother's insides, grows smaller following the break of the umbilical cord. This too is our first confrontation with the physical world, and as we enter into the light of the

[1] The self, for future reference, we may refer to, in Freudian terms, as the 'ego'.

world, this unity begins to fade. Now the infant, rather than being fed and swaddled perpetually, must cry out to receive the care it requires from its mother. Freud points out that "An infant at the breast does not yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him. He gradually learns to do so in response to various promptings" (27). Though the breast and the satisfaction that it provides comes upon demand, the first object distinction in life takes root at this moment - the first boundary delineated. The breast has become an object. Now, rather than existing as everything, we have shrunken to just child and mother. Nonetheless, we are still early on in our journey, and our survivalist tendency to define and characterize everything around us has not totally taken shape. The feeling is still oceanic, though perhaps not as vast. Beneath the surface of the metaphorical water, a buoy begins to emerge.

Our arrival into a conception of self is the next stage of severance, characterized by a distinction between the physical boundaries between our bodily vessels and all that surrounds us. Freud writes that "originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive … feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it" (29). The mention of a "shrunken residue" feels particularly potent in relation to the notion of severance. Freud suggests that the ego state we eventually come into, characterized by its isolation, contains within it traces of a previous state of boundlessness. That is to say that, as our ego comes into dominance and we begin to draw distinctions between ourselves and the world about us - and even distinctions between different parts of our own self - the traces of the whole are not lost. And yet while these traces may persist in more subtle ways, it becomes

extremely difficult to rediscover them in the form of such a shrunken residue. As such, most of our actions revolve around reacquainting ourselves with the whole in any minute way that we can.

I have always thought the womb to seem such an uncomfortable place. I hate tight spaces, and the thought of being physically bound within another human being makes me squirm. Though I have, of course, been touched by the outside world - the boundaries of my reality painfully defined. It is the ego that defines these boundaries. There was a time in which that feeling was upon me as I hung suspended in my mother, though I have been shaped into something quite different. My ego has taken hold, that sense of unity has been robbed from me, as it has for all of us. I desire something more, though I don't quite know what. I longingly cast my gaze inwards. There is a piece of me missing. Its absence gnaws at me relentlessly.

I can't help but wonder if we are bound to a lifetime of inescapable solitude. Might this feeling still linger somewhere within me? Within all of us? In metaphorical terms, an ocean so vast as to span eternity does not just dry up and cease being entirely. No, though we may lose sight of it amidst a thick and heavy fog. Perhaps the feeling is tucked away deep inside us at this very moment, only we have been conditioned into losing sight of it. There are, it seems, ways in which this sensation of absolute unity may persist beyond infancy. Proof, as it were, of its lingering presence. Freud, himself, writes that "in mental life, nothing which has once been formed can perish – that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances… it can once more be brought to light" (30-31). Freud seems to be suggesting here that life becomes a constant search to rediscover the oceanic feeling, and we may not even realize it; our every action imbued with a strategic, unconscious desire to regain touch with this lost primordial unity.

In an effort to support this claim, Freud, at the close of Chapter one, paints a vivid picture of Roman architecture. He compares Rome, a city with deep and rich historical roots, to the human mind. Modern day Rome, having gone through numerous different ages, each with its own architectural features, is situated atop numerous layers of architectural history that lie in ruins beneath it. What once was is now nothing but a memory; a piece of history that has ceased being. The mind, too, evolves and builds new layers, though unlike Rome, the mind is not bound to such confines of time and space. Where Rome can only have one layer in existence at a time, the mind can have all layers in existence at all times. What once was in the mind surely still lingers somewhere. But while that oceanic feeling - that beautiful sense of unity - may still be hiding in the depths of our minds, pinpointing *where,* exactly, is a task that feels quite maddening. The search for such a feeling, lost somewhere deep inside, is exactly where the path to our discontent leads, and yet Freud does not mention this oceanic feeling again.

On Human (Un)Happiness

Solitude casts us into the valley of despair, a landscape that we are cursed to roam in an endless search for something greater than ourselves. Though we may hunt our entire lives to rediscover this sense of eternity, we can only ever catch fleeting traces of it. These ‘traces’ can be understood as sensations of pleasure, which we hold on to with such longing fervor, only for them to dissolve within the heat of our grasp. These ever-fading pleasures allow for a momentary return to that unbound state, a transitory dissolution into a larger whole; they are not merely means of gratification, but desperate attempts to restore a lost sense of unity and purpose. Life

becomes a constant and insatiable chase for these evanescent pleasures; a search for a sustainable happiness that can never truly be.

The issue of human happiness finds itself at the center of *Civilization*, with much of the text aiming to analyze the ways in which we have found ourselves so dissatisfied in the modern era. Freud writes that "life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks" (41). Such a statement stands as the very foundation on which this text is constructed - a response to the suffering of daily existence. It may, then, seem as though Freud will argue that it is the very search for constant pleasure that leaves us in this constant cycle of disappointment, further elucidating his theory of the pleasure principle.[2] I argue, though, that beyond simply tracing the movements of pleasure and displeasure in human life, Freud is also hinting toward an existential interpretation of human unhappiness as rooted in a sense of meaninglessness and loss of the whole.

According to Freud, in an effort to mitigate the suffering born of our animalistic routine that is the seeking of pleasure and avoidance of displeasure, we employ "palliative measures", of which there are three main types: "powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it" (41). These palliative measures are merely a categorization of all of the different means by which we go about seeking pleasure in an effort to find happiness. These measures become our reasons for living, deeply ingrained in our routines and daily lives. We come to see that just about everything we do falls under some palliative, categorical umbrella; that all of life, all of our actions and choices in this modern era, are constant attempts to fill the hollowness

[2] The pleasure principle is the drive that motivates the seeking of immediate gratification of instinctual / libidinal impulses, as theorized by Freud in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).

inherent in us. Though we may live in communities, in civilizations of enormous numbers, we are eternally solitary beings, bound to a singular vessel that can never be anything more. This is the heart of suffering. Freud leads us to the conclusion that everything we do can be reduced down to the search for a lost unity, and what makes these actions “palliative” is that they allow for a momentary dissolution back into that sense of wholeness. Every action we take revolves around the goal of reencountering this feeling and returning to that unbound, unisolated state, if only for a moment.

The constant ache of this solitary existence, we find, is simply too much to bear. The world is mocking; it laughs and shrieks as we so desperately try to fuse back with it. We are made of the same matter as the earth upon which we walk, and yet it is this very matter that restrains us from it. In a room full of people we are most alone. All of us prisoners of the same design, yet still never able to fully bridge the gap between ourselves. It is an impossible task. The repressive forces of civilization exacerbate our isolation, but this chronic condition is lifelong, ingrained within our being. Would that we could melt into each other, into the world as a whole, shedding these solitary, fractured forms. Desperately we will try through a variety of methods, though it is so often to no avail. It is a kind of self medication, and one that will typically only feel us leaving even more detached from it all than before.

There are numerous examples that Freud provides us so that we may better understand the intention that underlies all of our actions; the different measures that we take to seemingly seek pleasure and avoid displeasure, but really to momentarily rediscover this sense of unity. Perhaps the most effective that he writes of is intoxication - the ingestion of chemical substances so that we may “become incapable of receiving unpleasurable impulses”, allowing us to, at any

time “withdraw from the pressure of reality and find refuge in a world of one’s own with better conditions of sensibility” (46-47). Intoxication of any sort is perhaps the most classic example of the removal of pain via the construction of a new reality. In the instance of intoxication, the individual is granted a momentary escape from their conception of the self, and the subsequent sense of solitude inherent within it.

This withdrawal from reality is a kind of anesthetic, temporarily numbing the constant ache of the “pressure of reality”. It is a way to temporarily bind the fractured pieces back together; a crude and fragile collage that will inevitably crack and break apart again. Intoxication is perhaps the rudimentary approach to the quelling of one’s pain, leading, too, to the most injurious repercussions, and yet its celebrated place within culture is continuously upheld. Is this not cause alone for ponderance? A bottle of spiritual anesthetic lies somewhere in just about every home, despite the health and mental dangers it presents - such a potent medicine stands as such a normal part of daily life. Might some kind of intoxication be necessary in the face of reality? Understanding life is to understand the self as fractured, and to be fractured is painful. We do all that we can to put the pieces back together, even if it will eventually harm us more.

In a similar vein to that of the substance abuser, we are presented with the figure of the hermit, who turns away from society at large in an effort to allay his pains. The hermit may attribute his suffering to his involvement in civilization, though really his suffering stems from the pains of isolation. He subsequently rejects this reality and runs to the mountaintop to live out the rest of his days in solitude. Perhaps he has come to understand that no matter how close we get to another human being, we will never be able to completely fuse two into one; that even when we are surrounded by others we are still, by our very nature, all alone. The hermit

experiences the same pains as the substance abuser, the root of which lies in his estrangement from the world around him. He suffers at the hands of disunity. Voluntary isolation is his readiest safeguard, his way of turning reality on its head and rejecting it completely. He is safe from reality because he rejects it and constructs a sense of agency over it. How can one suffer from loneliness if he *wants* to be alone? Here, "a certain amount of protection against suffering is secured", though we must wonder how sustainable it can truly be (47). Rejecting this reality is nothing more than a will negation of the inevitable. It is a repression that will inevitably return[3] - the pain will always linger.

Even the most powerful of all these palliative measures, the mystic attraction of love, which "has given our most intense experience of an overwhelming sensation of pleasure" is equally - if not the most - dangerous and unsustainable method by which we seek this spiritual comfort. Freud writes, "we are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love" (52). Love makes us constantly aware of the possibility of loss, the same loss that has come to shape our very existence, our every action. Love may provide us with the closest thing to the unity we seek, bringing us the closest we can come to pure and uninhibited pleasure. Freud himself writes that "a man who is in love is prepared to declare that 'I' and 'you' are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact" (26). And while love may be the most powerful force against our suffering of severance, momentarily reunifying us and bringing us the closest we may ever come in this lifetime to the sensation of wholeness, it, too, reduces us to our most vulnerable. At the height of love, we open ourselves fully; to love truly is to be defenseless. As such, when our love is lost,

[3] Return of the repressed is the tendency to repeat past traumas that have not been worked through in the form of new symptoms, as coined by Freud throughout his work.

which it inevitably will be in some form, we are struck with immense displeasure, for we are pulled back into that dreaded isolation with unforgiving ferocity. Never will we suffer more than from a lost love.

I wonder, have we been condemned to a lifetime of suffering? The sheer fact of our existence elicits a suffering so great that our life's work becomes an all consuming effort to appease it. Freud outwardly suggests that our suffering is a failure to abide by the pleasure principle, though the more basic element that underlines the catalyst of our sufferings is the sense of loss inherent in our condition. Of our three examples - the addict, the hermit and the lover - each and every one of them strives to protect themselves from this shared suffering in some way. Our cause of discontent is not just failing to satisfy an impulse to pleasure, but also the severance of the whole self. Freud's understanding of suffering is, at its core, informed by the oceanic feeling and the inevitable fracturing we experience throughout our lives. Every one of us goes about our lives constantly driven by this loss of unity, our every action carried out in an effort to quell the chronic pain that it brings. The movement of life becomes a hopeful attempt to regain unity. And yet, for better or for worse, it is our disunity that defines us.

Something will always stand in the way of true happiness, of true sustainability. Freud himself argues that "the programme of becoming happy, which the pleasure principle imposes on us, cannot be fulfilled; yet we must not – indeed, we cannot –give up our efforts to bring it near fulfillment" (54). Here the existential sentiments echo undoubtedly; we begin to see that the structure of these pains and disappointments in our lives have quite explicit parallels to the meaningless of life and a fractured sense of self. Freud will nonetheless attempt to provide a more concrete understanding of our discontent, turning to the role of civilization with more

specificity and scrutinization. Freud will go on to attribute the simple prohibitions of laws and self in civilization as the true catalyst for our suffering, though this is just another layer upon which our discontent is built. I aim to prove that even through the lens of Freud's critique of civilization, we can still see the existential problem of disappointment and loss at the heart of our suffering.

The Critique of Civilization

Chapter three of *Civilization* sees Freud take a more diagnostic outlook on our discontent, opening with the claim that our unhappiness can be traced back to our own social relationships. As social beings we have built up regulations so that we may coexist amongst each other in as peaceful a manner as possible. These regulations, however, seem not to protect us from our daily sufferings, but rather simply stand as a means by which we are policed into renouncing our instincts in service of our community. Inner peace is the tradeoff for external peace. This leads Freud to the conclusion that "What we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery", due to the fact that "all the things with which we seek to protect ourselves against the threats that emulate from suffering are part of that very civilization" (58). This, however, is only half of the story.

While civilization undoubtedly exacerbates our suffering in a variety of ways, shrinking us down into even smaller segments of our already fractured concept of self, Freud's conclusion appears only partial. Blaming civilization for the entirety of our disappointment and suffering neglects the very notion on which this text commences. Our severance from the oceanic feeling is at the heart of our discontent - our true disappointment rooted in this existential longing for

that which will forever elude us. The existential thread that is so overlooked within Freud's writing brings to light an entirely new, and more full-bodied understanding of this suffering As such, reading Freud's critique of civilization through this lens brings to light a newfound clarity in this suffering that civilization only heightens. It is imperative, though, to examine closely the ways in which civilization continues to build atop the foundation of our chronic discontent and exacerbate our suffering, especially if we are to understand our condition fully.

While the root cause of our life's disappointment lies within the primordial severance - the shrinking sense of self inherent in humanity - we should not discount the way in which civilization aggravates this condition, shrinking us down and alienating us even further. What was once the whole world became just the mother and self, and soon after just the solitary vessel. This social contract that we make to join civilization, however, initiates another split *within* this vessel of the self. The physical unit of one is split invisibly by the might of social forces. Freud writes that "it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression or some other means?) of powerful instincts" (75). I.e., existing within society is incompatible with our most basic drives, eventually sparking an ideological war within us and alienating us internally. In tracing the ways in which civilization necessitates the renunciation of such instincts we will come to uncover a further understanding of the phenomenon of the fractured self.

The critique of civilization begins on the basis that the renunciation of instinct causes the individual to suffer, and civilization itself relies on this sacrifice to thrive. The primary instincts that we surrender are those of sexuality and aggression; a fee that we pay so that we may revel in

the safety and survival benefits that come along with civilized living.[4] Yet, in renouncing these primary instincts, we, too, renounce a piece of ourselves, finally splitting the only whole that we have left. This further fracturing can be seen, most explicitly, within the restriction of sexual life. Freud suggests that the "first, totemic, phase [of sexual restriction] already begins with the prohibition against an incestuous choice of object, [which is] perhaps the most drastic mutilation which man's erotic life has in all times experienced" (84). This is so critical because it highlights the early stages during which we forcefully experience these drive renunciations. When ideologies are forced onto us as children, it is often without our full knowledge or understanding of why. As such, we experience distress without knowing why, leading to further distress down the line.

Whether it be through taboos, laws, or social customs, civilization works to control sexual life in the name of the wellbeing of civilization itself. Were our sexual desires not controlled from a young age, it would be difficult for civilization to establish hold over us in other ways. Love is the ultimate aim[5], though it stands in opposition to the interests of civilization. Freud says that "civilization obey[s] the laws of economic necessity, since a large amount of the physical energy which it uses has to be withdrawn from sexuality" (85). Thus, if love is conquered, civilization has more of our energy to expend so that we can build upon it. Impeding a drive that is at our very core results in a unique kind of suffering, for it forces us to experience yet another severance, this time within ourselves.

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[4] Civilized living refers to one's existence within a complex structure of human socio-cultural development. Emphasis on the notion of humans living *together*.

[5] It should be noted that love, being the ultimate aim of the individual, is a testament to the desire for a unification that stems from the loss of the oceanic feeling.

We are similarly forced to shed a vital piece of our being in our instinctive tendency towards aggression. Civilization is incompatible with such behavior, thus it forces us to alienate ourselves from it, furthering this internal fracture. We may seek love, though we are, at our core, simultaneously aggressive beings. Freud writes:

> "Men are not gentle creatures … they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness … the existence of this inclination to aggression, which we can detect in ourselves and justly assume to be present in others, is the factor which disturbs our relation with our neighbor and which forces civilization into such a high expenditure [of energy]" (94-95).

Such aggressiveness may manifest in a variety of ways[6], though it is unsustainable for the survival of civilization in the same manner by which sexuality threatens societal function. The consequence of this "primary mutual hostility of human beings, [is that] civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration", and so something must be done to stop it (95). Civilization, perhaps quite ironically, establishes a preconceived hostility towards aggression in an effort to extinguish our aggressive, human tendencies. The result is an inclination to bury that aggression deep within us; to reject it entirely. This is yet another instance of drive renunciation and a subsequent internal estrangement.

These repressive tendencies typically stem from a force within us that is perpetuated by a sense of guilt; a conscience of sorts that has been set to grow within us from the external world.

[6] Freud uses the example of the wish to torture and humiliate one's neighbor.

Freud dubs this policer of urges as 'the superego'.[7] This superego is the product of the individual's internalized aggression working against the ego's own aggressiveness and manifesting in a sensation of guilt; a phenomenon that becomes increasingly adverse to the individual's own being. Freud understands this superego as a means by which civilization "obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city" (114). It is of particular interest to note the language that Freud uses here. In likening the superego to a militant force, Freud highlights the true nature of the superego as oppressive and intrusive. The formation of the superego, or, conscience, naturally runs counter to our two most basic drives - sexuality and aggression - forcing us to police and repress them, again, without even knowing why we are doing so.

Perhaps what is most perplexing about civilization is that, by its very nature, it is a force that appears to unify us, though it stands as the final step in the process of our fracturing. Humans have historically joined together in civilizations for two purposes: "to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations" (63). Civilization allows us great advantage in our basic survival, as larger groups means more strength and efficiency. Through civilization we are able to achieve longer lifespans, greater health, technological advancements, and so on, yet strangely enough we are unable to shed ourselves of the everpresent sensation of isolation even when we are constantly surrounded by other humans. In fact, it is quite the opposite; never are we more at odds with others than when we are living together with them within the framework of civilization. Yet Civilization not only places us at odds with others but with ourselves as well,

[7] The concept of the superego, along with those of the id and the ego, were first introduced by Freud in his 1923 text, *The Ego and the Id*.

turning the self against self and breaking down any remaining sense of self unity. We may never be able to truly break away from our instincts, but we may hold pieces of ourselves with such contempt that we may pit them against the self entirely. The instinctual pieces of ourselves that we are taught to bury will always be there, resulting in internalized enmity. Civilization, then, no doubt plays a crucial role in the cause of our disappointment with the world, only by way of further severance.

It is no wonder that Freud holds civilization to be the root cause of our unhappiness; it is what initiates the last step in the chain of fracturing - the splitting of the individual's own consciousness. Civilization is a vital aspect of our state of discontent, though it should be stressed that this unhappiness truly begins with a spiritual kind of severance per the loss of the oceanic feeling. Freud writes that "if civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man's sexuality, but on his aggressivity, we can understand why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization" (100). Civilization is not the cause of our discontent, it merely exacerbates our condition, allowing for the loss of unity to penetrate deeper within us. The existential sense of loss that results is only compounded by the renunciation of drives at the hands of civilization. We come to see that just about everything is traced back to the once lost unification that inevitably fades within us all. And so, we must ask ourselves, if this lost unity is what underlies every sense of discontent in life, can things ever get better for us? Is progress even possible if we are bogged down by such a great existential force that we are powerless against? Perhaps we are cursed to a lifetime of suffering, and perhaps it might then be easier to give up entirely. Suddenly the world begins to take on a dark and dreary haze. I believe, however, that Freud is suggesting another way of reading things.

As we reach the tail end of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, after having been taken through a whirlwind of hypotheses regarding our sufferings, we might reasonably conclude that we have been left with no logical prescription. There is never a moment in which Freud even attempts to provide us with some course of action - some solution to free ourselves from the woes of our existence. Rather, we are merely left with the very question that Freud himself seems to contemplate: "whether and to what extent [the] cultural development [of the human species] will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction" (149). Such a question asks us to consider whether or not civilization may win out against the destructive urges of humanity, but beneath it lies a more crucial question: whether or not we can live with the fracturing inherent in our being?

Though he never explicitly returns to the question of the oceanic feeling following his first chapter, it is difficult to deny that the question of fracturing and lost unity are central to his considerations. Perhaps outwardly claiming that the loss of the oceanic feeling and the notion of severance that we are forced to contend with lies at the heart of our suffering may have been too extreme for Freud. A claim so explicitly inquisitive of the existential seems to stand in stark contrast to his more scientific work, and yet, the undertones of such existential sentiments are so bold throughout this text. Whether it be in the discussion of palliative measures, which are reducible to desperate attempts at rediscovering a once lost unity, or the notion of fracturing that is explicit in the categorization of id, ego and superego that define our being, Freud's writing is an unmistakably existentialist attempt to probe our sense of lost unity and cope with the misery it brings us.

If we read *Civilization* in its most literal sense, we are left only with the assumption that we suffer because we are incompatible with civilization. The existentialist reading of this text, however, and the one that I argue Freud laid carefully beneath the groundwork of his discussion of civilization, is so critical because it exposes our condition of suffering to us something chronic and complex, beyond just the scope of civilization. Rather, we understand our anguish as something ingrained within us - a constant straining of our own desires against the reality of this world. We are forced to confront the fact that we are locked in a constant war with our urge to discover eternal unity and our inability to do so completely - the two are incompatible. Such a reading forces us to come face to face with the solitude and meaninglessness of our lives, instead of hiding from it under the guise that we might somehow be able to cure ourselves of this suffering entirely. Even Freud's method of psychoanalysis takes on existential significance in its attempt to help us live within the reality of our suffering. Through it we can learn to hold on to the uncomfortable truth of our situation and grow to contend with our suffering as an inevitable part of life. Only in death might we rediscover the whole and grow back into eternity, but Freud illuminates to us that as long as we are alive, we must face this suffering head on or retreat in some form.

Chapter II - Absurd Therapies: Camus and Psychoanalysis

> "The question of the purpose of human life has been raised countless times; it has never yet received a satisfactory answer and perhaps does not admit of one" - Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (42).

There is often an irreconcilable gap between what we desire most in this life and the reality of our condition. Perhaps this phenomenon manifests itself most universally in our desire to find meaning within a world devoid of it. So vehemently do we convince ourselves that there exists some significance, some purpose to our being. We desire a reason, an answer, something to ground ourselves in this shaky and senseless reality, only to find ourselves confronted with the fact that what we seek does not exist. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), defines this confrontation between a meaning-seeking self and the meaningless world as "the absurd" and surveys the lengths people go to to avoid the absurdity of their lives. While Camus is quick to dismiss suicide as a viable response to the absurd, he draws our attention to the phenomenon of "philosophical suicide," a kind of willfull illusion by which we attempt to negate one of the terms of this absurd confrontation. Throughout the text, Camus encourages us to consider what it would mean to actually live with the absurd, to live in what he calls a state of "revolt."

In this chapter, I will argue that Camus takes on the position of the psychoanalyst, both in his diagnoses of our suffering and the therapeutic response that the newfound understanding of our suffering elicits. Through our reading, we can come to understand the avoidance of the absurd - the insistence on a meaningful life - as a pathology. Following this framework, we can view the various methods through which we avoid meaninglessness as 'symptoms' of this pathology. In a similar manner to that of Freud,[8] Camus takes us through a variety of case studies

[8] Freud is well known for his case studies, which were an essential part to the formation of his theories. Perhaps his most famous is that of 'Little Hans', whose phobia of horses he attributed to the Oedipus complex.

in an effort to illuminate the many facets and possible responses to our condition. Likewise, Camus' prescriptive call for "revolt" functions not just as a logical or moral imperative, but as a therapeutic response aimed toward making life more liveable. Eventually we arrive at the creative act of literature and the call towards a rescripting of our own lives. Much like psychoanalysis does not aim to provide a cure all for our illness, Camus too does not attempt to free us of our chains, but rather to allow us to navigate them more with more ease and comfort.

Symptoms and Diagnosis

We live within a world of our own design. We choose what it is that we tune into and out of, constructing our own reality as we grow. It is all in our head - everything - and we do not even realize it. That is until one day we are struck by a force with no warning, powerful enough to knock us off our feet, destabilizing in an instant our perception of reality that we have worked so hard to make concrete. "It happens that the stage sets collapse" writes Camus. "One day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement … weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness" (13). That is to say, we are confronted with an awakening of sorts, upon which we realize our own desire for something more: an answer amidst the chaos of that which we cannot comprehend. These conceptual foundations upon which our reality is built, the very ones we thought to be fixed, show themselves to be unstable. The entire world has become erratic, slippery, completely foreign. We realize it has been like this the whole time. We have become fully conscious of our situation and suffering ensues. What are we to do now? We must look towards a new understanding of our condition.

Absurdity, according to Camus, is born of a tension, or a comparison between the human desire for meaning and the meaningless of existence. It is what stems from this awakening. Camus defines it as such:

> "'It's absurd' means 'It's impossible' but also 'It's contradictory.' … we shall deem a verdict absurd when we contrast it with the verdict the facts apparently dictated … the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression, but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact an a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation … the absurd is not in man nor in the world, but in their presence together. For the moment it is the only bond uniting them" (29-30).

Thus, we can understand absurdity as the desperate attempt to comprehend that which is entirely incomprehensible. It is a constant straining between the chaos of reality and the hope for meaning, order, purpose - the *why* of life. The absurd necessitates participation from both the individual and the world. In fact, quite ironically, absurdity is our *only* link to the very world that we feel so divorced from. As such, any sort of healthy engagement with the world necessitates its survival. Only with death does the absurd cease, for it is inherent in human existence - an inevitable aspect of life - and yet we go to such great lengths to avoid it. What is it that we fear so deeply about this fact of reality? Camus will go on to clarify our tendency towards such avoidance of the absurd and the pathological implications of such an impulse.

While *The Myth of Sisyphus* is a text known for its portrayal of the absurdity of life, Camus begins the narrative of the essay by displaying the variety of ways by which we avoid absurdity on a daily basis. The most common tactic of avoidance is nostalgia. Nostalgia references the desire for unity, for a purpose or coherent meaning to life that stems from a sense of continuity. It is "an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity" that is inherent within us (17). When the stage sets collapse there is nothing we seek more than the clarity of the world that we thought we once had. It is a way to make sense of the chaos by subsequently rejecting it. Nostalgia perpetuates this sense of clarity in a false form - it seeks to jump into false hopes to retain the sense of unity that eludes us. In this sense the nostalgic rejects the absurd and cannot be a healthy way of engaging with the world.

Nowhere is the concept of nostalgia best illustrated than in Camus's discussion of philosophers past, in which he provides us with what is essentially a case study in nostalgia. Camus characterizes these thinkers, ranging from Jaspers to Scheler, as "a whole family of minds related by their nostalgia but opposed by their methods or their aims, [who] have persisted in blocking the royal road of reason and in recovering the direct paths of truth" (23). To Camus, their philosophies are sick because they reject the absurd conditions of life by trying to explain away the constant longing for unity and clarity. Subsequently, nostalgia is the symptom of this sickness. It is here that Camus begins to take on the role of the analyst. To better understand the root of this illness of avoidance, Camus places each of these figures in the metaphorical chair of the analysand, slowly examining their symptoms. What he comes to is a deeper understanding of an illness that goes beyond just philosophers past. This is an illness that continues to plague many of us continually.

Camus analyzes a wide array of philosophers, though he is most interested in the case study of Søren Kierkegaard, whom he praises for coming the closest to properly identifying and living with absurdity, only to eventually reject it via a "leap of faith". Kierkegaard does not at first seem like one to turn and hide from the absurd. He "refuses consolations, ethics, [and] reliable principles[,] [and] as for that thorn he feels in his heart, he is careful not to quiet its pain. On the contrary, he awakens it" (26). I.e., Kierkegaard conjures an absurd spirit that strains against an incomprehensible reality, embracing his pain instead of avoiding it. This brings him the closest among his peers to living successfully in the absurd, reveling in the tension that others before him evaded or negated. Eventually we learn, however, that Kierkegaard lacks the ability to endure and foster that tension inherent in absurdity. Kierkegaard takes a leap of faith by which he identifies that which is incoherent with God. At this instance "he is led to blind himself to the absurd which hitherto enlightened him and to deify the only certainty he henceforth possesses, the irrational" (39). Upon attributing the irrational and incomprehensible to a concept that simplifies it to that which *is* comprehensible, the absurd is killed. Kierkegaard at first seems to understand that he cannot escape the irrational, but in deifying it he gives himself over to nostalgia entirely.

The nostalgic individual seeks to be absolved from the heavy burden we are forced to bear in our daily engagement with the absurd. What he seeks is a cure - an escape from the inevitable, and this is what his nostalgia provides him. Camus writes that "Kierkegaard wants to be cured. To be cured is his frenzied wish, and it runs throughout his whole journal. The entire effort of his intelligence is to escape the antinomy of the human condition" (39-40). It is critical here to note the diction that Camus is utilizing; the key word at play is "cure". Through this

language Camus perpetuates a psychoanalytic dialogue in his likening Kierkegaard's condition to that of an illness. We come to see through the case study of Kierkegaard that such attempts at finding a cure for our suffering are really just willful negations and repressions of reality. These repressed feelings will too resurface, for, Camus writes, "A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it" - it is inescapable (24).[9] In other words, a cure is futile. If we are trapped within this consciousness of absurdity, then we must lean into it and live absurdly.

Our nostalgia grows out of an avoidance - a *fear* of the absurd - but whatever kind of momentary safeguard from suffering that this avoidance grants us will always be unsustainable. Camus writes that "So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of its nostalgia. But with its first move this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding" (18). Here, again, we see Camus articulating his own psychoanalytic theory of repression. Any attempts at escaping the absurd fail tirelessly as that which we avoid comes flooding back. In the instance of Kierkegaard, and for most all of those that seek freedom from the absurd, this escape can only be had through a rejection of reality. And yet, even then, willful rejections of reality do not change the fact of meaninglessness. Camus describes Kierkegaard's rejection of the absurd via the leap as "an almost intentional mutilation of the soul to balance the mutilation accepted in regard to the absurd" (40). We must wonder, are such actions not entirely unsustainable? Surely self harm is not our only option of engaging with the world in a way that is bearable. When we work so passionately to reject the absurd we are bound to get wrapped up in

[9] Yet another parallel to the return of the repressed.

dangerous tactics such as these. Camus, the analyst, is quick to define these as suicidal tendencies.

At first glance we might think it too hasty to liken nostalgia to suicide, though Camus is quick to assert that when we interact with the world through this mode we create a completely intentional self delusion. The absurd is founded on a straining: "the mind and the world straining against each other without being able to embrace each other" (40). It is when we disturb this straining, by "negat[ing] one of the terms of [this] painful opposition" that we perpetuate a very real form of self harm (41). In other words, the absurd requires a constant tension between ourselves and the world, and when we try to explain this tension away or negate one of these terms, we not only kill the absurd, but we deny our own reality. In this sense, living with nostalgia really is a detrimental form of self harm, as it is an active working against the fabric of our own reality, pushing us further and further away from truth. This instance can be thought of as the second phase of our illness, in which the symptoms worsen and sickness begins to truly set in. Camus specifically defines this phenomenon as "philosophical suicide".

Many existentialist philosophers fall into the trap of philosophical suicide via their reliance on some form of nostalgia and hope. For Camus, philosophical suicide can be thought of as "a convenient way of indicating the movement by which thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation" (41). It is a means of explaining away the inconsistencies between our desire for meaning and the lack of any guiding principle within the world - a total banishment of both reason and, subsequently, absurdity. We are guided towards philosophical suicide when "nostalgia is stronger … than knowledge" (48). Given that the absurd can only exist while the conflict between human reason and the irrationality of the universe is kept alive,

any attempt to explain away and negate one of the terms of this conflict is to be classified as philosophical suicide. These philosophers seek transcendence, often done through the perpetuation of illusion, something that negates the concept of absurdity altogether.

Kierkegaard commits philosophical suicide in his attempt to nullify life's meaninglessness via illusory values. This is done specifically in his attempts to transcend meaninglessness in the form of faith, or hope. For Kierkegaard, meaninglessness results from the very existence of God. By that standard, this world of ours is wholly meaningless, but the world that God inhabits is fully meaningful. Kierkegaard, in an attempt to transcend the absurd and inject meaning into the meaningless, bridges these two worlds via a "leap of faith", by which "the absurd becomes God" (33). It is in this leap that Kiekrkegaard admits there exists some hope outside of him, rejecting the fundamental principle of meaninglessness and committing philosophical suicide. For Kierkegaard, "negation is [his] God. To be precise, that God is maintained only through the negation of human reason" (42). That is to say, what is so dangerous about philosophical suicide is the way it causes us to lose contact with a necessary piece of ourselves: our reason. Kiekerkgaard exemplifies the fundamental problem with nostalgia and hope and the role in the road to philosophical suicide: they eliminate the term of the meaningless world. If we are to believe that there is some hope outside of us, we cannot accept the fundamental principle of meaninglessness. In doing so we reject truth and subsequently reject life altogether.

After leveling this critique against the history of existentialism, Camus recognizes he may have put an impossible task before us. There is but one important question in this life, according to Camus, and it is "whether one can live with [the absurd] or whether, on the other

hand, logic commands one to die of it" (50). The absurdity of life for someone who faces it head on may become too intense to bear. The question then becomes, can one who successfully avoids philosophical suicide bear the absurdity life without resorting to actual suicide? Can one truly live the absurd without dying of it, or are we stuck between two fatal extremes? Is there any promise of a life well lived for us?

After reviewing Camus' discussion of symptoms and suicidal tendencies, we can logically conclude that the "disease" we are facing is really a chronic avoidance of the absurd. We do all that we can in an effort to avoid the truth of our reality, going to such painstaking lengths to negate a confrontation with the absurd. We might wonder, though, is this condition inevitable? If philosophical suicide is the only alternative to real suicide, the former must certainly be better. Camus, however, is not ready to accept this claim. For him, these two extremes of suicide are not inevitable. Rather, our condition of avoidance is simply a pathology, and one that we can work on in an effort to reorient ourselves in life. We can overcome our condition and live with the absurd. We are not cursed to a fate of suicide, though getting to a place of liveability requires that we first understand our tendencies and do our best to work with them. Much like psychoanalysis, this is an active process .

Therapy and Prescription

Having reached the point of our diagnosis, we now understand that our disease is the avoidance of the absurd. This diagnosis leaves us with the following questions: Should we seek to cure it? Is a cure even possible? We may learn to overcome our suffering in part, though we should be careful in just how far we think we can go. Following the logic of philosophical

suicide, it should immediately become evident that searching for a *complete* cure would eventually lead us back to where we started, in this state of negation. Given that our disease is, at its core, an avoidance of absurdity, our goal is to confront absurdity head on, learning how to live with it and how to deal with it. There is no escape, for an escape would translate to a cure, which would be a negation of absurdity. Thus, living absurdly is the only sustainable way to live - keeping that straining between the mind and the world alive. The question is, though, how can we live with it in a way that is less tortuous?

Camus is not calling for a passive acceptance of our condition. Rather, the path forward requires an active engagement with it. For Camus, the goal of the patient is for him to be able to live "solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, and to bring in nothing that is not certain" (53). This is Camus' rudimentary blueprint for living with the absurd, and this continuous call for action is undeniable throughout his writing. If we are following Camus step by step in this process, we have, at this point, actively worked to understand hope and nostalgia as perpetuations of our sickness and they are absent from our minds entirely. We must now begin to move through this world with reason alone. Through this reason, we come to understand that "[life] will be lived all the better if it has no meaning" (53). This is because if life were to have a meaning, we would simply be regressing back into the slippery slope of sickness and philosophical suicide. Given this, we *must* work to actively practice living absurdly. It is our only option. Living in absurdity is our fate, and it is a fate only livable by "[doing] everything to keep before [us] that absurd brought to light by consciousness" (53). We must *consciously* strive to keep the absurd alive, in the forefront of our mind and in every action we take. It is an active process, and one that Camus refers to as "revolt".

Living in revolt requires a conscious dealing with the disease that lies within the unconscious. It truly is a form of psychoanalysis. We can understand revolt as a confrontation with the absurd, and it is perhaps the only method for us to engage with it in a bearable manner. Revolt is, according to Camus, the process of "keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it" (54). Such a prescription requires total engagement with absurdity, and an embrace of our own reason and the world's lack of it. Avoidance of any kind cannot co-exist with revolt. Camus's language of revolt as being a conscious act is critical here. It not only underscores the active nature of revolt, but so too echoes the psychoanalytic principle that working through one's past and psychic life truly is an active process. This process stands in tension with the passive modes of habit and repetition by which we typically engage with the world. If we are to begin the process of healing, it requires that we put in work. Such sentiments on behalf of Camus highlight his philosophy as inextricably rooted in this kind of therapeutic approach.

There is a passage in which Camus posits that "the important thing, as Abbe Galiani said to Mme d' Epinay, is not to be cured, but to live with one's ailments" (38). How perfectly he reflects the attitude of both the psychoanalyst and the absurd man. Like the psychoanalyst, who aims not to cure us, but to make our condition more livable, Camus has a similar goal in mind. Revolt requires that we live with our fate by pushing against it. It is about establishing some form of agency and accepting our freedom. "That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it" (54). Revolt is about embracing the freedom that we do have - the freedom of thought and action - for "if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action" (57). It is

the same freedom of action that underlies psychoanalytic therapy. When we get to the heart of our condition, we have the freedom to act on it or leave it to fester.

Camus writes, “I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also debilitate me at the same time. They relieve me of the weight of my own life, and yet I must carry it alone... Consciousness and revolt, these rejections are the contrary of renunciation” (55). Nostalgia and hope, too, seek to relieve us of this weight, making us feel free, but Camus is quick to assert that this perceived freedom is just illusion. “They *feel* free with regard to themselves, and not so much free as liberated” (59). True freedom comes with living in the absurd, in which we are freed of illusion and preconception, able to be truly present. What results from this acceptance of freedom is passion, a true embrace of life. It is the realization that “what counts is not the best living but the most living” - a sense of invigoration and an affirmation of life even in its absurdity (61). This yes-saying attitude is a rearticulation of the active process that is necessary in our convalescence, though we might wonder how exactly we are to implement them?

At the beginning of his essay, Camus tells us he cannot give us a law of the absurd, but can only explain it through examples of absurdity in our lives. So too do we find that absurd living can only be described through case studies. Similarly, in psychoanalysis there is not an exact prescription that can be given; rather, the prescription is psychoanalysis itself. Camus fails to provide us with a real cure, but he does sketch out these ideas to help us understand what one might look like. There is no exact formula for our rehabilitation, though we do know the necessary terms to the equation. At this juncture, when the clear translation of theory into action

becomes muddied, the doctor's coat must come off as the psychoanalyst moves towards an embrace of more creative measures.

Three Case Studies of Absurd Living

Theory can help us in many ways. It leads us to a diagnosis and understanding of our condition, and can even provide us with a prescription for dealing with its chronic symptoms. What theory cannot do, however, is put that prescription into action. We seek to bridge the gap between theory and practice, but doing so proves to be a difficult task. The process of translating Camus's theoretical ideas into active practice requires a much less analytical approach. Just as Freud himself often turns to the world of art to provide examples of psychoanalytic principles that prove to be more enlightening than any theory he himself offers, so too does Camus turn to three fictional figures to illuminate his prescription for a life without appeal: Don Juan, the actor, and the conqueror. Given that psychoanalysis is, at its core, a kind of reading, it feels quite appropriate that figures from the world of literature are best suited to help us apply these labels to the real world.

Camus's existentialism functions as a similar kind of reading, using fictional characters as illustrations of different modes of engagement with the absurd. Such figures all exemplify, in some aspect, the absurd man, who is able to keep a constant tension alive between himself and the universe. The absurd man is the affirmer of life - the one who lives the most. It should be clarified, however, that Camus does not aim to provide us with clear-cut models for how to live like that of the absurd man. Instead, the words he uses are "illustrations" and "images" of the absurd lifestyle (68). It is critical to note that Camus shies away from the notion of the absurd

man as being fully definable. If we were able to lay out a clear and easy formula or criteria on how to reach this way of living, the contradiction would negate itself and fall apart. There is no clear-cut definition or exact model to follow to live as the absurd man. Every absurd man lives differently, and this should be understood before delving into a discussion of exemplary absurd men. The sole criteria for these chosen men is that they "aim only to expend themselves" - i.e., aim to live the most (69). Such is the main criteria of absurd living for Camus. Thus, if we are to begin living positively, we must first cultivate our insatiable appetite for life.

Camus begins his list of absurd illustrations with the Don Juan figure, an infamous seducer of woman who loves as much as he can. For Camus, "the more one loves, the stronger the absurd grows", and Don Juan moves from woman to woman, not out of a lack of love, but "because he loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self" (69). Many see Don Juan as a melancholic figure, assuming that he is on a quest for a total love that eludes him, continuously repeating his actions in the hopes of finding something new, but Camus finds him to be the opposite. The seducer loves the most and subsequently lives the most. True melancholics, according to Camus, "have two reasons for being so: they don't know or they hope" (70). Don Juan knows that life has no meaning, and he does not hope to assign a meaning to it. Rather, he is a great and wise madman in that he literally expends himself as much as he can through his sexual conquests.

Some may criticize Don Juan for his seduction tactics, arguing that he repeats himself again and again, woman after woman, though this only proves his dedication to the absurd lifestyle. One may say that Don Juan perpetuates this lifestyle out of pure habit - something of which Camus is quite critical - and though such lifestyle may seem to have habit ingrained

within it, Don Juan rejects this phenomenon entirely. Camus likens Don Juan to Sisyphus, writing that “Seducing is his condition in life”, and rather than attributing this condition to habit, Don Juan rejects habit entirely in favor of active pleasure (72). The important thing for the absurd man is that he seeks quantity in his pleasure, “and what Don Juan realizes in his action is an ethic of quantity” - he chooses each and every woman, each and every seduction(72). Some may say that he is condemned to his repetition, but Don Juan is not a prisoner to habit or urge. We can imagine him free just as we can Sisyphus. Many condemn Don Juan, but for Camus he is the ultimate example of the absurd man. He cannot suffer for his actions, for he is well aware of himself and all that he is. He lives outside the typical code of morality, and in doing so he can never be condemned for his fate. He truly is free.

The second illustration that Camus provides for us of a life lived with the absurd is the actor, who embodies a variety of lives and embraces the transient nature of his being. Camus writes that “the actor’s realm is that of the fleeting. Of all kinds of fame, it is known that this is the most ephemeral” (77). The notion of life’s own ephemerality and subsequent meaninglessness is underscored here, though the actor draws his very power from this. An actor does not hold on to hope, for it is not in the nature of his craft: “an actor succeeds or does not succeed” (78). Unlike, say, the writer, who cannot help but hold onto the hope that his works might outlast him, the actor’s craft requires success in the present, because when he himself is gone, so too will his art be. The actor embraces mortality, and, more than any other artist, must live in the present. The actor only has a few hours to embody someone else entirely, and “in that short space of time he makes them come to life and die on fifty square yards of boards” (78). In this instance he has truly expended himself to his greatest ability. Like Don Juan who

experiences his love in great quantity, the actor experiences a quantity of different lives that he himself gives life to. “Never has the absurd been so well illustrated or at such length”, writes Camus. The actor says yes to life a thousand times over, constantly birthing new life into being and living them out in their fullest form.

The absurd man is entirely aware that his life is meaningless, though his desire for meaning cannot be undone, and so he understands that he, himself, must not be taken too seriously. The notion of role-playing finds itself quite central in Camus’ theory of the absurd man, and so it is no wonder that the actor so strikingly exemplifies this lifestyle. He must always maintain this understanding and caution himself from getting too absorbed into any one way of being. The actor is constantly bringing new roles to life, but he retains the knowledge that they are ultimately fictional. Nothing that each of these characters experience will have any significance outside of the performance, and yet the actor continues on regardless, playing out the destiny of his characters, and in doing so, the destiny of his own self. The actor lives so many lives that his real life is ultimately a performance. This is his advantage - he has within him the consciousness that our lives are ours to constantly play out and act in as we see fit. The actor knows that we can live a whole new life tomorrow than what we lived today. He is free of one particular self image, better able to navigate his own existence through the breakdown of role play. The actor is liberated.

Finally, Camus provides the conqueror as the third image of the absurd life, primarily because the conqueror most strongly exemplifies a life of active being, rather than passive existence - a necessary condition of the absurd man. Camus distinguishes between two kinds of individuals: those who live in the present moment, and those who uphold “eternal values”

through contemplation. The conqueror is a man of the present world, actively engaged in the world he inhabits and all of its conflicts, though Camus warns us of blindly assuming that "because [the conqueror] loves action [he has] had to forget how to think" (84). Being a man of the present, the conqueror seeks to change the world in which he lives, but knows he cannot truly do so. He is constantly engaged in the struggle between the desire for the eternal and his understanding that such a phenomenon is entirely impossible. This is his futile struggle: he seeks victory "but there is but one victory, and it is eternal. That is the one [he] shall never have. That is where [he] stumble[s] and cling[s]" (87). And it is in this that the conqueror maintains his absurd contradiction - that constant striving for that which will always be unattainable even in knowing it is such.

The desire for the eternal pulls constantly against the understanding of his own ephemerality, but this point of tension is exactly where the absurd blossoms within him. "Conquerors sometimes talk of vanquishing and overcoming. But it is always 'overcoming oneself' that they mean" (88). What makes the conqueror a perfect image of the absurd man is not that he overcomes his external opponents, but that he overcomes his own self by realizing his potential as an individual. In other words, "The conquerors are merely those who are conscious of their strength to be sure of living constantly on the heights and fully aware of that grandeur" - they exist in that moment of tension, upon the cliff and before the leap (88). All the while they are fully aware of themselves, the world, and their incompatible desire for eternity. The conquerors are the most lucid among us. Naturally, those who uphold those "eternal values" will always oppose the conquerors for prioritizing present and earthly concerns over eternal ones, though Camus upholds this as an obvious strength: "We call the lucid ones virile and we do not

want a strength that is apart from lucidity" (90). I.e., those who know their condition and still press on in search for that which they desire are the strongest among us in their unceasing engagement with the absurd. They live the most, even in the face of total hopelessness.

Camus concludes his discussion of these three illustrations with a reiteration of the notion that absurdity cannot be defined by these individuals. These individuals, for Camus, "are mere sketches [that] represent a style of life" (90). They are fictitious, and given this fact, we must ask what use they are to us in our own therapeutic journey? What makes these illustrations so significant at this juncture is the way in which they function, not so much as didactic teaching aids, but as models of self knowledge and expenditure. All of these illustrative characters "play the absurd. But equally well, if he wishes, the chaste man, the civil servant, or the president of the republic. It is enough to know and to mask nothing" (90). They help us to conclude that anybody can live absurdly, so long as they are continuously aware of their own desire for meaning and and the meaninglessness and futility of their place in the world, yet continue to "think clearly and cease to hope" (92). All of these illustrations are to be taken with a grain of salt given their fictitiousness, though perhaps what is most important about them, and relevant to ourselves, is the way in which they are always able to be respected at the hands of their creator. Given that we are our own creators, perhaps there exists the possibility of us taking hold of our own narrative and writing it as we so desire. Though, if we have any hope of reaching such a goal for ourselves, we should first dissect the very drive to creation.

Creation

There is no one more absurd than the individual who, knowing that his actions are futile and this world meaningless, sets out to create an entire world that mirrors our own. This is the working of the absurd creator, the individual who, Camus argues, lives the epitome of the absurd life. The creator does not seek to extract some hidden meaning out of the world through his art, but rather works to describe and examine it in all its insignificance. In doing so, the creator "lives doubly" by building a world just as meaningless as the one in which he finds himself. He is the ultimate affirmer of the absurd in that, he not only lives in a constant state of revolt, but he goes a step further by expanding and cultivating the absurd. Camus specifically focuses on the fiction writer, arguing that through the act of writing, he is able to engage with absurdity head on. In this way, Camus's discussion of creation mirrors the psychoanalytic conception of art. For the existentialist, like the psychoanalyst, art provides a space in which the individual can play with their inner desires, struggles, and tensions. For Camus, creation is the ultimate form of coping and learning to healthily engage with this absurd world.

Camus begins by exploring the concept of mimesis within absurdity. He writes that "all existence for a man turned away from the eternal is but a vast mime under the mask of the absurd" (94). In other words, imitation is a central component of the absurd lifestyle. The absurd man, conscious of his own insignificance, will work to play out his life as a mimetic role, always aware that he is merely acting. The absurd life necessitates mimesis, and for Camus, creation is the ultimate mimetic form in that it works to copy this world. What is so central about the process of creation however, is that it "is not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing" (94). The true artist knows that explanation is useless in this world.

To attempt to find some kind of hidden meaning through creation is not only futile, but would be philosophical suicide. The emphasis on description is key, because while explanation is impossible, “sensation remains and, with it, the constant attractions of a universe inexhaustible in quantity” (95). That is to say, the artist uses observation and description as a tool to engage with the absurd world, rather than transcend it. Creation becomes the *activity* of absurdity - something to hold onto as we attempt to engage with it, not a cure for it.

Art is a byproduct of life’s absurdity, born of the same anguish that has driven philosophers to formulate their own writings and theories of the world. The two disciplines “interlock and the same anxiety merges them” (97). Yet, as our earlier case studies have shown us, many of these philosophers have betrayed the absurd, turning away from it in cowardice. Naturally we must wonder if the same can be said of the creators of the world. It is simple to call ourselves artists, but the act of *true* creation is far from simple. This prompts Camus to ask whether or not a truly absurd work of art is possible? Are creators, like many philosophers, cursed to a betrayal of the absurd? Art and philosophy are like siblings, both spurred from life’s absurdity. For Camus, while they may both be used as tools to deny the absurd, they too can be affirmers of it given that they are aware of their limitations and strengths.

Absurd art is absurd, first and foremost, because it does not attempt to speak to anything greater than the reality in which it is based, or to signify something outside of its perspective. It will never yield to the temptation of describing a deeper meaning than the world in front of it. In the truest form of absurdity, “The work of art is born of the intelligence’s refusal to reason the concrete. It marks the triumph of the carnal. It is lucid thought that provokes it, but in that very act that thought repudiates itself” (97). Much like the absurd man who keeps the tension alive

between his own thoughts and the meaningless world, the absurd creator understands his inability to transcend this meaninglessness. “The absurd work requires an artist conscious of these limitations and an art in which the concrete signifies nothing more than itself. It cannot be the end, the meaning, and the consolation of a life. Creating or not creating changes nothing. The absurd creator does not prize his work” (97-98). For Camus, art is not about an outcome or consequence outside of itself. It is not about referencing or recreating some known reality - though this is certainly a part of it. It is not about trying to create or change some predicted future. Rather, what makes art special is that it is an output of the tension itself. It is about the act.

The ephemerality of the artistic process holds quite similar to the psychoanalyst’s own therapeutic approach. Art allows the mind to do its work and play out everything that lies beneath, much like how a dream functions for the psychoanalyst.[10] The act of creation is the output of the drive, just as other behaviors allow drives to play out. It is an expression of the absurd tension, not towards the aim of resolving it, but towards discovering it and letting it be. Letting things be - such is the sentiment that lies at the very heart of both Camus’s and the psychoanalyst’s approach to rehabilitation. It is not a cure we seek, for a cure does not exist. What the artist represents for Freud is the ability to hold onto the aspect of childhood that doesn’t censor free expression of unconscious desire. Art is the outward manifestation of the child’s ability to play with desires. The writer alone holds onto them and puts our essence of being onto paper. For both, the artist is capable of expressing the fundamental nature of the world through his creation.

[10] Dreams and art both tap into and express that which is hidden in the unconscious.

Rescripting Sisyphus

It is only after his at length discussion of absurdity, weaving his way through diagnoses and prescriptions, case studies, and the act of creation, that Camus finally turns to the subject for which his book is named: Sisyphus. Camus frames the entirety of the text through the figure of Sisyphus and concludes with a brief retelling of the original myth. Through this, we come to understand that the reframing of myth serves as the ultimate response to our sufferings. Rescripting becomes a way to deal with the world in a way that is neither nostalgic or hopeful, but actually empowering, as is echoed in Camus's own retelling of the myth of Sisyphus.

Sisyphus, condemned by the Gods to continuously roll a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down upon reaching the top, seems to be cursed to a tragic fate, though, for Camus, he stands as the true absurd hero. We can imagine very few things that could be worse than such an existence of endless toiling upwards for no clear reason whatsoever. Though it is in that moment at the top of the mountain, in which the rock rolls down after all of his labor, that Camus defines Sisyphus as the absurd hero. In this moment "Sisyphus knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn" (121). The constant pushing against that which torments us eternally is the closest we can come to overcoming such torment. Our ability to will how we react in the face of this torture is born directly out of this scorn.

In drawing our attention to the boulder's descent, Camus is rescripting Sisyphus himself, bringing to light the fact that the traditional reading of Sisyphus focuses only on his ascent up the hill, leaving out a crucial piece of the story. The moment of descent is critical for Camus,

because it is in this instance that Sisyphus must pause and reflect on his fate before picking up the boulder and beginning his toil upwards again. It is this pause that makes Sisyphus so absurd, because it is in this instance that he becomes consciously aware of his struggle. Much like the absurdity of everyday life - "Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm" - makes us ask *why* - Sisyphus's awareness makes him ask why, and in this awareness he takes his fate on as his own (13). The absurd man, for Camus, must live with complete awareness of his absurd position in this world, and it is in his descent that Sisyphus is consciously aware of his struggle. He understands that his torture will continue for eternity, but through his awareness of it, he discovers a sense of agency. The absurd man can bring himself above his fate precisely through his understanding of it.

Camus suggests the moment that Sisyphus becomes conscious of his fate, so too does it become tragic. This awareness, however, may also allow us to turn the narrative of tragedy on its head. Camus references Oedipus, stating that he, too, becomes a tragic figure only when he becomes *conscious* of the fate that has been guiding him throughout his entire journey. It is in this moment of realization, though, that he also finds his victory. Of Oedipus, Camus writes "'at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that the only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: 'despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well'" (122). Like Oedipus, Sisyphus, after contemplating and coming to understand his own condition, concludes that all is well. Camus's rescripting of both of these narratives suggests that what we may initially perceive as tragedy is actually quite the opposite. In fact, the fate of Sisyphus, Oedipus,

and ourselves represent our greatest victory in this absurd life. Camus is working to undermine the aristotelian ideal that we feel pity when watching tragedy, and suggests that what is really so tragic about Sisyphus's condition for us is not his labor, but that fact that we are watching ourselves.[11] What is so tragic about Oedipus is that we see ourselves in him, just as we see ourselves in Sisyphus's toil. By this logic, we can begin to read Sisyphus as our own, and in doing so we may be able to learn to rescript the narratives of our own lives.

When we recognize and understand our "tragic" condition, so too do we recognize our limitations and cease to hope for something more. Understanding ourselves helps to orient us in a direction that is both promising and empowering. In this sense, happiness and the absurd are intertwined; "two suns of the same earth. They are inseparable" for true happiness requires an understanding of life's absurdity (122). That is to say, in understanding the absurdity of our lives, we can begin to take it on as our own and rescript it from tragic to comic. But it is crucial to note that we can *only* begin to rescript when we have first come to understand ourselves. Sisyphus knows himself to be the master of his days, for even though his fate has been laid out for him by a force beyond his control, his contemplation of it places him above it and allows him to own it as his own. In presenting Sisyphus in this way - as a man who knows his fate and in doing so makes it his own - Sisyphus assumes responsibility for his fate. He comes face to face with reality and makes it his own, ceasing to hope for something more and instead choosing simply to live in what is. Happiness is only achievable when we accept our fate as the one thing we truly have in this world. Any attempt to avoid or negate this fate is simultaneously an avoidance of the program of happiness.

[11] Freud underscores this very point in his *Interpretation of Dreams*.

Camus leaves Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain with the conclusion that “all is well”. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” he writes, employing us, too, to rescript the narrative of both Sisyphus and ourselves (123). Such a rescripting is entirely necessary, because to imagine Sisyphus as anything other would imply that sickness is the preferred path. If his awareness of his condition does not make him happy, then it would follow that the only thing that could make us happy is illusion in the form of hope or nostalgia for something false - an avoidance of awareness altogether. It would follow that happiness in itself is an illusion. Camus’s word choice is critical in this last sentence. “We *must* imagine Sisyphus happy” because it is the only way by which we can live without relying on hope, faith, or any other kind of illusion to keep us going. It is imperative that we take on our own readings and the role of our own interpretations and imaginings, just as Sisyphus takes on his own fate.

Camus presents to us an understanding of our own existential sufferings that is undeniably in conversation with the therapeutic approach of psychoanalysis. The entire foundation upon which our suffering rests is built out of an existential incompatibility with the nature of the world. We desire the one thing we cannot have: meaning. We may not even realize it, though, until one day the stage sets inevitably collapse and the floor is ripped from beneath us. How are we to go on in the face of such chaos? How do we begin to make sense of this, let alone live with it? What Camus sets up is a way to understand our condition and navigate it comfortably in the same manner as the psychoanalyst. He works alongside us to create a map so that we may better traverse the terrain of our own psyches and ways of engagement with the world.

In the same way that the psychoanalyst serves the role of a guide for the individual attempting to cope with their own sufferings, Camus passes the baton to us as well. After having gone through the twists and turns of this text, we have learned how to read and interpret both myth and ourselves in a new light. As we conclude, Camus seems to be calling us back to the very beginning of the text, so that we might begin the project of reshaping our own stories. We have come to see that happiness is far more attainable than we might have ever imagined, though it begins with a small step and is an active process that requires work to be maintained.

The Will to Comfort - Concluding Remarks

"The last pages of a book are already contained within its first pages" Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (11).

At this point we have explored two seemingly opposing philosopher's views on the state of our suffering. It has, too, been brought to light that they are much more similar than we might have imagined, particularly when viewed within the framework of the other. We have come to understand that our suffering is born of an existential incompatibility with the world. We crave that which eludes us - a sense of unity and clarity as a remedy for the isolation and estrangement that we experience. Never will we be able to truly soothe our aching, though when we come to a deeper understanding of it, we can learn to harness a sense of agency and take on our fate as our own. This is the therapeutic approach, and the one that Freud and Camus logically lead us to, but where does this leave us now? I cannot shake the feeling that we are not much farther from where we began.

How many times have I looked to these two texts separately in the hope of discovering some new kind of answer? That I cannot tell you. Perhaps if I could I would not need to be writing this, for each time I am left in the same place that I began. Freud will continue to tell me that civilization is responsible for my dissatisfaction, just as Camus will say that it is my fate to suffer in the face of the chaos of the world. When I grow dissatisfied with these answers, I can read into them more subtly, perhaps even through the lens of the other, and tune into that which may not be so explicit. Such is the conception of this very project, born of the hope that in reading these two texts together they might be able to point me in some kind of direction that they were not able to before. And when I put them together they tell me a story of fate, defined

by an unceasing sense of existential loss. They tell me that I am predisposed to suffering, but that I can take hold of my narrative and live without expectation. They tell me that, yes, I can feel better. And yet, as I conclude this writing and begin to lift my head up from the keyboard that I have been staring down at for so many months, why is it that I do not feel satisfied?

I wonder what it is I have been searching for all this time? All these hours frantically scouring the spaces between the lines of these books and the keys of my laptop. Some kind of answer? Or is it more than that? Have I been building a wall around myself? Fastening a makeshift womb of knowledge and theory to shield myself from the very woes of the world that I write about? Perhaps I do not *want* to look up from this keyboard. It is one thing to theorize, but it is another to put these thoughts into action. Have I not been cowering behind these thoughts in a desperate bid to avoid suffering myself? Do not all philosophers bury themselves beneath a blanket of postulations to accomplish this very same goal? The very thing that I warn you of, my reader, I have fallen into the trap of myself. And so I invite you to turn and consider the implications of that which this entire endeavor has sprung from - a search for comfort.

What would it mean to retreat back into the womb? To spread ourselves out and dissipate back into that oceanic state? To be freed from the need for answers and order and finally be satisfied? It would mean, by definition, to cease living. Our lives are, for better or for worse, defined by our suffering. Life only just begins when we are ripped from eternity and start to fracture. Without suffering there is no life, and vice versa. Freud and Camus make this abundantly clear, for it is their most concrete intersection of thought. Perhaps this is why we might feel so dissatisfied with their conclusions. We do not want to hear that there is no escape, no permanent easing of our pains. But then, any sort of “satisfying” conclusion to this project

would be cause for great worry, missing the point altogether. To live is to suffer, that much we know, and despite our dissatisfaction, there is also a release that comes upon seeing and knowing our suffering, for when we realize that there is nothing more the pressure ceases, and we can begin to live in this present state joyously, for that is all that we can do.

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