EXILE AND [RE-]UNION:
A HERMENEUTIC OF EXISTENTIAL EXILE

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ABSTRACT

Human existence is inherently limited by bounds which restrict experience, knowledge, and even Being itself; the human individual is fundamentally a finite being. Such finitude is encountered as both a limit and a question, standing as the manifestation and representation of all limits imposed upon human existence, yet compelling one to ask (and ultimately to decide) what the meaning of such finitude, of existence itself, might be. The desire to understand and know is ultimately a religious desire, constituted as the attempt to discern meaning in mystery. It is precisely the irreducibility of human finitude which makes possible, and perhaps necessitates, all acts of faith; within a position of finitude one must choose in faith toward meaning.

Defined as the existential commitment that challenges the finitude of individual human existence toward the determination and realization of meaning, faith arises in the constitution of and commitment to a ‘story’ and is cultivated in the subsequent determination of whether (and how) existence can be meaningful within the terms of that story. In the movement of faith a relation is posited which preserves the essential quality of both subjective self and objective world, while recasting each in a meaningful way with respect to the other and in the light of the relation which reveals and defines each. ‘Existential exile’ is ultimately the failure to recognize the possibility of relation between self and world, including others, and faith, which emerges in the devotion to the possibility of relation, simultaneously paves the way toward a realization of meaning in relation and the finite transcendence of existential exile.
The purpose of this study is to establish ‘existential exile’ as a manifestation of the finitude that defines the human condition, to demonstrate a possible manner in which the individual human condition can be recast and recognized as part of an irreducible relation whereby existential exile is transcended, and to suggest the role that faith plays in the formulation and ultimate realization of the possibility of accomplishing the relation (related-ness) that is necessary both for the transcendence of existential exile and the attainment of existential meaning. Ultimately, while questioning specific historical attempts to define, situate, and substantiate faith, this project will construct a more tenable position in faith from which the greater possibility for meaning in human existence can be saved and the condition of existential exile transcended. Further, the present study will contend that Albert Camus’ literary oeuvre may be taken as a comprehensive religious myth intended to account for the condition of existential exile. Through the construction of stories and his concentrated attempts to bring myths to life as a way of engaging his own existential exile, Camus implicitly posits the ‘act of literature’—story telling and myth making—as a legitimate manner of taking account of, and responsibility for, the meaning of the ontological situation. The literature that Camus produced to both depict and stand as such an engagement likewise both depicts and stands as the act of faith through which the ontological situation is fully resolved. Ultimately, it will be suggested that with his writings Albert Camus generated an imaginary re-enactment and recasting of the human condition, an unceremonious liturgy of exile and [re-]union, which ultimately may inspire a more general and conclusive response to the challenge of existential exile toward the realization of ‘home.’
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present study stands as the culmination of my efforts in the Doctor of Liberal Studies (DLS) program at Georgetown University as well as the articulation of ideas and concerns that led me to, and carried me through, my time at Georgetown. Over the period of time that the ideas contained herein developed and finally gained some semblance of a final expression, I have benefited significantly from many individuals at Georgetown.

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Finally, there is Ruth Einstein, without whom none of this work could have been done, without whom I would have neither the energy nor the desire to undertake, let alone complete, the present task and all that has led up to it. Ruth is in every possible sense my inspiration: for her unfailing interest, support, and encouragement; for her dedication that sometimes rivaled my own; and, most importantly, for helping me to see what home really means.
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INTRODUCTION

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
—T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

What remains for the individual in the world where there is no home? This question encapsulates a fundamental challenge of the ontological situation, as that challenge is constituted in the experience of exile and the longing for home. While the desire for Truth or meaning to one’s existence may arise more explicitly as a definitive directing force of Being, the question of such meaning cannot be wholly resolved while the challenge of exile remains inadequately addressed; before questions of the meaning of human existence may be posed and answers subsequently attempted, the question of one’s place in, and relation to, the world must first be faced.

In its most common, and perhaps most literal, manifestations, exile is experienced as the forced expulsion from one’s home into a new place where one is a stranger, longing to find some ground upon which one can relate to the new abode if not return to the home that has been lost. Yet the home that is lost is much more than merely a place of habitation; existentially, ‘home’ also entails not just the connection between oneself and one’s place but also one’s connection with the attendant features of life in a particular place at a particular time. Edward Said, in characterizing exile as “fundamentally a discontinuous state of being,” notes that “exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past.”¹ This disconnection is, however, only

the beginning; the exile experience, which arises most acutely in this sudden disconnection, is equally constituted in the hope for a possible future reconnection with one’s home. The exile, therefore, is not merely one who has lost one’s home but also one who maintains a devoted hope for its restoration.

To be compelled to leave one’s home is perhaps the most traumatic and devastating experience one can undergo while still living. Yet despite the trauma, this particular kind of experience does not hold exclusive right to the name ‘exile’; the definitions and descriptions of the literal exile experience may equally apply to experiences which may not be so narrowly defined as the forced expulsion from one’s home. Instead, exile may be experienced as an alienation from a Divine Order, from an inherent connection with others or with the world, or from the possibility of knowledge, understanding, and meaning. The exile experience is not limited to the immediate experience of physical movement but rather is manifest at every level of human existence, thus ‘existential exile’ is proposed here as a name for the exile experience which is an ever-present component of human reality.

The present study, composed in the spirit of philosophical theology, stands as an attempt to situate, to elucidate, and ultimately to respond to the challenge of existential exile and the question of the possibility of home in exile. The first aim is addressed in Part I, in which the ontological situation, constituted in finitude and experienced in exile, is examined. Chapter One, which begins by addressing the most pressing limits placed upon human existence (the inaccessibility of Truth, discussed here as mystery, and the fact of human mortality), presents an historical trajectory of the evolution of the religious ‘quest’ for Truth and meaning toward the ultimate goal of challenging the human position in finitude. This historical account concludes by conceding that finitude, as the fundamental constitutive component of human existence, cannot ultimately be overcome, while suggesting the possibility of finite transcendence,
whereby within finitude meaning, and meaningful relation, may be achieved and the individual’s place in the world realized. Toward this end, a new conception of religious faith is offered as the commitment which articulates and enables the realization of meaningful relation. Chapter Two concludes the account of the ontological situation by presenting a parallel historical account of the exile experience, both literal and metaphorical, toward a definition of existential exile as a manifestation of the finitude of human existence. By fully exploring the condition of exile and subsequently establishing existential exile as a fundamental human experience, the human need for ‘home’ in the world, and thus the significance of the model of religious faith discussed in the preceding chapter, is further legitimized.

Part II of this study is constituted as a deeper and more complete elucidation of the immediate challenges of existential exile and the desire for home, as those challenges are described and engaged in the philosophical and literary writings of Albert Camus, whose work is presented here as an intentional attempt to respond to exile precisely as the definitive challenge of human existence. For the purposes of the present investigation, the whole of Camus’ work is broken down and subsequently examined as two discrete divisions; the first, in which Camus explores the Absurd as a constitutive component of human existence, is discussed in Chapter Three, whereas the second, in which Camus offers his conception of revolt as the appropriate response to the Absurd, is examined in Chapter Four. Over the course of the discussion in Part II, it is contended that Camus’ conception of the Absurd is derivative from the more fundamental condition of existential exile, while also suggesting that the manner in which Camus both illustrates and personally engages in a particular manner of responding in revolt is revelatory of the kind of religious commitment necessary to effect a finite transcendence of existential exile.

Finally, in Part III, a closing assessment of Camus’ work as a comprehensive engagement
with the condition of existential exile is offered, fully revealing the human capacity for relation as a possible avenue toward finite transcendence. Further, the role of faith as religious commitment to a comprehensive story of existence toward the realization of relation and meaning is revisited, and the whole of Camus’ oeuvre is re-examined as a comprehensive religious myth of the ontological situation. Ultimately, inspired by both the model that Camus constructed in his ‘myth of exile’ as well as his own personal commitment to the need for and subsequent construction of that myth, a concluding response to the challenge of existential exile is articulated, both as such a response is to be found in Camus’ comprehensive myth as well as in more general terms, toward the final determination of whether, and how, existential exile may be transcended and a [re-]union realized. Such a [re-]union, defined herein as ‘home,’ is constituted in the harmony, however transitory, that arises in the realization of meaningful relation, not as an inherent and inevitable human truth but rather as a human potentiality. ‘Home’ is not proposed here as an Absolute ontological truth of human existence, in that there is no true, original, and promised Home from which one began and to which one can return. However, the human capacity to realize meaningful relation is absolute and ontological, thus home is always present as a human reality in its potentiality to be realized. Although the achievement of home is never guaranteed, and though home when achieved is not permanent, the possibility of meaningful relation, of harmony, and thus of home is always present as a human reality.

Before proceeding to the present study in earnest, a few brief words may be in order to account for the choice to discuss Camus’ works as an appropriate and exemplary illustration of the engagement with existential exile. In order to fully resolve the challenge of exile, it is essential to reveal the manner in which the condition may be transcended. In this context, the literary and philosophical output of Albert Camus, considered as a unified whole, provides an
extraordinarily appropriate example of not just an understanding of but also a complete and lucid engagement with and response to existential exile as a fundamental component of the ontological situation. Underlying the totality of Camus’ works is the implicit directive of revolt against the fundamental absurdity and exile which characterize human existence, an appeal to a living-in-spite-of which legitimizes human existence in the face of its essential absurdity and lack of inherent meaning. For Camus, the absurd and exile are conditions of existence that are shared by all of humanity. Yet through a lucid acceptance of those conditions, one becomes free to create meaning and value for oneself and humanity. Moreover, Camus’ conception of his role as an artist further posits his commitment to *artistic* creation as a religious commitment to revealing the possibilities for meaning and redemption within the human condemnation to existential exile. In his 1957 speech accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature, Camus noted the following:

> For more than twenty years of absolutely insane history, lost hopelessly like all those of my age in the convulsions of the epoch, I derived comfort from the vague impression that writing was an honor today because the act itself obligated a man, obligated him to more than just writing. It obligated me in particular, such as I was, with whatever strength I possessed, to bear—along with all the others living in the same history—the tribulation and hope we shared. … [We] had to fashion for [ourselves] an art of living in times of catastrophe in order to be reborn before fighting openly against the death-instinct at work in our history.²

Through the construction of his art, Camus does not merely offer an explanation of any particular aspect or condition of human existence and an illustration of a particular response; in addition to these, through such construction he likewise paves the way for a more realized engagement with existence in the world toward a lived response. Camus’ literary and philosophical oeuvre thus stands, as is argued here, not merely as an account of the condition of

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exile and its possible transcendence, but also as an act and a commitment which itself realizes a degree of finite transcendence toward the realization of home.

Many biographers and critics have noted the legitimacy of finding in Camus’ writing, in particular his fiction, elements and aspects taken from Camus’ own personal experience, suggesting perhaps that his art was in many ways a working out through creativity and language the full depth, meaning, and significance of particular aspects of human existence, including exile, death, and the prospects for human relation. This is one of Patrick McCarthy’s main points in his book *Camus* (New York: Random House, 1982), in which he notes that no matter how objective Camus attempted to be in his books, “they all lead back to him” (9). Likewise, Carol Petersen’s *Albert Camus* (Translated by Alexander Gode; New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1969), ostensibly a comprehensive study of Camus the man as well as his work, has at its heart the recognition that “the man Camus is present in every sentence that he wrote” (vi). In a similar fashion, Herbert Lottman’s *Albert Camus: A Biography* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 1997) likewise posits Camus’ ‘original’ exile experience as well as the persistent and deep alienation, with respect to the place and the people of both the Algerian home of his birth and later his home in France, which arose throughout his career as significantly constitutive of the man and his work.

In *The Burden of Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), in the chapter entitled “The Reluctant Moralist,” Tony Judt likewise focuses primarily on the facts of Camus’ life in order to elucidate the motivations for both his attitudes and art. With a strong focus on Camus’ personal experience of exile, Judt paves the way for a primary contention of the present work: from Judt’s claim that Camus was fundamentally shaped by profound and repeated experiences of exile, from the home of his family, from Algeria, from the intellectual community in Paris, and even from himself, emerges the ground upon which it may be
concluded that the whole of Camus’ work may legitimately be regarded as an attempt to come to terms, for himself and for humanity in general, with exile as a perpetual and essential experience of human existence.

In his essay “Fall and Exile: 1956–1958,” published in *Albert Camus, 1980* (Raymond Gay-Crosier, Ed.; Gainesville, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1980), Carl Viggiani posits exile not just as a concrete and influential personal force in Camus’ life but also as a major theme in Camus’ fiction. However, whereas most commentators and critics agree that the theme of exile is apparent in Camus’ later writing, Viggiani contends that exile is at the center of not just the later ‘stage’ of works that comprised *The Fall* and *Exile and the Kingdom* but also of the whole of his work as a totality. Further, Viggiani notes that this is a product of Camus’ own profound and continued personal experience of exile, from his original exile from homeland and family to the intense alienation, over the final decade of his life, from others and from a sense of ‘home.’

In *Albert Camus’ Critique of Modernity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011), Ronald Srigley continues this interpretation, though he portrays Camus as an exile not merely from the home of his birth or from others, but also as an exile born of the confrontation with the spirit of modernity, which Srigley describes as the insistence on pressing, and ultimately on surpassing, all limits imposed upon human existence. According to this view, by turning its back on the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, modernity had alienated itself further from the reality of human existence, thus constituting itself as a place of exile. Further, while Srigley argues against the general presumption that much of Camus’ fiction is autobiographical, at least to the extent that it may be recognized as a record of Camus’ own confrontation with particular aspects of human existence (this is a contention which is somewhat contrary to what will be argued in the present study), he suggests that rather than a vague personal record Camus’ work as a totality should be seen as an objective “organized myth,” an interpretation
which is very much in accord with the contentions of the present study.

Beyond the acknowledgment of Camus’ personal experience as an exile and the recognition of similar experiences of exile in his works, the essential connection between exile and Camus’ conception of the absurd, crucial to the present argument, has been suggested elsewhere. In The Problematic Rebel: An Image of Modern Man (New York: Random House, 1963), Maurice Friedman, while not explicitly citing the experience of exile as the root and origin of the awareness of the absurd, does suggest as others have that the parallel realizations of the absurd and alienation are twin offspring of the confrontation with the death of God, understood as the loss of a definitive archetypal account of what human existence means and toward what it is directed. In a similar fashion, both Leo Pollman and Robert Soloman, in Sartre and Camus: Literature of Existence (Translated by Helen and Gregor Sebba; New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970) and Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), respectively, recognize if not a causal relationship from exile to the absurd at least a continuity which unites exile and the absurd as parallel experiences. Other analyses of note which devote significant effort to presenting exile and alienation at the center of Camus’ personal experience as well as essential symptoms of both the realization of the absurd and the experience of human existence in general include John Cruickshank’s Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), Kurt Weinberg’s “The Theme of Exile” (Yale French Studies 0, No. 25, Albert Camus [1960]: 33–40), Jeffrey Gordon’s “The Triumph of Sisyphus” (Philosophy and Literature 32 [2008]: 183–190), and Phillip H. Rhein’s Albert Camus (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989).

While Camus’ experience of, response to, and treatment of exile is the major explicit focus of the present study, perhaps a major implicit focus is the classification of Camus’ work as, at its heart, a religious enterprise. The connection between Camus’ thought and work and Western
religious thought, Christianity in particular, is not new. Jean Ominus presents one of the most compelling and comprehensive accounts of the question of the ‘religious’ nature of Camus’ work in his book *Albert Camus and Christianity* (Translated by Emmett Parker; Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1970). Despite the fact that Camus was a self-acknowledged atheist, Ominus contends (along with many other Christian critics) that Camus’ work is not necessarily at odds with Christianity or religion in general, in particular because of what he presents as Camus’ emphasis on humanity’s fundamental limitations and the human need for a “Divine intercessor.” Ominus also notes Camus’ acknowledgement of the common ideological ground between himself and Catholics as well as his occasional appeals to the latter to recognize their shared struggle and desires (see, for example, Camus’ statement to the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Maubourg in 1948, published as “The Unbeliever and Christians” in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, translated by Justin O’Brien; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961). Likewise, Joseph McBride, in *Albert Camus: Philosopher and Littérateur* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), offers an even stronger account of this correlation, arguing that, largely influenced by St. Augustine, Camus’ engagement with the absurdity of existence is motivated in large part by his implicit contention that the human desire for God is natural and that humanity is meant to attain something like the Christian heaven.

William R. Mueller, in an essay titled “The Theme of the Fall,” from his book *The Prophetic Voice in Modern Fiction* (New York: Association Press, 1959), thoroughly discusses the parallels between Clamence’s fall from his Edenic way of living and the fall of humanity as depicted in both the book of Genesis and the later Pauline account given in the Bible. While acknowledging that Clamence’s attitudes and actions, particularly his use of overtly Christian imagery, likely indicate that Clamence sees no hope for humanity in Christianity, Mueller suggests that the larger point of the novel may not necessarily be so damning of the prospects of
the Christian faith and that Camus may have intended to allow room for one to meaningfully embrace the faith.

Carl Viggiani (in the aforementioned “Fall and Exile,” as well as in his essay “Camus and the Fall from Innocence,” *Yale French Studies* 25 [1960]: 65–71) notes a similar connection between Christianity and much of Camus’ later work, suggesting that perhaps by this point in his life and thought Camus had begun to consider the possibility of the Christian capacity to elucidate the mysteries of human nature and experience. Avi Sagi proposes a similar assessment, suggesting in his *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (New York: Rodopi, 2002) that Camus’ position may be classified as “secular religiosity” (146). These writers are certainly not alone in this appraisal; Camus’ increasing tendency toward a religious atheism is noted by Stephen Eric Bronner in his *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), while Richard Akeroyd, in *The Spiritual Quest of Albert Camus* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Portals Press, 1976), similarly posits Camus’ work as a religious endeavor. Other noteworthy studies that reveal and analyze the parallels between Camus’ thought and work and religion include Thomas Hanna’s *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1958), Robert Chester Sutton’s *Human Existence and Theodicy: A Comparison of Jesus and Albert Camus* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), and James W. Woelfel’s *Camus: A Theological Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975).

Hanna, in his essay “Albert Camus and the Christian Faith” (*The Journal of Religion* 36 [1956]: 224–233), acknowledges that a concern with religious themes motivates all of Camus’ literary output, while Bernard C. Murchland, in his essay “Albert Camus: Rebel” (*The Catholic World* 1126 [1959]: 308–314), seemingly completes Hanna’s contention by suggesting that Camus’ work contains hints that a culmination in a particular conception of salvation was to
come; these complementary positions are suggested in the present study and support the contention that Camus’ comprehensive myth of exile and [re-]union is motivated by a fundamentally religious concern and is directed toward a particular kind of redemption of the human condition in exile.

The preceding review does not do justice to the existing Camus scholarship; while there are other texts and studies which explicitly address the themes of religious faith and exile in Camus’ thought and writings, certainly there are a myriad of other sources which expertly analyze a diversity of themes of equal significance in Camus’ oeuvre. However, the present study was not undertaken primarily as an assessment of this monumental thinker and writer of the twentieth century, thus it might perhaps be excused if the account offered here is not as comprehensive as the scholarship that has preceded it. Yet at the same time, it is hoped that, by having its origin and its heart in the question of the possibility of realizing home in the world, the present study will adequately engage that fundamental character of Camus’ works themselves as well as that which motivated and made possible their creation. By beginning with the challenge of exile and the longing for home, by following the wandering path that establishes both as essential components of the ontological situation, and finally by undertaking a parallel examination of Camus’ oeuvre as itself a comprehensive myth of exile and [re-]union, it is hoped that the human condition (as and in existential exile) may be understood, and the grounding spirit which unites all of Camus’ writing into a cohesive whole may be legitimized, differently from before, and that the place where we begin, the world within which one longs for home, may finally be known as if for the first time.

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3 Both Hanna’s and Murchland’s essays were re-published in Germaine Bréé (Ed.), Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), the latter under the title “Albert Camus: The Dark Night before the Coming of Grace?”. 
PART I

THE ONTOLOGICAL SITUATION
Chapter One
Finitude

Across the millennia of human history and human experience, questions of the meaning of existence have perpetually posed themselves to thoughtful individuals, societies, and cultures. Ranging from inarticulate wonder at the beauty of nature and the complexity of human interaction and the subsequent bonds of communication and community that can evolve, to the formulation of sophisticated queries addressing specific components of the world, as well as individual and communal experience within that world, such questions seem to be an essential element of human existence. Who am I, and who are we? What is the world, and how am I (are we) to understand and interact with it? What should I/we become? Is there a purpose for my/our existence, and how might that purpose be recognized and ultimately realized? Implied in all questioning is the suggestion of the possibility of an answer. Yet while such questions as these may in fact stand as inherent to human existence, the possibility of definitive ‘truths’ in-answer is itself questionable. The human history of questioning has thus far yielded no consensus Truth; consequently, questioning persists in tandem with existence itself.

Seemingly equally co-existent with human existence and its attendant questions has been the presence of religion, defined (perhaps crudely) at its most basic level as the organization of stories and symbols to explain the comprehensive human temporal situation by revealing the meaning of the past, present, and future for humanity, both individually and collectively.¹ It

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¹ Mark C. Taylor, in his work After God, defines religion as “an emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure. … These two moments are inseparable and alternate in a kind of quasi-dialectical rhythm.” Mark C. Taylor, After God (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 12–13. As he subsequently explains, the twofold (and seemingly paradoxical) capacity to both provide and undermine order and structure is essential in a complete definition of religion. While the emphasis here, at
should be immediately apparent that ‘religion’ is not used here to refer to any particular organization of rituals or tenets; rather, ‘religion’ must be broadly understood as the attempt, whether through myth, philosophy, or anything in between, to uncover the meaning within human existence. This distinction is crucial; rather than stand or fall with the fate of particular symbols, rituals, theologies, or sects, the idea of religion must be equated with the longing for, and attempt to discover, meaning. While particular religious systems may be perfect examples of the attempt to discover and define meaning, no such examples should stand as a comprehensive definition of religion proper. Theodore Ziolkowski beautifully illustrates this point in his analysis of the twentieth-century decline of what might historically stand as ‘religious belief’; and he contends, though such a decline was evident, the need for a ‘religious’ understanding toward meaning (a “surrogate of faith”) persisted:

Once the previously sustaining religious belief has failed, men and women seek surrogates. As Emerson observed (in his essay “The Sovereignty of Ethics,” 1878), “Man does not live by bread alone, but by faith, by education, by sympathy.” In the more severe words of a twentieth-century philosopher, humankind appears to be “condemned to meaning.” Karl Jaspers put it more cynically: “The absurd faiths of the modern era, ranging from astrology to theosophy, and from National Socialism to Bolshevism, suggest that superstition has no less power over the human mind today than it had formerly.”

least at the outset, will be on the intention of ‘religion’ to structure and stabilize existence, Taylor’s contention of the simultaneous opposite effect is worth stating here and may perhaps come into play more substantially as the present investigation unfolds.

In a similar fashion, Dennis Ford defines religion as “any set of symbols and rituals that provide a sense of life meaning and orientation, regardless of whether they are drawn from traditional religions, philosophy, psychology, or aspects of an otherwise secular culture, such as sports or popular entertainment. The question of meaning signifies a religious search, but it is also a philosophical, psychological, and mythical search, to the extent that each of those disciplines asks similar questions about what constitutes the good and meaningful life, even if they answer those questions in fundamentally different ways.” (Dennis Ford, The Search for Meaning [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007], xxi), Ford’s definition is in accord with the first aspect of Taylor’s definition, while wholly ignoring the opposite and equal component which Taylor likewise attributes to religion. Despite this omission, Ford’s more one-sided definition of religion as an orienting force regardless of its ‘discipline’ is a suitable beginning point.

Despite the specific failures of any particular religious system or faith, its telos, the need for meaning, remains; further, just as the need for meaning persists, so too does the relevance and need for ‘religion’ as the engagement with and toward meaning.

A brief digression here may further demonstrate the saliency of this distinction while likewise demonstrating the primacy of religion itself. In his account of the genesis and evolution of Romantic literature, M.H. Abrams asserts that the fundamental change which characterized such literature as explicitly Romantic was not limited to the literary world. Rather, Abrams concludes, this change, which originated from the social and political “spirit of that age,” was echoed in the realm of philosophy as well. Abrams presents this “natural supernaturalism” as essentially a humanistic and naturalistic appropriation of fundamentally religious themes and ways of addressing the world, the “secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking.”

However, despite the explicit distinctions that Abrams makes between the manifestations of this change in literature and philosophy, the change itself is fundamentally religious in nature. While Romantic thought and art represented, according to Abrams, a clear attempt to account for the world in more human (natural) terms rather than the traditional (supernatural) view of the world, the newly raised view was no less an attempt toward meaning, and thus no less an assertion of faith, than the old theological view. Whereas the traditional theological position was defined by its faith in a particular conception of the world to follow life in this world, the Romantic view asserted a unique faith in the possibilities of life in this world. Essentially, as Abrams concludes, the Romantic view was the assertion of trust in the possibility of attaining an earthly paradise through the efforts of humanity itself; the Romantic hope lies in “the certainty, or at least the possibility, of a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a

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renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home.”

At its heart, Abrams’ study of the origin and growth of Romantic literature and philosophy is an assessment of the religious “sentiment” of the age. Contrasted with the traditional theology from which it had sprung, this Romantic religiosity was fundamentally different in that it was explicitly a belief in humankind and the perfectibility of the present, physical world. At the same time, such a belief, though specifically in a natural (versus a supernatural) object, is precisely an act of faith; whereas specific metaphysical faiths often entail a hope in the prospects of a world to come, the Romantic faith was a correspondent hope, though in the prospects of the present world as it is populated and shaped by human beings. Thus, while Abrams focused on a distinctive shift away from a traditional, theological conception of faith, the Romantic “condition” which he portrays remains essentially religious in nature. Through a thorough investigation of representative examples from both literature and philosophy, Abrams both clarifies and situates the religious shift that characterized the modern Romantic sensibility while maintaining the uniquely religious quality of the resulting paradigm. Abrams’ work is not simply a study of the rise of a particular literature or philosophy at the expense of ‘religion’; rather, it is an examination, illuminated by simultaneous investigations into both philosophy and literature, of a distinctly religious matter.

Ultimately, regardless of the manner in which the question is raised and answers are attempted, the course toward meaning must follow the path marked out by religious faith. This chapter will explore the dynamic that can exist between religious faith and the possibility of knowledge, ‘Truth,’ and meaning, as this dynamic is conceived within the terms of the ancient Greek, Modernist, and Postmodernist positions. Following this exploration, several examples of tenable paradigms of religious faith will be presented, leading ultimately to an explicit

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5 Ibid.
articulation of what religious faith means, both for the balance of the investigation that will follow herein as well as within human existence as a whole. However, before any such examples may be examined or any such definitions proposed, it will first be necessary to discuss more fully an essential aspect of the human condition which necessitates a position in faith.

**Limits**

What does it mean to be human? Is there a fundamental quality or condition of human existence? Certainly the answer to this question may depend on the context within which it is raised. Is the question meant to determine what differentiates humans from the rest of nature? An obvious answer might be to say that reason is what distinguishes and thus most fully characterizes the human, though a similar capacity in certain animals is sufficient to question this as an absolute distinction. A similar possibility on which to focus might be the human propensity for love or other complex emotions, toward oneself and other humans, as well as toward other elements in nature. Over the course of a lifetime an individual may encounter any number of legitimate objects for his or her love: the parents and siblings that constitute one’s original family; the partner to whom one chooses to devotes one’s life; the children for whom one may feel immeasurable affection and responsibility; the dog with whom one spends more years of one’s life than in most relationships with other human beings; even a particular place, a tree, or an ocean. Yet here again, it may be argued that the behavior of certain kinds of animals might be illustrative of a similar emotional capacity.⁶

Yet whether either possible answer suggested above really gets to the heart of the distinction between what is human and what is not, this manner of attempting to define the

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⁶ The fact that swans, for example, typically mate for life, or that mated penguins work together so fiercely and systematically to protect their young, may be interpreted to suggest that these animals may be motivated by something akin to what we, as humans, might call ‘love.’
‘human’ through such a distinction seems misguided, ultimately missing the mark of what the question is intended to reveal. In asking what is most fundamentally characteristic of what it means to be human, it is implied that the answer must not merely rely on distinctions but rather must ultimately get to the heart of that without which human existence ceases to be what it is and becomes something different.

If this be our sole criterion, perhaps a fundamental quality of human experience is something that tends toward both reason and complex emotion while transcending the specificity of either to approach something greater; perhaps what it means to be human is suggested in the capacity for wonder. In the 1987 film Der Himmel über Berlin, writer/director Wim Wenders suggests this through his portrayal of an angel who longs to become human, if only “finally to suspect, instead of forever knowing all.” Throughout the film it is suggested that what separates the angels, the non-human, from the reasoning, feeling, loving, and suffering human beings over whom they watch is the angels’ incapacity for wonder. This point is emphasized through the repetition of the “Song of Childhood” throughout the film, in which the child is portrayed as the ‘ideal’ of the human capacity for, and active engagement in, wonder:

When the child was a child,
It was the time for these questions:
Why am I me, and why not you?
Why am I here, and why not there?
When did time begin, and where does space end?
Is life under the sun not just a dream?
Is what I see and hear and smell
not just an illusion of a world before the world?
Given the facts of evil and people,
does evil really exist?
How can it be that I, who I am,
didn’t exist before I came to be,
and that, someday, I, who I am,
will no longer be who I am?7

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Just as the poem contends that the child is driven by, and a willing participant in, wonder, so too the film ultimately contends that it is the presence and allowance of wonder that defines the human condition itself: within wonder, one most fully exists as a human being; without wonder, one simply cannot be human.⁸

If this contention is accepted, that the experience of wonder is a fundamentally human experience which fully expresses what it is to be human, then it must be conceded that human experience is equally characterized by a fundamental deficiency. Wonder, after all, implies the absence of something, as it is only within the space of absence that wonder can arise. One does not wonder when one knows. What is perhaps most moving in any individual human experience is the recognition of a particular limit that is suggested in that experience; to find oneself in wonder is therefore to find oneself at a particular limit beyond which one is unable to pass. Thus if wonder is to stand as an essential human experience, then an essential characteristic of the human condition must center around the imposition of limits.⁹

Though not explicitly stated above, that which must be absent to provide the fertile space for wonder to bloom is the certainty given in knowing the full story. The child in Handke’s “Song of Childhood” does not possess the whole story of existence, knowing neither the wherefore and whence of the beginning nor what end awaits. This absence of the complete story is revelatory of the presence of mystery that pervades human existence; at the heart of all human

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⁸ It is worth noting here, if only briefly, the emphasis placed not just on experiencing wonder but in fully engaging that wonder through the asking of questions. The importance of such questioning will be explored here in due course.

⁹ John Marmysz applies a similar characterization to philosophy, defining the philosophical position as one of “wondrous distress.” As Marmysz contends, while the philosophical pursuit begins with a question, it is perpetuated by the implicit realization that all answers will ultimately fall short and it endures in the anxiety for answers that remains. See John Marmysz, The Path of Philosophy (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2011).
experience is the recognition of mystery, constituted through the encounter with limits and subsequently allowing for the experience of wonder.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Mystery}

The word ‘mystery’ suggests not just wonder and uncertainty but the very absence of the full story that was suggested above. Etymologically, ‘mystery’ comprises two Greek roots: \textit{mythos} and \textit{steresis}. \textit{Mythos}, from which ‘myth’ is also derived, means ‘story,’ while \textit{steresis} refers to the unnatural absence of something that would ordinarily be, or is expected to be, present. \textit{Mystery}, therefore, is the story for which essential parts are missing; to experience the mystery of human existence is to recognize that essential elements of the story are absent, leaving the individual to wonder what the full story is.\textsuperscript{11} Yet the true depth of existential mystery is more than just a few missing parts to the story; in the absence of the complete story, it is also impossible to see and know the reason for the story or its ultimate goal or purpose. Within mystery, there can be no way of knowing the meaning of the story; one finds only silence and is thus left to wonder what the meaning might be.

Yet because to wonder is an inexorable human tendency, simply acknowledging that the story is incomplete and that human existence is therefore undertaken in mystery is not sufficient; wonder does not cease, nor does the need for the complete story to be evident and the

\textsuperscript{10} The analysis of mystery and the corresponding responsibility to mystery (fulfilled through questioning) that follows here is, in broad terms, an adaptation and development of a hermeneutic of human experience suggested by Francis Ambrosio, whose own analyses of these themes are explicitly and comprehensively presented in his series of lectures entitled \textit{Philosophy, Religion, and the Meaning of Life} (The Teaching Company, 2009). The treatment of mystery and questioning presented here, though certainly influenced by Ambrosio’s account, must be understood as an interpretation of, and thus tangential to, that account; therefore, while proper credit must be attributed to Ambrosio’s influential discussion, the conclusions and contentions presented in this discussion are those of the present author.

meaning of the story to be thereby revealed. The only choice left to the individual is to continue to seek the complete story and its meaning, despite the realization that definitive answers may not be possible and the mystery itself may never be wholly penetrable; because human existence is essentially defined by mystery, the primary responsibility of the individual is to raise questions for which there can be no definitive answers. This responsibility to mystery, assumed through questioning, is perhaps best exemplified in the ancient Greek notion of *moira*.

The ancient Greek philosophical account of the order of the universe evolved from the acceptance of the necessity of collective functions within the primitive social group as well as the subsequent recognition of necessity (*ananke*) as a divine but impersonal force; in either case, the individual within the social or religious group recognized that one had a particular place to occupy and role to fill, in accordance with one’s particular function or the direction of the gods, and this recognition motivated and ultimately maintained order within the societal group as a whole. Further, from the particular force of order within the specific group was deduced the notion of a greater order in Nature. The articulation of an overarching Natural order, and the positing of such an order as a moral, prohibitive force from without, eventually fostered a philosophical conception of Nature—*physis*, the essence of all existing things and the time and space in which they exist, as well as the force or energy which drives their existence. *Physis* is the universe and everything in it, including the manner in which things happen; it is the revelation of *ananke* (the necessity that governs human existence) and that everything that happens *must* happen because it cannot possibly happen any other way. Within *physis*, each individual is given a portion and a fate which is one’s own; this is one’s *moira*. It is therefore the individual’s responsibility to realize one’s own portion while not

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extending beyond and thus violating the laws of necessity. The order of necessity, which serves as the foundation for moira, is the force which frees its subjects to exist and act within a pre-set limit or boundary but which strikes against its subjects who cross that boundary. This recognition of necessity is precisely the experience of limits. For the ancient Greeks, individual human existence is defined within one’s moira, the limits on existence imposed by necessity.

The recognition of one’s moira (as a responsibility to fill, as well as to stay within, one’s portion) is not just a recognition of one’s limits but is also a recognition of one’s place within the whole. Necessity governs the organic ‘whole’ of existence: one’s limits are defined precisely by what is left outside; that is, the rest of the whole beyond one’s portion, the whole which will continue to be after one’s portion has been exhausted. However, if human existence consists in the perpetual engagement with mystery and its limits and the struggle to fill one’s portion, then one’s portion may only be said to be wholly exhausted when such an existence has come to an end. Finitude is thus the ultimate expression of one’s moira, as the primary limiting factor on human existence is its inevitable end in death. Amongst the myriad limits imposed upon human existence, one’s death is that limit which is most unpredictable but which is simultaneously most inexorable. One’s responsibility to one’s moira is to participate fully within the limits imposed, which necessarily entails a lucid engagement with one’s ultimate limit (death).

Such an account of human existence as an encounter with and thus circumscribed within limits is not exclusively a Greek conception; while the ancient Greek analysis of the individual recognition of and responsibility to one’s moira is a paradigmatic articulation of the human experience of limits, it is by no means the only or the last. A more timeless, and perhaps more definitive, experience of human limits and human destiny is achieved through an engagement
with *absolute finitude* as a fundamental structure of human existence; that is, through an engagement with death.

**Death**

In the second volume of his three-volume *Philosophy*, Karl Jaspers presents his own existential account of limits, though he refers to such limits as “boundary situations”:

> [T]hat I am always in situations; that I cannot live without struggling and suffering; that I cannot avoid guilt; that I must die—these are what I call boundary situations. They *never change*, except in appearance. There is *no way to survey them* in existence, no way to see anything behind them. They are like a wall we run into, a wall on which we founder. We cannot modify them; all that we can do is to make them lucid, but without explaining or deducing them from something else. They go with existence itself.\(^{13}\)

Just as the Greek conception of *moira* was determined as much by what lies *outside* of one’s limits as the portion that is circumscribed *within*, so too Jaspers’ conception “implies that there is something else” behind the boundary, while simultaneously recognizing that “this other thing [behind the boundary] is not for an existing consciousness.”\(^{14}\) Thus Jaspers’ analysis not only captures the presence of limits and their imposition on human existence, but it also recognizes that what lies beyond such limits is *essentially* an object of mystery. Further, while Jaspers lists several possible examples of boundary situations, for him (as for the ancient Greeks) the most fundamental experience of limits occurs with death. Death is thus the most dramatic of all boundary situations and is in fact representative of all such similar situations whereby a boundary (a limit) is encountered. Peter Koestenbaum, in *The Vitality of Death*, similarly characterizes death as the manifestation of all limits placed on human existence:


\(^{14}\) Ibid., 178–179.
[T]he final and most direct statement of man’s problematic condition is his finitude, the fact that he is bound by his limits in the face of his inherent and perennial striving for transcendence. … We have here [a] paradox: man seeks infinite transcendence while in fact he is irrevocably limited. … [D]eath is a good symbol to lead us to an understanding of [this paradox].  

Therefore, as the experience which most fully manifests the limits and mystery which characterize human existence, consciousness of death and its implications must stand as a defining aspect of human existence. Death is the comprehensive embodiment of the fact of limits and the ultimate revelation of the absolute finality of human finitude; the realization of the inexorable finality of death entails not just the acknowledgment of death as the necessary end to the current state of being but also the attendant realization of the now necessary impossibility of understanding human existence itself as anything but fundamentally finite. Death is thus a universal fact which delineates the terms by which existence is to be both lived and understood, thereby defining, along with mystery and wonder, the limits which constitute what it means to be human.

Ernest Becker proposes as the “tragedy” of life “man’s finitude, his dread of death and of the overwhelmingness of life.” A more precise and accurate description is difficult to imagine. Human finitude truly constitutes the tragedy of human existence, not merely by representing the downfall or end of that existence, but also because finitude, as the ‘cause’ of the ending of existence, is itself an essential component of the nature of human existence itself; human existence is thereby undermined and ultimately overthrown from within by an essential aspect of its own nature (that is, its finitude), an aspect without which human existence could never have been human existence at all. It is not sufficient to say that human existence is finite; rather,  


it must be said that human existence is its finitude, and thus the quality which defines such existence is simultaneously that which annihilates it.

As a part of their expulsion by God from the Paradise of Eden, Adam and Eve were given knowledge of their mortality. If the expulsion from the perfection of the garden and God’s presence is taken to be the enactment of the transition from the Divine to the human, then certainly the sudden awareness of finitude and death must be understood as a crowning realization of what it means to be human. What must be emphasized here is that not merely finitude itself, but the awareness of finitude, is constitutive of the human condition. As Mircea Eliade suggests, “whatever was the cause of the first death, man became himself and could fulfill his specific destiny only as a being fully aware of his own mortality.” What’s more, such an acknowledgment of human finitude immediately and irrevocably effects the balance of life remaining until the end is reached. In support of this contention, Paul Tillich offers the following:

> We are not always aware of our having to die, but in the light of the experience of our having to die our whole life is experienced differently. In the same way the anxiety which is despair is not always present. But the rare occasions in which it is present determine the interpretation of existence as a whole.

To this Becker adds, “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing

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17 “To Adam he said, ‘Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, “You must not eat of it,” Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.’” (Genesis 3:17–19) This passage suggests not a punishment but a revelation; God does not say, “for your transgressions you will ultimately suffer and die,” but rather “for your transgressions you will suffer until you die [for death is your eventual and ultimate fate].”


else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man.”

Death is thus an immediate and immovable presence in life from the first moment of recognition of its threat until the final moment when its hand can no longer be stayed. Eliade concludes:

[W]hatever one may think...of life and death, [one] is constantly experiencing modes and levels of dying. This means more than just a confirmation of the biological truism that death is always present in life. The important fact is that, consciously or unconsciously, we are perpetually exploring the imaginary worlds of death and...anticipating death-experiences even when we are...driven by the most creative epiphanies of life.  

If death affects not merely the end but all of one’s life, then finitude must be felt as a limiting force imposed against the entirety of human existence.

But how is the awareness of finitude and its subsequent implications to be attained? We are not all individually and directly cast from the Garden and explicitly told of the fate that awaits us; rather, we enter into existence only to discover, at some time or other, that the life that has been given is not infinite. For many, the awareness of death arises from an immediate experience with death itself, most often when it touches someone else. Peter Koestenbaum suggests this as a conventional occurrence:

The feeling that the world is coming apart at the seams, that the universe is caving in, overcomes us when a person for whom we have complete responsibility—such as a [child]—or on whom we are totally dependent—such as a [parent] or [spouse]—is threatened with death or is actually dead. The last experience is a close reminder of our own death. We feel sick, weak, and queasy at the prospects of our own immediate death. We cannot easily control the anxiety, hysteria, and nausea that overcome us when we are confronted with the immediate threat of our own death. ... The death of myself, as interpreted here, is not only filled with anxiety but it is also tragic.

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20 Becker, The Denial of Death, ix.


22 Koestenbaum, The Vitality of Death, 4.
The realization of death need not result from such an immediate and direct experience, as it may instead arise from thoughtful reflection or even through inarticulate ‘moods.’ Martin Heidegger, for example, contended that it is through disposition (or moods) that the disclosedness of Being as finite is fully achieved; for Heidegger, the particular mood which discloses the essence of the human being, which Heidegger calls “Dasein,” as finite is anxiety: “Anxiety reveals the nothing [non-being]… anxiety leaves us hanging because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole.” In anxiety, Dasein is held out into the nothing and thereby disclosed as transcendence:

Being itself is essentially finite and reveals itself only in the transcendence of Dasein which is held out into the nothing…. Only in the nothing of Dasein do beings as a whole, in accord with their most proper possibility—that is, in a finite way—come to themselves.

Coming to itself, as Dasein does through the disposition of anxiety, reveals temporality as the constitutive horizon for Being. Thus the “end” of Dasein, glimpsed through the recognition of one’s temporality, is as much a constitutive element of Dasein’s existence as the “there”—finite and thrown, Dasein is inexorably progressing towards its end:

As long as Dasein is, there is in every case something still outstanding, which Dasein can be and will be. But to that which is thus outstanding, the ‘end’ itself belongs. The ‘end’ of Being-in-the-world is death. This end, which belongs to the potentiality-for-Being—that is to say, to existence—limits and determines in every case whatever totality is possible for Dasein.

In a similar fashion, whereas Heidegger contends that the recognition of the fact of the finitude of existence arises within the mood of anxiety, Jean-Paul Sartre speaks of an experience of

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24 Ibid., 108.

‘nausea’ that overtakes one. In Sartre’s view, this nausea is a product of the realization, perhaps at the outset not fully articulated, of the contingency of existence; behind the pure facticity of existence as it is directly experienced there is no underlying meaning, there is in fact nothing at all. It is the awareness of the “nothingness” of existence that, for Sartre, provides the premonition of finitude and death and thus provokes a particular nausea as the first symptom of that recognition. What’s more, the nothingness that is glimpsed is, of course, an essential aspect of Being itself; as Sartre contends, “nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm.” Albert Camus presents the encounter with finitude and death in similar terms, though labeling it as the revelation of the “absurdity” of existence. In the case of Camus’ philosophical interpretation, as will be seen in much greater detail in Part II, the realization of the Absurd serves as both an essential characterization of existence as well, and perhaps more importantly, as a starting point for a lucid and authentic engagement with the human condition.

But what does death mean for human existence? What are the full implications of an engagement with this the most profound of limiting forces? From the preceding discussion, because death has been presented precisely as that which limits and ultimately annihilates, it may be rightfully concluded that death is an immensely powerful negative force opposed to human existence. Absent any metaphysical belief in a life after death, the end suggested by death amounts to the end of all things to the individual who dies; while certainly for others the world will continue to exist, for the one who dies it is as if the world itself and all life contained therein has ended. What’s more, there is usually not even the courtesy of an indication of when that end may come, such that the individual to die may first attempt to ‘complete’ one’s life and one’s project in an appropriate manner. No, death is not a point that is often reached with any

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great measure of pride or victory; rather it is merely the sudden ending of all that one has undertaken and had planned to do. Death is random in the manner and time at which it occurs, and yet it stands unassailable as a fact of existence. For this reason, the shadow cast over a life by the specter of death can have dire consequences; if life may end at any moment, for seemingly no reason, immediately and effectively ending but not thereby completing all projects that constituted that life, then could there be any purpose in having undertaken such projects at all? What are the prospects for meaning in an existence that is fated to little more than whim and wonder? Todd May suggests similar consequences with his four ‘themes’ of death:

First, death is the end of us and our experience. Secondly, that end is not an accomplishment or goal; it is simply a stoppage. Thirdly, death is at once inevitable and uncertain. We are certain to die, but we don’t know when. So death does not only lie at the end of our lives but in fact pervades them. And, finally, these three characteristics make us wonder whether there is any meaning to our lives.27

But must the fact of death undermine the possibility for meaning in life? Must the engagement with death end in doubt and despair? Certainly numerous religious systems have historically offered plausible alternatives to the despairing view of death. If, they often argue, one can recognize that death in this life merely allows for passage into a new and better life, then death must be accepted as not just a fact of life but a wonderful improvement of the human situation. Yet this is not the only possible way of engaging death in a manner which does not immediately and necessarily undermine the life that precedes it. Throughout the formal philosophical tradition, beginning with the ancient Greeks and leading into contemporary existentialist positions, a full engagement with death can often lead to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the human situation as finite, thus making possible the assertion of meaning in spite of, even perhaps because of, the fact of death. In Plato’s account of Socrates’ defense of himself, it is clear that Socrates’

27 Todd May, Death (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2002), 22.
identity as the philosophical hero is determined not just by his persistent questioning but by his insistence on maintaining his position in-question even against the threat of death. In Socrates’ own words, “I…made it clear not by my words but by my actions that death did not matter to me at all—if that is not too strong an expression—but that it mattered all the world to me that I should do nothing wrong or wicked.”

Here Socrates asserts that fidelity to his identity is more important to him than whether he lives or dies. “This duty I have accepted, as I said, in obedience to God’s commands given in oracles and dreams and every other way that any other divine dispensation has ever impressed a duty upon man.” According to Plato’s assessment of Socrates, it was Socrates’ engagement with death which solidified his identity as questioner and as in-question, in the face of the limits and mystery imposed by death.

In Heidegger’s assessment of death as well, there is room for meaning and authenticity despite the fact of death. According to Heidegger’s conception, authentic existence is only possible after one has wholly and lucidly faced death and acknowledged it as one’s only certain and personal fate, “that possibility which is not to be outstripped.” The individual, in Heidegger’s view, is forced to recognize not only that death is inevitable but also that one’s own death is inexorably one’s own; the individual is individuated by this fate and thereby freed to make the balance of one’s life one’s own as well, in an authentic fashion that would have been impossible without first fully and lucidly engaging death.

29 Plato, Apology, 33b.
30 Heidegger, Being and Time, 298.
31 This aspect of Heidegger’s philosophy is discussed in further detail in the chapter two, where it is contended that the achievement of authenticity through the recognition of Being-towards-death represents a possible manner of existential ‘reconciliation’ through a reconnection with the ground of Being.
The response to death, therefore, can follow two paths: one leads to inherent meaninglessness, while the other seeks to achieve meaning despite the mystery and the limits imposed in death. As Todd May concludes: “Death is tragic, arbitrary, and meaningless. At the same time it can, because of the particular way it is tragic, arbitrary, and meaningless, open out on to a fullness of life that would not exist without it.”

What, then, is the appropriate response to the fact of death? Is it possible to abide death’s presence and yet still live?

In his book *The Vitality of Death*, Peter Koestenbaum lists four potential responses that may follow the individual recognition of the fundamental finitude of human existence. The first two options he classifies as ‘non-religious,’ whereas the latter two he deems to be ‘religious’ in nature. “The first is Promethean rebellion against one’s finitude through art or ambition. … The second nonreligious solution is commitment to a production or an ideal that is a better candidate for permanence than the human body.” These choices may be considered non-religious not because they are not explicitly derived from a theological system of belief but rather because they do not directly address the question of the meaning of either life or death. Instead, both suggestions seem to attempt to divert or distract from the question of finitude and transience by seeking something that may endure beyond one’s death. This is not to suggest that either option is inherently inappropriate or unsuited for the task, but merely to point out that the absence of a deeper question of the meaning of death or life is what classifies both options as non-religious.

In contrast to these two, Koestenbaum offers two further possibilities:

The first of the religious solutions is resignation or the attempt to believe that

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32 May, *Death*, 4.

33 Koestenbaum, *The Vitality of Death*, 32.
the gross injustice of this paradox is part of an infinitely good and benign, albeit mysterious, design. Total ascetic submission along the lines of “Thy will be done” and “We thank thee” in the face of disaster illustrates this solution in its traditional religious manifestations. A second religious solution is to seek identification with the Encompassing through complete spontaneity while at the same time dissociating the ego from the body and the person (or from the so-called empirical or psychological ego). That, in essence, is the solution of mysticism.\footnote{34 Koestenbaum, The Vitality of Death, 32}

In each of Koestenbaum’s ‘religious’ alternatives, there is evident an inclination towards meaning and identification with the facts of both life and death. Even in the first solution, whereby one merely accepts one’s fate with resignation while making no active attempt to understand that fate, it seems that what makes resignation and acceptance possible is the conviction that there is a meaning and purpose, despite the fact that one has no indication of what that meaning and purpose might be.

While it is clear that the fact of death may legitimately lead to a choice between two possible paths, either directed toward meaning or abandoned within the absence of meaning, what is more immediately imperative is the capacity for, and the urgency of, the choosing. As has been stated repeatedly throughout the preceding discussion, essential elements of human existence remain shrouded in mystery, thus there is no definitive indication of what one ought to choose in the matter of engaging death. This engagement must necessarily be undertaken in wonder, and that wonder ultimately (and urgently) necessitates a choice. The recognition and resulting expectation of death forces one to realize that time is short, though one never knows how short; the choices themselves that are available at any given time are themselves limited, and even amongst those limited choices the time that is left may only allow one to undertake a select few. As Koestenbaum contends, the urgency imposed by the fact of death manifests as a tremendous pressure to choose: “We experience the pressure—which has always been present
in latent form—of deciding what we dedicate our lives to, and how we shall spend our existence. And the pressure is to decide on this issue immediately and [to] act without delay.”

Despite the fact that the compulsion to choose arises as a particular exigency, the choice itself remains wholly within the control of the individual; in fact, in the engagement with death, this act of choosing may stand as the only aspect of the confrontation over which the individual has control. What one chooses suggests what is most important to the individual choosing; faced with limited time and limited resources, the individual must choose the action or situation that is most valued within a particular scenario. At the same time, the choice itself, as a determination of value, may perhaps be regarded ultimately as a bestowal of value. Against the fact of death, a particular choice is given greater value precisely because it was chosen; the choice of one particular possibility over another suggests what is ultimately of value, within existence as a whole, to the chooser. As Koestenbaum concludes, “in the face of the ultimate threat [of death], …value is totally transformed.”

What’s more, this bestowal transcends the individual’s particular situation and becomes, for the individual, an assertion of value that is intended to stand up for all against the finitude that undermines any claim toward meaning within human existence. Ernest Becker characterizes this attempt to transcend death through a particular assertion of value as heroic:

It doesn’t matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a sky-scraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. … ’[C]ivilized society is a

35 Ibid., 12.

36 Ibid., 6.
hopeful belief and protest that science, money, and goods make man count for more than any other animal. In this sense everything that man does is religious and heroic, and yet in danger of being fictitious and fallible.\textsuperscript{37} The last portion of Becker’s contention is particularly important: although the individual’s efforts to assert value and meaning against the fact of death are heroic, these efforts are in perpetual danger of being misguided, poorly chosen, and thus untenable. The fact that a choice is demanded by the situation of finitude implies the mystery of the situation; further, because one chooses from a position in mystery, there is no guarantee that one will choose appropriately or that there is a ‘correct’ choice. At any point after choosing, one may discover that one has chosen poorly or inappropriately; it may even be that one may live fully within a poor or inappropriate choice and yet never know. This contention brings us to a final, yet undeniably essential, element in the engagement of death: the act of choosing a particular value or course against the backdrop of death, while revelatory of what one values within existence as a whole, also discloses a particular faith in that value.

As has been stated, death is encountered as both a limit and a question: death stands as the manifestation and representation of all limits imposed upon human existence, and one is forced to ask what the meaning of death, and thus the meaning of life unto death, might be. Definitive answers to these questions are impossible; human existence is mysterious, and human beings are fundamentally limited in their ability to know and experience. Death is thus experienced as both a mystery and as a certainty in finitude. Yet the individual human being, precisely as a finite being, is faced with an urgency to answer the question (after all, time is short) while not wholly able to know any answer; a choice must thus be made in faith. One must choose a plausible ‘story’ of death and life, then determine whether (and how) existence can be meaningful within the terms of that story. This, then, is the ultimate demand that is placed upon human existence by the fact of

\textsuperscript{37} Becker, \textit{The Denial of Death}, 5; emphasis added.
death: within a position of finitude, which is equally constituted in mystery and limits, one must choose in faith toward meaning. At the outset of this study, ‘religion’ was broadly characterized as the attempt to uncover meaning within human existence. To this characterization it may now be added that the religious quest for meaning is in equal measure an attempt to live with and in mystery. The question of death is inherently a religious question not just because it concerns meaning, which cannot be known, but also because in any attempt to engage the question, to live the question and formulate a possible response (or even simply living as a response), a movement of faith is required at the confluence of the desire to know and the inexorable presence of mystery; the question of death is ultimately a question of the possibility of meaning, which must be, in fact can only be, answered by a choice in faith. Further, the choice in faith itself becomes a commitment to self-identification and the determination of one’s own individual identity.

Faith, therefore, is proposed here as an essential component of the human attempt to confront, and perhaps transcend, the ontological situation in finitude and mystery toward meaning and understanding. In the section that follows, specific examples from the history of ancient Greek, Modernist, and Postmodernist thought will be examined as attempts to engage the mystery of human existence to attain greater knowledge, ‘Truth,’ or meaning from within the position of finitude, which is here asserted as a fundamental constitutive component of human existence. From these accounts a more precise understanding of the underlying necessity to reconcile the tension between meaning and mystery will emerge as the quest for ‘home,’ and in the end a particular conception of faith will be proposed as a possible means toward home.

**Pressing the Limits**

*From Mythos to Teoria: The Ancient Experience*

The ancient Greek philosophical conception of the human engagement in mystery toward
knowledge and ‘Truth’ is perhaps best formulated and articulated in the person of Socrates, the ‘philosophical hero,’ as Plato depicts him. Yet before examining the example of Socrates, it may first be helpful to situate the ancient Greek philosophical position with respect to the mythic and tragic traditions from which it arose.

As was discussed in the previous section, far back in the Greek cultural imagination there arose a recognition of a relationship between human conduct and the action of nature. This relationship, given as an ordination of necessity (ananke; what must be as well as what ought to be), is interpreted as “destiny” or “justice” by the Greeks, and it is seen as a manifestation of the limiting force of nature. This is, of course, the recognition of limits experienced in the encounter with necessity. As was suggested in the preceding discussion, the ancient Greek understanding of limits entailed a responsibility not just to stay within, but also to fill, the space circumscribed by those limits—this space is one’s portion (moira).

The concept of moira as a recognition of one’s place or portion is ultimately a recognition of one’s relationship within the whole. Originating with the roles that defined tribal membership, moira evolved from that sense to be understood as a dispensation from the gods, only to be restored again as a function of ananke and the mysterious nature, finally to become once again a recognition of the role of the individual within society. With the evolution of the polis, ananke as the rule of law became justice, and the acknowledgment of the rule of law (as Necessity) made one a citizen of the polis; thus, one’s moira evolved with respect to one’s place in the polis. “Only if [the polis] preserved a homogeneity, or rather a harmony as Plato would have preferred to express it, based on the acceptance by each citizen of an allocation of function according to character and capacity, could it hope for salvation.”

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(moira)—that for which one is responsible, and that to which one is entitled—constitutes one’s participation within that group. It must be noted here that while the experience of one’s limits may arise from the desire to know the ‘truth’ that remains shrouded in mystery beyond one’s portion, the complete engagement with limits entails the question of personal identity, as one must fully know what one is and what one is to be in order to fill one’s portion appropriately and completely. To excel within the limits of one’s portion, to realize most fully one’s identity, is the ideal of existence, the model of which is the hero.  

The hero in the Greek cultural imagination was a means of imagining, based on the what was valued by the culture, who the members of that culture truly were; what’s more, the hero was intended to exemplify the best (arête) of what it is to be human. Arête is the integration of all of the pieces that make up human existence; it is the “filling up” of one’s moira without extending beyond its limits. It is absolutely dependent on knowing oneself. Within the ancient Greek conception, the earliest attempts to locate and understand the identity of the hero were mythic; that is, such attempts consisted in the generation of stories that were meant to depict the world as it truly is, not in a particular time or place but on a universal level, while suggesting a possible meaning of that world.

For the Greeks, the purpose of the myth was to portray the hero in such a way that the listener to the myth could not only understand, but also identity oneself with, that hero. The myth should not merely inspire the listener as an objective, neutral observer but rather should pull one into the myth itself as a depiction of one’s own world. Dennis Ford explains:

The person living within a myth identifies wholly with the characters and events of the myth. [The] oral performance and retelling of Greek myth elicited an active, hypnotic identification of the audience with the myth. The audience

39 For a comprehensive account of the evolution of the mythopoetic to the tragic to the philosophic hero within the ancient Greek cultural conception, see lectures three through five of Francis Ambrosio’s Philosophy, Religion, and the Meaning of Life.
was not merely watching a performance of a myth; it was ritually engaged in a reenactment and identification with it. … This fanatical identification with the myth annihilates my autonomous, separate ego. I no longer live ‘as if’ but in and within the myth.40

Thus the individual listener is not merely impressed by the example of the mythic hero but is rather moved to identify with and emulate the example that the hero sets. The Greek mythic heroes (Achilles and Odysseus, for example) were early representations of a way to be, based on what was valued by the Greek culture at the time: Achilles for his strength, courage, and success in battle, and Odysseus for his resourcefulness, versatility, and endurance.41 At the same time, the mythic heroes were examples of a way to pursue the question of one’s identity.

Yet for all its value as a model of the Greek conception of the hero, myth was not able to sustain itself as the primary manner of depicting the paradigm of the hero. Karen Armstrong, in her Short History of Myth, suggests that one principle cause for this failure may center around the idea of questioning, which itself (as discussed above) was such a fundamental part of the Greek cultural mindset. Following in the wake of myth, tragedy thus appeared. In some sense, tragedy retained crucial aspects of myth, constituted as it was as an account of the world and the individuals place and identity within it. Ancient Greek tragedy presented the human relationship with necessity and the gods as representative of the subjection of the individual to an objective order. M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern likewise recognize this association, as they confirm:

Greek tragedy…is founded and enacted in a certain historical situation, ‘the heroic condition of the world,’ which is apparently a continuum of the period in which the plays were composed and the earlier mythical world to which they refer. It is a condition in which the moral laws…appear ‘in their pristine liveliness’ in the shape of the gods. For the spectator of Greek tragedy the gods are the natural embodiment of those moral forces with which he is familiar and

40 Ford, The Search for Meaning, 33

which inform his daily life.\textsuperscript{42}

At the same time, however, tragedy began to \textit{question} not merely the conditions of the world but also its \textit{justness}; no longer content to merely depict the conditions of necessity, tragedy began to question why this is so and whether it \textit{should} be so. Armstrong explains:

Myth does not question itself; it demands a degree of self-identification. Tragedy, however, put some distance between itself and the traditional mythology, and queried some of the most fundamental Greek values. Were the gods really fair and just? What was the value of heroism, or Greekness, or democracy?\textsuperscript{43}

The problem which emerged in Greek tragedy is that the moral forces to which the Greeks were subjected, as these forces were embodied in their gods, often come into conflict. Yet because these forces, even when conflicting, stemmed from what the Greeks perceived to be a part of objective necessity, there was no simple way of determining wholly ‘right’ versus wholly ‘wrong.’ Thus, as G.W.F. Hegel articulates in his lectures on aesthetics,\textsuperscript{44} at the center of Greek tragedy was most often a collision, not between sides which represented good and evil, but between one-sided positions which both, in their own way, represented some good.\textsuperscript{45} While certain individual manifestations of the Greek ‘moral’ order may have been seen to conflict with other particular manifestations, each could still be seen as originating from the same underlying moral ‘framework.’ As Stephen Bungay explains, “what Hegel’s model of tragic conflict does point to very clearly is that Greek drama is set in a determinate ethical framework, and poses


\textsuperscript{43} Karen Armstrong, \textit{A Short History of Myth} (New York: Canongate, 2005), 99.

\textsuperscript{44} These lectures were originally delivered by Hegel in 1823, 1826, and 1828–1829 and later published as \textit{Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art}, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

questions of right and wrong which are problematic, and cannot be avoided.” This ambiguity of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ was clearly presented throughout specific Greek tragedies.

In Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, for example, the ‘transgression’ enacted by each character (Agamemnon, in sacrificing Iphigenia; Clytemnestra, in murdering Agamemnon; Orestes, in murdering Clytemnestra) can be seen to be driven, at least in part, by a recognition of right and necessity. While each character ultimately assumed responsibility for his or her individual actions, there is still a sense that each action was directed by an underlying objective will. Similarly, in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the positions maintained by both Antigone and Creon may be seen to have originated from each individual’s sense of what is right or good.

*Oedipus Tyrannus*, too, is a striking example. To begin, the question of Oedipus’ guilt for his own deeds must be raised; while he obviously was the immediate cause of his own suffering, in that he did, in fact, murder his father and marry his mother, it is fair to question whether he was rightfully to blame for his own actions. Yet despite the apparent plausibility of determining that Oedipus is as much a victim as a villain, Oedipus himself wholly and lucidly accepted full responsibility, ultimately punishing himself for his transgressions. As Walther Kaufmann explains, while Oedipus did commit those transgressions, he was not at fault *morally*; yet despite this fact, and despite that what has happened can be attributed as much to fate or necessity as to Oedipus himself, he takes full responsibility and holds *himself* fully accountable.47

Ultimately, this recognition of responsibility transcends the immediate depiction in the tragic drama itself to affect the witness as well. As the tragic hero increasingly recognizes

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responsibility for one’s own ‘heroic’ identity, the witness to tragedy similarly begins to assume responsibility for the heroic identity as well. By subjecting the traditional mythic conception of the world and the hero within that world to questioning, the ideal itself of ‘hero’ began to be more subject to, and thus more attainable by, the individual. The identification with the hero that myth sought to achieve became even more realizable in tragedy, as the individual witness to the tragedy is called upon in a greater capacity to serve precisely as a witness; as such, the viewer is expected not merely to understand but also to evaluate the conditions within which the hero finds oneself as well as the subsequent course of action taken by the hero. Through this evaluation, a greater identification with the hero is achieved by the witness, ultimately generating a level of participation whereby the witness realizes oneself in the place of the hero, while also substantially diminishing the space between the ideal (as hero) and the actual (as individual witness).

[T]ragedy forced the audience to face the unspeakable, and to experience extremity. It is close to the ideology of sacrifice, because it leads to katharsis, an interior purification resulting form the violent invasion of heart and mind by the emotions of pity and terror. But this new form of sacrifice was imbued with Axial compassion, because the audience learned to feel the pain of another person as though it were their own, thereby enlarging the scope of their sympathy and humanity.48

Despite this greater level of identification with and responsibility for the heroic identity through the form of tragedy, it was perhaps not until Plato presented his ideal of the philosophical hero that the ancient Greek emphasis on questioning in mystery towards identity, as a manner of knowing and understanding the world and one’s place in it, achieved its most complete and comprehensive articulation.49


49 In Friedrich Nietzsche’s view, no such progression from tragedy to Plato’s philosophical position was required. As Nietzsche explains in The Birth of Tragedy, tragic (Dionysian) art is the means by which the absence of meaning to life is revealed, while at the same time noting that tragic art itself consoles one
Plato hoped to replace both myth and tragedy with a new manner of verifiable discourse that could attain a status superior, with respect to the pursuit of truth, to that of either myth or tragedy. To this end, and in response to the mythic and tragic conceptions of ‘hero,’ Plato presented Socrates as the philosophical hero and the ideal of integrity of identity. Socrates, as he is portrayed by Plato, structured his being in the face of the divine mystery which characterized human existence; for his part, Socrates not only recognized his position within the mystery but he also embraced and engaged it. Of equal importance to the recognition of the mystery is questioning in the face of mystery. Answers to the mystery questions of existence, by their very essence, are unknowable; yet Socrates accepted and asserted as the task of human existence (undertaken through philosophy) a devotion to questioning, despite the unavailability of answers. By questioning the mystery of existence, Socrates asserted his faith in the possibility of meaning while actively assuming the responsibility for that meaning; Socrates embodied excellence (arête) in his essence as in-question and as wholly responsible for the question.

The origin of Socrates’ identity may be found in the Delphic Oracle’s command “Know thyself.” More immediately, however, Socrates’ active pursuit of questioning toward the development of his identity began with the Oracle’s decree that there was no one wiser than Socrates. Of course this claim prompted Socrates to question all those who seemed wise, who recognizes this state of existence. He asserted that tragedy alone (specifically, the historical model of Greek tragedy) sufficiently reveals the true nature of existence, including its essential lack of meaning but also its simultaneous necessary order; what’s more, Nietzsche adds that through its expression of the truth of human existence, tragedy provides the grounds on which such an existence can be embraced. As is revealed through the Dionysian aspect of Greek tragedy, the individual is connected with the world in a fundamental way, and it is through this connection that human existence itself gains a particular value. “Feeling oneself to be part of the joyous vitality of the whole, one could take participation in life to be intrinsically wonderful, despite the obvious vulnerabilities one experiences as an individual.” Thus in Nietzsche’s view, despite the obvious and inherent suffering which life entails, a clear sense of harmony with the world is possible, as is revealed through Greek tragedy, through the recognition of one’s place within the Dionysian whole.

individuals who seemingly possessed greater wisdom than he himself did, which subsequently aroused the ire of those around him and ultimately led to his execution.

Despite the charges that Socrates had not properly respected the gods, by Plato’s account Socrates’ behavior must be understood as a strict obedience to the Divine command. By declaring that there was no one wiser than Socrates, the Oracle was proclaiming a Divine Truth. At the same time, the declaration itself was ambiguous; Socrates did not fully understand the meaning of the claim or the nature of his own wisdom, thus he received the proclamation as a command to determine, for himself, its meaning. Socrates undertook his questioning in faith of the existence of a meaning to the Oracle’s claim but with personal responsibility for the determination of that meaning. This he did not just to satisfy his own wonder at the meaning of the Oracle but also because he felt it to be his religious duty to determine the meaning.51

This religious duty outweighed all other considerations for Socrates, including the possibility of his being condemned to death. Rather than change his behavior and save his own life, Socrates remained true to his questioning in pursuit of the meaning of the Divine command and the identity constituted through such questioning, and not even the threat of death could compel him to undermine his piety or his identity. In his defense to his Athenian jurors, Socrates articulated this realization:

You are mistaken, my friend, if you think that a man who is worth anything ought to spend his time weighing up the prospects of life and death. He has only one thing to consider in performing any action—that is, whether he is acting rightly or wrongly, like a good man or a bad one.52

Ultimately, Socrates concluded by asserting his conviction in his chosen manner of living and behaving, and his attendant belief that, once his convictions are formed, to act otherwise would

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52 Ibid., 28b.
be to act in disobedience to his identity and the Divine will; such action would in fact be a challenge to the law of necessity which governed his existence. Thus, Socrates refused to allow a fear of the possibility of death to determine his actions or his identity.

Essentially, Socrates was condemned on account of his refusal to concede his beliefs and his identity and accept a life not driven by questioning. In his own view, to so concede would constitute disobedience to the Divine Mystery; further, for Socrates there really was no other way to live, as it is only through such questioning that true arête can be achieved. “To let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking, and examining both myself and others is really the very best that a man can do, and life without this sort of examination is not worth living.” Socrates was not condemned merely for his chosen manner of living but also for his insistence on remaining true to his choice and, ultimately, to his duty and his identity. Whereas his accusers and jurors were guided by the belief that a fear of death would be enough to direct an individual’s beliefs and actions, Socrates maintained that the only truly grounded and justifiable fear is that of failing to live properly: “The difficulty is not so much to escape death; the real difficulty is to escape from doing wrong.”

Through this account of Socrates’ engagement with death, Plato presents Socrates as the philosophical hero in his piety to the Divine mystery of existence and his devotion to questioning the mystery, in individual responsibility, toward meaning. Yet beyond his defense of his identity, Socrates offered another account of death that emphasizes these philosophically heroic qualities while also further illustrating Plato’s underlying theory of truth and the role of faith within that theory.

Whereas the Apology presents Socrates’ defense of his identity and behavior to an Athenian

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53 Ibid., 38a.
54 Ibid., 39a.
jury, the *Phaedo* presents Socrates’ defense of his attitude toward death to his friends. This ‘second’ defense is dependent upon two points: the first is that the soul and the body are representative of two distinct value systems, of which the soul is the greater, and the second is that while the body perishes in death the soul survives.\(^5\)

Socrates claims that the philosopher, more than any other individual, by focusing on the soul as opposed to the body, attains a certain level of freedom for the soul from the body; that is, through a focus on the soul, a separation of soul from body begins to develop. Further, it is through *reflection*, freed from the inaccuracies and deficiencies of clarity which are characteristic of the bodily senses, that truth can be attained. The body leads the soul astray, whereas reflection leads the soul to truth. Because true knowledge belongs to the realm of the *eidos*, which only the soul can apprehend, and not to its incomplete physical manifestations in body, only through contemplation of the *eidos* can one approach true knowledge. Likewise, with respect to the self, only a focus on one’s soul can yield a full, true sense of personal identity. Only when the body has been transcended in favor of the soul can true knowledge of the self be attained and one’s identity established (essentially a response to the Delphic decree “know thyself”).

It is precisely the philosopher who chooses the value system of the soul over that of the body; further, it is through this *deciding* to value the soul over the body that the philosopher attempts, in a manner of speaking, to free the soul from the body. Early in the *Phaedo* Socrates and his listeners all agree that death is nothing more or less than a separation of soul from

\(^5\) “We are in fact convinced that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself. It seems, to judge from the argument, that the wisdom which we desire and upon which we profess to have set our hearts will be attainable only when we are dead, and not in our lifetime. If no pure knowledge is possible in the company of the body, then either it is totally impossible to acquire knowledge, or it is only possible after death, because it is only then that the soul will be separate and independent of the body.” (*Phaedo*, in *Collected Dialogues*, 66d–67a)
body. It is, therefore, on account of the philosopher’s constant effort to realize that separation, to free the soul from the body, that the philosopher is inherently and fundamentally prepared for death; the philosopher’s lifetime of attempting to achieve this separation is, in essence, preparation for death. Socrates, as a philosopher and thus as one who has striven for this separation, is unafraid, in fact cheerful, in the face of death:

If at its release the soul is pure and carries with it no contamination of the body, because it never willingly associated with it in life, but has shunned it and kept itself separate as its regular practice—in other words, if it has pursued philosophy in the right way and really practiced how to face death easily—this is what ‘practicing death’ means…. If this is its condition, then it departs to that place which is, like itself, invisible, divine, immortal, and wise, where, on its arrival, happiness awaits it, and release from uncertainty and folly, from fears and uncontrolled desires, and all other human evils, and where, as they say of the initiates in the Mysteries, it really spends the rest of time with God.  

While this account is sufficient to convince that a separation of soul from body is beneficial, there remains the question of the soul’s survival after death. Even if that to which the soul would progress after death is of greater worth than simply ‘bodily’ existence, it would all mean very little if the soul is unable to survive the journey. For this reason Socrates proceeds to offer four progressive ‘proofs’ of the immortality of the soul, after which his listeners are fully prepared to accept Socrates’ contentions as well as his joyous death. Death, after all, is the greatest fate that can befall the philosopher: after the body dies, the soul, which alone allows access to the absolute and eternal eidos, suffers no harm and is finally freed from the physical and sensory constraints of the body.

The danger in this account, however, is to accept that Socrates has, in fact, proven anything to be true. Luckily for his listeners, Socrates cautions them against this very thing. What is most striking in Plato’s account of Socrates’ final lesson here is the subsequent assertion by Socrates

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56 Plato, Phaedo, 64c.

57 Ibid., 80e–81a
that what he himself has said must not be taken as truth. In the *Apology*, he had already conceded that he does not know what comes after death. As the *Phaedo* nears its closing stages, and as the time approaches for Socrates to take his poison and test his proof, he offers a final conclusion regarding the theory of the soul he has just presented:

Of course, no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them. But that either this or something very like it is a true account of our souls and their future habitations—since we have clear evidence that the soul is immortal—this, I think, is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth risking, for the risk is a noble one. We should use such accounts to inspire our selves with confidence….

There is one way, then, in which a man can be free from all anxiety about the fate of his soul—if in life he has abandoned bodily pleasures and adornments, as foreign to his purpose and likely to do more harm than good, and has devoted himself to the pleasures of acquiring knowledge, and so by deckimg his soul not with a borrowed beauty but with its own—with self-control, and goodness, and courage, and liberality, and truth—has fitted himself to await his journey to the next world.”

Socrates account of the immortality of the soul is thus not a proof of fact but rather a statement of his particular *theory* of death and life. This theory is not a scheme of knowledge; rather, it is meant as a ‘spectacle,’ a witnessing of (and thereby participation in) the mystery. The task of the philosopher is to theorize, to recreate the drama of life and death. Theory does not give access to reality. The purpose of a theory is to explain what one believes and why, while giving evidence that a particular theory is a rational plausibility that is convincing and compelling. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates does not necessarily *prove* the immortality of the soul, but he does make the notion of the immortality of the soul plausible; what’s more, he gives a thorough and sound representation of the form a life should take, once it is assumed that the particular theory itself is accepted as true. If one spends one life favoring the values of the soul over those of the body

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59 Plato, *Phaedo*, 114d–e.
(this is, in Socrates’ terms, care of the soul), and if one behaves in a manner informed and directed by his explanation, then one has sufficient reason to believe (to hope) that one’s soul will endure beyond the death of one’s physical body and attain a position of perfect and absolute knowledge. In the Republic, after fully explicating his notion of the ideal polis, Socrates concludes in a fashion similar to his conclusion of the discussion of the soul in the Phaedo, noting that what he has described is not necessarily true:

[P]erhaps there is a pattern of [the ideal polis, as he has described it] laid up in heaven for him who wishes to contemplate it and so beholding to constitute himself its citizen. But it makes no difference whether it exists now or ever will come into being. The politics of this city only will be his and of none other.  

Just as tragedy was intended as a spectacle that ultimately inspired identification in those who witnessed it, theory is likewise intended as a spectacle that inspires identification through contemplation. Once contemplated, the theory demonstrates how such a society, based on such values, would look. This ought to be enough to demonstrate that the choice of such a world, and therefore the necessary choice of such values, is best. Thus care of the soul, as extolled and exemplified by Socrates, is theorizing about the implications of choices made, “so that with consideration of all these things he will be able to make a reasoned choice between the better and the worse life.”

In Plato’s conception of the world and human existence, there is a place for absolute Truth. The problem, of course, is that finite human beings cannot attain such truth. Absolute Truth resides in the realm of the eidos, while finite human beings are relegated to the world of appearances and of mystery. Yet the individual’s responsibility to mystery is to question; only through questioning does the individual determine value and identity for oneself. Theory,

60 Plato, Republic, in Collected Dialogues, 592b.

61 Ibid., 618d.
therefore, must be understood as the culmination of such questioning; it is an explanation (explicitly not a statement of truth) regarding existence and the conditions within which such existence is entered into and lived. A theory is created as an explanation, and its purpose is to be contemplated with the ultimate hope of appropriately informing and directing human existence. For a theory to be a “success,” it must fulfill this twofold responsibility to reality: it must be a plausible account of the specific mystery of human existence which it seeks to contemplate, and from the conclusion it reaches regarding that mystery it must offer direction. Further, the theory must take responsibility for that explanation by positing itself as a directive for all who contemplate the theory as such. Socrates’ theory of the soul, while explaining the basis for his hope in the face of death, recognizes the irreducibility of the tension between this hope and the essential human limit realized through death. Death itself is not overcome, but through a recognition of the distinction between body and soul and through the establishment of a wholly integrated identity through care of the soul, one can transcend the body and its limits. Through hope, one becomes “philosophical”; that is, one practices death with a fuller understanding of one’s limits and of one’s identity. Ultimately the theory, a story that is generated both to offer an account of a particular aspect of human existence and provide direction based on that account, is accepted by the individual on faith.

The philosophical hero (Socrates), representative of the end of the evolution of the Greek hero, represents excellence in both his way of being as well as his way of pursuing the question of his being. According to Plato, Socrates is a philosophical hero because he is the embodiment of the best way to be human, to deal with mystery, and to relate to the questions of life, which are unknowable. Philosophy is excellence as a way of life; that is, the right way to be a citizen.
The philosophical hero is thus, in Plato’s conception, the citizen hero. For Socrates, to consider arête, there must first be a common, shared task associated with being human. The first task is, therefore, to discover the function of the individual, or the individual’s identity. This function, according to Socrates, may not ultimately be revealed; however, it is essential to understand the necessity of seeking this function. “We shall be better men if we believe it right to look for what we don’t know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don’t know we can never discover.” It is essential to recognize the inherent mystery to human existence, but it is equally necessary to question. Knowledge of one’s identity is the only way to achieve integrity (embODYing piety, wisdom, courage, and justice) as a person, not necessarily by the answer, but in a way of wholly addressing the question. Socrates embodies arête in his way of being human; that is, in his way of living the question (care of the soul). Socrates is a himself, in his conviction, a response to the question because he is essentially in-question. Because there can be no definitive answer, Socrates’ identity is the response to the question in his wholeness as in-question. Socrates is the spirit of questioning and the spirit of philosophy; he is the philosophical hero of arête, just as Achilles was the hero of war and Odysseus the hero of survival.

For the ancient Greeks, the idea of personal identity is essentially in question, and that question is embodied in the figure of the hero. The meaning of individual human existence is largely determined by the identity that one reveals for oneself. As ancient Greek culture moved from a mythic through a tragic to a philosophical perspective, this notion of identity

63 Plato, Meno, in Collected Dialogues, 86b.
64 As Ambrosio contends, such meaning is engaged through the cultivation of the identity of the hero. See Philosophy, Religion, and the Meaning of Life.
evolved as well while always maintaining a central place within the cultural imagination. Within the ancient Greek cultural imagination, myth, tragedy, and theory are each particular ways of attempting to discern the meaning of the world and one’s own individual identity in response to the world and the position in mystery from which the world is experienced and ‘known.’ In each case, an assertion of knowledge is made which simultaneously fulfills both tasks; the individual articulates a particular understanding of the meaning of the world, while also structuring one’s identity in and as a response to that meaning. Yet at the same time, the response itself implies the preservation of mystery, as such mystery provides not merely the precondition for the myth or the theory but also the ground to which the myth or theory remains rooted. Myth and theory are therefore, for the ancient Greeks, religious endeavors, in that in each case meaning is sought within the human situation in mystery. Neither myth nor theory are, therefore, statements of truth; rather, they are metaphoric accounts of the search for meaning, which are taken on and followed in faith and which thereby constitute a progressive commitment toward self-identification.

*Truth: The Modernist Experience*

Whereas the ancient Greek mythic and tragic positions and the philosophical conceptions of Socrates and Plato centered around an acknowledgment of, and acceptance of, the presence of mystery in human existence, what will here be characterized as the Modernist position refuses such an acceptance; rather, the Modernist position maintains that though certain mysteries may persist, they may eventually be overcome through human endeavor, and meaning (Truth) may ultimately be posited in the ground which remains once all mystery has been vanquished. John Stuart Mill succinctly states this conviction: “All the grand sources of human suffering are in a
great degree, many of them almost entirely, conquerable by human care and effort.”65 At the same time, whereas the ancient Greeks sought identification with their heroes and their accounts of meaning, the Modernist position depended instead on separation and objectification:

The philosophic mind knows through dialectic and conceptual thinking. Whereas the mythic mind knows by identification with the characters and actions of stories—that is, by submitting to their examples—the philosophical mind deliberately disengages from and objectifies knowledge.66

While a comprehensive survey of Modernist thought is not practical here, what will be attempted is a summary discussion of representative thinkers who conflated questions of faith with the pursuit of truth in a characteristically Modernist fashion. Over the course of this discussion a distinctly ‘religious’ engagement will emerge in the Modernist position against the mysterious quality of human existence in the world with respect both to meaning (Truth) and to the ultimate declaration and definition of one’s place in the world.

Of course the transition from the ancient Greek to the Modernist philosophical position was not immediate. The Hellenistic philosophies of stoicism and skepticism that more immediately followed Plato similarly addressed the possibility for individual identity and value in a world fundamentally characterized by mystery, yet neither position offered a legitimate account of meaning which wholly embraced the mystery and the individual’s place therein. Stoicism emphasized not merely an acceptance of but a complete acquiescence to the mysteries of the world. Rather than attempt to understand and fully engage the world, the stoic instead urges withdrawal into one’s own consciousness, free from the anxieties and sufferings inherent to existence in the world. While on the surface this position seems to accord with Socrates’ emphasis on the values of the soul over those of the body, stoicism does not give sufficient


66 Ford, The Search for Meaning, 71
consideration to the meaning of the external world and one’s place in that world. Rather than attempt to understand (even within the limits of possible human understanding) what existence in the world means, the question is wholly abandoned in favor of an existence which is wholly contained within and defined by individual consciousness. In a similar fashion, skepticism also abandons the question of the meaning of existence in the world by systematically doubting the existence of the outer world in its entirety, claiming instead that no external knowledge is possible and that the individual must content oneself with self-knowledge alone. The existence of the external, objective world, and thus any possibility for one’s relation to it, is extinguished from the outset in skepticism.

While the emphasis that both stoicism and skepticism place on self-consciousness and self-knowledge is appropriate with respect to the Socratic aim of self-identification, both the stoic and skeptic insistence on wholly forsaking the outer world to that end deprives the identity that is so constituted the opportunity to attain a particular meaning within the context of existence in the world. In contrast, in medieval (particularly in Christian) philosophy, consideration of the external world is restored, primarily as it stands in relation to an absolute cause of its being (God). Yet the medieval characterization of the Absolute and of the world never fully attains the status of rational knowing but rather stands as an inarticulable ‘sense’ of the presence of, and unity with, the Absolute. As fundamentally limited creatures, human beings simply do not possess the capacity to truly know and understand the Absolute; yet rather than a shortcoming of the human condition this fact is accepted as a celebration of the Divine itself, and thus the ideal philosophical position is to accept that the Absolute alone, by virtue of its Divinity, can wholly possess Truth. Even Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the most ‘rationalist’ of medieval Christian philosophers, recognized the ultimate limits of human reason in attempting to discern the existence and character of God.
In his attempt to reconcile Aristotle’s system of logic and metaphysics with Christianity, Aquinas distinguished reason and revelation as the two possible paths to knowledge of the Divine, ultimately concluding that reason without revelation is adequate to allow one to conclude that God exists. However, Aquinas acknowledged that human knowledge of a thing is limited by the knowledge of the essence of that thing, and thus full knowledge of the character of God is not possible for human reason. At the same time, the inability of human reason to fully know the essence of God is not a sufficient reason to doubt the Christian account of the nature of God. As Aquinas contended, “Not everything...that is said about God, even though it be beyond the power of reason to investigate, is at once to be rejected as false.”

Ultimately, Aquinas contended that while reason can legitimately lead one to accept the existence of God, the inability of reason to fully know God need not thereby lead one to conclude that belief in God is inherently undermined by reason’s inability to know. Rather, as Aquinas concluded, “demonstrable truth is in agreement with the faith of the Christian religion.” Though not inherently contradictory, this position is tenable only as long as “demonstrable truth” and the tenets of the Christian religion do not come into direct conflict, a condition which could not be maintained as the medieval period began to give way to the Enlightenment. As the Modern era progressed, the increasing sophistication of scientific thinking and technology came into greater and greater conflict with religious ‘Truth’; the two positions in science and religion became more disparate and eventually wholly incompatible, and a choice between either religious or scientific Truth seemed inevitable. This tension is perhaps best exemplified in the debate that centered around the position of the Earth within the

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68 Ibid.
The geocentric model of the universe, whereby the Earth stands as the permanent and immobile center of the universe, was still the accepted model for medieval thinkers. Although the Ptolemaic system altered the model slightly by positioning the Earth slightly off-center, the Earth still stood as the fixed body around which the stars and other planets revolved. This conception of the cosmos was wholly in accord with the Christian doctrine of the time, which also asserted the permanence of the world that God created and its position at the center of His attention and love. This is not to suggest an inherent connection between the Ptolemaic model and the Christian conception of the universe and the human place within it; while the Ptolemaic model sufficiently explained and predicted the observed movement of the planets, it provided no explicit foundation for a cosmological demonstration of the existence of God or the creation of the universe by God. At the same time, however, there was no inherent tension between the Ptolemaic model and Christian doctrine, which is precisely what allowed the two conceptions to peacefully coexist; because neither openly contradicted the other, the scientific and religious conceptions were able to exist as parallel, if not complementary, accounts of the universe.

However, this harmony would last only until the dawn of the Modernist/Enlightenment period, when Copernicus “resurrected” Aristarchus’ 1800-year-old contention that the Earth itself actually moves in a manner similar to the other planets. By positing that the Earth and all the other planets revolve around the Sun, Copernicus was able to more accurately and efficiently explain and predict the observable motion in the universe. While the initial reaction to Copernicus was mild, Galileo’s subsequent diligent observations and demonstrations of the

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69 A thorough account of the evolution in astronomy from Aristotle to Galileo, Kepler, and beyond exceeds the scope of the present discussion. For a comprehensive account of this evolution and the implications for both scientific and religious thought, see Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), chapter seven of Karen Armstrong, The Case for God (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), and chapter seven of Marmysz, The Path of Philosophy.
veracity of Copernicus’ contention elevated the tension between the traditional religious conception and the new scientific account to a critical point. Further, the possibility of absolute Truth itself seemingly suffered, as both the religious and scientific conceptions that had held sway for so long were simultaneously undermined by new observations, demonstrations, and conclusions. A choice was demanded between the new scientific view and the old religious conception, and a new Truth was required which could once again reunite the scientific and religious positions and stand as a comprehensive and unifying absolute ground of human knowledge and experience.

René Descartes, writing in the 17th century, took up the challenge of revealing such a unifying ground. Commonly recognized as the first “Modern” philosopher, Descartes attempted to rationally account for the existence of both God and the world, contending that a firm foundation in certainty (that is, a ‘truth’ with which one can begin) is necessary to achieve true knowledge of either; one must first find an original truth which can be arrived at, wholly understood, and accepted independently, and without the certainty of this single foundational truth nothing else can be known about the world. In order to achieve such certainty, Descartes assumed for himself a method of systematic doubt, whereby he questioned the veracity of all that he had previously held to be true. Only through such doubt did Descartes believe he could clear the way for the revelation of a foundational truth, which would be absolutely free from doubt and could thereby reveal further truths and elucidate the true nature of God and the world. According to Descartes’ explicitly articulated intention in his *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, in order for anything to be accepted as true, it must reveal itself to him as such, with no ground upon which it could be doubted; that which is to be accepted as true must be simply understood to be so, purely independent of any judgment. Descartes’ foundational certainty, “I am, I exist,” attained through a recognition of himself as a thinking being, allowed
him to reach further conclusions regarding the nature of his existence, as well as the existence of God and an external world.

By beginning his philosophical pursuit in absolute doubt in order to determine rationally and systematically what actually exists, Descartes embodies the Modern spirit in its conviction regarding the human capacity for certainty and the intelligibility of the world. According to this view, a particular degree of certainty regarding the world is attainable through human understanding; further, through the achievement of such understanding, the individual is able to determine for oneself a system of conduct which is substantiated and legitimized by the beginning certainty regarding the world.

With his *Meditations on a First Philosophy*, Descartes has two goals: to determine a suitable, self-evident foundation for all knowledge, and to prove that God exists. For Descartes, questions of ‘God’ and the ‘soul’ are the primary questions with which philosophy should concern itself. Moreover, because so many irreligious thinkers are not convinced by arguments for the existence of God, philosophy ought to formulate an irrefutable proof of God’s existence:

I know that the only reason why many irreligious people are unwilling to believe that God exists and that the human mind is distinct from the body is the alleged fact that no one has hitherto been able to demonstrate these points. Now I completely disagree with this: I think that when properly understood almost all the arguments that have been put forward on these issues by the great men have the force of demonstrations, and I am convinced that it is scarcely possible to provide any arguments which have not already been produced by someone else. Nevertheless, I think there can be no more useful service to be rendered in philosophy than to conduct a careful search once and for all, for the best of these arguments, and to set them out so precisely and clearly as to produce for the future a general agreement that they amount to demonstrative proofs.\(^70\)

Descartes insists that, after he has articulated his complete argument, “there will be no one left in the world who will dare to call into doubt either the existence of God or the real distinction

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between the human soul and body.”

The ultimate goal underlying Descartes’ Meditations is the revelation of a foundation, accessible through experience, upon which his physics and his philosophy can be based. Once such a foundation has been established, Descartes further hopes to show how the existence of God can be demonstrated upon that foundation in experience. He opens his Meditations by first articulating the need for an overarching doubt, aimed at questioning all that he has held to be true, so that he can “build anew” an enduring structure for the sciences and for philosophy which can be asserted as true beyond doubt. For Descartes, this is a necessary starting point; before he can determine what, from experience, must be taken as true, he must first systematically suspect everything which presents itself as true until it can be proven to be so.

Following the suspension of his acceptance of any certainty and assumption of a position in radical doubt, the first ‘truth’ that Descartes finds that he can accept wholly on its own merit is of his own existence: “I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.” This truth, along with the attendant elaboration that he is a thinking being, becomes for Descartes a foundational truth.

Descartes then turns his attention to material things outside of the self, and his ability to determine whether such things truly exist. He begins by noting that, at the outset of his engagement with corporeal things, they often seem more “clearly and distinctly” real as objects than do certain elements of his mental being. But does the explanation for this clarity and distinctness lie solely within the object itself? Descartes is not ready to posit such character with the object itself. By examining the material change in a piece of wax when it is melted, he reveals that there is nothing purely physical in the new “state” of the wax which clearly reveals

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71 Ibid., 6.

72 Ibid., 17.
it to be the same piece of wax. What enables him to see it as the same substance is his understanding and judgment. And while he may be mistaken in his judgment of what he perceives, he cannot be mistaken in recognizing that it is he himself who is judging or seemingly perceiving. Thus, at the end of Meditation II, Descartes concludes that there is nothing which he can more clearly know than his own mind.

With this foundation firmly in place, Descartes is ready to expand his knowledge to God and the material world. In his third Meditation, Descartes attempts to prove that God’s existence can be known with certainty. Yet before he can adequately demonstrate the truth of God’s existence, Descartes must first reveal and subsequently avoid the source of potential error in achieving ‘truth’ in such matters. He notes that objective reality (ideas) in itself cannot be false; rather, it is only in the presumption of the correspondence of the idea to an object, between objective reality and formal reality, that error may arise. This presumption of a correspondence is called by Descartes judgment; in Descartes’ account, judgment is what ultimately leads to error, thus in order to determine the ‘truth’ of ideas, Descartes must first determine whether ideas actually arise from external objects as from a cause.

Descartes asserts that the most clear and distinct idea he has is of God:

[T]he idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, immortal, omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances.\(^{73}\)

However, as Descartes understands the notions ‘cause’ and ‘effect,’ any cause, in order to be such, must have at least as much objective reality as its effect:

It is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much <reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect unless it possessed it? It follows from this both that

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 28.
something cannot arise from nothing, and also that what is more perfect—that is, contains in itself more reality—cannot arise from what is less perfect. And this is transparently true not only in the case of effects which possess <what the philosophers call> actual or formal reality, but also in the case of ideas, where one is considering only <what they call> objective reality.\(^{74}\)

With this in mind, Descartes concludes that if an objective reality exceeds that of which Descartes could himself be the cause, then what the idea represents itself must actually exist as the cause of that idea. Further, if such a formal (that is, independent of Descartes’ mind) cause exists, then there is at least one other existing being in the world besides Descartes.

Ultimately, it is the idea of God which Descartes concludes he cannot himself cause. Therefore, because the qualities of the idea of God suggest qualities which Descartes himself could neither cause nor possess, God must exist as the formal cause of the objective reality of the idea Descartes has of God:

So there remains only the idea of God; and I must consider whether there is anything in the idea which could not have originated in myself. By the word ‘God’ I understand a substance that is infinite, <eternal, immutable,> independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists. All these attributes are such that, the more carefully I concentrate on them, the less possible it seems that they could have originated from me alone. So from what has been said it must be concluded that God necessarily exists.\(^{75}\)

Without here evaluating the strength of Descartes’ arguments or the soundness of his conclusions, what must be emphasized is the position that Descartes creates for himself with respect to belief and truth. For Descartes, the meaning of the world and of his existence is something that can be known by the human mind. What’s more, unlike Socrates’ contention that the human soul could eventually achieve Truth but only after it had been freed of the body through death, Descartes contends that he himself will attain such certainty purely through the

\(^{74}\) Ibid.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 31.
proper use and application of his own rational capacities. Thus the foundational truth with which Descartes began, that he exists as a thinking being, ultimately allows him to realize the truth of the existence of God and of the external world, from which he could then grasp countless other truths regarding those entities. Descartes’ position thus represents a transcendence of mystery to a position of absolute knowledge of both the world itself and one’s place in the world, while at the same time providing purely rational ground upon which the existence of God can be accepted.

George Berkeley, who developed a comprehensive idealism to refute both skepticism and atheism, may similarly be seen as a Modernist example of supplanting faith with presumed truth. In his Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, Berkeley fully articulates his claim that there is no such thing as material substance. Rather, according to Berkeley, everything that exists does so as an idea in the mind. All that we can know are sensible qualities of things which we perceive, and such qualities exist only in the mind’s perception of them. To be is, therefore, to be perceived; that is, only those things which are immediately perceived actually exist, and it is precisely this perception which constitutes the existence of the sensible ideas. There is nothing that is not perceived that can be said to exist, and there is nothing which exists which is not also perceived.

One immediate problem which arises from Berkeley’s claim is that of continuity of existence. If things which one perceives only exist in one’s mind, how is it possible to account for the continued existence of those qualities in the absence of one’s perception, or the seeming consistency between one’s perception of such a quality and a similar perception of someone else? If, as Berkeley contends, all that exists are sensible ideas, in the absence of being perceived such ideas would cease to exist. Yet that the experience of sensible qualities of things appears to be both intersubjective and perpetual, independent of an individual perception,
suggests to Berkeley that all ideas must exist in perpetual perception by an absolute mind, through which their constant existence as sensible ideas is maintained:

To me it is evident...that sensible things cannot exist otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I conclude, not that they have no real existence, but that seeing they depend not on my thought, and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, there must be some other mind wherein they exist. As sure therefore as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent spirit who contains and supports it.76

There is, therefore, a mind which transcends all minds and which contains in it all sensible ideas: the mind of God. While it is true that things only exist in their being perceived, it is the eternal and infinite perception of God which ultimately animates the existence of all sensible ideas. Such ideas exist eternally in the mind of God, and it is God’s perception which bestows and maintains their existence:

*Sensible things do really exist: and if they really exist, they are necessarily perceived by an infinite mind; therefore there is an infinite mind, or God. This furnishes you with a direct and immediate demonstration, from a most evident principle, of the being of a God.*77

Whereas Descartes sought to prove the existence of God in order to better know and understand the sensible world, Berkeley’s proof of the existence of God can only come *after* his determination of the true nature of the world. In fact, it is only the fact that sensible objects exist exclusively in the mind that clearly points to the existence of God. Further, not only does God’s perception of ideas maintain the existence of those ideas, but it is the manner in which God exhibits these things for human perception which constitutes the order and nature of their existence, taken as laws of nature. Regardless of the differing directions in which their contentions operate, both Descartes and Berkeley have presented religious truths regarding the


77 Ibid., 47.
nature of individual human existence as well as that of the world, explicitly concluding that a
demarcation stands between the two fundamentally separate entities of ‘self’ and ‘world’ and
thus simultaneously implying the need to elucidate the terms of that demarcation. However, it
still remains to be fully revealed how these two seemingly separate entities are to be related and
how the individual is to fully actualize and engage one’s ‘place’ in the world. If ‘religious’
knowledge is meant to provide orientation for the individual and suggest a proper way of
understanding and interacting with the world, it remains to be seen how either Descartes’ or
Berkeley’s achievement of Truth provide such orientation; the question of the meaning of such
Truth remains.

Immanuel Kant, writing more than a century after Descartes, operates from within similar
presumptions and attains similar convictions regarding the human capacity for certainty and the
intelligibility of the world. Just as Descartes believed that the individual human, through the
assumption of radical doubt, could ultimately attain certainty, Kant likewise believed that the
human mind is capable of attaining certain knowledge. However, in Kant’s view, there are
limits to what can be known; objects in the world are not ultimately known in themselves, but
rather are known through specific categories of the mind, and the noumena (God, freedom,
immortality) are unknown and unknowable. In his Critique of Pure Reason, Kant lists the
twelve “original pure concepts of synthesis,” categories of quantity, quality, relation, and
modality, which the mind possesses a priori and through which an understanding of the world is
attained. Kant contends that these categories of the mind determine how the mind engages with
objects and thus what the mind can know of those objects. However, this view does not suggest
that what one may know is reduced to an individual or subjective understanding of what one
experiences; rather, Kant adds that the categories of the mind are universal aspects of human
reason and understanding, thus objective knowledge of the world is possible. While not
dismissing the very objectivity of such knowledge, Kant does note that any individual can attain such knowledge. This is an important distinction, emphasizing Kant’s (and the general Modernist) emphasis on individual freedom and autonomy, through the universal human capacity for reason, to attain and understand truth for oneself. Rather than defer to traditional/historical sources of authority, Kant (and other Modernist thinkers) contended that the individual, through the use of reason, has the capacity to determine for oneself what is truth and what is right action. In Kant’s case, this contention is illustrated by his conception of moral behavior and the existence of God.

Kant’s account of a rational basis and justification for morality and belief may be seen to be in response to David Hume, who proclaimed the absurdity of equating belief with the use of reason. In his Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, Hume examined different aspects and varieties of religious claims, ultimately concluding that there is never sufficient evidence in any case to “prove” the truth of religious beliefs.\(^78\) Despite this lack of reasonable evidence, Hume did not go so far as to condemn all religious belief; rather, he insisted that such belief be recognized as fundamentally distinct from the use of reason. According to Hume’s account, although it is apparent that religious convictions are often propounded as if they were actual truths, the essence of such belief, for it to truly qualify as belief, ought to exist beyond the notion of truth altogether. On this point, however, Kant intercedes on behalf of the possible

\(^78\) By Hume’s account, the presumed qualities of a cause cannot exceed those of the experienced effect. Thus, if there is a God who created the world, then that God’s qualities cannot exceed the qualities that can be directly experienced in the world. There is no clear evidence in the world for a moral mandate, thus to infer that God has established one is to extend beyond what the ‘effect’ (experience) shows. Similarly, there is nothing in this world which suggests the existence of some greater afterlife, thus there is no evidence to suggest that such exists. Thus, Hume concludes: “All the philosophy, therefore, in the world, and all the religion, which is nothing but a species of philosophy, will never be able to carry us beyond the usual course of experience, or give us measures of conduct and behaviour different from those which are furnished by reflections on common life. No new fact can ever be inferred from the religious hypothesis; no event foreseen or foretold; no reward or punishment expected or dreaded, beyond what is already known by practice and observation.” (David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977], 101.)
harmonious union of reason and belief. While Kant would not equate belief with empirical knowledge, he does associate the two by noting the role reason plays in the attainment of both.

As was stated earlier, Kant claims that objects in the world are experienced and understood through universal categories of the mind, and it is thus through these categories that knowledge is obtained. What can be understood through the categories must be capable of being given to the senses. God, however, cannot be sensed and therefore transcends the categories of human understanding, thus experience alone can neither prove nor disprove God’s existence. Despite this, Kant maintains that the concept of God presents itself to human understanding consistently and convincingly enough to conclude that, though ‘God’ is not a possible object of knowledge, neither is God an illusion. Ultimately, Kant’s notion of God will function as a sort of unifying force within his overarching conception of human morality, a system which is, in Kant’s view, wholly accessible and understandable through the use of reason.

Kant suggests that the individual’s relation to the world is not limited to what can be known of that world; there is also a practical element, or the element of action. Further, Kant claims that the individual’s actions are subject to an a priori moral law that is independent of empirical experience. He begins with the assumption that, for any moral law to carry with it the compulsion of absolute necessity which makes it valid as moral law, the grounds for accepting and following that moral law cannot simply be found in the individual nor in the specific encounter of the individual with the world. Rather, he concludes, the grounds for moral obligation lie “a priori solely in concepts of pure reason.”79 Kant insists that only the good will can be taken as good without qualification and without reference to anything else in the world; the good will is good in itself and is determinate of morality. Further, it is the true function of

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reason to produce such a good will as an end (as good) in itself. A will is good when it does its duty, which is to act out of reverence for the moral law, strictly because it is recognized as good (and not, instead, to achieve some other separate desired effect, such as pleasure or even happiness). The good will, then, as an absolute moral value, exists wholly independently of individual human experience, and it is recognized as such through a priori reason; further, one’s acting in accordance with the law that the good prescribes affirms and asserts that good as moral. This is the essence of Kant’s Categorical Imperative, which states that one should “act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” Through pure a priori reason alone, one recognizes one’s duty to act in accordance with this imperative, and reason alone provides the power to act accordingly.

This moral law, what Kant calls the Categorical Imperative, appeals to an individual’s sense of duty as a universal ‘force.’ As a moral law, the categorical imperative is followed from within, as Kant concludes that the recognition of ‘right’ or ‘good’ action is attained through the individual use of reason; moral commands are, therefore, not derived from God nor from any other external source, yet such commands maintain a particular force as an absolute because both reason and the individual recognition of responsibility to moral duty (that is, to the demands of the categorical imperative) are universal.

To this claim of the universality of morality, Kant adds that the human capacity for moral reason can support belief in God. In Book II of his Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, Kant equates the universal duty of each individual toward moral perfection with the archetype of the Son of God. It is through a “practical faith” in this archetype, the Son of God, that man is led to God, as only through aspiring to emulate this model may one hope to gain acceptance.

80 Ibid., 37.
with God.\textsuperscript{81} What’s more, the existence of the archetype, as it is realized through reason alone, is sufficient for man’s understanding to lead one to belief in God. Further, despite the fact that human action must always fall short of the Divine model, Kant insists that it is the \textit{disposition} which directs those acts that will ultimately foster an “endless progress of our goodness”\textsuperscript{82} toward that ideal set by the divine archetype. Although such an ideal will not be reached, the proper disposition will allow one to continuously move toward that ideal and thus be “well-pleasing” to God.\textsuperscript{83} Therefore, Kant’s conception of the \textit{a priori} moral sense, universally understood and accepted through the human use of reason, has led ultimately to a conception of “the true religion, which…from now on is able to maintain itself on rational grounds,”\textsuperscript{84} as it is the moral disposition, which is centered around the individual’s duty in moral action, which is the means for one’s relation to God. The individual’s moral improvement is necessarily one’s own task and duty and can be attained only through one’s own efforts, guided and directed by reason.

In sharp contrast to Hume, who insisted that religious faith be set apart from that which can be known through reason alone, Kant returned reason to a place of primacy for religion as the sole manner in which the Divine intention can be known. However, the emphasis for Kant is not necessarily the movement of \textit{belief} but rather moral \textit{action} as a derivative of a rationally recognized divine disposition. As Kant asserts, it is not through belief or any other movement beyond reason that one constitutes one’s relation to God; rather, it is only through action, inspired by the divine


\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 60.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 61.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 79.
disposition as it is revealed through reason, that one can live morally and relate to God.

Through his faith in the human capacity for reason, as a universal quality, Immanuel Kant was able to assert his case regarding the particular manner of recognizing the existence of God and a manner of right conduct; further, he concluded that, precisely because reason is absolute and universal, every human being is equally capable of attaining and acting from within the same realizations. Ultimately, through the use of reason, Kant’s overarching system of morality functions as an absolute which can legitimately govern human existence. On this account, Kant is exemplary of the Modernist position regarding the capacity for (and capability) of human reason, while demonstrating a manner in which, through the use of human reason, one reaches a particular absolute foundation for one’s understanding of the world as well as an absolute direction for one’s conduct with the world.

A final example of the attainment of a particular ‘religious’ truth through purely human capacities may be found in G.W.F. Hegel’s conception of the human reconciliation with Spirit. Hegel’s religious thought is a synthesis of fideism, the notion that one must move beyond evidence to achieve belief in God, and rationalism, the idea that reason alone leads one to God. History, according to Hegel, demonstrates more than either fideism or rationalism alone can reveal regarding the truth of religion. In his youth, Hegel attacked Christianity for its basis outside of human experience and reason, claiming that the believer must accept Christianity as fideism and explicitly recognize it as such or reject it altogether “in the name of human reason, dignity, and freedom.”

A more mature Hegel, however, rejected the exclusive reliance on either fideism or rationalism as a means to attain religious belief, offering instead the synthesis of the two. According to Hegel, the idea of God or the Divine (Spirit) is first of all given by God

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for human understanding and exists outside of human experience. Once given, Spirit (Geist) unfolds over the course of history and is revealed to human understanding and must ultimately be reconciled by reason to itself. Initially given outside of reason, Spirit must also be grasped outside of reason but only after it has revealed itself to reason. According to Hegel, what allows for such a reconciliation by reason of something that is not initially given to reason is the fact that, once given, Spirit is made manifest through history:

Genuinely, rational man must know God as Spirit, must himself become spiritual, reconciled to Spirit.... It is possible to know Spirit ‘in itself’ only because Spirit has appeared ‘for itself’ and ‘in and for itself’ in history.... It is possible to know God because he has revealed himself in history. 86

For this revelation of Spirit to be manifest to the human capacity for reason, it must be made manifest as a necessary event in the unfolding of history. As Hegel concludes, what is ultimately revealed by Spirit to humanity is the essential unity that exists between the two, thus the necessary event, reached by the development of human consciousness through history, is the recognition of this essential unity and the reconciliation of the human with God. “The necessity [that the divine-human unity shall appear] is not first apprehended by means of thinking; rather it is a certainty for humanity.” 87

The reconciliation between humanity and God is not simply a revelation of the essential unity between the two 88 but is also the “spiritualization” of the human; it is the process by which the inevitable and necessary union of human and Divine unfolds:

In order for it [this divine-human unity] to become a certainty for humanity,

86 Ibid., 248.


88 “The substantial unity [of God and humanity] is what humanity implicitly is.” Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion (Volume III), 313.
For such a reconciliation to occur at a particular place at a specific point in history, the human and the divine must have been implicitly one all along. The principle of the implicit unity is not a statement of the individual’s essential existence in history but rather a statement of human destiny. Further, this statement can only be made after the reconciliation has taken place and the unity has become explicit. This destiny has been implicit, though, in that its enactment (the reconciliation between man and God; the “spiritualization” of the human) is a necessary event for the shared destiny of humanity and Spirit; Spirit must realize itself in human consciousness.

This implicit being, this implicitly subsisting unity of divine and human nature, must come to consciousness in infinite anguish—but only in accord with implicit being, with substantiality, so that finitude, weakness, and otherness can do no harm to the substantial unity of the two. Or expressed differently, the substantiality of the unity of the divine and human nature comes to consciousness for humanity in such a way that a human being appears to consciousness as God, and God appears to it as a human being. This is the necessity and need for such an appearance.

The history of human existence prior to this reconciliation is therefore one of estrangement; the existence of the human individual is a wretched alienation from the Divine. The true human self, according to Hegel, is “brought forth” finally in time (at a historical moment) through the reconciliation as a self in unity with God, and thus “[h]istory itself finally heals the wounds that it has inflicted.” Furthermore, this occurrence in time is precisely in human time; that is, the reconciliation between the human and the Divine is attainable on wholly human terms and as a

89 Ibid., 313.
90 Ibid., 312.
91 Crites, 250.
result of wholly human capacities.

Each of the thinkers examined in the preceding discussion explicitly addresses the possible existence of some divine Absolute which stands independently of,\(^{92}\) and thus has the capacity to direct, human existence, yet this point is not sufficient to qualify their respective positions as ‘religious engagements’ in the manner that was suggested at the outset of this discussion. Rather, what more fully characterizes these paradigmatically Modernist articulations as religious is that, in each case, the quest for Truth is undertaken from an original position in mystery with the intended goal of overcoming mystery and the simultaneous presumption that such an overcoming is *humanly* possible. Given sufficient time to experience and to reason, according to the Modernist conception, the human individual can fully know God, discern the meaning of the world within which one exists, and identify how one is to conduct oneself in light of that knowledge in this world. At the same time, these characteristically Modernist formulations, while raising the question of Truth in human existence, suggest the parallel question of the individual’s place within, and thus relation to, the world. The acquisition of Truth comprises not merely the self-knowledge (identity) which was central to the ancient Greek conception but also a comprehensive understanding of the world as well. Truth (meaning) is thus constituted through the parallel achievement of an understanding of self and world and the synthesis of such knowledge to ultimately reveal one’s place within the world; this revelation of place may perhaps be seen as the ultimate *telos*, or meaning, of the Modernist Truth. However, the Modernist ideal of absolute Truth proved unattainable, and the human position as limited in and by mystery proved inescapable. Yet as the forthcoming discussion of the Postmodernist position will demonstrate, the inexorable link between meaning and the

\(^{92}\) It should be noted here that within Hegel’s conception the Absolute is not wholly independent of human existence; rather, there is an inherent connection between Absolute Spirit and the human, though that connection has been concealed by the human estrangement from the Divine.
recognition and realization of one’s ‘place’ in the world endures, despite the radical destabilization and ultimate dissolution of the prospects for the human attainment of absolute Truth.

*Meaning: The Postmodernist Experience*

For the purposes of the present discussion, the Postmodernist position will center around a radical undermining of that which was presented as the Modernist position in the previous section. Whereas the Modernist contention insisted on the possibility of the human individual to possess, and subsequently act in accordance with, knowledge of the Truth of the ‘world,’ thus positing progress toward Truth as a fundamental (and explicitly attainable) goal of human existence, the Postmodernist position will be discussed as a re-centering of the question of what can be known of the world and what can stand as meaning within that world when the possibility of the human achievement of absolute ‘Truth’ is recognized as an impossibility and the goal of inevitable and inexorable human progress becomes untenable. The Postmodernist position developed here may perhaps ultimately be understood, at least in part, as a return to the ancient Greek position in wonder whereby a story (myth, theory), rather than absolute Truth, stands as a viable account of the world and thus points the way toward the possibility of meaning.

As Richard Bernstein suggests in his *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, the tremors and convulsions which shaped the Postmodernist sensibility have a subtle origin in the beginnings of the Modernist period itself. Descartes, by beginning his philosophical pursuit in absolute doubt in order to determine rationally and systematically what actually exists, embodied the Modernist spirit. Yet beyond its *method*, the Cartesian project offered a deeper contribution to science and philosophy: that of the recognition of the particular *situation* which characterizes human existence. While Descartes’ greatest aim was to determine what can be known with absolute
certainty regarding human existence, the very question of achieving such certainty necessarily situates the human individual in a particular position with regard to that certainty. As Bernstein explains, Descartes’ Meditations are a record of one individual’s recognition of one’s own severe finitude and dependence on an absolute, perfect, and infinite God. Without that absolute, objective foundation, all knowledge and certainty would be impossible. Descartes intentionally assumes complete, radical doubt in order to reveal an absolute foundation for knowledge and thereby fully eliminate the possibility and basis for such doubt. Though not explicitly stated, Descartes’ search for an objective foundation for knowledge suggests the fundamental human need for just such a foundation. As Bernstein notes, the history of philosophy (as well as that of other social sciences) has “witnessed the playing out of bold attempts to secure foundations and the elaborations of new methods that promise genuine knowledge, followed by a questioning that reveals cracks and crevices in what had been taken to be solid and secure.”93 The “genuine knowledge” that has been sought, Bernstein concludes, concerns “what we are, what we can know, what norms ought to bind us, what are the grounds for hope.”94

Implied within these questions themselves, however, is the greater problem of whether there is any definitive way to answer such questions at all. Is objective ‘Truth’ a reality which can be attained and understood by the res cogitans, or is it merely an apparition that has been futilely chased through the shadows of history and existence? Beyond the attainment of such a certainty and the attendant conclusions such an absolute allows, perhaps there is something more fundamental suggested by the pursuit of such certainty. As reason and science progressed through the Modernist period, it became harder and harder to substantiate claims of certainty.


94 Ibid., 4.
and convictions of the presence of an ‘Absolute’ or of the intelligibility of the world. As the world came to be seen as a conglomeration of objects interacting in a purely physical/causal fashion, without any discernible underlying order or purpose, it became increasingly more difficult to recognize the authority and role of value systems which, though historically accepted on faith, had been increasingly justified and legitimized through reason and science. While the prospects for certainty progressively dimmed, the desire for such certainty, as a means for the continued constitution of an absolute, persisted. This tension is one manifestation of the fundamental challenge within human existence that surfaced in the Postmodernist period.

The Postmodernist spirit, therefore, though concerned with precisely the same question of the intelligibility of the world and of the possibility of an individual recognition of and relationship with an Absolute, no longer maintains the steady conviction of the inevitability or attainability of truth. This, according to Richard Bernstein, is the “Cartesian Anxiety,” which contends that “there are or must be some fixed, permanent constraints to which we can appeal and which are secure and stable,” while recognizing that “there may be nothing—not God, reason, philosophy, science, or poetry—that answers to and satisfies our longing for ultimate constraints, for a stable and reliable rock upon which we can secure our thought and action.”

Søren Kierkegaard was perhaps one of the first thinkers to question the Modernist position (in particular the contentions of Hegel) and attempt to directly address the tension between the impossibility of absolute objective knowledge and the need for an absolute foundation for belief and action. For Kierkegaard, the individual attainment of ‘knowledge’ of God is constituted either in belief which results from objective reflection or faith which arises through subjective decision. The nature of the coming-to-be of this knowing, whether it is objective or subjective, is essential to the value of that knowing. But what is the difference between these two possible

95 Ibid., 19.
means to faith? As Kierkegaard explains, the difference is to be found in the relationship that may emerge between the subject and the object:

> When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related. Reflection is not focused upon the relationship, however, but upon the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related. If only the object to which he is related is the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth. When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual’s relationship: if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth, even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true.”

Kierkegaard classifies the act of faith as essentially a subjective deciding. At its heart, the question of faith is a critical one, and the subjective role of the individual human cannot be ignored. As Kierkegaard explains, “Since the problem in question poses a decision, and since all decisiveness…inheres in subjectivity, it is essential that every trace of an objective issue should be eliminated.”

The relation to God is, for Kierkegaard, a relation to the infinite, but a relation constituted by inwardness and subjectivity; both aspects (the inward and the infinite) are essential. “Only in subjectivity is there decision, to seek objectivity is to be in error. It is the passion of the infinite that is the decisive factor and not its content, for its content is precisely itself. In this manner subjectivity and the subjective ‘how’ constitute the truth.”

For Kierkegaard, faith in God is to be attained not through an objective understanding of the nature and existence of God, but rather by the subjective assertion of the existence of God precisely in spite of the absence of an objective grounds for belief. Objective knowledge has no bearing on the decisions which constitute human existence, according to Kierkegaard; “subjectivity is rooted in decisiveness and

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97 Ibid., 207.

98 Ibid., 214.
commitment, and they are rooted in passion and action, not in thought."99

Not only is the act of faith constituted by the subjective decision to believe, the decision is explicitly made in the absence of, in fact in opposition to the possibility of, any objective justification of that faith. Objective truth, if it be reached, must stand outside of time and individual experience. Yet the individual cannot transcend time and one’s existence, thus it is impossible for the individual to transcend subjectivity. Truth is the unity of thought and being, which cannot be accomplished on an objective level. Only in passion, or subjective commitment, can such a unity be attained:

Only momentarily can a particular individual, existing, be in a unity of the infinite and the finite that transcends existing. This instant is the moment of passion. Modern speculative thought has mustered everything to enable the individual to transcend himself objectively, but this just cannot be done.100

What truly warrants and justifies religious faith for Kierkegaard is precisely passion and inwardness, which overcomes any appeal to objectivity. Faith, Kierkegaard concludes, is only truly possible though such subjectivity: “It is subjectivity that Christianity is concerned with, and it is only in subjectivity that its truth exists, if it exists at all.”101 Only passionate inwardness, Kierkegaard adds, is sufficient to overcome the attendant objective uncertainty which necessarily threatens the subjective decision to believe. For Kierkegaard, the true value of faith in God, in fact, its truth, is found precisely in its subjectivity; that is, in its necessarily un-objectivity:

An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual…. The subject merely has, objectively, the uncertainty; but it is this


101 Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments, in A Kierkegaard Anthology, 208.
which precisely increases the tension of that infinite passion which constitutes its inwardness. The truth is precisely the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite... Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual’s inwardness and the objective uncertainty.102

Truth is therefore not the what but the how—it is the relation that is constituted through the passion of absolute subjective commitment. Faith, therefore, exists in the relationship-in-tension between belief itself and the acknowledged objective uncertainty of that in which belief is placed. The personal engagement which is fundamental to Kierkegaard’s conception of faith is what is key. “Subjective truth is not a truth that I have, but a truth that I am.”103

Truth, for Kierkegaard, lies not in an objective Absolute but rather in an absolute relation (commitment), from which meaning may be derived. In contrast to this position, Friedrich Nietzsche contends that even the possibility of an absolute relation is untenable and thus humanity must look elsewhere for a suitable foundation for value and meaning. In order to suggest the radical and total absence of any absolutes, Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God.

“Have you not heard of the madman,” Nietzsche asks, “who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: ‘I seek God! I seek God!’”104 Nietzsche himself heard a similar appeal to God from all around him; everywhere individuals sought God, in hope of the meaning and direction God (as an objective Absolute) could provide for their lives. The Modernist examples discussed above suggest different ways to and conceptions of God, while still presenting religious Truth and subsequent human value and action as fundamentally connected and ultimately as absolute conceptions. Yet Nietzsche’s

102 Ibid., 214-215.


The madman knew that the acceptance of such absolutes is misguided and that belief in God is misplaced; as he reveals to the mocking crowd: “Whither is God? I will tell you. … God is dead.” At the same time, the madman understands the import of God’s death and the impact it ultimately portends for humanity. Unmoored, divested of one’s customary guidance and direction, the madman wonders “What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? … Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?”

Through the words of the madman, Nietzsche reveals humanity’s reliance on God as an absolute foundation for meaning and value in existence, while suggesting that this reliance is no longer plausible or tenable. This is Nietzsche’s starting point: God is dead, but humanity does not recognize this death nor is it prepared to accept the implications of that death. Nietzsche’s task is thus to overcome the Modernist position and reveal the manner in which humanity can transcend its reliance on such an absolute, to surmount the appeal to God as the creator and assigner of value, to “vanquish his shadow.”

According to Nietzsche’s view, traditional conceptions of religion, order, and morality, such as those articulated by Christianity, as well as the Modernist views which, through perhaps different means, still reached similar conclusions regarding the Absolute, are nothing more than artificial systems constructed to project values, rather than actually existing systems which legitimately determine or bestow value. What is taken as moral law, dictated from an objective authority (God, for example), is shown by Nietzsche to be a product of human invention and human habit. With The Genealogy of Morals Nietzsche further emphasized this point, showing

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105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid., §108.
how notions of “good” and “bad” arose from a specific dynamic of power, as those individuals in power ultimately created the distinctions between good (equated with what those in power value) and bad (that in which the values of the powerful or “good” are lacking). Conversely, according to Nietzsche, the distinctions “good” and “evil” developed from resentment, which arose from the heart of the wretched and oppressed: those who were without power and therefore subjected to the power of others viewed themselves as good, whereas those who held power over them were seen as the source of their suffering and were therefore evil. In revealing these very earthly, non-metaphysical origins of such distinctions, Nietzsche shows how traditional systems of morality have truly developed—not as a necessary product of some objective, authoritative truth but rather from human desire, need, and habit. What’s more, in addition to being essentially a human construct, Nietzsche ultimately concluded that traditional morality is a profound hindrance to humanity attaining its highest potential, as the limits which morality imposes upon the spirit of the human individual are misplaced and excessive. As he explains, “morality would really be saddled with the guilt, if the maximum potentiality of the power and splendor of the human species were never to be attained.”

The death of God essentially commands, in Nietzsche’s view, an end to the reliance on objective value systems. Nietzsche contends that once such systems are undermined and ultimately dissolved, the values themselves, which had been established and legitimized by the system, are themselves devalued. This devaluation of all value poses a severe threat to humanity, as seemingly only nihilism can fill the void left by the twofold annihilation of not just the objective values themselves but also the possibility of an any absolute value system at all. Ultimately, to overcome both the need for such a system and the subsequent threat of a

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comprehensive nihilism, Nietzsche attempts to develop a conception of humanity which creates and preserves its own meaning and value. Nietzsche is most concerned with the individual’s ability to say “Yes” or “No” without reference to any metaphysical value system, what Nietzsche ultimately calls the “revaluation” of values.

The revaluation is precisely the recognition of the groundless-ness of all seemingly objectively given value systems, a loosening of the hold that such systems had over human existence. In the absence of God and an objective value system, humanity itself is shown to have been the source of all that was taken to be valued. “Only man placed values in things to preserve himself—he alone created meaning for things, a human meaning.” This is both a revelation and a blessing: while the seemingly divine source of valuation is revealed to be “merely” human, humanity is likewise bestowed with the power and responsibility for valuation. For there to be any value at all, the individual must create it. Further, if such value is to be created, one must recognize that such responsibility lies solely with oneself. This is, essentially, the genesis of the revaluation—the “free spirit” sees through and surpasses all external proclamations of value and by the exercising of one’s own power creates at every moment one’s own system of value.

Such a spirit allows objective value systems to crumble, celebrates the final overcoming of such values, and opens the door to the nihilism which follows only to subsequently overcome nihilism as well; through the complete acceptance of responsibility for values and the exercising of the power to will one’s own value, the revaluation is undertaken and a nihilation of nihilism is achieved. This ideal free spirit must come, Nietzsche contends, to overcome the erroneous value systems created by false absolutes as well as the nihilism which results from the inevitable

destruction of those absolutes; the free spirit must come if the “great health” of humanity is to be realized: “This man of the future, who in this wise will redeem us from the old ideal, as he will from that ideal’s necessary corollary of great nausea, will to nothingness, and nihilism… who gives back to the world its goal and to man his hope, this Antichrist and antinihilist, this conqueror of God and of Nothingness—he must one day come.”¹¹⁰ All that one needs to reveal and cultivate this spirit in oneself, Nietzsche maintains, is the recognition and subsequent manifestation of one’s will to become such a spirit and revaluator; this will, which breathes life into the free spirit and promises to resurrect hope in a human dignity, is the Will to Power.

The Will to Power is essentially a will to self-overcoming. Through the manifestation of the individual will, the free spirit overcomes not only the illusion of objective, metaphysical values, but also the need for such prescribed values. The Will to Power is the will to create a style of person who recognizes the absence and impossibility of any objective value systems and who has courage and drive to create values, live according to those values, while taking full individual responsibility for their creation and for living accordingly.

In his depiction of the death of God and the manifestation and application of the Will to Power, Nietzsche presents a paradigmatic Postmodernist undermining of absolutes and a re-centering of value around the individual human person; in this manner, the problem of the possibility of value in the absence of an Absolute is thus solved. Yet what of the question of knowledge and truth? If there is no objectively known Absolute which can serve as a foundation for value, is the possibility for knowledge of the world or ‘Truth’ likewise undermined? To answer this question, and to round out the discussion of the Postmodernist position, a brief analysis of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological conception and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic model will be presented.

In Edmund Husserl’s view, Descartes’ *Meditations on the First Philosophy* represents a prime example of a ‘beginning’ philosophy, whereby philosophy, once grounded upon an absolute foundation, can then provide a foundation for all of science. Husserl resists Descartes’ presumption that revealing such an absolute foundation is inherently possible, insisting instead that a truly radical beginning philosophy must free itself from any such presupposition. This stance is not, however, sufficient to suggest that the ideal of an absolute science, precisely as the ideal toward which Husserl’s beginning philosophy is directed, be abandoned altogether. While Husserl refuses to assume that such an absolute science is possible, he contends that it still ought to be the object of pursuit. “As beginning philosophers we do not as yet accept any normative ideal of science, and only so far as we produce one newly for ourselves can we ever have such an ideal. But this does not imply that we renounce the general aim of grounding science absolutely.”

Husserl contends that the aim of phenomenology is not to determine the actual existence of the world; rather, it is to understand the manner in which the world is experienced and understood. Phenomenological reflection is thus directed not toward objects but rather toward the manner in which objects are presented in and to consciousness. Rather than judge the factuality or the being/non-being of the natural world, the world itself is bracketed and the judgment is thereby put out of play. This is the phenomenological epoché (reduction). The epoché is not a negation of the world, nor a doubting of its factual being; rather, it is a suspension of judgment itself regarding the natural world, a phenomenological reduction which “completely shuts me off from any judgments

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about spatiotemporal factual being.”

Questions, then, of from where the world derives its ‘reality’ are misdirected, in Husserl’s view; rather, phenomenological questions ought to address the manner in which consciousness presents objects and thus constitutes the meaning of objects. Meaning, for Husserl, is found in the manner in which objects in the world are presented for consciousness and the manner in which consciousness itself engages and intends those objects. As Husserl contends, all acts of consciousness are intentional, in that they are always directed toward something. That toward which the intentional act is directed is the object of consciousness; it is the world and all objects therein. Yet at the origin of the intentional act stands the ego; distinct from the world, it is the force which directs the act of consciousness and thus experiences the object of that act. With the ego firmly entrenched as the center and origin of all acts of consciousness which reveal the world, Husserl concludes:

The Objective world, the world that exists for me, that always has and always will exist for me, the only world that ever can exist for me—this world, with all its Objects… derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has for me, from me myself, from me as the transcendental Ego, the Ego who comes to the fore only with the transcendental-phenomenological epoché.”

This is not to say that the ego creates meaning or the world; intention toward the world does not equal creation of that world. Rather, there is meaning to the world as it is presented to consciousness precisely because it is disclosed to and by consciousness. Objects are brought into ‘givenness’ as what they are. Meaning is constituted through intentionality, which, though directed by the subjective ego, simultaneously accounts for what the object itself is as it stands independently of that ego.

It must be noted that ‘constitution’ is not synonymous with ‘creation.’ To presume that


113 Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, §11, 26.
Husserl is contending that the ego creates its own world, which it subsequently inhabits and perceives, would be misguided; rather, what Husserl does claim is that the world which the ego perceives and experiences, in the precise form in which it is perceived and experienced, is given in a particular way by the acts through which it is perceived and experienced. This ‘givenness’ of the world is what Husserl calls ‘constitution.’ Objects encountered in the world cannot be encountered as or taken to be anything at all without limitation; rather, the object can only be brought forth in a manner which is in accord with the manner in which the object offers itself to consciousness. Consciousness itself, while uncovering the object, must “submit to the way things disclose themselves.” Thus consciousness does not create, nor even determine, the character of the object; rather, consciousness uncovers or posits the object, giving sense to the object which is consistent with the object as it has presented itself to the consciousness which uncovers it. As “giving of sense,” ‘constitution’ ultimately refers to the generation of the meaning of the world, rather than the generation of the being of the world in-itself. Husserl does seem to suggest that constitution may account, in some sense, for the generation of the being of the world, though this ‘being’ must be understood to imply the being as-perceived rather than anything resembling a being in-itself. ‘Constitution’ is the manner in which the object experienced by consciousness is ultimately revealed to and structured for consciousness.

Consciousness is responsible for generating a world which is meaningful to consciousness, in that the world is presented in its particular way to consciousness as the same consciousness as the same consciousness


116 Ibid., 165.

117 The notion of ‘being in-itself has, of course, been bracketed out with the epoché.
specifically intends it. For Husserl, there are two distinct possible conceptions of the ‘world’: there is that which exists, in-itself, wholly independent of any act of consciousness which intends it, and there is that ‘profile’ of world which, at any time, consciousness may intend. In the *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl emphasizes the distinction between these two worlds: that which exists wholly independently of consciousness and that which is presented in/through consciousness. While the two are fundamentally different, the former is an empty consideration in that only the latter can be experienced.

The attempt to conceive the universe of true being as something lying outside the universe of possible consciousness..., the two being related to one another merely externally by a rigid law, is nonsensical. They belong together essentially; and, as belonging together essentially, they are also concretely one, one in the only absolute concretion: transcendental subjectivity. If transcendental subjectivity is the universe of possible sense, than an outside is precisely—nonsense.¹¹⁸

The ‘constituted world,’ Husserl contends, because it is organized and presented to consciousness by the very same conscious acts which intend it, is essentially generated, at least in its sense-having (*meaningfulness*), through consciousness itself; it is, as Husserl contends, *constituted* by/through consciousness. However, this constituted world is for Husserl the only world which can have meaning for consciousness, as the very notion of a world in-itself is fundamentally closed off to consciousness and thus immediately and permanently meaningless.

It can therefore be concluded that the world, insofar as it can ever be experienced as meaningful, can only be experienced as it is constituted by the consciousness which experiences it; to fully know the world, it is necessary to know the extent to which the ‘knower,’ by the attempt to know, constitutes that which is to be known. Husserl concludes:

Genuine theory of knowledge is...possible only as a transcendental-phenomenological theory, which, instead of operating with inconsistent inferences leading from a supposed immanency to a supposed transcendency

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¹¹⁸ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §41, 84.
(that of no matter what ‘thing in itself,’ which is alleged to be essentially knowable), has to do exclusively with systematic clarification of the knowledge performance. Precisely thereby every sort of existent itself, real or ideal, becomes understandable as a ‘product’ of transcendental subjectivity, a product constituted in just that performance.119

If the phenomenological world is ultimately to be understood as ‘constituted,’ the implication that there is something constituting, that is, that there is something which performs the acts of consciousness which thereby constitute the world, is undeniable; because the world is constituted by/for consciousness, there must be an ego which stands at the center of the act(s) of constitution to direct, and subsequently to perceive, that which is constituted. The ego is itself the source of all [intentional] acts of consciousness, which are essentially and simultaneously acts of constitution. These intentional/constitutional acts of consciousness extend in various directions toward the ‘world’ or intended objects thus forming a ‘whole’ of meaning, centered around the ‘nexus’ from which they are directed. The ego exists as that which discloses the world (to itself as ego), while that which exists for the ego has its sense of existing precisely because of the ego’s knowing consciousness; it is the “experienced of [the ego’s] experiencing.”120 Essentially, all that exists for the ego does so through its constitution by the ego’s consciousness; all that the ego does is done within its consciousness.121

119 Ibid., §41, 85.

120 Ibid., §40, 82.

121 Of course, the question has been raised whether such a transcendental ego truly exists (as, for example, by Jean-Paul Sartre in his Transcendence of the Ego [1937]. Yet Husserl anticipates this challenge: if all experience is gained through the ego, then the ego itself stands constantly as present to itself in experience. That is, because it is itself the lens through which all experience of objects occurs, the ego is itself implicitly experienced in any experience of any object in the world. Further, through this constant experience of the ego (as lens of all experiencing), the ego itself is constantly asserted as itself existing: “The ego is himself existent for himself in continuous evidence; thus, in himself, he is continuously constituting himself as existing” (Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, §31, 66). Elsewhere (e.g., in his Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic, §3) Husserl has noted that through retention and the interplay of fulfilled and unfulfilled perceptions, one is able not only to recognize re-perceptions of the same object or aspect of an object explicitly as such but is also able to more fully recognize aspects or objects of the world as identical and abiding. As he explains, “The
Yet within this process of constitution between ego and object, the question of the possibility of legitimate knowledge or meaning remains. While both the transcendental ego and the object (world) itself play a significant role in the constitution of meaning for the particular object (or world), what roles do both play in limiting the sense which may be bestowed? While there is seemingly a degree of freedom regarding what can be constituted in any particular experience of an object, there are likewise possibilities of constitution which cannot legitimately be applied to certain cases. There are limits which can be recognized in most any case of an act of consciousness/experience, and both the ego and the object are substantially constitutive of the ultimate sense or meaning which is bestowed. However, while the ego may be seen to be constitutive of its world, it must similarly be recognized that the ego is itself self-constitutive, fact that a re-perception, a renewed perception of the same thing, is possible for transcendence characterizes the fundamental trait of transcendent perception, alone through which an abiding world is there for us” (Edmund Husserl, Horizons and the Genesis of Perception, §3, Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic, trans. Anthony J. Steinbock, in EH, 225). Seemingly this principle ought to apply as well to the ego’s continuous perception of itself; because the ego itself is a consistent component of different individual acts of perception (and as such is ever present, though differently ‘situated’ with a different perspective, in these acts of perception), the ego itself must finally be seen as itself identical and abiding. Husserl draws this parallel between the experience of the identity of objects and the experience of the identity of the ego in the Cartesian Meditations:

The ego grasps himself not only as a flowing life but also as I, who live this and that subjective process, who live through this and that cogito, as the same I. Since we were busied up to now with the intentional relation of consciousness to object, cogito to cogitatum, only that synthesis stood out for us which ‘polarizes’ the multiplicities of actual and possible consciousness toward identical objects, accordingly in relation to objects as poles, synthetic unities. Now we encounter a second polarization, a second kind of synthesis, which embraces all the particular multiplicities of cogitationes collectively and in its own manner, namely as belonging to the identical Ego, who, as the active and affected subject of consciousness, lives in all processes of consciousness and is related, through them, to all object poles (Cartesian Meditations, §31, 66).

Thus, because the ego is ever present as the ‘lens’ of all experience, it is abiding for itself in this role. Clearly there is here an indication of one possible manner of recognizing a unique identity within the ego: as the origin of all experience of the world, the ego is always present to itself in consciousness as such, and through its continuous acts of consciousness it not only recognizes itself perpetually but does so in new and revealing ways. Through its constant awareness of itself and further revealing of itself to itself, the identity of the ego is constituted: “Since, by his own active generating, the Ego constitutes himself as identical substrate of Ego-properties, he constitutes himself also as ‘fixed and abiding’ personal Ego” (Cartesian Meditations, §32, 67).
and this manner of self-constitution is achieved precisely through the ego’s relation to the objective world. All egological acts are intentional, thus the ego stands in constant reference toward the object world; the ego cannot present itself without simultaneously presenting the objective world to itself through its intentional acts. At the same time, the objective world has no meaning for the transcendental ego until it is grasped by consciousness and presented to itself. Consciousness is thus fundamentally and necessarily open; ultimately, it is in its transcendence toward objects (the world) that the transcendental ego is most fully characterized and defined, and it is precisely within this relation in transcendence that the ego reveals itself, including its acts and their objects, to itself. It is through this relation of intentionality and constitution that the transcendental ego appears, both to itself and phenomenologically as a possible object of consciousness; in this sense, all constitutive acts of the ego are simultaneously self-constitutive acts. Thus the transcendental (subjective) ego and the transcendent (objective) world, which, according to Husserl’s conception, cannot fully be understood independently of each other, may now be seen to be wholly dependent upon each other for their own individual existence. Further, and perhaps more importantly, meaning is only realized (is, perhaps, only possible) in the relationship between ego (individual) and object (world). Thus, without relying on absolute objective knowledge, Husserl’s phenomenological account allows for the possibility of knowledge of the world and of individual identity while demonstrating a possible manner of realizing meaning.

If Husserl’s phenomenological conception suggests the manner in which meaning is dependent upon relation, perhaps a more explicit articulation of the primacy of relation in the question of meaning may be found in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic account, which likewise depicts a path through relation (explicitly characterized as dialogical) to a particular account of attainable truth. Yet before fully characterizing Gadamer’s conception of [the
realization of truth, a brief summary discussion of the hermeneutic experience that leads to truth must first be undertaken.

In his introduction to *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer states that the investigation he is about pursue is “concerned to seek the experience of truth that transcends the domain of scientific method wherever that experience is to be found, and to inquire into its legitimacy.”¹²² The realm which transcends that of scientific inquiry, that which is “connected to modes of experience that lie outside science,”¹²³ is for Gadamer the human sciences. His aim is not to disparage scientific method and its ‘appropriateness’ as a vehicle for truth; rather, Gadamer hopes to demonstrate that science does not hold an exclusive right to truth and that the human sciences stand at least on equal footing in their capacity to manifest truth. In his view, it is through the hermeneutic experience that truth can be uncovered.¹²⁴

Gadamer contends that the hermeneutic experience begins from a position of prejudice. In contrast to the scientific/rationalistic Enlightenment claim that ‘truth’ can only be uncovered purely objectively and in the absence of prejudice, Gadamer attempts to justify the preservation of a place for prejudice in the greater task of interpretation and understanding. As he explains, the very act of engaging a text (for example) in an attempt to understand that text implies that, from the outset, one expects something in particular, that the text, upon examination, contains something of import which will be uncovered through such examination; thus the act of


¹²³ Ibid., xxi.

¹²⁴ The analysis of the hermeneutic pursuit of truth that follows here is, in broad terms, an adaptation and development of similar contentions suggested by Francis Ambrosio (see, e.g., “Gadamer, Plato, and the Discipline of Dialogue,” in *Man and World* 19 [1986]: 21–53; “Gadamer: On Making Oneself at Home with Hegel,” in *The Owl of Minerva* 19, [Fall 1987]: 23–40; “Dawn and Dusk: Gadamer and Heidegger on Truth,” in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 27 [March 1987]: 17–33), though the conclusions and contentions presented in this discussion are those of the present author.
engagement itself is driven by a prejudice, in the expectation that the text holds something to be understood. Further, the content of what the text is expected to contain, an even more specific prejudice, does not hinder but rather enhances the engagement with the text. By not only bringing one’s own prejudices to bear on that which one attempts to understand (as with, for example, a text) but also by consciously recognizing (foregrounding) those prejudices, one simultaneously questions the text and the legitimacy of those prejudices.

Prejudice is thus not a self-imposed limit to one’s possible understanding; rather, the recognition of prejudice, with prejudice understood as the influence of history, tradition, and one’s ‘situation’ which precedes all self-consciousness, is the recognition that one’s understanding is fundamentally limited by history, tradition, and one’s ‘situation.’ The limits to human understanding are precisely governed by the limits imposed by historicity, and these limits are only fully acknowledged through the exercising of one’s prejudices. Thus, Gadamer concludes:

History does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.

The limiting influence of prejudice, which may seem to be a self-imposed limit mis-guiding understanding, is actually derived from, is in fact a fundamental component of, the historical reality which constitutes one’s own being and consciousness.

However, the bringing to bear of one’s prejudices upon that which is to be interpreted necessitates that those prejudices be brought to bear in a particular manner. As has already been asserted, the legitimacy of one’s prejudices must be examined alongside that which is the

126 Ibid., 278.
subject of one’s prejudices. In this sense, the *questioning* of the text is likewise a questioning of one’s own prejudices. As Gadamer explains, “[t]he essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open.” Implicit in the simultaneous foregrounding and questioning of one’s prejudice is the idea of a particular ‘openness’ which is fundamental to the hermeneutic experience of interpretation and understanding.

The openness which arises in the proper questioning of one’s prejudice constitutes an openness to experience which in turn makes understanding possible. Implicit in this conception of experience, in addition to this essential openness, is the recognition of limits. Because the individual stands within a particular history and tradition from within which one attempts to gain a certain understanding, complete objective knowledge of that situation is impossible; in this sense, there are fundamental limits placed on what can be known of the situation within which one finds oneself. At the same time, the great lesson which experience (*Erfahrung*) teaches is that the individual is finite. The individual’s experience is always directed towards new experiences which

127 Ibid., 299.

128 The idea of experience (as both *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*) figures prominently in the foundation of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Gadamer’s use of *Erlebnis* conveys a double meaning in the unification of undergoing and emerging from a first-hand experience, while the content of that experience creates a lasting effect on the individual who has undergone the experience. For Gadamer, both aspects of experience are essential, as the essence of ‘*Erlebnis*’ is to be found in “mediating between the two meanings…and in seeing these meanings as a productive union: something becomes an ‘experience’ not only insofar as it is experienced, but insofar as its being experienced makes a special impression that gives it a lasting importance.” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 53) Gadamer’s explication of *Erlebnis* is supplemented with a parallel discussion of *Erfahrung*, a slightly different conception of experience which underlies much of his examination of the historical quality of experience. Whereas *Erlebnis* refers to separate and distinct occasions of engagement and the lasting significance which such engagement(s) instill in the individual, *Erfahrung* seems to suggest a more unified sense of experience as a whole as it is engaged in its historicity. It is this understanding of experience which provides the foundation for the entire hermeneutical enterprise, as experience in this sense creates the necessary ‘openness’ which allows for dialogue, questioning, and, ultimately, the dialectic which constitutes the task of hermeneutics. The openness to experience, Gadamer concludes, is a fundamental characteristic of *Erfahrung* as hermeneutic experience: “Historically effected consciousness rises above such naïve comparisons and assimilations by letting itself experience tradition and by keeping itself open to the truth claim encountered in it. The hermeneutical consciousness culminates… in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma.” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355)

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ultimately qualify or correct that which came before. This movement of experience does not progress towards an ultimate end at which complete and correct knowledge will be attained; rather, it is a dialectical movement, the underlying purpose of which is to create a greater openness for more experience. Yet while openness is fundamentally constitutive of experience, this openness (and thus the experience which it shapes) is itself constituted by the question:

[T]he openness essential to experience is precisely the openness of being either this or that. It has the structure of a question. And just as the dialectical negativity of experience culminates in the idea of being perfectly experienced—i.e., being aware of our finitude and limitedness—so also the logical form of the question and the negativity that is part of it culminate in a radical negativity: the knowledge of not knowing.\textsuperscript{129}

Here, finally, can be seen the heart of the hermeneutical experience: the question. It is the question, Gadamer contends, which creates and perpetuates the openness of experience. Yet just as the preservation of prejudice necessitated the simultaneous examination of one’s prejudices along with the interrogation of the object of those prejudices, both ‘participants’ in the dialogue of question and answer are given equal priority in their being-meaningful in the dialogue. Hermeneutics can thus be defined as an open and reciprocal dialogue; in raising and pursuing the question, an open dialogue is formed and perpetuated in the reciprocity of question and answer as both the individual engaging in the act of interpretation and the ‘object’ to be interpreted address each other in question and in response:

Thus we return to the conclusion that the hermeneutic phenomenon too implies the primacy of dialogue and the structure of question and answer. That a historical text is made the object of interpretation means that it puts a question to the interpreter. Thus interpretation always involves a relation to the question that is asked of the interpreter. To understand a text means to understand this question. But this takes place, as we showed, by our attaining the hermeneutical horizon. We now recognize this as the \textit{horizon of the question} within which the sense of the text is determined.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{129} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 356.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 363.
In the dialogue of question and answer both sides are equally constituted and maintained through the dialectical relation which is formed, as its reciprocal motion in play characterizes it. In play, the reciprocity, the relation, is primary. Both ‘poles’ of the relation emerge in their meaningfulness within and derive their meaning from the relation itself. Each element (pole) in the relation is necessarily bound to and therefore limited by the other, and the existence of either is impossible outside of the necessary relation to the other in-play. The ultimate goal of this dialectical movement (play) is the understanding of the object to be interpreted, an understanding which, as Gadamer notes, must take the form of language: “the way understanding occurs—whether in the case of a text or a dialogue with another person who raises an issue with us—is the coming-into-language of the thing itself.”\(^\text{131}\)

As has been suggested, Gadamer places significant emphasis on the role of dialogue in the achievement of understanding. Embodied in this assertion is the more fundamental assertion of the primacy of language. For Gadamer, understanding is essentially and explicitly made possible exclusively through language: “Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs.”\(^\text{132}\) What’s more, language not only constitutes the ‘field’ of relation from which understanding can spring, but it is likewise language which fosters and continuously shapes the experience of understanding itself: “In language, the order and structure of our experience itself is originally formed and constantly changed.”\(^\text{133}\) Thus, Gadamer concludes, “Being that can be understood is language.”\(^\text{134}\) The world, in its totality and its possibility for meaning, is expressed

\(^\text{131}\) Ibid., 370–371.

\(^\text{132}\) Ibid., 390.

\(^\text{133}\) Ibid., 453.

\(^\text{134}\) Ibid., 470.
in (is in fact explicitly) language itself. The whole of language is the whole of reality, and beyond either there is no trace of the other. Language is the ‘world’ within which all coming-to-be occurs, and thus coming-into-language is the relating which constitutes the being of the elements related and is the expression of the full meaning, the truth, of the relation.

Understanding is achieved only through the relation that is carried out through language; language is the relation, constituted in/as play, through which the particular elements-in-relation come into being. Further, the elements-in-relation not only gain their being through language which constitutes the relation, but their being is similarly contingent upon the being of the other as the opposing but reciprocating element fundamentally and necessarily related to itself; here again, the being of each element-in-relation is inexorably tied to the being of the other element to which it is related; neither can exist without the other, both come into being together through language and their relation in language, thus their being is ultimately an indivisible unity. Truth, then, is precisely this unity of elements-in-relation and language in the dialectical movement in-play which forms that relation. If language is understood as the ‘light’ which allows the subject or object to be understood in its relation (through language) to the other, then language, specifically the play of language and its capacity to allow elements-in-relation to come into being in their relation to each other, is that which constitutes truth.

What we mean by truth here can best be defined again in terms of our concept of play. The weight of the things we encounter in understanding plays itself out in a linguistic event, a play of words playing around and about what is meant. Language games exist where we, as learners…rise to the understanding of the world…. The analogue in the present case is neither playing with language nor with the contents of the experience of the world or of tradition that speaks to us, but the play of language itself, which addresses us, proposes and withdraws, asks and fulfills its answer.¹³⁵

In the play of language, the elements-in-relation interact in a dialectical dynamic of

¹³⁵ Ibid., 483-484.
question and answer, forming the dialogue which constitutes their relation and which ultimately reveals the truth of that relation. Thus truth, like understanding (which, as has been seen, is likewise constituted in/through language), is relational, historical, and dialogical. As Gadamer concludes, it is precisely this dialogical “discipline of question and answer” which is the “discipline that guarantees truth.”

The unity (truth) that is called into being in the dialectical movement of play in-relation is dependent upon the maintenance of the openness to relation by which it was first constituted. Just as the hermeneutic experience begins in openness to experience, the experience of truth is an event which must be perpetuated by a continual openness; truth is not a terminal point, but rather a continuation of the particular openness which fosters the question and answer that is characteristic of disciplined dialogue. Thus, in the absence of an Absolute which stands outside of all relation as a foundation for truth and meaning, the attainment of truth occurs as the meaningful engagement in-relation, whereby the relation is constituted in and as perpetual play.

As the discussion of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard demonstrates, the question of one’s place in and relation with the world retains its position of prominence in human existence despite the growing recognition that an absolute answer (Truth) is impossible. At the same time, Husserl’s phenomenology and Gadamer’s hermeneutics, while acknowledging the limits of human understanding, both reveal a manner in which legitimate knowledge of the world may be attained while suggesting the primacy of relation between self and world in the constitution of such knowledge. This manner of constitution implies a return to the question of the individual’s interaction with, and place within, the world. As the Postmodernist characterization concludes, the impossibility of perfect absolute knowledge of the world does not

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136 Ibid., 484.
not preclude the individual from engaging in a revelatory and meaningful relation with the world, even as that relation is undertaken in mystery. This contention synthesizes the ancient Greek acceptance of mystery and determination to uncover one’s individual identity against the mystery of human existence with the Modernist conception of Truth (meaning) centered around knowledge of both the self and the world toward the aim of fully disclosing and demarcating one’s place in the world. This ‘religious’ desire, to discover one’s place, and thus meaning, in mystery, is a matter which finally can only be resolved through a particular religious commitment: faith.

However, it must be emphasized here that the ‘place’ which is sought is not presumed to be an absolute reality which promises a total and permanent unity or reconciliation. In its dismissal of the Modernist prospect of absolute Truth, the Postmodernist understanding likewise dismisses the possibility of a humanly discernible totality which can make sense and meaning of human reality as a whole. Yet this is not a simultaneous dismissal of meaning as a human possibility; rather, it is the acknowledgment that meaning is not a static Absolute but instead a dynamic entity that can only be uncovered in the ever-evolving dialectic of relation, through which both self and world are more fully engaged and understood. In his treatment of Postmodernist role of theology, Charles E. Winquist articulates this contention:

To seek depth today is to desire a complex association of meanings that are weighted with a sense of being real and important. This is a desire to know an ‘other’ in and of language that can be valued in the forming of personal and communal identity. This is a desire to think the singularities of experience that can exfoliate themselves in the production of new meaning. … There is in this formulation a secular mandate for theology even in the context of the transitoriness, contingency, and dissimulations of postmodern thinking.¹³⁷

In the absence of the possibility of knowable Truth, religious commitment emerges as the appropriate manner of pursuing such dynamic meaning, suggesting that religion, rather than a

set of prescribed rational beliefs, is instead an ongoing commitment to the pursuit of relation and the possibility of impermanent but significant meaning. It is precisely this conception of religious commitment that Karen Armstrong\textsuperscript{138} proposes as the original and appropriate definition of religious faith.

In The Case for God, Armstrong contends that religion began as a commitment to both individual and social practices undertaken as a liturgical realization of spirituality and transcendence:

Religion as defined by the great sages of India, China, and the Middle East was not a notional activity but a practical one; it did not require belief in a set of doctrines but rather hard, disciplined work, without which any religious teaching remained opaque and incredible. The ultimate reality was not a Supreme Being—an idea that was quite alien to the religious sensibility of antiquity; it was an all-encompassing, wholly transcendent reality that lay beyond neat doctrinal formulations.\textsuperscript{139}

While noting this manner of religious engagement as originary, Armstrong notes that the manner in which ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ are understood has undergone a fundamental transformation over the course of history from the Ancient through the Modernist and into the Postmodernist periods. However, despite this transformation, Armstrong contends that this original conception, despite its transformation, remains as the appropriate essence of religious commitment and faith; further, Armstrong suggests that the ‘object’ of this kind of religious faith is not an objectively knowable God\textsuperscript{140} but instead a “transcendence that gives meaning to [individuals’] lives.”\textsuperscript{141} This account of religious faith is wholly in line with Winquist’s contention of the suitability of theology as a manner of deciphering individual and communal


\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 26.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.; see also, e.g., 282–283.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 321.
meaning on the way toward seeking the “depth” of transcendence, thus positing religious faith as a persistent and plausible path toward the realization of relation and meaning.

**Faith**

*Paradigms of Faith*

In the preceding discussion of the transition from the Modernist to the Postmodernist position, it was suggested that Modernist systems of objective ‘Truth,’ value systems that had historically been accepted on faith but had been becoming increasingly justified and legitimized through reason and science, were no longer tenable precisely as systems of Truth within the Postmodernist conception. It can now perhaps be suggested that while the Postmodernist attitude represented an end to the reign of Absolute Truth, this attitude also allowed a return to the acceptance of mystery and the restoration of the individual to a position of equal primacy. However, implicit in the discussion of the Postmodernist position is the contention that the impossibility of an objective Absolute must be followed by a *choice* which restores the possibility of meaning to existence. In the absence of certainty upon which to ground such a choice, this act of deciding must therefore be understood as an act in *faith* undertaken from a position of freedom.

Kierkegaard’s depiction of truth centered around precisely this notion of deciding. As was discussed above, for Kierkegaard truth arises in the relation that is constituted through the passion of absolute subjective commitment; it is the relationship-in-tension between the belief itself and the simultaneous recognition of the objective uncertainty of the object of the belief. Truth therefore lies not in an objective Absolute but rather in an absolute relation (commitment), from which meaning may be derived. This conception of truth, Kierkegaard ultimately concludes, *is* faith:

> But the definition of truth…is a paraphrasing of faith. Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the
objective uncertainty. If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast the objective uncertainty.\textsuperscript{142}

Thus in Kierkegaard’s terms, faith is absolute subjective commitment.

This conception of faith is illustrated by Kierkegaard’s account of Abraham in his \textit{Fear and Trembling}. As Kierkegaard explains, Abraham was told by God that he would father a great nation through his son Isaac, only to be commanded later to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham’s faith, in Kierkegaard’s estimation, is defined not merely by his compliance with God’s order, but rather by his compliance and the simultaneous conviction that \textit{despite his compliance in killing his son Abraham would still father a great nation through that very same son}.

By faith Abraham received the promise that in his seed all races of the world would be blessed. Time passed, the possibility was there, Abraham believed; time passed, it became unreasonable, Abraham believed. … [I]t is great to give up one’s wish, but it is greater to hold it fast after having given it up, it is great to grasp the eternal, but it is greater to hold fast to the temporal after having given it up.\textsuperscript{143}

By believing in both the finite (the promise of fathering a nation through Isaac) and the infinite (God’s will), Abraham reconciled the two in the only manner possible: through the leap of faith. Faith is, for Kierkegaard, the reconciliation through \textit{hope} of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, the possibilities of which seem mutually exclusive and paradoxical.

Though Nietzsche’s contentions developed as a response to the death of the God in whom Kierkegaard placed his ‘absolute’ faith, Nietzsche’s position may still be viewed similarly as representative of a kind of faith. According to Nietzsche, once all possible external sources of value and meaning have been exhausted and devalued, it is left to the individual to determine, for oneself, that for which one is responsible and the final extent to which one can will and

\textsuperscript{142} Kierkegaard, \textit{Concluding Unscientific Postscript}, 204.

create value for oneself. This is precisely the model which Nietzsche presents as the ideal for human existence; this is Nietzsche’s object of faith. Nietzsche believes that the individual will to value is the only value sufficiently powerful and human to direct individual human activity: this will is the simultaneous acknowledgement, acceptance, and love of the necessity which governs human existence, and through this acknowledgment, acceptance, and love the will itself wills that necessity. One thereby embraces and wills all that is necessary, revalues value for oneself, and ultimately “becomes” what one is. Nietzsche’s view, which was formulated from within the recognition of the groundlessness of traditional religion and morality, has thus demonstrated the possibility for faith in a particular conception of the human person within the dynamic of freedom and necessity constituted through the Will to Power as both individual and world.

This interpretation of Nietzsche’s conception as illustrative of faith is further strengthened through an understanding of his notion of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same. This notion presumes that an individual’s existence, including every act, sensation, feeling, and movement, from its absolute beginning to its eventual but unavoidable end, will be endlessly repeated in exactly the same order and fashion as it has been lived thus far and will be lived to its end. Nothing about that existence will change; rather, “every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence.”¹⁴⁴ The challenge cast by this notion lies in the individual’s response to such a proclamation: “the question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight.”¹⁴⁵ If


the eternal recurrence is accepted as the condition of existence, then every choice must be made with the recognition that what is chosen is done so not merely for that instant but for all eternity. In choosing, one asserts a particular value not just at that moment but for all eternity, thus the choice itself must be guided by a particular faith not just in that moment but in the enduring quality of the chosen value for all eternity.

In both of these ‘paradigms of faith’ what is emphasized is the role of a particular relatedness. In Kierkegaard’s explication of faith, truth arises only through the passion of absolute subjective commitment and the relation that is subsequently constituted by that commitment; truth lies thus in the absolute relation (commitment), from which meaning may be derived. Similarly, Nietzsche contends that the Will to Power comprises both individual and world, constituting both the limits and the freedom which define human existence within the world. Thus to recognize and act in accordance with the Will to Power is to simultaneously, if only implicitly, acknowledge a shared constitution with, and thus a fundamental relatedness to, the world.

In parallel, the discussion of Husserl’s phenomenological conception of the constitution of knowledge and Gadamer’s depiction of the hermeneutic disclosure of truth demonstrates that while the individual subject must accept the freedom and responsibility to realize meaning, such meaning can only occur within the dialectic reciprocity of fundamental relatedness. In each case, while the ‘objective pole’ in the relationship is removed from its place of primacy as an absolute foundation for truth and meaning, the ‘subjective pole’ explicitly does not seek to supplant the objective in its original role; rather, all that remains to be engaged as ‘absolute’ is the relation itself.

This section opened with the contention that the Modernist ‘systems of objective Truth’ were questioned, and ultimately overthrown, by the Postmodernist recognition of the
irrecoverable loss of a permanent, unified, and unifying account of the human reality. Despite this loss, as will be contended here in the present investigation, the possibility of meaning within human existence is not similarly lost; rather, such meaning is left to be understood and pursued in a manner different from that which characterized the Modernist perspective. As Charles Winquist notes, the persistent human need for meaning arises from “an insistent sense of finitude that is the only credible sense of reality after serious reflection of the experience of what it means to be human,” and it “keeps us bound to surfaces that are the space and theater of meaning.”\(^{146}\) Despite the inaccessibility, if not complete absence, of a foundation beneath the surfaces to which Winquist refers, this does not mean that the edifices of meaning which had been built thereupon must necessarily crumble; rather, meaning must be sought upon those surfaces and within the evolving relation that arises between them and the individual. As Winquist concludes,

> There is no settled reality, first principles, or safe texts that can guarantee the security or quality of life together or the meaningfulness of the self’s becoming. … What is at stake is that self becoming is always relational (communal), always contingent, and always unfinished. Both the self and the community are works against incompleteness.\(^{147}\)

This fundamental “incompleteness” may never wholly be made whole, and thus an absolute transcendence of this condition is not ultimately possible, yet this fact is not sufficient to undermine the value of the attempt at completeness nor the possibility of a finite transcendence that may be attained, realized not as a transcendence of finitude itself but rather of particular manifestations of that finitude. In his own assessment of Postmodernist religious commitment, Kevin Hart notes that “we might reject unity as a metaphysical essence, whether located in God or in human consciousness, but it does not thereby follow that we must also abandon unity as a

\(^{146}\) Winquist, *Desiring Theology*, 138.

\(^{147}\) Ibid., 141.
horizon of intelligibility." It may perhaps be added here that the irreversible loss of “depth” and unity does not thereby necessitate an abandonment of the religious commitment through which relation and meaning may still be realized, thus it may now be concluded that a religious commitment in relation and in faith remains as a legitimate human choice toward the realization of finite transcendence; from this conclusion, a particular conception of faith itself may be defined in precise terms.

**Faith Defined**

Paul Tillich contends that faith must reach beyond ordinary experience to access and account for the ground of being. He explains:

> Faith is not a theoretical affirmation of something uncertain, it is the existential acceptance of something transcending ordinary experience. Faith is not an opinion but a state. It is the state of being grasped by the power of being which transcends everything that is and in which everything that is participates.  

While Tillich’s depiction captures the essence of the movement of faith, further elucidation of a possible ground of being is required to fully reveal the function and object of faith in its entirety. The preceding historical account of the pursuit of truth, value, and meaning revealed a possible ground for its successful achievement. Perhaps, then, there is here a clue as to what may legitimately serve as a ground of being upon which faith may appropriately be constructed.

As the preceding account has shown, the need to know truth, value, and meaning is an essential fact of human existence, as such existence is necessarily situated within a position in *mystery*. What is also evident is that this need to know is frequently engaged as an active pursuit toward understanding; while acknowledging one’s position in mystery, the ancient Greek,

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Modernist, and Postmodernist positions each depict an assumption of individual responsibility for the determination or disclosure of meaning, whether such responsibility manifests as myth, theory, or some kind of absolute Truth. Finally, what each historical engagement has revealed is that regardless of the manner in which the mystery is engaged and meaning is pursued, a decisive answer has yet to be achieved, thus necessitating a continuation of the search and modifications of the manner in which the search is undertaken. As Mark C. Taylor contends, “At the limits of human understanding, faith must supplement reason.”\(^{150}\) Despite the absence of a knowable objective Absolute and thus the individual’s confinement to a position of subjectivity, knowledge, understanding, and perhaps some sense of truth is possible for the individual so situated through a recognition of and subsequent decision to engage and maintain the presence of relatedness between oneself as subject and the world as an object in relation. Because all knowledge, understanding, and value are constituted and realized in relation, relation may stand as a ground for knowledge; because all meaning and identity are likewise constituted in relation, relation may stand also as a possible ground of being. Both subject and object are most fully revealed and realized through their relating to each other, and it is precisely the fact of the relation itself which supplies meaning to both entities; both subject and object derive their being and meaning from the manner and persistence of their relatedness. Meaning is thus constituted in relation, and within this dynamic of necessary relation toward meaning is given the essence of faith.

Meaning emerges in the demarcation of and engagement in one’s portion with respect to the whole. Meaning is possible only when one understands one’s portion and lives the relation between oneself and one’s portion and all that remains outside that portion as both mystery and limit. Faith is thus an existential commitment to relation as the structural character of reality.

\(^{150}\) Taylor, *After God*, 36.
Faith arises in the confrontation with mystery and the human capacity for response and responsibility through which identity and meaning are constituted, through responsible participation in mystery. Faith is thus a mode of being-in-the-world, in relation, toward meaning. Faith effects the transcendence of the wholly subjective and/or objective, in the recognition and living of the fundamental relatedness (in relation), in the unification of part and whole, self and world, finite and transcendent. It is the affirmation of the possibility of meaning and the possibility of responsible participation in the mystery toward meaning.

While the act of faith centers around the possibility of relation, the object of faith is a particular manner of relating, of being at-home in relation. If the ultimate telos of faith is to achieve a position of home in relation, then the ultimate expression of faith is the acknowledgment of and commitment to both the relatedness (as necessary) and the revelation of meaning within that relation, which together constitute the declaration of home. The religious desire, discussed above as the attempt to uncover meaning while living with and in mystery, can now be fully revealed as the quest for home, defined as the harmony (however transient) that arises in the realization of meaningful relation, not as an inherent and inevitable human truth but rather as a human potentiality.

Ultimately, the commitment in faith, the declaration of home in relation, is not only an assessment of one’s position but simultaneously an attempt to effect, to realize, the ‘truth’ of being at-home in relation. Thus the full significance and consequence of this manner of faith is not merely the account which it provides of the conditions of human existence and the possibility of meaning within those conditions, but that the act itself fosters the condition of being at-home in relation, making such a position and such an existence meaningful. As William James contends, this is the fundamental purpose of faith of any kind:

[W]hen all is said and done, we are in the end absolutely dependent on the universe; and into sacrifices and surrenders of some sort, deliberately looked
at and accepted, we are drawn and pressed as into our only permanent positions of repose. Now in those states of mind which fall short of religion, the surrender is submitted to as an imposition of necessity, and the sacrifice is undergone at the very best without complaint. In the religious life, on the contrary, surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused: even unnecessary givings-up are added in order that the happiness may increase. Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary; and if it be the only agency that can accomplish this result, its vital importance as a human faculty stands vindicated beyond dispute. It becomes an essential organ of our life, performing a function which no other portion of our nature can so successfully fulfill.\textsuperscript{151}

The act of faith not only allows one to accept and live within the world as one experiences and understands it but also to shape, define, and give meaning to the world. Viktor Frankl’s immensely powerful account of his experiences in a concentration camp and his manner of enduring those circumstances suggests the same contention, though perhaps in a more compelling and urgent fashion.

Frankl attempts to demonstrate that what is most essential is the recognition of the ‘will to meaning,’ and he attempts to reveal possible manners in which one may find that meaning for oneself. Once meaning has been posited, Frankl contends that the existence of such meaning is sufficient to allow one to face even the most painful suffering within existence; quoting Nietzsche, he notes that “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”\textsuperscript{152} Ultimately, on the strength of the articulation of, and living of, a particular faith in the possibility of meaning, Frankl concludes:

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way. … It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.\textsuperscript{153}


\textsuperscript{152} Viktor Frankl, \textit{Man’s Search for Meaning}, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 104.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 67.
At-Home, In-Relation

The need for meaning appears as both an historical and universal condition of human existence. At the same time, throughout the historical engagement with this condition that is presented here, meaning has been continually attempted through the persistent formulations of myths, theories, and Truths. While myth has been presented here as a beginning point, a first attempt, in the engagement with and attempt to understand mystery and limits, the underlying purpose of myth itself seems particularly relevant to the notion of faith developed above. For the ancient Greeks, the myth was intended to inspire identification with the hero and thus participation in the heroic ideal which the hero represented; the myth “must lead to imitation or participation, not passive contemplation.”\(^{154}\) The mythic account was not intended as a shallow attempt at history or an inferior manner of accounting for the meaning of the world. Myth is “not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it”\(^{155}\); myth should be “regarded as a ‘vivid, life-renewing idea,’”\(^{156}\) as the human attempt “to come to terms with chaos.”\(^{157}\)

This underlying purpose which guided the construction and perpetuation of myth is no less present and relevant in the contemporary/Postmodernist concern than it was in that of the ancient Greeks. Perhaps what is required, then, is a new mythic attempt to wholly characterize and account for the human condition while suggesting a manner in which meaning may be

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\(^{155}\) Ibid., 3.


\(^{157}\) Ibid., 171.
disclosed and lived; to account for, and engage in faith (as faith is defined above), the ontological situation. Yet before doing so, the description of the ontological situation must itself be completed. It has been contended here that a fundamental constitutive aspect of the human condition is finitude; that is, the individual exists in a position defined by mystery and limits. Meaning emerges in the demarcation of and engagement in one’s portion with respect to the whole, and thus meaning is possible only when one pursues one’s portion and lives the relation. Yet there remains the question of the nature of the experience which calls the possibility of relation into doubt and thus necessitates the act of faith. This is the experience of ‘existential exile,’ which arises as a failure to recognize a portion (place in the world) for oneself and which thereby undermines the possibility of home. How does the condition of exile arise? In what manner is it experienced? What does exile mean? It is to these questions that the focus of the present investigation must now turn.
CHAPTER TWO
EXISTENTIAL EXILE

In the previous chapter, an attempt was made to articulate the fundamental condition of human existence as, at its heart, a position of finitude yet longing for transcendence toward meaning. The preceding contended that, in all of its aspects and manifestations, the individual human being everywhere encounters limits: the human individual is limited to finite knowledge and finite experience and is permitted to exist for only a finite period of time. It is this finitude which, perhaps more than any other aspect of human existence, determines what an individual is and how one relates to the world within which one exists. For this reason it was concluded that absolute objective knowledge (and thus objective knowledge of an Absolute) is an impossibility for the finite human being. The pursuit of Truth is therefore abandoned, and as one’s conviction in the possibility of Truth is diminished, so too is the inclination to accept any system of knowledge and action which was founded upon such an Absolute. Thus the pursuer of truth echoes the cry of Nietzsche’s madman: “Wither are we [now] moving? Away from all suns? … Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?”¹

However, as the possibility of an objective Absolute, which is recognizable and intelligible to the individual and which can subsequently act as a ground for systems of belief and action, is wholly undermined, a particular movement of faith may follow and thus transcend the inherent tension between the need for meaning and the ontological situation in finitude. The form of such faith, as it was articulated in the preceding chapter, is not in an Absolute, nor is it properly faith in any thing wholly external to the individual; rather, it is an existential commitment to relation

as the structural character of reality, a mode of being-in-the-world in relation. Faith arises from the human capacity for response to the condition as finite and the simultaneous capacity for responsibility within and against the limits imposed upon human existence. Such faith may manifest in the conviction that one’s existence as well as the existence of one’s ‘world’ are co-dependent, and that, although there may not be any apparent or inherent evidence of that connection, such a connection (or relation) is nevertheless not just possible but necessary for the affirmation of the possibility of meaning and the possibility of responsible participation in mystery toward meaning. The commitment to relatedness, coupled with the determination of meaning in relation, ultimately constitute a declaration of home; the end toward which faith is directed is thus a particular manner of relating whereby ‘home’ in-relation is achieved.

Yet more must be said regarding the notion of relatedness, in particular with respect to the specific elements which are presumed to stand in relation. There remains to be elucidated the question of the possibility of relation, from which arises the experience of being ‘in exile’ and the subsequent desire to [re]turn to a world in which one is (or can be) ‘at home.’ This experience represents an awakening to the condition of ‘existential exile,’ which will stand as the central concern of the next phase of investigation. Whereas the preceding chapter centered around the notion of finitude as the fundamental component of the ontological situation, the present chapter will focus on exile as a reflection of (and on) finitude and thus as a particular manifestation of the ontological situation. In what follows, an extended discussion of exile will be undertaken to thoroughly explore the character and consequences of the experience of exile, to reach a precise yet comprehensive definition of the term, and finally to propose a new characterization of the term, under the name ‘existential exile,’ as a defining experience of human existence.

Traditionally, ‘exile’ is presented as a social, political, religious, or anthropological state of being physically displaced from one’s home and left to live in a place or manner that is different
from what was one’s own. The exile is an alien (alius, other, strange), and the place of the exile is thus ‘other than,’ different from, home. Within this conception of the exile dynamic, the exiled individual is subjected by a will or power outside of oneself, resulting in a new manner of being in the world which is not of the individual’s choosing nor within the individual’s understanding or control. Through examining and building upon such accounts of exile, it will be shown that the characteristics of this sort of existence in exile parallel those of the sense of existential exile that arises when one recognizes one’s fundamental other-ness with respect to the world. In this sense, exile is the loss not of ‘home’ but of ‘being-at-home’ in the world. Ultimately, existential exile will be identified and developed as the defining condition of human existence, a condition of ‘otherness’ which arises from a specific questioning of the relatedness of the individual to the world. Finally, with a fully articulated conception of exile in hand, coupled with the particular notion of faith proposed in the previous chapter, a singular engagement with the challenge of exile may be undertaken, aimed at answering the question of the possibility of its transcendence.

For the moment, however, questions of engaging, and possibly transcending, the challenge of exile must wait. Rather, it is first necessary to name and know the terms of the question. To that end, it must first be asked—what is at stake in raising the question of exile?

The Question of Exile

What does exile mean? Before the term can be defined, before even the experience of exile can be quantified or qualified, it must be determined what is meant, explicitly or implicitly, in the formulation of the question of exile. The question of exile entails the question of demarcation, of the line that is drawn to singularize and separate, including “every kind of estrangement or
displacement, from the physical and geographical to the spiritual.\textsuperscript{2} Exile as demarcation allows interpretation as both end and beginning, as a closing of what had been and a simultaneous opening of what is now to be. The myth of original creation, as the beginning of human existence, is dependent upon an act of exile: human existence, precisely as ‘human,’ truly begins after an exile from the paradise of freedom from the anxieties of imperfect knowledge and morality. Likewise, though on a more individual (but still universalized) level, each human existence begins with a similar exile from the womb into a new world of experience and pain and a subsequent cry of despair at the warmth and comfort that has been lost.

Condemnation and liberation, end and beginning, loss and gain; these are the first implications experienced in beginning to raise the question of exile. While consideration of the question may be limited to particular instances and occurrences, such as that perpetrated against an individual person, or people, at a particular time and circumstance in history, the full depth and breadth of the condition cannot be comprehensively characterized in any single manifestation. Martin Tucker attempts to construct such a focused image of exile in his encyclopedic account of the vast number of twentieth-century writers who produced (at least portions of) their work in exile, though he is forced to concede, from the outset, that ‘exile’ is not a term that can be easily applied to a single type of experience. Rather, “Exile is a living tissue that grows in stages and degrees. … [It] represents one of the modern era’s significant communities of experience.”\textsuperscript{3}

For a condition that can be experienced at precise instants and levels, under very specific circumstances, but also as a permanent and pervasive element of human existence, a definitive


description of exile poses a serious challenge of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, before attempting to fully answer the question of what exile means, the constitutive questions implied in the question of the overarching meaning of exile must first be explored.

It has already been suggested here that ‘exile’ seems to convey, in its most basic sense, a relation; this relation may be imperfect, it may be ruptured or broken, or it may be wholly unrealized and thus stand only as a potentiality. Whatever the case, to speak of exile is to speak of the manner in which two distinct entities are related to each other. Typically, the entities in question are assumed to be ‘person’ (individual or group), at one pole, and ‘place,’ at the other. Further, the precise relation implied in ‘exile’ is usually understood to name a now-deficient relation between a specific person (or group) and a particular place; that is, the manner in which the relation between the person and place had been constituted and maintained has suffered, thus making it impossible to preserve their manner of relating (their being related). Finally, the severance of this being related is felt as a loss; the individual, ‘exiled’ from a particular place, longs for that place to be returned (or, rather, to return to that place).

In the winter of 1997 to 1998, the New York Public Library convened a series of lectures which attempted to illustrate and investigate the individual experience of exile. One of the speakers, André Aciman, explicitly articulated the problematic of relation between a person and a particular place in his introduction to the published version of the lectures, noting as well the insatiable drive toward relation which the condition of exile inspires and perpetuates:

_They are in permanent transience…_ an exile is continuously prospecting for a future home—forever looking at alien land as land that could conceivably become his. Except that he does not stop shopping for a home once he’s acquired one or once he’s finally divested himself of exile. He goes on prospecting, partly because he cannot have the home he remembers and partly because his new home bears no relationship to the old. Over and above these minor distractions, however, his problem starts at home, with home. There isn’t—and, in certain cases, wasn’t—any. The question…is how do you—
indeed, can you ever—rebuild a home?⁴

Victor Hugo had, more than a century ago, described exile in similar terms as a “long dream of home,”⁵ further adding that to be in one place while longing for another forces one “to have two souls.”⁶ Once one’s ‘home’ has been lost, a new ‘home’ must be found. Yet, as Aciman suggests, the search for a new home is ever undertaken in, and constantly colored by, the shadow of the old home; once found, the new home must measure up to the memory of the old home, must fill a void which is unmistakably deeper than even the foundation of the original home had ever been.

Yet perhaps this account risks being too specific too soon; it must be noted that this is but an example, one form in which the relation in exile may appear. What matters most here is the presence of two particular elements in relation, whatever the quality and stature of that relation may ultimately be. Thus, a first question of the meaning of exile must center around the identification of the elements themselves which stand in relation; to determine what exile means, it must first be determined what constitutes the individual and that to which the individual stands in relation. While the two elements in relation seemingly must exist independently of each other in order for the rupture in their relationship to be felt, still there must also be (or have been) some inherent, intimate connection between the two to have been severed; yet to know the nature of that connection, the essence of the elements themselves must first be known. What is the individual in exile, and from what does the individual find oneself exiled? Further, what does the identification and elucidation of one reveal about the other? Does the constitution of one determine the constitution of the other? Are the two players dependent


on each other for their being? Is ‘exile’ merely the name of the thread which binds the two and maintains their tenuous relatedness, or is ‘exile’ actually constitutive not just of their relatedness but also of their very being on a more fundamental level? Once the elements themselves in play in the relation of exile have been identified, it can further be asked how the name ‘exile’ wholly accounts for the relation between elements and the wholeness of that relation.

After the being of the parts in relation and their being-in-relation have been sufficiently appraised, the specific character of the encounter with exile and its attendant experiences can be investigated to better determine the essential qualities that define ‘exile’ as such. Edward Said, a preeminent thinker and writer on exile in the late twentieth century, echoes the preceding accounts of exile as a loss of home while further emphasizing the trauma and desolation inherent in that loss: “Exile is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. The essential sadness of the break can never be surmounted. … The achievements of any exile are permanently undermined by his or her sense of loss.”

Jan Vladislav, the exiled Czech writer and poet, shares Said’s view of the intrinsic sorrow while adding the deeper risk and sadness associated with the choice that is necessitated by the condition of exile:

Either he decides to lead his own life, or else he accepts an alien life. In the end, it does not matter where, in what part of the world. To live one’s own life means to protect a home within oneself, an elusive yet real home. It means to provide a refuge for one’s personal history, one’s family traditions, one’s language, one’s ideas, one’s native land. To live an alien life, even if only a few feet from his place of birth, is to lose all of this. To accept an alien life is to accept an alien death—and that is notably the lot of those forced into exile.”

Boris Khazanov, an émigré from the former USSR, similarly recognizes the autonomy forced upon one in exile, in the form of complete responsibility, in its simultaneously condemning and liberating quality; having arrived in Germany from the USSR, Khazanov noted that “there [was]

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nothing left of the forest games we played back home, and a new sensation [crowded] out the old—a feeling of loneliness and freedom.”

Finally, the exiled Polish Ukrainian–born poet Adam Zagajewski perhaps best sums up the tension between despair and hope, between end and beginning, that is implied in exile: “Exile is like birth. There are so many disadvantages, and some joys, both in being born and being in exile.”

While these separate accounts suggest a somewhat unified trajectory of the encounter with and response to exile, this is merely one interpretation; the possible experiences of/exile are far more heterogeneous. Yet despite the possible range and disparity of the specifics of the encounter with exile, a properly directed questioning of the nature of such experiences may reveal some commonalities, ultimately contributing to a more definitive understanding as such. Thus, after having first inquired of the character of the elements in relation and the nature of their relation, the specific experiences, reactions, feelings, and consequences that accompany exile must likewise be examined. Must exile begin in the nostalgia of recollection and remembrance, or might it equally arise from a projective dream or hope? What of the necessity of temporal considerations at all—is exile dependent upon a convergence of a particular time (or place) with the self in exile, or might one find oneself in exile without any change to one’s temporal or spatial situation? Must the awareness of exile arise exclusively from any concrete experience, or is it rather a structure of consciousness which arises as inherent product of self-identification? These questions are all essential, not merely for the clarification of any particular experience but also for the greater goal of comparison and definition. As will be seen in the discussion of specific ‘exile experiences’ that is to come, while the answers to these specific questions may be different from one case to another, reliance on these sorts of questions may

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9 Ibid., xiii.

10 Ibid., 126
reveal commonalities which may ultimately inform the attempt to define exile as such.

Finally, having sufficiently explored the nature of the elements in relation in exile and the character and quality of the experience of exile, questions of the facticity of exile as a condition may be raised; that is, does the name ‘exile’ refer to an actual or ‘true’ state of existence in relation, or rather does it name an acute misunderstanding of the relation in question? Further, is exile a fundamental and inherent condition or characteristic of human existence, or does one somehow become exiled? Is exile permanent, or does one fall into/out of exile? Is exile the product of a historical progression (and thus itself a purely historical/contingent condition), or is it the product of something more fundamentally (and thus timelessly) human?

These questions—regarding the elements of the relation that is characterized as in-exile, the experience of exile, and the facticity of exile, will direct the following discussion of specific exile ‘events,’ presented not as a comprehensive account of the history of the exile experience but rather as an historical evaluation of an event structure that is a component of the ontological situation of human existence. The analysis of such events will suggest certain fundamental commonalities from which a mosaic of the co-incidental qualities of exile will emerge: a picture that presents the essential nature of the exile experience. Upon the foundation which that picture provides, a definition of ‘existential exile’ will be constructed; upon the sketch rendered through an analysis of specific exile events, a precise map of the desert terrain of exile, an exacting account of the shallows and the abysses hidden beneath the dunes, will be drawn, toward the identification of the way back from exile toward home.

The Experience of Exile

The Genesis of the Experience

Where does exile begin? Etymologically, it begins in expulsion; one is first a part of, and
then finds oneself out of (ex-), one’s ground, land, or soil (solum). The implication of movement (salire, to leap or spring), as an act of separation, is revealing; some action or force compels one toward exile.\textsuperscript{11} Although it may be unclear as to whether emphasis should be placed on the act of separation itself (salire) or that from which the exile separates (solum),\textsuperscript{12} it is clear that the newfound dis-connection that is implied is essential. At the same time, it seems clear that this disconnection ought to be viewed not as a matter of whim but rather as a circumstance of necessity: exile is a physical separation that is forced upon the individual from without.\textsuperscript{13} In his comprehensive survey of the semantic and historical development of exile, Paul Tabori begins his assessment upon the foundation of these contentions:

The dictionaries define exile as forced separation from one’s native country, expulsion from home or the state of being expelled, banishment; sometimes voluntary separation from one’s native country. ... Enforced removal from one’s native land, according to an edict or sentence, penal expatriation or banishment, is another version. Synonyms include the verbs and nouns displace, send out, exclude with dislodgment, eviction, ejectment, deportation, expatriation, relegation, extradition, excommunication, and sending to Coventry as the obvious shadings and nuances.\textsuperscript{14}

Exile thus entails (at least in its beginning) being thrown, against one’s will, away from that which had served as one’s ground (home); the exile is thereafter forced to live away from, outside of, the place that had been home. What’s more, there is the sense that to be thus evicted is a particularly painful punishment. Edward Said suggests this characterization in noting that exile “originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an

\textsuperscript{11} Sophia A. McClennen, \textit{The Dialectics of Exile} (West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 2004), 14–17.

\textsuperscript{12} Maria-Inés Lagos-Pope, ed., \textit{Exile in Literature} (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1988), 15–16.

\textsuperscript{13} McClennen, \textit{The Dialectics of Exile}, 17.

anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider.”

But does this tell the whole story? While exile may perhaps begin (semantically, if not historically) with the forced expulsion from home, neither the circumstances of expulsion nor the definition of ‘home’ are sufficiently clear. While Tabori explicitly refers to ‘home’ as one’s native country, that is perhaps far too exclusive a definition; Susan Rubin Suleiman adds that “nation, ethnicity, blood is not the only foundation for imagining home and community.” At the same time, the consequences of the condemnation to exile may reach further than just those implied by physical separation from the place of one’s birth or one’s home; if one’s home, viewed as a bastion of comfort and refuge, is lost, then what remains of the possibility of subsequent achievement of similar feelings of security and belonging in the world? Perhaps the impact of exile is not limited to the physical or the immediate. As Charles Simic notes, “exile, being uprooted and made a pariah may be the most effective way yet devised to impress on an individual the arbitrary nature of his or her own existence.”

Regardless of the original etymological intention of the term, ‘exile’ cannot be limited to reference to the purely physical and immediate separation of an individual from one’s home. It may be concluded the solum of exile refers not to the physical ground of one’s homeland but instead to relation as a more fundamental ground of being. In this sense, to be in exile may mean far more than mere physical separation from a particular place by signifying an existential separation from what is original and thus constitutive of existence itself. Without suggesting that the purely physical and immediate experience of exile as expulsion is somehow secondary

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16 Suleiman, Exile and Creativity, 261.

to any other exile experience, the existential designation adds dimensions which are crucial to a complete understanding of what exile truly means. In the 1993 Reith Lectures, Edward Said, himself almost piously dedicated to the plight of physical and cultural exile, noted the parallel significance of metaphoric exile in his characterization of the ‘intellectual exile’:

[W]hile it is an actual condition, exile is also...a metaphorical condition. By that I mean that my diagnosis of the intellectual exile derives from the social and political history of dislocation and migration...but is not limited to it. Even intellectuals who are lifelong members of a society can, in a manner of speaking, be divided into insiders and outsiders: those on the one hand who belong fully to the society as it is, who flourish in it without an overwhelming sense of dissonance or dissent, those who can be called yea-sayers; and on the other hand, the nay-sayers, the individuals at odds with their society and therefore outsiders and exiles so far as privileges, power, and honors are concerned. The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives, so to speak, tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being. Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation.\(^{18}\)

While the plight of the physical, literal exile from home may impose pain and suffering at its most basic, and thus most terrible, level, this is not the only possible manifestation of the exile experience. Just as the exile must be amphibious, living in one place while maintaining (if only internally) a home elsewhere, perhaps the term itself, exile, must likewise be amphibious: while it maintains its obvious and original immediate and physical implications, it must also be equipped to contend with a host of existential implications, no less consequential for being less tangible. Therefore, with a comprehensive definition of ‘existential exile’ as a primary goal, analysis of the experience of exile will include both literal and metaphorical encounters with the condition. Without suggesting that the desolation and despair that may result from metaphorical

exile can occupy the same space in the category of suffering as does the physical, emotional, and spiritual pain of the literal exile, it will be seen that both kinds of experiences are equally revealing (though perhaps of different aspects) of the depth and breadth of what it means to be in exile and thus equally constitutive of the definition of ‘existential exile.’

Having chosen to accept accounts of the exile experience outside of the physical and the literal, there are now new grounds upon which exile may be considered (or perhaps more accurately, there are new perspectives from which one may be seen to be in exile). Where does exile begin? To reiterate, exile begins in expulsion. Where did exile begin? If only mythically and within one precise tradition, exile began with the expulsion of Man and Woman from the Garden of Eden; in Genesis 3 may thus be found the story of the first exiles.19

It was suggested in the previous chapter that the expulsion from the Garden represents an acquisition of the knowledge of human mortality and thus of human-ness per se. As punishment for their disobedience and for eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden and into the world:

So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.20

On the surface, the fate of Adam and Eve consists of an expulsion from the idyllic and innocent life they had known in the Garden into a life of struggle and suffering. Their original home, the Garden, is lost to them forever; they are forbidden to return, and their new home falls short of

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19 Following the example of Paul Ricoeur, the Adamic myth is discussed here not as an historical account but rather as an historical attempt to reach the meaning of a specific condition of human existence; that is, making use of the “symbolic function of the myth.” For the present treatment of the original condition of exile, as for Ricoeur’s treatment of the condition of evil, it will be accepted that “the story of the fall has the greatness of myth”—that is to say, has more meaning than a true history” (Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil, trans. Emerson Buchanan [New York: Harper and Row, 1982], 235–237).

the quality of their original home in all possible respects. Thus in addition to the new prospect of pain to which they are now subject by living ‘in the world,’ they must also contend with the perpetual remembrance of what has been lost to them forever. Existence is now, and will remain, for them imperfect. Adam and Eve are therefore exiles from the Garden into the world.

There is, however, much more at stake in the story than a simple case of disobedience resulting in punitive expulsion. Upon closer inspection of the story, by their behavior Adam and Eve did more than merely disobey; by eating of the Tree of Knowledge, they began to bridge the gap between themselves and their Lord, thus diminishing the distinction between Human and Divine: “And the LORD God said, ‘The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.’”21 Because Adam and Eve had, by eating the fruit, attained Knowledge,22 it became necessary for God to emphasize and enlarge the gulf between Himself and his disobedient creations. By daring to become, if unwittingly, more God-like, Adam and Eve were forced into a new state which forced upon them more human-like qualities—imperfection, limitations on what they could do and where they could go, and awareness of their own mortality. By being exiled, Adam and Eve become most fully and irrevocably human. In this sense, the myth of the Fall of Man suggests not merely that the Fall is an exile, but more precisely that exile is itself a fall into humanity.23

What are the implications of this interpretation? To begin, just as the origin of the condition

21 Ibid., Genesis 2:22.

22 For a more extensive discussion of the role of knowledge in the Fall, see Mike Grimshaw, Bibles and Baedekers: Tourism, Travel, Exile, and God (London: Equinox, 2008), 80.

23 As Stefan Rossbach notes, “there are many competing religious and philosophical symbolisms in which the significance of exile is dramatized to the point where exile is not the result of human decisions but rather a condition that defines human existence as such.” Stefan Rossbach, “On the Metaphysics of Exile,” in Aftermaths: Exile, Migration, and Diaspora Reconsidered, eds. Marcus Bullock and Peter Y. Paik (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 76–77.
of humanity as fallen is here intimately tied to the exile event, the persistent repetition of exile as an occurrence, perpetuated against fallen humanity, is both foreseen and justified. Throughout the book of Genesis the history of God’s people, far beyond the immediate experiences of Adam and Eve, is endured as a series of recurring exiles. Paul Ricoeur notes that if exile is taken as a symbol of the original Fall, it is a symbol which is repeated throughout, and perhaps most accurately defines, the Jewish theology of history:

[T]his symbolism...has its strictly mythical expression in the theme of banishment, inseparable from the story of the fall; the fall inaugurates a time of banishment, wandering, and perdition, symbolized successively by the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Paradise, the wandering of Cain, the dispersion of the builders of Babel, and the undoing of creation in the Flood.  

In this view, exile is a seminal component, perhaps even the defining feature, not just of the original Fall but of all of the travails that followed.

Second, the Genesis story of exile from The Garden stands as the paradigm of the exile event, against which all subsequent experiences may be measured and understood. Even if the specific circumstances do not explicitly equate to those of the original Fall, the experience may be felt as similar. With the story of the Fall as an example of the original limitations placed on humanity and the recognition of what is lost forever, perhaps any experience of loss can be clarified in its likeness to the story of the Origin.

Genesis [presents] humankind’s first exiles. Since then, is there anyone who does not—in some way, on some level—feel that they are in exile? We feel rejected from our first homes and landscapes, from childhood, from our first family romance, from our authentic self. We feel there is an ideal sense of belonging, of community, of attunement with others and at-homeness with ourselves, that keeps eluding us. The tree of life is barred to us by a flaming sword, turning this way and that to confound us and make the task of approaching it harder.

24 Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil, 331.

On their own, experiences such as those that Hoffman lists might not appear as manifestations of exile; however, comparison with the archetypical Exile event—that from The Garden—better situates such disparate experiences in an order that is defined by the despair and permanence of loss.

Finally, and perhaps most instructively, by suggesting that the exile from The Garden was a constitutive event in becoming human, the Genesis story ultimately contends that being exiled (or rather, being in-exile) is an essential, defining aspect of what it means to be human. Adam and Eve, as the first humans, represent not just the origin of the human but also the essence of what ‘human’ means—imperfect, limited, finite, banished from their original home. As Ricoeur concludes in his analysis of the presence of sin and evil, the first beings stand for all beings, and their choices, which led ultimately to their status as exiles, become a part of the universal condition for all beings who follow in their wake:

The first function of the myths of evil is to embrace mankind as a whole in one ideal history. By means of a time that represents all times, “man” is manifested as a concrete universal; Adam signifies man. “In” Adam, says Saint Paul, we have all sinned. Thus experience escapes its singularity; it is transmuted in its own “archetype.” Through the figure of the hero, the ancestor, the Titan, the first man, the demigod, experience is put on the track of existential structures: one can now say man, existence, human being, because in the myth the human type is recapitulated, summed up.26

Adam and Eve, as individuals, entered into sin; at the same time, precisely because they are meant to stand as both the beginning and the symbol of all humanity, account for the sinful nature of all of humanity: “the myth, in naming Adam, man, makes explicit the concrete universality of human evil; the spirit of repentance gives to itself, in the Adamic myth, the symbol of that universality.”27 Likewise, humanity’s ‘new’ condition (in exile) with respect to

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26 Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil, 162.

27 Ibid., 241.
its previous wholeness and perfection is made universal as well. Ricoeur concludes:

The chronicle of the first man furnishes the symbol of the concrete universal, the model of man exiled from the kingdom, the paradigm of the beginning of evil. In Adam we are one and all; the mythical figure of the first man provides a focal point at the beginning of history for man’s unity-in-multiplicity.28

The inherent connection between exile and human existence is thereby made clear: to be exiled is to be human, and to be human is to be exiled.29

The myth of the original exile from The Garden is thus a necessary preamble to situate and direct a comprehensive understanding of exile. From here, as with the examination of faith in the previous chapter, the cartography of the exile experience will pass through three phases to uncover a particular historical trajectory, each phase of which will suggest a somewhat unified notion of exile; subsequent comparison of the three will reveal particular nuances which will be instrumental in the ultimate definition of, and direction from, existential exile that will be offered thereafter. The focus of the first phase will fall on the period which most directly and immediately followed the prologue in Eden: the ancient Greco–Roman and Judeo–Christian experience.

Exile from the Divine: The Ancient Experience

It is perhaps in the ancient experience that the consequences of literal/physical exile were most dire. Where the immediate surroundings of home and the members of one’s family, tribe,

28 Ibid., 244.

29 Of course, the commission of sin and the resultant expulsion from the garden could also be interpreted not as the manifestation of an essential (and thus necessary) aspect of human nature but rather as merely the result of a particular human choice which could have been otherwise. On the surface, this interpretation seems to characterize the condition of exile as merely contingent, rather than as a fundamental component of the ontological situation; however, such a characterization would be misguided. To suggest that the choice by Adam and Eve, and the banishment into exile that followed, could have been otherwise is to emphasize that Adam and Eve held their respective fates in their own hands; that is, their existence was undertaken from a position in freedom. In this interpretation, freedom thus stands as a constitutive element of the human situation, the full application of which necessarily entails a particular severance; to be free is to be uprooted, and total freedom is possible only in exile.
or city wholly constituted one’s ‘world,’ to be expelled meant to be sent into a completely unfamiliar world of which one presumably had no knowledge or experience. Edward Said notes that “in premodern times banishment was a particularly dreadful punishment since it not only meant years of aimless wandering away from family and familiar places, but also meant being a sort of permanent outcast, someone who never felt at home, and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, and bitter about the present and future.” While Said chooses here to focus on the exile’s despair in trying to emotionally reconcile the present with the past, E. Sidney Hartland emphasizes the horror of ancient exile as a more practical matter:

Banishment…is a penalty hardly less terrible than death. In a society founded on kinship, natural or artificial, as a society in the lower culture is, a person whose ties of kinship are not recognized by his proper community is an outcast and an alien from all. He meets with nothing but universal hostility, and his death is certain, if not by violence, at any rate by slow starvation and misery alone in the forest or the wilderness.

The condemnation to exile may thus likewise be a condemnation to death; to be banished from one’s home is to be banished from one’s means for survival. As Franz Neumann notes, this conflation of exile and death in the ancient world was common:

Rome, as Greece earlier, often condemned the oppositional intellectual or artist to exile. The general term for this punishment is exterminatio, literally meaning expulsion beyond the frontiers. But the meaning of the term changed from about the third century AD and then assumed the meaning it now has—that of physical destruction.

The punitive power of exile is undeniable, a power which is perhaps be exemplified, as Neumann alluded to, in the ancient Greek conception.

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Ancient Greek poetry and tragedy are filled with images of condemned exiles, castigated and cast out for profound crimes against the divine order. Odysseus, after having been detained from his home by war for ten years, is forced to endure another ten years of exile for his transgressions against the gods. During this exile, Odysseus experiences manifold pains and losses, until he is finally permitted by the gods to return home, with no ship and no possessions, the lone survivor of all who had embarked for home with him. Even this is not the end of his exile; upon his arrival home he is initially unrecognized and thus remains an exile in his own home. Yet despite all that Odysseus suffers, the poem suggests a distinction, rather than a coincidence, between exile and death. Though all of his men die during the ten-year journey in exile, Odysseus does not; in fact it had been foreseen for him in the Land of the Dead that he would, eventually, return home safely. The dead Theban prophet Tiresias, after warning Odysseus of the perils that awaited him on his journey home, reassured Odysseus that death would only find him at his home:

And at last your own death will steal upon you…
a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes
to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age
with all your people there in blessed peace around you.33

Yet how does this eventual death compare, in Odysseus’ eyes, with his current plight in exile? Perhaps an answer is suggested by Odysseus’ subsequent encounter with the dead Achilles. While Achilles mourns his current position as a dead man amongst the dead, Odysseus confesses his certainty that Achilles must maintain a position of utmost esteem, even in death, even in the exclusive company of the dead. In Odysseus’ view, Achilles manner of living, as well as his manner of death, were of such high honor as to lead him to a similarly honorable position in death; Achilles, greatest of all living man, surely must enjoy similar status among

the dead. To this position, however, Achilles immediately objects:

No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus!
By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man—
Some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrabes to keep alive—

than rule down here over all the breathless dead.34

Whereas Achilles suggests that he would rather “slave on earth” than suffer death, the analogy for Odysseus surely must refer to his plight in exile: would Odysseus rather toil in exile than “rule...over all the breathless dead”? Although Odysseus’ exile is explicitly not a death sentence, it is fair to wonder whether those of Odysseus’ companions who died along the way were not thereby spared additional anguish. Further, despite Achilles’ sobering words regarding his own position in death, the fact that Odysseus’ death is foreseen within the comfort of home, almost as a reward for having undergone the trial of exile, suggests a certain ambiguity regarding whether exile or death is the greater punishment.

In addition to the equation of exile with death, there is evident within the ancient Greek tragic imagination a suggestion of the connection between exile and the overarching rule of law. In Aeschylus’ Oresteia, Orestes is driven into exile by the Furies for murdering Clytemnestra, the killer of Orestes’ father Agamemnon. Presenting themselves to be legitimate instruments of justice, the Furies pursue Orestes in exile for presuming to have the authority and legitimacy to administer justice himself:

Hold out your hands, if they are clean
no fury of ours will stalk you,
you will go through life unscathed.
But show us the guilty – one like this
who hides his reeking hands,
and up from the outraged dead we rise,

witness bound to avenge their blood
we rise in flames against him to the end!35

34 Ibid., XI, 555–558.

What’s more, Orestes’ exile cannot be ended until the Furies consent to transfer their judicial authority to a jury of Orestes’ Athenian peers. Punitive exile, at least according to Aeschylus’ account, is transformed from a divine but irrational whim to a product of an organized rule of law; yet while the authority to condemn to exile has shifted, certainly the punishment itself remains a terrible fate.

In her historical account of the practice of exile and ostracism in ancient Greece, Sara Forsdyke seemingly reiterates the conclusion of the trial of Orestes. In contending that exile was used primarily as a political tool for the demarcation and preservation of power in Athens, Forsdyke emphasizes the necessity of the transition from unilateral, permanent expulsion toward a democratic system of ostracism managed and administered by an assembly of Athenian citizens. Forsdyke introduces this necessary evolution by contending that the primary consequence of exile, at least in its serial form, was a destabilization of the political and social order. She explains:

The city of Mytilene, on Lesbos, provides the first example of the role of exile in the political development of the archaic poleis. Not only did the elites of archaic Mytilene utilize exile as a means of competing for power, but the continual back-and-forth movement of elites from power to exile so destabilized the polis that it precipitated a crisis of the political order.  

As Forsdyke contends, this dynamic of exile and return as a corruptive force on the order of the city was by no means limited to occasional occurrences; rather, the resulting instability became a cultural norm as a result of the exile practices of the time: “The frequent expulsion of elites by their rivals—a practice that I term the ‘politics of exile’—created a crisis of stability for most poleis, since expelled elites frequently sought to return by force and expel their opponents in

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In order to counteract the resulting destabilization and disorder, it became necessary to replace the practice of exile with democratically decided ostracism: “an extraordinarily moderate form of exile, [which] functioned pragmatically to avoid the destabilizing consequences of the politics of exile, and ideologically as a symbol of the justice of democratic rule.” This new system of ostracism was limited to the expulsion of one citizen per year, and that for only ten years. By limiting the number of individuals banished from the city and thus hostile toward the city’s order, Forsdyke contends that the stability of the city was significantly restored. From this point of view, the damaging consequences of exile are manifested on two fronts: whereas the individual who has been exiled must endure the suffering that is attendant to the position of the outcast and homeless wanderer, the overarching order, both political and social, is at risk by the hands of the disgruntled exile; disorder is thus a fundamental result of exile.

What of the individual’s experience with exile? Perhaps the most legendary figure of ancient Greece, Socrates, found himself in confrontation with the plight of exile and its myriad consequences. For intentionally corrupting the youth and for not respecting the gods of the state, Socrates was ultimately threatened with death, which may perhaps be equated with an extreme exile from life. Yet is this a fair equation? Clues to suggest an answer to this question may be found in Plato’s account of Socrates’ trial.

After Socrates had responded to the charges brought against him and defined and defended his true identity against the erroneous conception of him that had inspired the accusations, it was made clear to Socrates that, even if he were found guilty, death may not necessarily be the inevitable outcome of the trial and judgment. The principal desire of the Athenian authorities is

37 Ibid., 278–279; emphasis added.
38 Ibid., 143.
39 Ibid., 279–280.
Socrates’ silence and his absence; whether death or physical exile produced that sentence was of little importance. Socrates, for his part, knew that he had only to flee, to cease his philosophizing in Athens and disappear, and his life would be spared; of course, he could not do so:

Where a man has once taken up his stand, either because it seems best to him or in obedience to his orders, there I believe he is bound to remain and face the danger, taking no account of death or anything else before dishonor. This being so, it would be shocking inconsistency on my part, gentlemen, if...when God appointed me, as I supposed and believed, to the duty of leading the philosophical life [that is, questioning], examining myself and others, I were then through fear of death or of any other danger to desert my post.40

Socrates here admits that exile from Athens, where he was compelled to fulfill his duty and his identity as a philosopher, would undermine his philosophical project. As William Gass explains, the presence of Athens as both the object and audience of Socrates’ philosophical activity was crucial to the fulfillment that activity:

Socrates was essentially an Athenian, and to be an Athenian was to continue to practice what he took to be his proper role in the city.... Socrates did not believe a mute, inglorious Socrates was possible, but his choice depended on a conception of the relation between the citizen and the city.... Socrates would not only have been deprived of his position in the polis, he would have been deprived of that philosophical activity which was his life.41

Yet there is more at stake here than merely Socrates’ vital connection with his city. To willingly accept exile from his city, and thus from his identity, would constitute an abandonment of his philosophical enterprise and thus a direct disobedience of the Divine Order that called him; exile, for Socrates, would thus be a fate far worse than death.

Here again, as with Odysseus, the question of the relative quality of suffering inflicted in exile in comparison with death is raised. While a definitive position from Odysseus’ perspective is not wholly clear (at the very least, the prospect of death at home as a ‘reward’ for enduring


exile is countered by Achilles’ contention that there could be no fate in life that is worse than death), Socrates’ position on the question of death versus exile is clear; given the choice between an exile from his home and his philosophy or death, Socrates insists on the latter: “You know that I am not going to alter my conduct, not even if I have to die a hundred deaths.”\(^{42}\) The reason for this, as Plato reveals in the *Phaedo*, is because death does not actually represent exile for Socrates but rather a fulfillment of the philosopher’s practice and re-union for his soul with the divine source of his identity.

At the outset of the *Phaedo*, Socrates explains that only the soul is capable of pure knowledge, and that it is limited in this pursuit by the body in which it finds itself imprisoned. Not only is the body thereby revealed as a limiting force upon the soul, but it is suggested that, for the soul to finally attain the knowledge it seeks, it must find a way to free itself from the body; this, of course, can only be accomplished in death. Socrates explains:

> We are in fact convinced that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself. It seems, to judge from the argument, that the wisdom which we desire and upon which we profess to have set our hearts will be attainable only when we are dead, and not in our lifetime. If no pure knowledge is possible in the company of the body, then either it is totally impossible to acquire knowledge, or it is only possible after death, because it is only then that the soul will be separate and independent of the body.\(^{43}\)

Even if this contention, that by escaping the body the soul may thus acquire pure knowledge, is accepted, there is no guarantee that the soul would endure to enjoy such an acquisition; so the objection is raised against Socrates. This of course leads to Socrates’ ‘proof’ of the immortality of the soul, which not only justifies his insistence on maintaining his philosophical position and identity against the threat of death, but also fully reveals Socrates’ conception of the pure state of the soul’s

\(^{42}\) Plato, *Apology*, 29d.

being in contrast to that of the body: “The soul is most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and ever self-consistent and invariable, whereas body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, dissoluble, and never self-consistent.”

For Socrates, physical existence is not the boundary within which the soul exists exclusively; rather, physical existence marks the soul’s period of exile—to be human is to be in exile. All living is thus living in exile, and death, by freeing the soul from the body, thereby ends the soul’s exile in the body. In his description of death Socrates presents an image not just of the liberation of the soul from the constraints of physical existence but also of a triumphant return of the soul from exile:

If at its release the soul is pure and carries with it no contamination of the body, ...then it departs to that place which is, like itself, invisible, divine, immortal, and wise, and where, on its arrival, happiness awaits it, and release from uncertainty and folly, from fears and uncontrolled desires, and all other human evils, and where, as they say of the initiates in the Mysteries, it really spends the rest of time with God.

Finally it is clear why death and exile are not equated in Socrates’ view, and ultimately why a ‘condemnation’ to death is preferable to a condemnation to exile: Socrates’ physical existence was already for him a period of exile, and to accept further exile away from the center of his philosophical activity would have only further alienated him that activity, from his identity, and thus from his soul.

Undoubtedly influenced by Plato’s account of Socrates’ conception of the soul as ‘exiled’ in the body, Plotinus likewise conceived of human existence as being in exile from the divine order of the cosmos. Plotinus conceived of the cosmos as a unity, positing the individual as standing outside of, alienated from, that unity. As Stefan Rossbach contends, the goal of

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44 Ibid., 80b.

45 Ibid., 80e–81a
Plotinus’ philosophy was to maintain some sense of connection, despite this alienation, between the individual and the cosmic order, to “maintain both poles of a taut line.”

According to Plotinus, the cosmic unity (the divine ‘One’) is the cause of all material existence, which originates as a procession from the One. From the non-material existence of the One, matter is brought to be through its separation from the One. Following this separation, however, there is a simultaneous pull of reversion back to the One, as the newly formed material being subsequently contemplates its original cause. There is thus a fundamental reciprocal relationship between the immaterial One and the materially existing being, with the One, as one pole of the relation, standing as the cause of the material as well as the successive object of the material being’s contemplation. This relation is thus undeniably analogous to that of exile, as the material object looks back toward its cause, its home, to question its nature and a possible return: “Therefore, the drama of concrete, material existence resembles a diaspora, where being itself undergoes a process of fragmentation that leads from the One—that is, from beyond-being—to the material cosmos.”

Just as Plato’s account of Socrates suggests that the soul’s ultimate telos is to abandon the body and return to the divine perfection of the eidos, Plotinus likewise seems to contend that the human being, exiled from its divine origin and unity, longs to return to a union with the One. In each case, material existence is presented as a deprived, corrupted state of being, which must be overcome and transcended to reunite with the Divine; thus a material existence which began by being exiled from the One seeks to resolve itself through a dismissal of the material and a

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reconciliation with the Divine. As Rossbach concludes, the way of this transformation lies, for Plotinus, in the act of *contemplation*:

The way of return always begins, of course, in exile, where the soul experiences a poverty of being and longs to possess that which it has lost, which is fullness of being. The ensuing spiritual desire is an essential state in the soul’s mystical ascent to its higher part and, further, to the One. As contemplation (*theoria*) is the unifying principle of reality, it is not surprising that contemplation is the key to the soul’s journey, but it has to be pure contemplation—contemplation that overcomes the constraints of the multiplicity of matter.  

The goal, and eventual end, of such contemplation is the total consumption of the material by the One, whereby the material individual is so overwhelmed by the presence of the One that the lines between the two disappear, and being is left behind in favor of a re-union with the Divine. What is most necessary here, as was the case in Plato’s account of Socrates, is that the existing being, having been created by an exilic act from its divine source, must achieve a transcendence of that new being toward a reconciliation with the original source in order to most fully be what it is: pure soul, “utterly at rest,” at one with the perfection and unity of the Whole. Put another way, the existence which begins in (as) exile is compelled to return home, not just to compensate for its original loss but also to achieve its full being as such.  

Of note, in both Plotinus and Plato, is the fact that in each case reconciliation with the Divine is dependent on a fundamental change enacted by the individual being who has been exiled from the cosmic unity. The Divine One, as such, is eternal and unchanging; it is always present, if not always accessible, in a static form. To achieve a reunion with the Divine, the individual must sacrifice that which distinguishes oneself as part from whole, that which makes one most human, after which acceptance (back) into the divine grace becomes possible.  

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49 Ibid., 86.


51 Ibid., VI, 9.7.
similar pattern, whereby the individual is exiled from the Divine into ‘human’ existence and subsequently longs for a return that is only possible through a transcendence of the human and the grace of the Divine, may be seen within the Judeo–Christian tradition.

Following the expulsion from The Garden, successive periods and experiences of exile define, to no small extent, the Judeo–Christian history and religious tradition. The seventeenth century BCE, when Jacob led the Jews into Egypt, may be seen as the beginning of four centuries in exile in that country. However, the period of exile did not immediately end with Moses leading the Exodus, as forty more years of exile in the desert immediately ensued. With the eventual end to their wandering and their final settlement in the land that had been promised, a period of relief from exile followed. However, this union would not remain in place forever, and with the destruction of the temple at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BCE, a new period of absolute exile began with the dispersion of the entire Jewish people from their land. As Paul Tabori points out, this new exile presented new problems which threatened to undermine not just the fundamental religious order but also the identity of the Jewish nation.\footnote{52 For Tabori’s extended discussion, see The Anatomy of Exile, 53–60. What follows here regarding the Jewish exile follows Tabori’s argument.}

To begin, there was the question of how to continue practices of worship that could not be enacted outside of the temple in Jerusalem. Ezekiel suggested an evasion of this problem, teaching the Jews that worship could be practiced properly in exile.\footnote{53 Tabori, The Anatomy of Exile, 55.} Additionally, there was the question of why to continue to worship and trust a God who had seemingly failed his people in allowing their ruin and expulsion from the Promised Land. Once again, Ezekiel (as well as Jeremiah) diffused the question, contending that the exile was a punishment that had to be
endured before a return to their Holy land could be possible. Without dismissing the importance of the manner in which the Jews confronted the problems of their new exile, what is noteworthy is the fact that being in exile allowed them to emphasize, if not fully define, their cultural and religious identity. At the same time, their expectation of an eventual end to their exile and a return to their Holy Land (home) was contingent upon their ability to overcome their sinful nature as well as upon the grace of God to allow their return. From their exile, the Jews were able to derive a greater understanding of their being-in-exile and a fuller conception of that from which they had been exiled; further, all of this contributed significantly to the development of the Jewish identity.

As a final example, the metaphoric figure of the ‘Wandering Jew’ epitomizes the Jewish identity as exile. One telling of the myth claims that Ahasuerus, a cobbler in Jerusalem, had refused to allow the tortured Christ to rest at his door during His march to Calvary and to his crucifixion. In response to being told to go away, Christ decreed that the cobbler would likewise go away and wander without end until Christ’s final Return. Another version names Cartaphilus as the perpetrator against Christ, having forcefully propelled Jesus from the presence of Pontius Pilate. Whatever the name of the individual and the precise nature of the transgression, for driving Christ away the offender was likewise compelled to leave and remain away until the Final Judgment. Here is another case of exile to punish a transgression against the Divine, with the possibility of reconciliation exclusively within the power of the Lord. What is striking, however, is that along with the curse of perpetual wandering is also the condemnation to immortality. Because he cannot die, Cartaphilus cannot leave behind his ‘human’ nature in order to transcend the gulf between himself and the divine. Just as his existence as human is perpetual, so too is his exile from the Divine.

54 Ibid., 55.
The ‘exile’ experienced by the Jews is a significant component, if only symbolically, of the Christian tradition as well. There is of course the shared origin in the original exile from The Garden, thus human existence for both the Jewish and Catholic tradition may be seen to be an exile from the presence of God. “In Christianity, the concept of exile was often used to refer to man’s life on earth. As exiles from heaven, their true home or destination, Christians had to act according to God’s will and live free from worldly temptations in order to earn their place in paradise.”\(^5^5\) As was also the case with the Jewish exile experience, the Christian tradition maintains that exile is ended by an act of divine grace following the individual’s transcendence of the human condition in sin. However, in the Christian tradition there is given the ultimate symbol of the Divine Grace through which the exile into humanity from God can be overcome; through the appearance of the Divine incarnate, Jesus Christ, the essential unity between God and human is re-asserted while a path from the exclusively human back to the Divine is likewise revealed. To become man, the Spirit is separated from God and enters the body of Jesus Christ; yet this exile is not complete, as Christ stands as both God and man simultaneously, perhaps suggesting that the exile of all of humanity is not as complete (or as permanent) as it may appear to be. Further, through his death, Christ reveals the way back to God from his own exile, thus demonstrating the way back for all sinners; through death, more precisely through Christ’s death, all humans as exiles from God are given a road by which they may return home.

In the centuries that followed after Christ’s death, monastic and ascetic traditions developed around the notion that “mundane, profane, worldly existence was in itself an exile from the Kingdom of Heaven.”\(^5^6\) To be human is to be in exile from the Divine and thus to wait for Divine Grace to end that exile and allow a return home; this contention, consistently intimated


throughout the Judeo–Christian tradition, is perhaps most perfectly articulated by Dante more than twelve hundred years after Christ stood as the paradigm of exile from expulsion to reunion. In Dante, exile is both a material and a spiritual condition, emphasizing the shared features of each while decisively confirming exile as an essential component of human experience.

For Dante, the experience of exile is twofold: while his immediate, historical reality was defined by his exile from Florence, his spirituality reality was defined, as for all of humanity, by an exile from God. In either case, the primary experience of the exile is defined by the loss of home, of what is one’s own:

You shall leave everything you love most dearly:
this is the arrow that the bow of exile
shoots first. You are to know the bitter taste
of others’ bread, how salt it is, and know
how hard a path it is for one who goes
descending and ascending others’ stairs. 57

Yet while it seems clear from much of Dante’s writing that his ultimate hope was to return from exile both literally and spiritually, as Giuseppe Mazzotta contends Dante recognized his position in-exile as a privileged position which enabled him to better understand the human condition; though he wishes to return eventually, the poet must stand in exile in order to know truthfully and tell faithfully. Mazzotta cites “Tre donne intorno al cor mis son venute,” Dante’s “celebrated song of exile,” to demonstrate Dante’s conflicted relationship to


58 See, for example, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, Canto XXV, 1–12: “If it should happen… If this sacred poem—this work so shared by heaven and by earth that it has made me lean through these long years—can ever overcome the cruelty that bars me from the fair fold where I slept, a lamb opposed to wolves that war on it, by then with other voice, with other fleece, I shall return as poet and put on, at my baptismal font, the laurel crown; for there I first found entry to that faith which makes souls welcome unto God, and then, for that faith, Peter garlanded my brow.

his exile: while exile provides the perspective necessary to “speak to the world,” such speaking only exacerbates his exile, a condition which, paradoxically, he ultimately hopes to escape.  

Yet in the end, the possibility of escaping his exile and returning ‘home,’ either to Florence or to God, is dependent not on what Dante the individual may accomplish but rather on what may befall him from without; in each case, the power to allow a return is granted solely to the entity, Florence or God, to which he hopes to return. As Mazzotta concludes, “the pilgrim’s experience is meant to show that man can become eternal, can transcend the fragmentation of time…not through the illusory project of man’s own making…but through God’s grace.”

In Dante’s experience and poetry we are thus given one final example of the recognition of the human condition as in-exile. While this contention was suggested throughout both the Ancient Greco–Roman and Judeo–Christian traditions, what Dante’s particular account adds is the concurrent experience of both literal and spiritual exile, a coincidence which reinforces the fundamental nature and impact of each. Dante is exiled both by human hands and by the Divine; exile is, therefore, the complete truth of Dante’s existence, historically and spiritually. Yet in each case, while recognizing the value of his exile and simultaneously longing to return, Dante concedes that such a return is only possible with help: the good and honorable exile submits his fate to the grace and charity of his ‘home,’ both literally and spiritually. Further, and perhaps an equally influential element of Dante’s poetic phenomenology, is his exploration of the role of the feminine and the power of romantic love as a structure of experience and identity that

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60 For a detailed discussion of Dante’s treatment of exile in “Tre donne intorno al cor mis son venute,” see Mazzotta, “Dante and the Virtues of Exile,” 650–653

introduces for the first time in the West the fully drawn figure of the romantic hero.  

_Exile from the Human: The Modernist Experience_

Whereas the ancient Greco–Roman and Judeo–Christian historical traditions portray a particular thesis of exile as separation from a unified divine order that can only be overcome through the transcendence of the human and the grace of the Divine, the Modernist/Enlightenment experience suggests an antithetical conception of the condition of exile. The beginnings of this new notion of exile may be seen in the development of the Romantic position. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Romantic faith centered around the possibility of the attainment of an _earthly_ paradise through the efforts of humanity itself; the object of Romantic hope was “the certainty, or at least the possibility, of a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home.” Abrams’ articulation of that faith appropriately intimates that what is at stake here is a new manner of confronting the human condition of exile.

Friedrich Schiller suggests the same by beginning his account of the trajectory of humanity with the original exile event—the expulsion of Adam and Eve from The Garden. Following the lead of the ancient exiles, Schiller similarly recognizes that, through this expulsion, humanity is placed at the beginning of a journey that has as its _telos_ an eventual return to order and unity. Yet where Schiller diverges from the ancient articulations is in his suggestion that the paradise toward which humanity is traveling is not the old Divine unity that was lost but rather a _new_ unity.

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62 For a fully developed exploration of the necessity of the [feminine] Other, and alterity in general via the figure of the romantic hero, see Ambrosio, _Dante and Derrida: Face to Face_ (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

centered around the full realization of the human potential. Following the Fall, Schiller contends,

Man was destined to learn to seek out, by means of his own reason, the condition of innocence which he now lost, and as a free, reasonable spirit, to return to that place whence he had started out as a plant and creature of instinct: from a paradise of ignorance and bondage he was to work up, even if it should be after thousands of years, to a paradise of knowledge and freedom; one in which he would obey the moral law in his heart just as constantly as he in the beginning had obeyed instinct, and as plants and animals still obey it.64

In Schiller’s view, the original exile event, instead of signaling the beginning of the fundamentally tragic condition of human existence, opens the possibility for the actualization of human capacity. By falling from an instinctual attachment to the Divine the individual is freed to realize its potential precisely as human. Certainly the unity that was lost through the fall “into multiplicity, fragmentation, and opposition” is felt acutely as loss; Schiller refers to this release from instinct in The Garden as “storm[ing] into an alien land in the arrogance of our freedom,” which is closely followed by the “painful longing to go back home.”65 Yet despite this pain and longing, humanity is now able, Schiller contends, to “[press] on toward a higher unity which will incorporate the intervening multiplicity and resolve all conflicts.”66 Schiller likewise emphasizes that the power to resolve these conflicts and return to a position of unity lies with the human, rather than with some Divine order or grace; as he states in his On the Aesthetic Education of Man, humanity “must fall away from Nature by the abuse of Reason before [it] can return to her by the use of Reason.”67 The possibility of overcoming exile is thus entirely within human hands.

64 Friedrich Schiller, Something Concerning the First Human Society, according to the Guidance of the Mosaic Records, quoted in Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, 207.
65 Friedrich Schiller, On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry, quoted in Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, 214.
66 Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, 209.
Ultimately, Schiller contends that the capacity for art, specifically art of the beautiful,\textsuperscript{68} equips the human to overcome the fragmentation and opposition of the human condition to enter into a new reconciliation or unity. As Abrams explains, “beauty unites ‘freedom’ and ‘supreme inner necessity’ in a ‘harmony of laws,’ not by ‘the exclusion of certain realities, but in the absolute inclusion of all realities.’”\textsuperscript{69} Through the reconciliation that art fosters, the individual is ultimately able to attain the unity and totality of human nature. Thus Schiller concludes:

We can, then, distinguish three different moments or stages of development through which both the individual and the species as a whole must pass, inevitably and in a definite order, if they are to complete the full cycle of their destiny. … Man in his physical state merely suffers the dominion of nature; he emancipates himself from this dominion in the aesthetic state….\textsuperscript{70}

Similarly to Schiller, G.W.F. Hegel likewise suggests that art may present a manner by which the individual can transcend a particular alienation toward a more fundamental unity with oneself; in the introductory remarks to his published Lectures on Aesthetics, Hegel contends that the “universal need for art…is man’s rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self.”\textsuperscript{71} Further on, he adds that the “task and aim of art is to bring home to our sense, our feeling, and our inspiration everything which has a place in the human spirit.”\textsuperscript{72}

The ‘Ideal’ of art, according to Hegel, is the unity of the universal Idea and the particular sensuous form in the work of art, which presents what it means to be a minded, self-conscious,

\textsuperscript{68} Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, 212.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 212.

\textsuperscript{70} Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters, 171.


\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 46.
spiritual, free being. “The highest value of art, and what makes great art great, is its ability to afford us an aesthetic experience of freedom and reconciliation.”\(^{73}\) In its ‘everyday’ being in the world, the Idea toward which spirit is directed is unable to be fully seen and experienced, therefore the establishment of a deeper ‘mode’ of experience is necessary. Thus, Hegel concludes:

> Spirit cannot, in the finitude of existence and its restrictedness and external necessity, find over again the immediate vision and enjoyment of its true freedom, and it is compelled to satisfy the need for this freedom, therefore, on other and higher ground. This ground is art, and art’s actuality is the Ideal.\(^{74}\)

In Hegel’s account, the ‘evolution’ of art as a means to present the Ideal of human freedom progresses through three historical phases: Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic. In the Symbolic form, the Idea which art attempts to express has not yet been fully understood, and thus because of its indeterminacy the artworks themselves are unable to present the Idea in a clear, accessible, understandable form. As Hegel explains, “instead of coming to a complete identification, it comes only to an accord, and even to a still abstract harmony, between meaning and shape, [each presenting] their mutual externality, foreignness, and incompatibility.”\(^{75}\) This difficulty is overcome, Hegel believes, in the Classical form of ancient Greece, the period in which the unity between content (Idea) and form is most completely achieved.

In the Classical form, most fully in Greek sculpture, physical form, especially that of the human body, is seen as a complete expression of the Idea of Spirit. “Here art has reached its own essential nature by bringing the Idea, as spiritual individuality, directly into harmony with its bodily reality in such a perfect way that external existence now for the first time no longer

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\(^{74}\) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 152.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 300.
preserves any independence in contrast with the meaning which it is to express.” However, like the symbolic form before it, the Classical form of art failed as well, moving finally into the Romantic period. This transition was characterized, in Hegel’s view, by a profound turn inward into a more radical subjectivity and depth of feeling than the Classical form could convey.

In place of the Greek conception arose the Christian notion of truth and unity whereby what was emphasized was not just the need for one’s harmony with one’s world, but also the need for the “inward unity of spirit with itself.” Here, then, is a twofold manifestation of an exile event similar to that which Schiller had presented. Through this need and from the dissolution of the Classical form, the Romantic form thus arose, as a final attempt through art to attain unity. In the dissolution of the Classical form, according to Hegel, the “inner then stands by itself on one side, the external existent separated therefrom on the other, and subjectivity, withdrawn into itself because in the previous shapes it can no longer find its adequate reality, has to be filled with the content of a new spiritual world of absolute freedom and infinity and look around for new forms of expression for this deeper content.” Where once spirit had been able to attain a sense of unity and harmony with its world through an accord with the necessary order of that world (as was held by the Greek form of life and expressed in Classical art), now spirit seeks a greater unity with itself and its world through a movement to “withdraw into the infinity of its inner life.” The final aim, then, Hegel concludes, which was ultimately sought through the dissolution of Classical art and the subsequent establishment of Romantic art, is absolute subjectivity:

76 Ibid., 301.
77 Houlgate, *Freedom, Truth, and History*, 163.
78 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 422.
79 Ibid., 509.
The true content of romantic art is absolute inwardness, and its corresponding form is spiritual subjectivity with its grasp of its independence and freedom. This inherently infinite and absolutely universal content is the absolute negation of everything particular, the simple unity with itself which has dissipated all external relations… and dissolved all particular gods into a pure and infinite self-identity. … [A]rt knows now only one God, one spirit, one absolute independence which, as the absolute knowing and willing of itself, remains in free unity with itself and no longer falls apart into those particular characters and functions whose one and only cohesion was due to the compulsion of a dark necessity.\textsuperscript{80}

This “simple unity with itself,” which was the essential goal to be accomplished through art, represents the ultimate transcendence of a particular sense of alienation from oneself toward a final union. However, in Hegel’s final estimation, art ultimately proved unable to satisfy itself or human beings who were attempting to discern precisely what it means to be human and thus to achieve a final unity. Art is thus supplanted first by religion and then by philosophy in its goal of achieving a comprehensive self-understanding, overcoming the alienation of the individual human being from oneself, and realizing for the individual harmony with oneself and the world. A brief return to Hegel’s religious conceptions, discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter, may therefore reveal more regarding his treatment of the exile experience and how it might ultimately be transcended.

In Hegel’s ‘religious’ conception, the individual stands in a position of alienation from the Divine (Spirit), a position which mirrors the Judeo–Christian view as well as the position with which Schiller’s depiction of exile began. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Hegel contends that Geist is revealed to human understanding as a necessary event in the unfolding of history. What Spirit ultimately reveals to humanity is the essential unity that exists between the Divine and the human, thus the necessary event, reached by the development of human consciousness through history, is the recognition of this essential unity and the reconciliation

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 519.
with God. This reconciliation is, in Hegel’s view, an articulation of the human destiny to return to an essential unity with the divine, to recognize that such an essential unity has been present, if unrecognized, all along.\(^{81}\) Hegel characterizes this position in dis-unity as estrangement; human existence is a wretched alienation from the Divine, precisely akin to both the Judeo-Christian and Romantic accounts of the original expulsion from The Garden. The true human self, according to Hegel, is “brought forth” finally *in time* (at a historical moment) through the reconciliation as a self in unity with God. This, in Hegel’s conception, can be seen as the reunion that ends exile.

Having asserted the necessity of the encounter with Spirit and the reconciliation between Spirit and man, Hegel goes on to provide a comprehensive account of such an encounter, as it is portrayed in the Gospel.\(^{82}\) But before addressing the content of the Gospel *per se*, Hegel begins by more explicitly clarifying his characterization as an exile experience through an explanation of the fundamental meaning of the Fall. Before the Fall, human existence in Paradise was characterized by unreflective harmony with the world; man was entirely innocent and possessed no self-consciousness. The fall from this existence, according to Hegel, was not accidental but necessary; for human recognition and subsequent reconciliation with the Divine to be a possibility, humanity first had to make the necessary movement toward self-consciousness. Humanity’s harmonious existence in Paradise is for Hegel a representation of humanity’s implicit unity with God, though, as has been shown, it is necessary for this unity to become explicit. In becoming self-conscious humanity also becomes self-concerned—humanity develops a will and establishes itself as individual and subjective against the universality and

\(^{81}\) For a more detailed discussion, see Chapter One.

objectivity of God. Such an establishment by man brings knowledge and pain, but it also fosters the possible destiny (which will become a necessary eventuality) of a self-conscious reconciliation with God. Through the fall into evil, the human individual, representative of humanity as a whole, can fulfill “the need for universal reconciliation in humanity—and this means divine, absolute reconciliation.” The state of humanity before the Fall is a representation, for Hegel, of the history of humanity’s implicit unity with God. The distinction between human and Spirit must first be posited, an explicit disunity between man and God must be felt, to allow for the synthesis of ‘human’ and ‘Spirit’ and an explicit unity to be ultimately created between humanity and God. According to Hegel, all of history has led to a necessary moment in time at which point humanity’s estrangement from God, as entered into through the Fall, can be overcome by the reconciliation of man and Spirit. This moment, for Hegel, is the Incarnation, which stands as the epitomic event of a transcendence of exile toward the supreme unity of humanity and Spirit.

Before the Incarnation, humanity was self-concerned, individual, and set in opposition to the Divine by virtue of an estrangement from Spirit. This is a state of “evil,” whereby “my lack of correspondence to my essence and to the absolute remains; and from one side or the other I know myself always as what ought not to be.” It is at this moment, however, that Spirit intercedes, sending the Spirit-made-man, in the personage of Christ, to live among humanity.

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85 Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, 305.

86 Ibid., 307.
By becoming manifest in/as man, Spirit demonstrates in the most supreme and explicit way its shared identity with humanity, revealing to human self-consciousness the nature and existence of this unity. The reconciliation, then, according to Hegel, is the movement by which the implicit unity that existed between Spirit and humanity becomes explicit, and the actuality of Spirit is revealed through this unity.

[T]he fact that the antithesis has disclosed and presented itself as an actually existing need is expressed by the words, “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his son” [Gal. 4:4]. This means: the Spirit is at hand, the need for the Spirit that points the way to reconciliation.\(^{87}\)

Again, this manifestation in the world is a manifestation in history; for Hegel, the particular manifestation that is the necessary event of the revelation of Spirit and the reconciliation of Spirit and humanity is the moment of the Incarnation. In this moment, the unity that had been implicit throughout history is realized, and humanity finds itself able to overcome its estrangement and rejoin the Divine transparently and completely; humanity has thus achieved the possibility of itself becoming Spirit and the end of exile. “Since it is the divine Idea which proceeds through this history, it is not only the history of a single individual, but is in itself the history of a real man, who makes himself into the existence of Spirit.”\(^{88}\) Through the Incarnation, Spirit makes itself human, real in a finite sense, while allowing the finite (humanity) to become united with Spirit. For this unity to be complete, Spirit must subject itself to the true nature of finitude, which is precisely what is accomplished in the Incarnation. Spirit joins humanity in its necessary estrangement in order to lift humanity from this estrangement into a reconciled unity with itself; humanity thus regains its unity with Spirit in the very midst

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 310.

\(^{88}\) Hegel, cited in Crites, 255.
of “the deepest abyss of cleavage.”\(^{89}\) This “deepest abyss” is reached, according to Hegel, though the Crucifixion and Christ’s subsequent descent into death, the ultimate estrangement from both life and the divine Spirit.

The final element of this key moment in history is the Resurrection, the moment at which the Spirit-made-human reaches beyond its finitude and estrangement and reveals itself in its complete and explicit unity with Spirit, as Spirit itself. Because the Spirit-made-human completed this passage through estrangement and reconciled itself with Spirit, humanity as a whole recognizes its own potentiality for such a reconciliation, seen precisely as a reconciliation (and not merely a unification) and an elucidation of an inherent but unconscious unity. It is this distinction between reconciliation and unification which classifies this moment as a *return from exile* rather than merely the attainment of a new state of being. Through the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, the identity of God becomes intertwined with that of humanity, sharing first in humanity’s finitude so that humanity might ultimately discover explicitly its Spirit-ness.

[Through the history of Christ] man sees the death of death and sin as such, and the identity of God and man as such, not simply for the individual God-man—he has lost his individuality in his death and resurrection—but for all men. It is in this sense that the “divine history” in Christ becomes revelatory and redemptive: to believe in Christ is to believe in the identity of God and man in general, and thus to know one’s own identity with God.\(^{90}\)

For Hegel, the history of Christ is the historic event of humanity’s reconciliation with God. Spirit, by its very nature, necessitates the restoration of its unity with humanity, thus the instance of this reconciliation is a necessary event in the history of Spirit. At the same time, such an event is necessary for humanity on an individual level: to fulfill one’s destiny one must

\(^{89}\) Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 125.

\(^{90}\) Crites, 258.
return to one’s implicit unity with Spirit, while through this return the unity becomes explicit. “Reconciliation is what is demanded by the need of the subject, and this exigency resides in the subject as infinite unity or as self-identity”\textsuperscript{91}; this is the longed-for and necessary reconciliation that ends the period of exile. 

In Hegel’s conception of the human encounter with Spirit, there is a necessary progression from unreflective and implicit unity, through estrangement, to self-conscious reconciliation and explicit unity. Again, the presence of all three stages precisely as necessary stages is what defines Hegel’s conception as a movement of exile and return. Essential to Hegel’s conception is the assertion that reconciliation, the overcoming of estrangement from the Divine, is an inevitable end; over the course of history, an end to exile is not just a possibility but an inevitability for humanity precisely as humanity. This reconciliation is not therefore dependent upon a particular transcendence of human qualities, as was the case in the Judeo–Christian conception, but rather is dependent on the human capacity to achieve itself fully. 

Ludwig Feuerbach, in his critique of Hegel’s account of the encounter with Spirit, accepts that the human encounter with the divine necessarily entails humanity’s estrangement from God. However, whereas for Hegel this estrangement was essential to allow humanity’s union with God to become explicit (as reunion), Feuerbach contends that this estrangement is the necessary product of humanity’s own misdirected sense of the Divine. According to Feuerbach, the human notion of God is nothing more that a mis-placed notion of humanity: the religious ideal (God) is a projection of what humanity would like to be, what the human thinks the human should be, and, ultimately, what the human actually is. What’s more, the ideal itself that is projected originates with humanity itself, as a determination of what humanity ought to be and a subsequent projection of this notion onto God as a directive from God. God is not an external Being who directs or

\textsuperscript{91} Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, 310.
inspires man, according to Feuerbach; rather, God exists only as a reflection of humanity, a “screen” onto which human ideals are projected and from which humanity then follows those ideals. What humanity takes to be the qualities of God actually begin with humanity: “Man’s knowledge of God is man’s knowledge of himself, of his own nature.”92 Thus the estrangement that humanity discovers through the religious encounter, according to Feuerbach, is not a disunity between itself and God but rather an estrangement from itself. By projecting its own infinite attributes as a species onto a God, humanity fails to see itself as the source of those ideals and thus loses sight of that which is ideal (divine) within itself. “Reflected in the religious consciousness of God, …religion is the revelation of a self-alienated humanity.”93 Whereas for Hegel, human alienation (exile) could only be overcome through the spiritualization of humanity (Spirit’s discovery of itself in humanity), for Feuerbach this estrangement is only overcome by the human realization that humanity is itself the source of the divine (humanity’s discovery of itself in Spirit [God]). Exile arises, therefore, in Feuerbach’s view, from the objectification of humanity’s own inner character and ideals and the positing of those qualities in the Divine.

The object of any subject is nothing else than the subject’s own nature taken objectively… Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge… What is God to a man, that is his heart and soul; and conversely, God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of a man—religion the solemn unveiling of a man’s hidden treasures, the revelation of his intimate thoughts.94 Ignorance of one’s self-divinity, according to Feuerbach, is the source of self-alienation (exile); the exile experience thus consists in the (mistaken) assertion that the qualities that are

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essentially human are articulated as distinctly “beyond” human (and therefore divine), attributed to God, and worshiped as such. Exile is precisely “the disunity of man from himself; [by setting] God before him as the antithesis of himself.”\textsuperscript{95}

Just as Hegel investigated the events of Christian history to elucidate the necessity of each for the unfolding of Spirit in history, Feuerbach similarly examines those events to reveal how each is actually a reflection of what is essentially human. For example, the Resurrection, according to Feuerbach, is a product of the human wish for a better life to follow once the current one has ended. “The resurrection of Christ is therefore the satisfied desire of man for an immediate certainty of his personal existence after death—personal immortality as a sensible, indubitable fact.”\textsuperscript{96} The notion of the Trinity, while presented as a representation of the dimensions of the Divine, is actually for Feuerbach the human understanding of itself in the totality of his nature. An authentic religion, according to Feuerbach, would therefore be a religion of humanity, and it is only through such a religion that exile could be wholly overcome. Such a religion would not require belief in a Being outside of humanity but would instead realize the “ideal” as fully human, thus allowing for the actual reconciliation by the individual with the divine in oneself. The opposition between “human” and “God” would therefore disappear, as would the experience of exile, viewed on the surface as disunity between humanity and God but in actuality the alienation of humanity from itself. The Divine itself would finally be realized in humanity, from whence it originated and within which it remains rooted:

\textbf{It is our task to show that the antithesis of divine and human is altogether illusory, that it is nothing else than the antithesis between the human nature in general and the human individual; that, consequently, the object and contents of the Christian religion are altogether human.}\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 135.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 159-160.
Through an investigation of the religious sentiment and the source of the Divine, humanity should ultimately arrive at itself as both the source and essence of the religious ideal, thus recognizing the divinity of the human, realizing the potential union with the Divine in oneself, and thereby ending a fundamental exile from oneself. Feuerbach, though refusing to posit the Divine as anything which stands outside of the human, shares Hegel’s contention that the human, *precisely by being human*, has the potential and the means to end its period of exile. Further, in each case, this reconciliation stands not just as a possibility but as an inevitability for humanity.

As a final word on this Modernist trajectory of exile, a few brief words on Karl Marx may be of value. Reacting to both Hegel and Feuerbach, Marx developed a different interpretation of the history and nature of religion which, like both Hegel and Feuerbach, centered around a particular experience of exile. Marx, like Hegel, recognizes that religion is a product of a particular historical progression. At the same time, whereas Feuerbach places the source of religion within the human, Marx claims that the religious sentiment is a product of the conditions, both social and historical, which define the situation of humanity. Marx accepts Feuerbach’s claim that humanity’s estrangement, as experienced through the religious sentiment, is essentially an estrangement from itself. The religious individual is one who, according to Marx, does not fully know oneself: “Religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again.” Marx, like Feuerbach, asserts that what one has found in his search for the divine Absolute is only oneself, though alienated from oneself. At the same time, Marx adds that what forces the individual to search beyond oneself for the Absolute is not an internal drive but rather is the condition of human existence, as shaped by history and society. The estrangement that humanity discovers is therefore less an individual relationship with one’s self-

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God and more a product of historical conditions. What one must therefore do, according to Marx, is overcome the social conditions that foster this alienation and thus give rise to the human condition of exile. “Remove the social conflicts, and you remove the religious illusions required by the conflicts.”

Whereas Hegel sees history as the necessary unfolding and development of Spirit through the human, Marx sees history as a particular unfolding which has created an unjustifiable need for religion which arises from humanity’s mistaken sense of estrangement (from itself). Yet the responsibility of history, according to Marx, is to truth, not falsehood: “The task of history…is to establish the truth of this world. The immediate task of philosophy, which is at the service of history, once the saintly form of self-alienation has been unmasked is to unmask self-alienation in its unholy forms.”

Feuerbach made an important first step in unmasking the “saintly form of self-alienation,” but he failed to apply the insight regarding the source of the religious sentiment.

Once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be criticized in theory and revolutionized in practice… Feuerbach, consequently, does not see that the ‘religious sentiment’ is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyzes belongs in reality to a particular form of society.

Once the source of divinity has been posited in the human (as Feuerbach did), and once the human is seen as a product of its history and society (as Marx concluded), what remains then is to address society and history as the root cause of the estrangement (exile). “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, it to change it.”

If the world is sufficiently changed, then the fundamental experience of estrangement which gives rise...
to the religious sentiment itself becomes no longer necessary. Marx thereby implies, as Hegel and Feuerbach had before him, that the condition of exile can ultimately be overcome by strictly human means.

Clearly there are significant differences between the conceptions of exile suggested in the accounts above, determined in no small part by the relative place given to the possibility of divinity outside of the human. Yet in each case, regardless of whether a Divine existence is posited outside of human existence, and regardless of the allowance given to the human need for such a Divine existence, the exclusively human capacity, precisely as a human capacity, is emphasized as the source of both exile and its reconciliation. Further, such a reconciliation is in each case contended to be a necessary end; it is the Truth toward which human existence is inexorably moving.

Yet this foreseen transcendence of exile has not occurred, and the condition of exile remains a constitutive component of human existence. The turn toward subjectivity and emphasis on the limitless potential of the human that defined the Modernist position has not yielded a total reconciliation and a final end to exile. Whereas the ancient Greco–Roman and Judeo–Christian positions, with their emphasis on a transcendence of the human and the grace of the Divine, were unable to effect an end of exile as an explicitly human condition, the Modernist attempt, despite its antithetical emphasis on the strictly human capacity as such, was likewise unable to see the human condition through to a final reconciliation and thus a termination of the exile experience. A new account is thus in order, which de-emphasizes either the divine or the wholly human to focus instead on the dynamic of the relation that truly and completely constitutes the exile experience, while suggesting a manner in which the possibility of a final reunion may be pursued.
Exile from Home: The Postmodernist Experience

This final account of exile arises in conjunction with a new age of drastically increased occurrences of exile events. The number and scale of conflicts between and within nations, particularly in the twentieth century, has significantly increased the quantity of individuals and groups who are compelled to leave their homes and homelands. As Edward Said observes, “exile has been transformed from the exquisite, and sometimes exclusive, punishment of special individuals…into a cruel punishment of whole communities and peoples, often the inadvertent result of impersonal forces such as war, famine, and disease.”\(^\text{103}\) This characterization differs significantly from the original conception of exile, which consisted of an expulsion by God, or by a Divine Order, which was felt by humanity but not within humanity’s power to control. Said notes that, over its historical development, exile has become a condition which is directly created by humanity, culminating in the present age as a new Age of Exile: “Our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration.”\(^\text{104}\)

At the same time, as Donatella Di Cesare points out, the tendencies toward ‘globalization’ that have characterized recent decades only further add to occurrences and experiences of exile:

> The globalization of the world has had and continues to have numerous effects. Among these effects there is the need of communities that try to go beyond the ‘nation state.’ But the nation state has constituted a form of inhabiting in which there was a convergence of place and self. This convergence has been cracked and the relation between place and self almost dissolved. What emerges…is a self without place and a place without self.\(^\text{105}\)

In this depiction exile is again presented not exclusively as a literal physical condition but also


as a name for how one experiences oneself and one’s identity in the world. Stefan Rossbach shares this view, explicitly recognizing the connections between the ‘external’ and ‘internal’ experiences of exile: “The globalizing politics of late antiquity as well as postmodernity turns the experience of exile into a mass phenomenon—in the form of the concrete experience of physical movement from one place to another or in the form of a philosophical or spiritual detachment from a reality that appears out of joint.”106 The all-too-frequent experience of disorder and expulsion from one’s “native land” has taken on a more fundamental quality that transcends the physical experience itself and [has] become a manner of understanding the human relation to existence and the world.107 Further, the experience of exile in this manner is not limited to those who directly experience the literal physical manifestation and has grown into a universalized conception of existence as a whole. As Rossbach further claims, the “contemporary configuration turns exile, displacement, and homelessness into a universal condition.”108 Thus, just as the original expulsion from The Garden suggested a more fundamental condition of human existence as exiled, so too does the current mass experience of exile and separation suggest the presence of a similar condition on a more basic and essential level. While this connection between the physical and the metaphysical experiences presents a plausible account of how the latter may have arisen as a prevalent condition, this is not the only manner of accounting for the Postmodernist conception of the fundamental situation of human existence in exile.

The Postmodernist conception of the exile experience may also be recognized as a result of

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its own historical progression. Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God, discussed in the previous chapter, may perhaps be understood as a foundation of the Postmodernist exile experience. Throughout the Judeo–Christian conceptions of exile, and even in some of the Modernist conceptions, the condition of exile was felt as an exile from God which could only be escaped through a reconciliation with the Divine. With Nietzsche’s contention that God is dead, however, such a reconciliation becomes an impossibility.

At first glance, then, the understanding of exile suggested within Nietzsche’s terms is seemingly a permanent condition. If there is no absolute Divine Order with which the individual can be reunited, then what end can there be to exile? This is the sensation of straying toward an infinite nothing that Nietzsche’s madman describes. This is the wayward solitary ship that finds itself not merely unmoored and exiled at sea, but without the possibility of returning to its home harbor:

We have left the land and have gone aboard ship! We have broken down the bridge behind us—nay, more, the land behind us! Well, little ship! look out! Beside thee is the ocean; it is true it does not always roar, and sometimes it spreads out like silk and gold and a gentle reverie. But times will come when thou wilt feel that it is infinite, and that there is nothing more frightful than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt itself free, and now strikes against the walls of this cage! Alas, if homesickness for the land should attack thee, as if there had been more freedom there—and there is no “land” any longer!  

But must this lost land be regained to escape the exile at sea? As was shown in the previous chapter, Nietzsche’s account of the end of absolute and objective value systems does not ultimately spell the end of the possibility of value itself. The same may thus be said here with respect to exile; whereas the fate of value was dependent, in Nietzsche’s view, on the possibility of an individual revaluation of value, the end of exile is dependent on a return not to land but to oneself. The Will to Power, as a will to overcoming, begins with a severance from external

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constraints and the assertion that objective metaphysical values are no longer necessary. In this way, the individual begins the journey toward the end of exile by realizing that the ‘land’ that has vanished from the horizon is miscast as the destination of return, and that the true road of reconciliation leads through oneself.\footnote{110}

Yet this is not the conclusion of Nietzsche’s account, nor is it yet the end of exile. For Nietzsche, the Will to Power is not strictly an individual will; rather, it is an element of the necessity which governs human existence and reality as a whole. The Will to Power is the fundamental essence of the world, as well as that of humanity itself. “\textit{This world is the will to power—and nothing besides!} And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides!”\footnote{111} The Will to Power is ultimately the necessary, constitutive force of human existence, the “basic force of the entire universe,” and the constitution of both the limits and the freedom within which human existence is determined. The individual stands in a fundamental relation to the world, as both are constituted in and through the Will to Power. Therefore, the exercise of the Will to Power, which began as a turn away from an absolute value system toward the individual construction of value and ultimately concluded in a [re-]connection with the fundamental order of the world, may be seen as an enactment of the course of exile and return. Exiled from the possibility of an absolute and objective order, the individual seeks to reunite with the self in order to rediscover and redefine value, and this movement toward reconciliation through oneself is ultimately a reunion with the ‘world’ through a shared participation in/as Will.

\footnote{110}{It should be noted here that Nietzsche presents this manner of self-overcoming as a \textit{perpetual} process, whereby the individual must constantly engage in the enterprise of revaluation without a terminal or permanent resolution. In this way, Nietzsche’s model is suggestive of a crucial aspect of the possibility of reconciliation as an ‘end’ to exile, the impermanence of transcendence (finite transcendence), which will be discussed further as the investigation unfolds.}

\footnote{111}{Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Will to Power}, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), §1067.}
to Power—this reunion suggests, if only temporarily or as representative of a human potential, the possible transcendence of exile.

Martin Heidegger, in his comprehensive exposition of Being, suggests a similar position in-exile as the origination of the individual human being who subsequently raises the question of the nature of its Being. With Being and Time, Heidegger set out to “raise anew the question of the meaning of being.”112 The “being” in question here is not merely any existing entity, but is rather the being which exists both ontically (that is, in its engagement with other beings) and ontologically (that is, in its comprehension of the structure of Being itself). The being which is the subject of Heidegger’s investigation first comprehends its Being and subsequently raises the question of the nature of that Being. This “being” is what Heidegger calls Dasein.113 Intimations of the experience of exile arise on several fronts in Heidegger’s analysis of the nature of Being. Being, in both its thrown-ness and its fallen-ness, may be characterized as being in a position of exile (in-exile). At the same time, Heidegger’s conception of authentic human existence, which serves as a transcendence of the thrown and fallen nature of Being, is proposed as a return to the ground of Being and thus may be understood as a return from exile to Being.

Primal comprehension of Being is a unique characteristic of, and is in fact constitutive of, Dasein’s being. “It is peculiar to this entity that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein’s Being. Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological.”114 Heidegger’s description here of


113 Following the terminology of William Richardson (see Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought [The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963]), the translation “There-being” will be used interchangeably with “Dasein.”

114 Heidegger, Being and Time, 32.
Dasein as ontological is not meant to imply that Dasein, by its very nature, possesses a primordial theoretical understanding of its own being, but rather that Dasein has a sort of “pre-ontological” awareness of Being; from the outset, Dasein stands in a position outside of full understanding of Being. At the same time, as a simultaneous effect of the original awareness of Being, the being which comprehends its Being (Dasein) at the same time questions the nature of that Being. “[Dasein] is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it.”115 This ontological manner of Being is existence,116 which in turn constitutes Dasein; the achievement of comprehension of Being is a transcendence of the ontic to an ontological relationship to Being. The question, therefore, stands as the first step toward a full understanding of, and thus a reconciliation with, Being. Dasein is finite transcendence: “There-being is a being whose structure is such that it comprehends the Being of beings. By this very fact, There-being passes beyond (therefore transcends) being to the Being-process as such.”117 Dasein thus achieves the uniqueness of its Being (is in fact constituted by) its transcendence to comprehension of that Being. But what does a comprehension of Being reveal?

As Heidegger contends, a first revelation is that Dasein is not itself the origin of its Being; rather, Dasein finds itself already present in its ontic/ontological situation, as a being among beings with a comprehension of the Being of beings. “The pure ‘that it is’ shows itself, but the ‘whence’ and the ‘whither’ remain in darkness.”118 Heidegger later designates Dasein’s

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115 Ibid.

116 “This term ‘existence’ formally indicates that Dasein is as an understanding potentiality-for-Being, which, in its Being, makes an issue of that Being itself.” (Heidegger, Being and Time, 274.)

117 Richardson, Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought, 36.

118 Heidegger, Being and Time, 173.
ignorance of its own origin and destiny as *thrown-ness.* The parallel between Heidegger’s story of the creation of the human and the Judeo–Christian account is unmistakable, minus of course the God who exiles. Even with this omission, Heidegger’s account can be seen as itself an account of exile: the individual being is sent from its unknown place of origin into a world that is not of its own making or understanding, without even possessing a full understanding of the meaning of its own Being. Yet while this particular account does not explicitly suggest the possibility of a return to that from which one is thrown, the attainment of an understanding of Being is presented in a manner that is suggestive of reconciliation and return.

Within this condition of thrown-ness, Dasein likewise finds itself situated ontically amongst other beings; Dasein’s transcendence and subsequent understanding of Being is achieved through its comportment with beings. “Being *in* itself does not seize Being *by* itself, sc. as separate from beings.” This *fallen-ness* at the same time implies a pull towards such comportment with beings and thus a “forgetting” of the structure of Being itself. In fallen-ness, Dasein loses sight of its finitude and instead becomes immersed in the “day-to-day” with beings. Dasein is “proximally and for the most part” caught up in the world of ontic experience. “Dasein has…fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its self, and has fallen into the ‘world’.” Here Heidegger presents a second manifestation of the exile experience: not only is Dasein exiled from its origin into a new and unfamiliar world, but the distraction of ontic existence with other beings widens the gulf between individual Dasein and Being, thus emphasizing Dasein’s exile from Being. Fallen-ness is a way of being-in-the-world which does not engage Being and thus loses

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120 Ibid., 38.

121 Ibid.

sight of the finitude of Dasein. In fallen-ness, Dasein loses itself in a “concernful absorption” with beings that are ready-at-hand and thus no longer has in question its own Being. This losing sight of its self and its Being by Dasein is, according to Heidegger, inauthentic existence. In inauthenticity, the world itself and other beings as such become the object of concern for Dasein, replacing the question of Being itself; inauthentically, Dasein dwells in the ontic. Inauthenticity may thus be regarded as a position in exile from Being.

Yet despite this fallen-ness, it remains the task of Dasein to “regain” its concern for Being and attain an authentic existence, which is only achievable, Heidegger contends, through a recognition of the finitude of human existence through the experience of anxiety. Coming to itself, as Dasein does through the disposition of anxiety, reveals temporality as the constitutive horizon for Being. Dasein is a temporal, finite being precisely because it is “slipping away” into non-being, towards its end in death. “In anxiety in the face of death, Dasein is brought face-to-face with itself as delivered over to that possibility which is not to be outstripped…. Factically one’s own Dasein is always dying already; that is to say, it is in a Being-towards-its-end.”123 It is thus anxiety, as disposition, which discloses the true essence of Dasein as “Being-in-the-world” and as “Being-towards-death.” The “end” (death) of Dasein is as much a constitutive element of Dasein’s existence as the “there”—finite and thrown, Dasein is inexorably progressing towards this end. In fact, death is the only individual certainty of Dasein’s existence: “death does not just ‘belong’ to Dasein in an undifferentiated way; death lays claim to it as an individual Dasein.”124

This individuation of Dasein by death points to the manner in which authentic existence is to be achieved; just as Dasein alone must die its own death, it is similarly left to Dasein to have its existence as its own. Fallen, inauthentic Dasein ignores temporality (specifically, futurity) as

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123 Ibid., 298.

124 Ibid., 308.
constitutive of Being, whereas authenticity lies in the recognition that the existence of Dasein should point towards the final realization of the Being that Dasein is and its end in death.

Without explicitly referring to exile as such, Heidegger’s account of Dasein clearly suggests a manner of existence (inauthenticity) which can be interpreted as an exile experience. To be inauthentically, according to Heidegger, is to occupy a position of fallen-ness away from Being. Yet in authentic existence, an awareness (re-cognition) of temporality (finitude) as the ontological ground of Being is attained, and the condition of fallen-ness is transcended. Authentic existence thereby represents a [re]connection with Being. Thus, as Nietzsche had, Heidegger similarly suggests a beginning in expulsion from the origin of Being, a time of exile through thrown-ness, fallen-ness, and inauthenticity, and finally a means toward reconnecting with the ground of Being through the letting-be of authenticity.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s own existential account of the origination of Being begins in a position similar to that of Heidegger, likewise presenting human existence as, fundamentally, undertaken in exile. According to Sartre’s existential position, human existence begins with no underlying definition or plan of what that existence will entail or be. As Sartre contends, “existence precedes essence… man first exists, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself.”125 With no original or essential identity to serve as a foundation or guide, the individual is, in accord with Heidegger’s contention, thrown into the world; once again this state of being thrown, abandoned into the world, may be seen as an expulsion into being: “when we speak of abandonment—one of Heidegger’s favorite expressions—we merely mean to say that God does not exist, and that we must bear the full consequences of that

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For Sartre, one of the primary consequences is that this expulsion is experienced as a permanent state of being; in exile, the individual will never have recourse to any ground upon which its own being may be founded. Human existence thus begins in, and is eternally characterized by, radical freedom:

If it is true that existence really does precede essence, we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom. If, however, God does not exist, we will encounter no values or orders that can legitimize our conduct. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.\(^\text{127}\)

The condemnation to freedom that Sartre describes is thus akin to a condemnation to exile; the individual is permanently exiled from absolute value, meaning, and direction, and forced through absolute freedom to determine each of these things for oneself. As in Heidegger’s conception, the individual is left to determine in and for oneself the ground of Being in hopes of achieving a reconnection with that ground. However, whereas Heidegger found the possibility for such a reconnection through an authentic engagement with death, Sartre contends that the fact of death only further alienates the individual from the possibility of meaning, thus deepening one’s being in-exile.

Up to death, precisely because one is radically free, the individual is able at each moment and through the exercise of freedom to determine what one is and thus what one means; what’s more, the continued exercise of freedom carries one into the future toward the prospect of further such determinations. However, the threat of death is present in every moment, not as the conclusion of a life but rather as the arbitrary ending of life before it can be suitably completed.

\(^{126}\) Ibid., 27.

\(^{127}\) Ibid., 29.
or concluded, cutting the individual off from all future exercise of freedom and all possibilities for meaning. In death, the individual loses both the freedom and the responsibility for the determination of one’s own meaning; what’s left behind is an incomplete life, whose meaning can only be determined from without. Thus, Sartre concludes:

[F]rom this point of view we can clearly see the difference between life and death: life decides its own meaning because it is always in suspense; it possesses essentially a power of self-criticism and self-metamorphosis which causes it to define itself as ‘not yet’ or…makes it be as the changing of what it is. The dead life does not thereby cease to change, and yet it is all done. This means that for it the chips are down and that it will henceforth undergo its changes without being in any way responsible for them. For this life it is not a question only of an arbitrary and definitive totalization. In addition there is a radical transformation: nothing more can happen to it inwardly; it is entirely closed; nothing more can be made to enter there; but its meaning does not cease to be modified from the outside. … To the extent that [the] meaning surpasses the limits of a simple individuality, to the extent that the person makes himself known to himself through an objective situation to be realized…, death represents a total dispossession. … Thus the very existence of death alienates us wholly in our own life to the advantage of the Other. To be dead is to be a prey for the living. This means therefore that the one who tries to grasp the meaning of his future death must discover himself as the future prey of others. We have here therefore a case of alienation. ¹²⁸

Human existence, which began in abandonment into a world in the absence of absolute order and definition, concludes with a final act of severance by alienating, once and for all, the individual from the possible exercise of freedom and thus the attainment of definition of oneself. And while, as Sartre suggests, movement toward definition may be achieved during one’s existence, the end in death will always come before a definitive achievement of essence or identity may be achieved; thus, the position in exile is permanent.

Heidegger and Sartre both therefore characterize the origin of human existence as an exilic event, while maintaining that the whole of existence is undertaken as a form of being-in-exile. However, whereas Heidegger’s conception seems to suggest that a ‘finite return’ from exile is

possible, Sartre’s position does not seem to allow for such a possibility.\(^{129}\) Albert Camus’ analysis of Sisyphus, the ‘Hero of the Absurd,’ may suggest a possible resolution of the tension between these two positions. The character of Sisyphus, as Camus understands him, is reflective of the exile experience on several levels. To begin, Sisyphus experiences his own death as an exile from life, an exile that is so painful that he tricks the gods, imprisons Death itself, and returns to the world of the living. For these transgressions, and for refusing to heed the call of Death to return, Sisyphus earns his legendary punishment of eternal toil at the same task without hope of success or completion. This condemnation may, too, be seen as an exile experience, as Sisyphus is placed in an in-between state of exile in the world, neither truly in life nor in death, wholly alienated from the aspects of each that he had known. Further, and perhaps most importantly, in this permanent condition of futile labor, Sisyphus is an exile from hope; it is this aspect of his exile that constitutes the depth of his punishment and which characterizes his position as Absurd.

However, in Camus’ characterization of Sisyphus there are hints at the possibility of, perhaps even of an already achieved, reunion. Sisyphus is, after all, in the world that he loved and to which he longed to return. In his punishment (exile), Sisyphus is fundamentally reunited with the world—his stone, his mountain, his earth; his hands and the air he breathes. What’s more, Sisyphus fully recognizes what the world and his existence in that world can offer him, and he supplies for himself the rest of the story—he is as united as one can be with life in this world. Thus, Camus concludes, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy.”\(^{130}\)

The historical account of exile given to this point is not a complete story; certainly there are

\(^{129}\) While in Heidegger’s terms such a ‘return’ may be possible, it remains only a ‘limited’ possibility. Even authentic (re-connected) existence is grounded in temporality, and for Heidegger, as for Sartre, death remains as the ultimate and inexorable end to human existence, authentic or otherwise.

other accounts which lend further support to the present contention that exile is a fundamental condition of human existence, just as there are competing accounts which suitably engage the ontological situation with no reference to exile at all. In particular, it should be noted that what has been given here as a ‘Postmodernist’ conception of exile is not presented as, nor should it be understood to be, a demonstration of a complete Postmodernist identification with the present claim that exile is a particular manifestation of the fundamental ‘challenge’ of finite human existence. The figures discussed herein stand at the periphery, though at the origin, of what has evolved to stand as a more paradigmatic Postmodernist ‘position,’ if such a position may in fact be characterized and defined in any satisfactory way. And while it is not within the bounds of the present investigation to fully explore and account for how and why the Postmodernist tendency may refuse to recognize, if not ultimately reject, the characterization of existential exile given here, it must be stated explicitly that the treatment that will be offered in what follows may be identified with the Postmodernist position only to the extent that neither exile nor its transcendence are experienced as Absolutes. Within these terms, the most instructive, thorough, and significant account of exile is that given by Albert Camus, and thus without presuming to identify Camus with the Postmodernist position, his account will be posited as an appropriate appraisal of the ontological situation as it is manifest in the condition of exile. However, before turning in earnest to a discussion of Camus’ engagement with exile, it will be beneficial to look back at the map of exile that has been sketched to this point toward the constitution of a final definition of ‘existential exile.’

Summary Sketch

In its most literal manifestations, exile is the forced expulsion from one’s homeland into a

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131 Kevin Hart, for example, offers an excellent assessment of the “fragmentary” in his *Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004).
new place where one finds oneself a stranger and from which one longs to return to the original place of departure. The condition of exile, from this standpoint, is defined with respect to the place forced from and the place forced into, the lost home and the new abode. At the same time, the continuing pain of difference and the perpetual experience of absence that characterize the time away often exacerbate the pain of loss that arises from the initial departure. In his 1993 Reith Lectures, Edward Said captures this twofold suffering:

The fact is that for most exiles the difficulty consists not simply in being forced to live away from home, but rather, given today’s world, in living with the many reminders that you are in exile, that your home is not in fact so far away, and that the normal traffic of everyday contemporary life keeps you in constant but tantalizing and unfulfilled touch with the old place. The exile therefore exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old. 132

As Said notes, the period of exile is essentially a period of homelessness; the exile is forced from home yet wholly unable to discover a new home in the ‘elsewhere.’ Yet home is not merely about place; home also entails a connection to the attendant features of life in a particular place at a particular time. Thus, to be forced from home is to lose one’s immediate association with one’s culture, customs, language, and heritage. These various attributes contribute to create a feeling of belonging, which Said defines as ‘nationalism,’ which stands in opposition to the exile experience: “[nationalism] fends off the ravages of exile. … All nationalisms in their early stages posit as their goal the overcoming of some estrangement—from soil, from roots, from unity, from destiny.” 133 These elements of one’s home life are not merely familiar and comforting presences on the daily landscape of one’s being, they are ultimately aspects of one’s being itself, each contributing a crucial part of the individual’s ever-forming identity. To be forcibly compelled to leave one’s home, culture, and identity is thus to


be propelled into a strange and alien place where a new thread toward home, culture, and identity must be sought, if such a thread even exists.

Yet to distinguish between home as a physical entity and a cultural or 'spiritual' entity is in some sense to miss the underlying point; exile is fundamentally a break, and the element from which the break is felt is less essential than the experience of the break itself. As Said concludes, exile “is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being.”\textsuperscript{134} John Barbour further expounds Said’s contention of discontinuity, characterizing it also as a question of orientation toward both the old and the new: “Exile involves orientation, or being pointed toward something distant, and also disorientation, or feeling lost and at odds with one’s immediate environment.”\textsuperscript{135} ‘Discontinuity’ or ‘disorientation’ is a primal element of the exile experience; whatever loss is felt most acutely following the expulsion, whether of land, culture, family, friends, or even identity, the individual in exile ultimately finds oneself fundamentally disconnected from that which one has lost, and this disconnection defines the exile experience. Disconnection, however, on its own does not tell the full story of exile; whereas disconnection implies the past in the experience of a lost connection, there is likewise an important consideration of the future that arises in the hope of a reconnection. While exile invariably entails a looking back at the past and what was, it likewise implies a looking forward toward what is hoped to be again. These challenges, of loss and a hope to regain, applied to the specific elements suggested above, home, people, language, culture, and identity, convey the essence of what it means to be a literal exile. Paul Tabori, in his own attempt to define this state of exile, reaches a similar conclusion:

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An exile is a person compelled to leave or remain outside his country of origin on account of well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion; a person who considers his exile temporary (even though it may last a lifetime), hoping to return to his fatherland when circumstance permit—but unable or unwilling to do so as long as the factors that made him an exile persist.\footnote{136} Exile, as Tabori concludes, is essentially a “forceful displacement,”\footnote{137} whereby the exile is physically expelled and prohibited from returning.

Yet exile is likewise legitimately experienced in ways other than as a literal expulsion from one’s homeland. Exile is not an exclusive organization, a refuge only for those who have been forced from their homes. As Jan Vladislav, the aforementioned exiled Czech writer and poet, notes, “[e]xile…exists in numerous forms, although ultimately it is the basic condition of all men.”\footnote{138} The terms which describe and define the literal exile experience are equally applicable to circumstances which do not fit the pattern or parameters of exile as a physical removal from one’s home. Exile may, rather, be experienced as an alienation from God or from a Divine Order, from a feeling of intrinsic connection with others or with the world, from the possibility of meaning or purpose, or even as a sense of separation from oneself. Do these various accounts differ so significantly from the essential conception of exile that arises from the more literal experience? Edward Said’s definition of exile, which centered around the notion of disconnection, is equally applicable to his own condition as displaced from his Palestinian home as to the account of alienation offered by Hegel, Feuerbach, Heidegger, or Sartre. Likewise, Tabori’s definition, with its focus on a forced separation and a longing to return, could in similar fashion refer to Adam and Eve, to Socrates’ soul, or to Dante, to the Jews of the Exodus

\footnote{136}{Tabori, \textit{The Anatomy of Exile}, 27; emphasis added.}
\footnote{137}{Ibid., 27.}
\footnote{138}{Glad, \textit{Literature in Exile}, 5.}
and the Diaspora more than three thousand years ago as well as the Jews driven across and from Europe by the malevolence of the Nazi regime less than one hundred years ago. The exile experience is not limited to easily quantifiable conditions of physical movement but rather is manifest at every level of human experience. As David Bevan argues, “exile, in its broadest sense, is not only a specific historical circumstance, it is also a constant of our common predicament.”

Exile is the condition, however it occurs, of fundamental disconnection, within which a particular ideal is held both as something lost and as something that is sought again; the exile is thus one “who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another.”

Existential Exile

Before the preceding account of various exile experiences was given, specific ‘questions of exile’ were outlined as possible signposts for a definitive mapping of a definition of exile. Having since sketched a composite portrait from various representative exile experiences and accounts, those initial questions—regarding the players in exile, the experience of exile, and the facticity of exile—may be returned to so that a final map of the desert terrain of ‘existential exile’ may be rendered.

The first question posed addressed the identification of the elements themselves which stand in a potential relation in exile. In order for there to be a discontinuity, disconnection, or disorientation, there must first be a relation from which an awareness of both self (an individual to experience such sensations) and other-in-relation (an element to which the individual is related through such sensations) may emerge. Exile may thus be understood as a structure of

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consciousness which necessarily emerges through the simultaneous, co-dependent achievements of self-identification and world-identification. As Sophia McClennen contends, “Without the belief that there is a connection between and individual and a place, exile has no meaning.” Edward Said calls exile the “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,” which entails the “crippling sorrow of estrangement.” The ‘human being’ of Said’s definition is clear: it is any human individual who engages the presence of a fundamental connection with a ‘whole’ through the absence of that connection. But what is the ‘whole’? What is the “native place” and “true home” in an existential sense?

The ‘whole’ from which the individual is exiled is nothing more nor less than a ground of Being: it is the possibility for order, unity, and meaning for the individual in the world as that world is experienced through individual consciousness. Neither the individual (as ‘part’) nor the whole can be completely understood without also understanding their manner of relatedness, as it is precisely this relatedness as/in exile which ultimately defines both. Implicit in the name ‘exile,’ as has been suggested throughout the preceding discussion, is the existence of a part that has been separated from a whole; the condition of exile thereby arises through the separation of part from whole. Therefore, ‘existential exile’ is the failure to recognize the possibility of meaningful relation between the self (as part) and the whole; to be in exile existentially is to be alienated from a ground of Being. Exile is thus a way of being-in-the-world that arises not from the loss of home per se but rather from the loss of being-at-home in the world.

If existential exile is to stand as the name of the failure to recognize the possibility of relation between oneself and a whole as ground of being, it must be asked how such exile is

141 McClennen, The Dialectics of Exile, 21.

encountered and understood, and what may be further revealed of the character of the elements in relation. As was suggested in the previous section, exile may be felt both as remembrance and projection, as loss and hope. *Nostalgia* seems to fully capture the retention and protention implied by the condition of exile. *Nostos* is the Greek for ‘return’ (or ‘return home’), and *algos* is the Greek for pain; *nostalgia*, therefore, suggests the pain that arises from the (perhaps unrealizable) desire to return home. Yet in the case of existential exile, it is not a return home that is sought, but rather a return to a feeling of being-at-home in the world. However, as was noted above, because existential exile is a failure to recognize the relatedness between oneself and the whole as a ground of Being, being-at-home in the world does not entail a change to one’s being-in-the-world but rather a change in how one understands one’s being-in-the-world.

Existential exile, as the experience of not being-at-home in the world, arises as an experience of *groundlessness*. The individual feels without roots; the exile is one for whom the world in which one exists is at odds with the world that is envisioned as it should exist. To suddenly recognize the gulf that exists between the world of which one imagines oneself a part and the world within which one actually exists is to awaken to one’s own existential exile. At the same time, to call the relation between self and ground/whole into question is necessary if that relatedness is to be fully known and realized. As was the case in Heidegger’s account of Dasein, the achievement of authenticity is only possible after Dasein has raised the question of the meaning of its Being. Similarly, the individual must first find oneself in existential exile if a full understanding of one’s relatedness to the ground of one’s being is to be fully attained.

Donatella Di Cesare reaches a similar conclusion in her own account of exile:

Exile seems to be one and the same with existence. Moreover, exile is the originary separation without which existence would not be what it is. Exile is...the interruption which falls upon existence in its inertia. Inert existence is existence that has become obvious to itself, that takes itself for granted.... Exile is the interruption that gets understanding moving again, because it makes existence no longer obvious to itself.... It uproots the existence that is so
obvious as to presume itself to be almost natural, the product of a tradition lived in terms of nature, where the individual seems to make one body with the world. Exile comes to interrupt this identity of the individual with his world.\textsuperscript{143}

The gulf between the individual and ground/whole that arises in existential exile, as the recognition of groundlessness, thus provides the space within which the relatedness between self and ground may be realized. Existential exile is thus precisely the absence of this realization; while it was suggested that the individual (as part) and the whole to which the individual is related could not exist independently of their relatedness, this does not indicate that the \textit{recognition} and \textit{responsible affirmation} of that relatedness is implicit or inherent. Existential exile is thus not merely a misunderstanding of the relatedness between individual and ground but rather a failure to \textit{realize} that relatedness.

\textbf{From Exile, to …}

Existential exile is, ultimately, a single and immediate manifestation of the finitude that is constitutive of what it means to be human. One begins in finitude, though it is perhaps the experience of exile through which one’s finitude is recognized as such. Once the understanding of one’s condition in exile arises, however, it is felt as a loss preceded by the \textit{feeling} of having been at home in the world. Thus, the end of existential exile, as a realization of the relatedness between oneself (as part) and the ground/whole, is not a return to a previously inhabited position, such as that hoped for within the ancient Greco–Roman and Judeo–Christian accounts of exile which looked forward to a return to a union with God or the Divine Order. Nor is it properly a reconciliation, such as that suggested in the Modernist accounts which suggested that the longing for a return could be overcome by a realization of the potential of oneself as one’s own ground, because the elements (individual and ground) are joined in a manner that had not

\textsuperscript{143} Di Cesare, “Exile: The Human Condition in a Globalized World,” 86.
existed previously. Further, it is not a transcendence of the finitude that stands at the origin of the exile experience and as the only ontological truth of human existence. Rather, the resolution of existential exile is a transcendence of groundlessness through a unification of diametrically opposed poles already in relation, yet newly related in a manner that goes beyond their initial relation, which was intrinsic but unacknowledged. It is a union that feels like a reunion, while accomplishing more than was contained in their initial union; thus the ‘end’ of existential exile will be referred to as [re-]union.

The final question, toward which the balance of the present work will be directed, is of the attainability of such a resolution to the condition of existential exile: is such a [re-]union possible? Now that the desert of exile has been crossed, its topography has been sketched, and a map has been drawn, can that map now be put to the task of leading, once and for all, out of the desert of existential exile? Is such an exit possible? Mark C. Taylor seems to suggest not: “In the desert that has become our worlds, there is only exile—chronic exile—without beginning and without ending...[which means] our questions are as infinite as the displacement that feeds them.” Yet within the space of the question there is always room for the determination, if not the creation, of a meaningful answer. In response to Taylor’s claim, Mike Grimshaw offers a similar contention: “The fragmented Exilic location understands that the dislocation and questions of Exile is also where the promise of the encounter of the presence/absence of God occurs. It understands that located in Exilic texts are those infinite questions where the encounter and the promise may yet be re-read.”

Within even the most extreme desolation, an answer, and perhaps an encounter with the


Divine, is still possible. Such is the opportunity offered in existential exile, which must be confronted as/in religious longing. In chapter one, the condition of human finitude was discussed as that which motivates the act of faith and thus incites the quest for home. Similarly, it can now be contended that the condition of existential exile, characterized as itself a position in and manifestation of finitude, necessitates an act of faith toward the possibility of [re-]union and the [re-]turn toward home.

Existential exile is ultimately the failure to recognize the relation between self (as part) and ground (as whole), and faith, which arises as a commitment to the possibility of relation, simultaneously suggests a possibility, a hope, of the attainment of meaning (in relation) and of the transcendence of existential exile; faith is thus a mode of being-in-the-world, toward meaning. The aim and achievement of faith of this kind is finite transcendence: it is the simultaneous experience and preservation of the finitude of human existence and the attainment of transcendent meaning in relation (despite the fundamental finitude, which is not overcome) through the achievement of [re-]union. In this movement of faith a relation is posited which preserves the essential quality of both self (part) and world (whole), while recasting each in a meaningful way with respect to the other and in the light of the relation which reveals and defines each. ‘Faith’ is not in one or the other, nor is it directed toward one or the other; rather, faith is the commitment which articulates and enables the meaningful relation through which the harmony of home can be realized as a human potentiality and as a human reality.

If this may stand as a sufficient characterization of ‘existential exile,’ then the description of the ontological situation is now complete: the human condition is constituted by its position in finitude, hoping for meaning, and in exile, hoping for home. At the conclusion of the first chapter, it was proposed that perhaps a mythic attempt to account for, and engage in faith, the ontological situation is in order. In the following chapters, an extensive analysis of the literature
and philosophy of Albert Camus, as precisely such a mythic attempt, will be undertaken to assess the manner in which those works present, engage, and seek to resolve the condition of existential exile as the position in relation that characterizes the individual (as part) and ground (as whole) that thereby stand in relation. As Judith Melton claims, the “experience of exile is surmounted with the sustaining meaning of a present, individually interpreted myth.”\textsuperscript{146} Over the course of the ensuing chapters, it will be determined whether and how Camus employs his own brand of myth to contend with the challenge of exile.

\textsuperscript{146} Melton, \textit{The Face of Exile}, 157.
PART II

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN
Despite his youth at the time of his 1936 visit to Djemila, Algeria, Albert Camus had attained a certain level of lucidity with respect to human existence in the world. As is so often presented in Camus’ writings, his achievement of insight arose from a personal encounter with the world and the ever-growing tension between an appeal to a possible future understanding and the necessary renunciation of the present that such an appeal seemed to entail. Yet as he sat and witnessed the day succumbing to “the ashes falling from the sky,” as he increasingly felt the threat of being overtaken by the rising will in himself to refuse to accept the inexorable tide, Camus found in that scene both the proof of, and the strength to accept, the necessity of that tide:

I do not want to believe that death is the gateway to another life. For me, it is a closed door. I do not say it is a step we must all take, but that it is a horrible and dirty adventure. Everything I am offered seeks to deliver man from the weight of his own life. But as I watch the great birds flying heavily through the sky at Djemila, it is precisely a certain weight of life that I ask for and obtain. If I am at one with this passive passion, the rest ceases to concern me. I have too much youth in me to be able to speak of death. But it seems to me that if I had to speak of it, I would find the right word here between horror and silence to express the conscious certainty of a death without hope.¹

Childhood struggles with the limits imposed by poverty, the absence of his father, the silence of his mother, and the constant specter of death in the form of tuberculosis had forced Camus to reckon with finitude from a young age, and death played a key role in his subsequent understanding of life. The desire for life and its corresponding inevitable end in death asserted themselves as the only certainties of existence, creating a paradox which would define Camus’ personal philosophy. One’s love of life only reinforces the presence of death, while death itself

bestows an urgency upon one's insistence on living; hence Camus’ claim that “there is no love of life without despair of life.” A sense of the energy and beauty of life, countered by a realization of the inevitability and finality of death, inspired a deep emotional and artistic response in Camus which fed his desire for clarity.

In the simplest of terms, it can be suggested that Camus’ oeuvre is, at its heart, an attempt to reconcile philosophically and artistically the tension between the love and despair of life. While Camus characterized this tension as an aspect of the absurdity that wholly characterizes human existence, it will become evident that the experience of existential exile outlined in the previous chapter is a fundamental constitutive element of the Absurd as Camus understood and attempted to articulate it. The present chapter will examine in detail Camus’ articulation of the Absurd, focusing on the manner in which the theme arose through Camus’ own personal experience, and including both his philosophical attempts to define the condition of absurdity and its consequences as well as his artistic attempts to situate the condition and fully explore its implications for individual human existence. As the investigation unfolds, parallels between Camus’ conception of the absurd and the preceding account of existential exile will be emphasized, toward the underlying and concluding contention the experience of existential exile stands at the heart of the absurd and that the synthesis of Camus’ philosophical and artistic work may rightfully be characterized as an integrated and cohesive attempt to understand and respond to the condition of exile as an experience of the ontological situation that defines human existence.

**Death in the Soul: The Encounter with the Absurd**

Camus’ philosophy of the absurd may perhaps be best understood as an attempt to account

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for his own personal predicament, or the context and conditions which determined the character
of his own individual identity and existence. At the same time, it must further be noted that the
conditions which most characterized and shaped Camus’ identity and existence may be
accurately and comprehensively given under the name of exile. It will thus be contended here
that Camus’ conception of the absurd, which he formulated as the foundation and beginning
point of his ‘philosophy of existence,’ is an explicit account of his own personal situation in
exile. The absurd itself, as well as Camus’ compulsion to characterize it and the manner in
which he attempted to do so, all have their origin in the experience of exile.

In his study of the growing tension between Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre which culminated
in their public break in 1952, David Sprintzen contends that Camus’ experience of exile began
in his childhood. From the outset, Sprintzen notes, Camus was caught in “two divergent
worlds,” his commitments divided between the impoverished world of his home and family and
the world of opposite resources and priorities of his classmates. The gulf between the two
would only increase as Camus moved forward both in age and education; greater devotion to his
studies left him less and less time to devote to fulfilling responsibilities to the family while
simultaneously emphasizing further for Camus the difference between the backgrounds and
experiences of his classmates compared with those of his family. Further, the total
incommensurability of both worlds precluded the young Camus from feeling ‘at home’ in either
world or constructing a new ‘home’ at their confluence; there is thus here the possible origin of

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3 David Sprintzen, Camus and Sartre: A Historic Confrontation (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books,
2004), 34–35).

4 Fictional (e.g., Camus’ The First Man) and nonfictional (e.g., Herbert Lottman’s Albert Camus)
accounts alike reveal the sacrifice felt by the entire family at Camus’ enrollment in the Lycée; to attend
(let alone succeed) at the school, the young Camus would have to forego learning a trade and thus
contributing financially to the family’s very limited resources. In this way, young Camus not only found
himself in a position from which he could not immediately ‘serve’ the family, but he also realized at a
greater depth the difference between himself and the rest of the family.
Camus’ own personal exile experience.

The character of this beginning experience in exile would apply equally well throughout Camus’ life. As Tony Judt suggests, Camus’ eventual departure from the home of his birth in Algiers for Paris only exacerbated his feelings of separation and not belonging, noting Camus’ statement that “we always recognize our homeland at the moment we are about to lose it” as evidence of a new dimension to his sense of exile that must have arisen once Camus had left Algiers. From this perspective, Judt concludes that Camus’ writing, if not representative of his perpetual longing for home, at the very least stands as his attempt to characterize the many facets of his own personal exile. Moreover, Camus’ exile only grew in Paris, intensified by the educational and ideological differences between Camus and his fellow intellectuals and aggravated by the internal struggle that arose between conflicting allegiances to himself and others. Ultimately, as Judt concludes, Camus lived and wrote from within the “permanent purgatory of exile—physical, moral, intellectual; always between homes (in metaphor and reality alike) and at ease nowhere.” Though the immediate causes and sensations of individual experiences of exile may have varied for Camus, the essence of the experience of exile itself lies at the heart of all that he experienced and thus all that he wrote.

Beginning in 1936 and continuing through 1938, a still young Camus (he was then in his

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7 Ibid.

8 For a discussion of these ideological differences as well as the consequences for Camus, see, e.g., Judt’s _The Burden or Responsibility_, Sprintzen’s _A Historic Confrontation_, Ronald Aronson’s _Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Leo Pollman’s _Sartre and Camus: Literature of Existence_ (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1967).

9 Judt, _The Burden of Responsibility_, 97.
early twenties) began a thorough philosophical examination of his existence and his world, driven by his desire to understand and reconcile life and death. The results of this reflection, garnered during a period of travel throughout Europe, ultimately formed the basis of *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* (1937) and *Nuptials* (1938), two collections of personal, introspective essays that would be Camus’ first published works. In these early essays, Camus details his sensory experience of the world around him and the discord which develops between him and that world. Although he desires above all to attain a level of clarity regarding existence which could explain his relation to the world, Camus finds no definitive answer; he finds instead only a beautiful yet silent world with which he is unable to connect. Despite the beauty of the world and the physical joy which existence in such a world fosters, Camus experiences acute anguish in not being able to see beyond the surface of such beauty and clearly understand on a more essential level the world or his place in it. While the beauty of the world around him touches him deeply, further intensifying his love of life and his desire to live, Camus realizes that such beauty exists entirely independently of him; he finds no inherent connection between himself and the world as he experiences it, in all of its beauty. This sense of the absence of a connection or a possibility for understanding, which Camus will ultimately characterize as the recognition of the absurdity of existence, is equally an originary, implicit recognition of the individual position in existential exile in the world; fundamentally distinct and separate from the world, the individual (in this case, Camus himself) has no immediate access to an understanding of, and connection with, the world. In his essay “Death in the Soul,” Camus articulates his sense of being at the mercy of, and exiled within, the world around him, and this feeling follows him as he leaves the cold solitude of Prague for the warmth and beauty of Vicenza. Camus characterizes his time in Prague as an episode of loneliness and isolation, as he feels himself separated from that which is familiar to him and which embraces him and left instead in a town.
of symbols and speech which he cannot understand; Camus’ sense of himself as exile is brought about through his recognition of the foreignness of the city and the absence of a place for him there:

Here I am, stripped bare, in a town where the signs are strange, unfamiliar hieroglyphics, with no friends to talk to, in short, without any distraction. I know very well that nothing will deliver me from this room filled with the noises of a foreign town, to lead me to the more tender glow of a fireside or a place I’m fond of. Should I shout for help? Unfamiliar faces would appear. … The curtain of habits, the comfortable loom of words and gestures in which the heart drowses, slowly rises, finally to reveal anxiety’s pallid visage. Man is face to face with himself… A great discord occurs between him and the things he sees.10

After several days’ exile in this foreign city, Camus finally left for ‘safer’ and more familiar territory in Italy, “a land that fits my soul, whose signs I recognize one by one as I approach.”11 Yet despite this familiarity with and appreciation for his new destination, Camus’ sense of disconnection, even not belonging, persisted; once in Vicenza, he recognized that still he stood separate from the world within which he found himself, lamenting the “confrontation between [his own] deep despair and the secret indifference of one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world.”12 Camus’ wonder at his surroundings in Vicenza fostered a sense of awe at the beauty of the world that crushed the specific loneliness and emptiness he had felt in Prague, while at the same time adding to his feelings of despair at his inability to create a sense of connection between himself and that world. In “Love of Life,” Camus further emphasizes the beauty of the world around him and the surging sense of life it inspires within him, while maintaining the realization that the awe which wells up inside him takes him no closer to clarity, understanding, or connection: “If the language of these countries harmonized with what echoed within me, it


11 Ibid., 48.

12 Ibid., 50.
was not because it answered my questions but because it made them superfluous.” As the beauty of the world around him intensified, Camus’ own anguish became more acute, as the silence and indifference of that beautiful world rendered hopeless his quest for understanding of the world and his connection to it.

In the essays that make up *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* and *Nuptials*, Camus conveys not only his intense desire to attain a level of understanding of and a connection with his world but also the absence of any inherent certainty of attaining either. Camus’ personal encounter with life leads him to a specific sensation and a distinct realization regarding life, as this encounter becomes an engagement with the absurdity of existence. These early essays, in conjunction with Camus’ personal notebooks, can be understood as an essential preface to much of his later work. As Camus examines his own individual encounter with existence, he ultimately arrives at a realization of the absurdity of that existence, which in turn lays the groundwork for his more formal examination of the absurdity of existence in general as it is undertaken in *The Myth of Sisyphus, The Stranger*, and beyond. Similarly, the basic response which Camus prescribes for any individual in response to the eventual realization of the absurdity of existence follows clearly from his own personal experience, in that it is the response which he chose for himself to counter his own recognition of that same absurdity.

Before beginning an in-depth analysis of the absurdity of existence or attempting to formulate a response to the absurd as a fundamental condition of existence, Camus began with his own individual experience of lucidity. In his *Notebooks*, he articulates a personal, first realization of the absurd, which arose for him from an acute acknowledgment of the absence of ‘home’:

> What does this sudden awakening mean, in this dark room, with the sounds of a city that has suddenly become foreign to me? ... What am I doing here, what is the point of these smiles and gestures? My home is neither here nor elsewhere.

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And the world has become merely an unknown landscape where my heart can lean on nothing. Foreign—who can know what this word means?\textsuperscript{14}

Here the result of Camus’ questioning of his world becomes clear: as clarity and understanding regarding his place in the world are clearly absent and unattainable, a sense of unfamiliarity and alienation creeps in, further weakening the already tenuous connection held between an individual and the world. For Camus, the world as it presents itself is all that can be accepted as real, and it is therefore this world in which and through which the individual is to define existence. If there exists no inherent connection between such an individual and the world, as Camus seems to suggest here, then the last remaining tie between the individual and anything external has been severed, thus extinguishing any hope of defining individual existence in relation to the world in any absolute way. This is not only a beginning articulation of what Camus will come to characterize as the absurd, but it is also a definitive formulation of that conception \textit{as it arises from a sense of alienation in the absence of home}. Alienation, for Camus, is thus the “individual experience of being cut off from others and from the powers that control one’s life.”\textsuperscript{15} The combination of this estrangement and the subsequent recognition of the emptiness behind appearances in the world necessitates a questioning of the value of living in such a world, as Camus poses in his essay “Irony”: “Suddenly [one] realizes that tomorrow will be the same, and after tomorrow, all the other days. And [one] is crushed by this irreparable discovery. It’s ideas like this that kill one. Men kill themselves because they cannot stand them.”\textsuperscript{16}

Yet Camus’ own response is driven by a refusal to succumb to this temptation and the choice to maintain his understanding of the absence of inherent meaning to existence, while


\textsuperscript{15} Sprintzen, \textit{Camus and Sartre}, 41.

preserving his quest to establish value for his own existence. Death is not ignored, nor is the silence of the universe; Camus chooses instead to preserve all of this, while still insisting on creating meaning within his understanding of and acceptance of the absurdity of existence:

What I wish for now is no longer happiness but simply awareness. One man contemplates and another diggs his grave: how can we separate them? Men and their absurdity?... The great courage is still to gaze as squarely at the light as at death. Besides, how can I define the link that leads from this all-consuming love of life to this secret despair?¹⁷ Camus maintains his love of life and his insistence on living it, despite the absurdity that is constituted in exile, without ignoring death and all of its implications for life. For Camus, the “great courage” lies in realizing the certainty of death and refusing to let this certainty preclude the possibility of living; living is the means to create meaning in the face of death, while lucidly maintaining the necessity of both.

Camus’ early essays and notebooks offer a moving account of his own personal encounter with the questions of finitude and exile, thus revealing glimpses of the foundation upon which his more formal engagements would be composed. Despite their consistency and coherence, such accounts are preliminary; more than anything, what these early writings reveal is a personal pre-disposition which situates what is to come. Through the attainment of an understanding of his own personal existence, both by his realization of the absurd and his articulation of a personal response, Camus effectively set the stage for the more formal examination of the nature of human existence that would follow.

An Absurd Reasoning: Philosophical Explication

In his essay The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus fully develops his understanding of the absurd and its implications, an examination born, as discussed above, of an urgency to examine his

own personal experience. The opening sentences of the essay clearly state Camus’ purpose—to investigate the question of whether or not life is worth living. This, he continues, is the fundamental question of philosophy. Specifically, Camus begins by addressing the question of suicide, and whether one can ever be justified in taking one’s own life. Suicide, for Camus, equates to an admission that life is too much to bear, that life is too difficult to understand or to endure, or that it is simply not worth the trouble. “Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized…the ridiculous character of habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.” Such a realization of the absurdity of existence, according to Camus, can strip life of any value it had previously held for an individual and force one to conclude that that life is no longer worth living. However, nothing essential about that existence has changed, as life has not suddenly become something other than it was; rather, a sudden insight is made, lucidity is achieved, and the absurd is finally recognized, as it had always been present.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus explains that an awareness of the absurd arises in the realization that whatever connections one may have felt with one’s world are ultimately groundless and hollow. There is no inherent connection between an individual and the world, and there is no intrinsic ground upon which the individual can achieve an understanding of one’s world. Camus explains:

> In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels himself an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting is properly the feeling of absurdity.

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19 Ibid., 5–6

20 Ibid., 6.
When previously held beliefs and systems suddenly fail to characterize one’s position in the world or answer one’s questions adequately, the individual is faced with the realization that one is out of place in a strange world that no longer feels like home; this is, for Camus, the fundamental experience which fosters the recognition of the absurdity of existence. The individual feels lost and alienated, thrown into a world which is suddenly bereft of absolute meaning and intelligibility. Camus presents this insight as an awakening; one is suddenly aware of what remains essential in one’s existence after all previously held beliefs and assumptions regarding that existence have been stripped away. In a manner which echoes an insight confided to his notebooks and cited above, Camus presents such a moment of lucidity:

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—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.21

The amazement to which Camus refers here is the wonder that arises from the recognition that, rather than what one had always assumed it to be, the world is something else entirely. It is no longer that within which one had lived with a complacent but erroneous understanding; rather, the world is revealed as a silent, indifferent place that offers no ground for understanding or appeal. Camus concludes:

[T]he primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia. For a second we cease to understand it because for centuries we have understood in it solely the images that we had attributed to it beforehand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. The world evades us because it becomes itself again.22

No longer what it once was, the world is now a strange place in which one cannot immediately feel at home; further, there is nothing underlying the individual’s ‘dialogue’ with the world.

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21 Ibid., 12–13.

22 Ibid., 14.
which ultimately situates or makes that dialogue inherently intelligible or meaningful. As Camus explains, it is precisely within this unintelligible dialogue that the absurd ultimately arises. The absurd concerns the individual and the individual’s relationship with the world; it is the relationship between individual and world itself which is key. The absurd is not a component of one aspect of existence or another; rather, it is the product of a particular deficiency or failure in the relationship itself. Such a failure fosters a disconnection, both internal and external, between the individual and existence, as a lucid individual sees both the precarious grip with which one clings to an understanding of the world, and thus of oneself and one’s place in the world, fall away.

Camus maintains that it is essential to the individual to maintain a grip on existence, as life must be seen as both logical and intelligible. Clarity with respect to life must be achieved if an individual is to be able not only to comprehend the significance of existence in the world but also to function within that world.

To understand is, above all, to unify. The mind’s deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man’s unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. … That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama.  

This longing, according to Camus, is not limited to the desire for absolute clarity; it is also a longing for happiness, as the individual sees the path to happiness necessarily leading first through an understanding of existence. Yet a clear realization of the absurdity of existence and its lack of inherent meaning reveals that such absolute clarity is unattainable, and any attempt to achieve that clarity will fail. The world in which one finds oneself is completely foreign and does not speak in a manner which allows one to attain a fundamental understanding or connection. The lucid individual finally realizes this point, recognizing that one has been

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23 Ibid., 17.
abandoned in a world in which the quest for absolute clarity and inherent meaning cannot be consummated; it is here that one more wholly glimpses the absurd, fully constituted in the tension between the desire for an inherent connection and its impossibility:

In his lucidity…the feeling of the absurd becomes clear and definite. … This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together.24

And so, Camus concludes, the realization of the absurd comprises two essential elements: it begins with existence in a world which offers no inherent meaning to or justification of that existence, and it fully develops when an individual insists on finding an inherent meaning or justification that is necessarily absent in the world. The absurd is not given simply as a condition of the individual, nor is it an exclusive condition of the world; rather, the absurd is the human attempt at clarity and inherent meaning in a world in which such clarity is unattainable and such meaning does not exist. The absurd is a product of the human presence in the world.25

The clarity which the individual once sought, or believed to be in possession of, is undermined by a realization which shows such understanding to be mistaken and such clarity to be unattainable. The world itself undergoes a transformation, leaving the individual alienated in an unfamiliar environment which defies explanation and eludes understanding. The individual longs for clarity, sees that the world will not allow for such understanding, yet refuses to give up hope. It is thus the insistence on achieving such clarity, in the face of its impossibility, from which the absurd emerges. Yet from this emergence, there can be no return. Once the absurd is realized, the individual can neither relinquish the desire for an impossible clarity nor return to a time when one believed oneself to be in possession of it.

24 Ibid., 21.

25 Ibid., 30.
The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of life can depend on it. The irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter—these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable.26

Ultimately, Camus contends that these three “characters in the drama”—the silence of the world, the human longing for connection, and the absurdity that arises in the tension between them—are equally constitutive and necessary components of human existence in full. Further, this emergence into absurdity from which there can be no return is not in itself a fate to be lamented; rather, the lucidity which allows such an emergence is itself a necessary element toward any possibility for human understanding or connection. In this sense, the realization and preservation of the absurd is the best that one can achieve as far as understanding one’s world. Camus concludes:

I don’t know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me—this is what I understand. And these two certainties—my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle—I also know that I cannot reconcile them.27

Far from a resignation to permanent exile, the lucidity which recognizes the absurd is necessary in order to accept the impossibility of an inherent connection, understanding, and reconciliation without thereby precluding later connections or understandings as a possibility.

In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus cites Søren Kierkegaard as one who proposes a possible approach to an absurd existence. Kierkegaard maintained that humanity has an eternal aspect which needs to be expressed, an infinite desire which cannot be satisfied by any finite thing. He

26 Ibid., 28.
27 Ibid., 51.
described, nearly a century before, the same dilemma which would occupy Camus: that of a finite individual searching for an infinite meaning or clarity within an existence in which such meaning or clarity is not immediately nor intrinsically present. For Kierkegaard, the way in which one may attain that clarity is to surrender one’s desire for it. The reason, Kierkegaard explains, that such clarity is elusive to humanity may be found in human finitude: the meaning one seeks is only to be found in the infinite, or, as Kierkegaard specifies, in God. The logic and reason of the finite individual cannot comprehend the infinite, and only by sacrificing logic and reason and replacing them with faith and commitment to the Absolute is one able to accomplish such understanding. Moreover, the confusion and sense of the absurd which leads one to comprehension is finally, for Kierkegaard, all the more precious, precisely because it ultimately leads one to God. As Camus explains, “thus the very thing that led to despair of the meaning and depth of this life now gives it its truth and its clarity.”

With *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard presents an example of the manner in which one ought to respond to the absurd. When God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, even though such obedience will seemingly negate God’s earlier promise that Abraham would father a great nation through Isaac, Abraham complies. On the surface, Abraham’s act seems merely to be an example of supreme obedience to the will of God: though Abraham expected to father a nation through Isaac, he foregoes the opportunity and chooses instead to follow God’s will. Yet, Kierkegaard maintains, closer examination reveals that Abraham did not concede his desire. Even as Abraham complied with God’s wishes, he did not abandon his belief in God’s original promise to him; although Abraham intended to sacrifice Isaac, he believed that Isaac would be returned to him by nature of the absurd, and thus God’s promise would be upheld. For Kierkegaard, Abraham exhibits the characteristics of the Knight of Faith, as he chooses to

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28 Ibid., 37.
believe in two assertions, made by God, which are seemingly contradictory. Abraham has faith in the attainment of reward in this world as well as the next; he allows for the co-existence of two possibilities that are seemingly at odds with each other, thus transcending the paradox between possibility and impossibility, while at the same time placing the individual, the particular, above the universal. While Camus sees the absurd as the necessary product of the confrontation arising between the claim of primacy of the universal versus that of the particular, the infinite versus the finite, Kierkegaard finds the possibility of their reconciliation through a commitment to the Absolute (God), which he describes as “the objective certainty along with the repulsion of the absurd held fast in the passion of inwardness, which precisely is inwardness potentiated to the highest degree.”

Thus through the “leap of faith” Abraham reconciles the demand of the universal with the desire for the particular, as presented through God’s command and Abraham’s own desire to realize the promise from God that he will father a nation through Isaac, and establishes himself as the Knight of Faith.

Yet at the conclusion of his discussion of Kierkegaard, Camus is not convinced. According to Camus, Kierkegaard errs in allowing for an association between the absurd and a world outside of the physical, a world which, according to Camus, may not exist. “He makes of the absurd the criterion of the other world, whereas it is simply a residue of the experience of this world.” At the same time, Kierkegaard’s view seems to offer a resolution to the absurd, a means for man to overcome the sense of the absurd by finding meaning in the infinite. Here too, according to Camus, Kierkegaard has erred. In his attempt to win clarity, Kierkegaard has eliminated the absurd by attaching the pursuit of clarity to something beyond this world.

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Kierkegaard does not claim to have found such clarity; rather, he asserts that the realization that clarity and understanding lie only with God frees one from the immediate need to be in possession of that clarity. Thus the need is gone, and the absurd has been overcome. Where for Camus the absurd is born of the confrontation between one’s insistence on attaining clarity in a world in which such clarity is not possible, Kierkegaard eliminates the absurd by eradicating the need for such clarity. It is exactly this absurdity, according to Camus, which must be maintained in order to confront one’s existence truly. Kierkegaard, in Camus’ view, leaps beyond this tension, but that means for Kierkegaard that “[e]verything is sacrificed here to the irrational, and the demand for clarity being conjured away, the absurd disappears with one of the terms of its comparison.”31 Yet in Camus’ conception of the absurd, the individual must refuse to allow such an evasion:

The absurd man, on the other hand, does not undertake such a leveling process. He recognizes the struggle, does not absolutely scorn reason, and admits the irrational. Thus he again embraces in a single glance all the data of experience and he is little inclined to leap before knowing.32 Camus cannot allow this annihilation of the absurd, because the logic of the absurd does not permit the leap of faith that Kierkegaard presents. Throughout The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus is insistent on the pursuit of an understanding of existence through reason and logic. As the conditions that allow for Kierkegaard’s leap do not readily present themselves through reason and logic, Camus is not obliged to follow this leap:

There is no logical certainty here. There is no experimental probability, either. All I can say is that, in fact, that transcends my scale. If I do not draw a negation from it, at least I do not want to found anything on the incomprehensible. I want to know whether I can live with what I know and that alone.33

31 Ibid., 37.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 40.
Rather than allow himself to follow a belief that cannot be sustained by reason, Camus chooses to maintain his logic and his lucidity. The leap, as Camus interprets it, is little more than an obstruction of lucidity, succeeding only at obscuring the individual’s understanding of one’s fate and one’s finitude. In his notebooks, Camus depicts the leap as a willed insulation against the despair: “In Italian museums, you see little painted screens that the priest used to hold before the prisoner’s face to hide the scaffold from him. The existential leap is one of those screens.”

Camus has clearly rejected one means of facing the absurd: that of deferring to an Absolute outside of the human and present in the infinite, as Kierkegaard had advocated. Camus’ refusal to afford himself such an appeal to an Absolute left the engagement with the absurd in the hands of the individual, as the absurd is, for Camus, something with which the individual must reckon alone, without appeal to an Absolute. Just as any perceived source of meaning or authority is necessarily absent from the world, so too is any similar source that could bestow such meaning upon any specific choice or action of man. A sense of disconnection with one’s world develops, as the world no longer dictates any specific course of action. The individual is thus “without ethics, without guidance, without religion, …fearful in the face of night and death.” It is precisely this position ‘without’—recognized as both not being in possession of and existing outside of—which constitutes the sensation of exile, and it is only from this position in exile, without connection, meaning, or direction, that the absurd is fully experienced: the recognition of the absurd begins with one’s realization of one’s lack of connection with the

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35 For a more in-depth discussion of Camus’ refusal to follow Kierkegaard’s ‘leap,’ see, e.g., Jane Duran’s essay “The Philosophical Camus” (in *The Philosophical Forum* 38, No. 4 [2007], 365–371) and chapter two of Robert Solomon’s *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

world, and thus the lack of inherent direction or meaning to existence within that world; the absurd is fully actualized through the insistence that an absolute connection and meaning must exist, and by the struggle to find such an inherent connection or meaning and thus overcome the position in/of exile.

Strangers and Exiles I: Stories of the Absurd

The disconnection between the individual and the world, the sense of exile which fosters an impression of the absurd, so richly defined in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, is carefully depicted throughout Camus’ narrative works as well. Though *The Stranger* may be Camus’ most celebrated example of the absurd in operation, the concept is perhaps more explicitly introduced in *A Happy Death*. The latter work was never officially completed, nor was it published until after Camus’ death. After several drafts, Camus set the work aside in favor of *The Stranger*, the work he would ultimately complete and publish. Just as the essays which constitute *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* and *Nuptials* may be seen as Camus’ personal engagement with exile and the absurdity of existence before formally developing his explicit philosophy of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *A Happy Death* may be seen as Camus’ more personal consideration of an individual’s living within an absurd existence, a theme which Camus would treat more formally and succinctly several years later in *The Stranger*. More than this temporal connection, what ties the two works together philosophically is the shared recognition, and ultimate need to engage, the absurd which arises in the awareness of death; both works are ultimately concerned with depicting the “quest for a life that is meaningful enough that death itself is happy.”

37 Camus began work on *A Happy Death* in 1936, and his last notes for the work are from 1938. Shortly thereafter he began work on *The Stranger*, which would be published in 1942.

A Happy Death presents Patrice Mersault, whose “quest for a life that is meaningful” is undertaken against a backdrop of routine: days at work, Saturdays with his lover, Marthe, and Sundays spent in his small apartment or watching the world from his balcony. It is not until he is introduced to Marthe’s former lover, the crippled Zagreus, that Mersault begins to perceive a path to happiness. Despite the fact that he had had both legs amputated and was subsequently severely limited in his capacity to enjoy his life, Zagreus maintained the value that he himself created for himself in merely living. Zagreus articulates the importance of such happiness to Mersault, imploring Mersault to pursue his own happiness while emphasizing that it can only be found in this life. Anticipating the example set in The Myth of Sisyphus, Zagreus advocates pursuing happiness and creating meaning instead of giving in to despair and suicide:

I’ll never make a move to cut short a life I believe in that much. I’d accept even worse… as long as I feel in my belly that dark fire that is me, me alive. The only thing that would occur to me would be to thank life for letting me burn on. And you, Mersault,… your one duty is to live and be happy.39

Ultimately, Zagreus encourages Mersault to kill him and to use the resources that Zagreus had earned to find happiness and justification for himself. Mersault obliges—he kills Zagreus, takes Zagreus’ money, and begins his own search for happiness. “And from that moment on, because of a single act calculated in utter lucidity, his life had changed and happiness seemed possible.”40

Meursault of The Stranger commits a strikingly similar act, thus beginning his own path toward lucidity and his own confrontation with the absurd. The Stranger begins with Meursault learning that his mother has died. Although he dutifully travels to the home where she had lived to participate in her burial and spends the eve of her funeral watching over her remains,


40 Ibid., 81.
Meursault betrays no emotional connection to the body before him nor to the life that has been extinguished in his mother. Throughout the proceedings he is stoic, and the authenticity of this emotionless reaction is only confirmed by the ease with which he resumes the routine of his life upon his return home. Equally without emotion, Meursault enters into two new relationships after the death of his mother: the first, a romantic liaison with a woman (Marie) he had previously known only slightly, began the day after his mother’s funeral; the second, a newly-intensified friendship with a neighbor (Raymond), was generated through an act of complicity two days later. The latter would ultimately lead Meursault through a series of ever-growing tensions, culminating in the act of violence that would determine Meursault’s fate.

Meursault and Raymond’s friendship was sealed by Meursault’s agreement to help Raymond exact revenge upon a former lover, an Arab girl whom Raymond believed had shown him profound disrespect. This act of revenge ended with Raymond beating the girl, thus earning Raymond (and by association, Meursault) the wrath of the girl’s brother. This wrath boiled over in a confrontation between the parties on a beach, resulting in knife-wounds for Raymond. Later on, after Raymond had been taken to a doctor, Meursault returned alone to the beach to clear his head. As he walked along the beach, the mid-day heat and the sun become more and more oppressive, and he began to feel the connection to himself as well as the world around him loosening, much as it had during the funeral procession for his mother.41 Drawing near to the place where the previous conflict had taken place, Meursault sees that one of the Arabs has

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41 As Meursault followed the funeral procession at the beginning of the novel, the physical sensations that assaulted him severely hindered his ability to focus on the procession or the funeral: “Sticking up above the top of the hearse, the coachman’s hard leather hat looked as if it had been molded out of the same black mud. I felt a little lost between the blue and white of the sky and the monotony of the colors around me—the sticky black of the tar, the dull black of all the clothes, and the shiny black of the hearse. All of it—the sun, the smell of leather and horse dung from the hearse, the smell of varnish and incense, and my fatigue after a night without sleep—was making it hard for me to see or think straight.” Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 17.
returned as well as is now casually playing a flute in a spot of shade. The weight of the sun on Meursault proves to be more forceful than the presence of the Arab, and Meursault, seemingly without explicit reason and with no clear intention, continues to advance toward the shade in which the Arab is resting. The Arab tenses himself upon Meursault’s approach, causing Meursault to pause. The Arab draws the knife that he had used on Meursault’s friend Raymond, completing the scene which now enveloped Meursault entirely and ultimately compelled him to act:

It occurred to me that all I had to do was turn around and that would be the end of it. But the whole beach, throbbing in the sun, was pressing on my back. … It was this burning, which I couldn’t stand anymore, that made me move forward… It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire. My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave… and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started.  

Driven by an overwhelming pressure exerted upon him from without, Meursault kills the Arab, thus shaking himself from the habit and routine of his life and placing himself face-to-face with the absurd. However, unlike Mersault of *A Happy Death*, Meursault of *The Stranger* does not immediately recognize in this act of murder a means to happiness; in fact, it appears to be the opposite:

I shook off the sweat and sun. I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I’d been happy. Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness.

In further contrast, whereas Mersault of *A Happy Death* consciously decided to commit murder precisely because of what he believed would result from this choice, Meursault of *The Stranger* acts without being able to attribute his ‘decision’ to shoot to any legitimate reason other than the

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43 Ibid., 59.
sun; Mersault killed in order to gain access to resources that he believed would aid him in his quest for happiness, while Meursault killed because the glare and heat from the sun, coupled with the glare from the Arab’s knife, were too much for Meursault to handle at that moment. In the latter case, the absence of a reason to act suggests the arbitrary and thus groundless nature of all such choices; this is, for Meursault, an explicit encounter with the absurd.

While it is true that the murder of the Arab demonstrated Meursault’s complete, clear realization of the absurd, he was seemingly moving toward such an insight prior to this point. Meursault had already attained a sense of the absurd liberty which governed existence, realizing the weightlessness which attached itself to actions and events, while noting that such actions and events ultimately changed nothing. On successive days at the beginning of the story, Meursault buried his mother (on Friday) and then began a love affair with Marie (on Saturday); despite the seeming momentous character of these events, Meursault spent the following day (Sunday) on his balcony, unaffected by all that has preceded, watching the day slowly pass before his eyes. As the day concluded, Meursault realized that “anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed.”

Upon his return to work the following day, Meursault’s boss offers Meursault the opportunity to manage an office in Paris. Again, Meursault reacts with indifference:

I said that people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn’t dissatisfied with mine here at all. He looked upset and told me that I never gave him a straight answer, that I had no ambition, and that that was disastrous in business. So I went back to work. I would rather not have upset him, but I couldn’t see any reason to change my life. Looking back on it, I wasn’t unhappy. When I was a student, I had lots of ambitions like that. But when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it really mattered.

\[44\] Ibid., 24.

\[45\] Ibid., 41.
Finally, just before shooting the Arab, Meursault again articulates the same insight:

We stared at each other without blinking, and everything came to a stop there between the sea, the sand, and the sun, and the double silence of the flute and the water. It was then that I realized you could either shoot or not shoot.\textsuperscript{46}

In each instance, Meursault realizes that there is no inherent meaning attached to any particular event or choice compared with any other. He acknowledges that no action as such has the power to make a significant difference: any choice made or action undertaken is done so in the face of an absurd existence, on the way to a certain death. No choice or action will change those inherent conditions of existence. As Camus concluded in his \textit{Notebooks}, “If it is true that the absurd has been fulfilled (or rather, revealed), then it follows that no experience has any value in itself, and that all our actions are equally instructive.”\textsuperscript{47}

In the preceding section it was suggested that the sensation of exile arises from the recognition of one’s situation as a position ‘without’—that is, not having, and being outside of, direction from and connection with the world. This is precisely the point of understanding and experience that Meursault has reached when he realizes that “you could either shoot or not shoot”\textsuperscript{48} and “to stay or to go, it amounted to the same thing.”\textsuperscript{49} Neither action in either case contains any essential meaning, because there is nothing in the world itself, independent of the act or the actor, which validates or condemns either action \textit{necessarily}. In beginning to recognize his position with respect to existence in the world as absurd (if only by degrees at this point in the story, as a full, explicit recognition and confrontation is still to come), Meursault is more accurately (if only implicitly) recognizing that he has been exiled from absolute direction,

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 56.


\textsuperscript{48} Camus, \textit{The Stranger}, 56.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 57.
connection, and meaning—this acknowledgment of exile is the first step in the realization of the absurd. If exile is the recognition that there is something (meaning, connection) from which one is cut-off, the absurd arises in the insistence that the state of being cut-off is intrinsically temporary and remediable, that the connection and understanding/meaning that has been withheld is ultimately, necessarily, and completely achievable. It is precisely this full-on confrontation with the absurd, encountered as a disconnection from the world and the simultaneous desire to [re-]connect, that both Mersault and Meursault represent: both seem to ask, what is missing? What could make this current disjunction make sense? What could allow me (finally!) to feel a part of the world and existence as a whole?

For Mersault of *A Happy Death*, the confrontation with the absurd arises in exile from happiness, and Mersault’s subsequent quest to [re-]gain happiness takes him through solitude, travel, and hedonism. Ultimately this course does not satisfy Mersault’s longing, and he finally decides to settle down, alone, in a house outside of Algiers. It is here that he focuses all of his energy in structuring his life and his actions in such a way as to achieve happiness. In Algiers, Mersault realizes that happiness is within his grasp, within this world; it is purely a matter of will. “Happiness implied a choice, and within that choice, a concerted will, a lucid desire. He could hear Zagreus: ‘Not the will to renounce, but the will to happiness.’” Mersault has achieved lucidity, and he begins to make his existence his own. What’s more, the life which he finds is strictly of this world and completely within his grasp and his control:

Now, in his hours of lucidity, he felt that time was his own, that in the brief interval which finds the sea red and leaves it green, something eternal was represented for him in each second. Beyond the curve of the days he glimpsed neither superhuman happiness nor eternity—happiness was human, eternity ordinary.  

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50 Camus, *A Happy Death*, 118.

51 Ibid., 120.
Thus in the face of a fate which is inescapable, and living an existence defined by its absurdity, Camus presents (through Mersault) the potential to [re-]gain a missing happiness; yet rather than some inherent and guaranteed happiness, what Mersault finds is a happiness that could only be attained from and in his own position in finitude. As was the case with Camus’ own search for clarity, this desire for happiness represents a confrontation between an ungrounded desire in the individual and a world which will not satisfy that desire; in Mersault’s case, it arose in the tension between his insistence that some kind of essential happiness must be possible and a world which promised only death.

In *The Stranger* Camus offers a similar construction of the absurd built upon a foundation in exile, yet this latter Meursault is more completely, and more explicitly, himself an exile. Throughout his trial for murdering the Arab, Meursault’s behavior with respect to his mother’s death at the opening of the novel is just as damning as is his behavior toward the Arab, as the prosecutor noted that “between the two sets of facts [of his reaction to his mother’s death and his murder of the Arab] there exists a profound, fundamental, and tragic relationship.”

Meursault’s lack of emotion in the aftermath his mother’s death and his behavior in beginning an affair the following day portrays Meursault as a detached and alienated man, a man who “had no place in a society whose fundamental rules [he] had ignored and [who] could not appeal to the same human heart whose elementary response [he] knew nothing of.” Meursault is prosecuted as much for his refusal or inability to grieve ‘properly’ his dead mother, which is presented as an abstract murder of his mother, as he is for his actual murder of the Arab.

Further, Meursault’s imprisonment clarifies and consummates his position in exile, as he

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53 Ibid., 102.
comes to recognize that he is wholly separated from the proceedings despite his presence at their very center. Each day in the courtroom during his trial, Meursault feels himself to be an “odd man out, a kind of intruder.” He notes that while the focus of everyone in the courtroom fell upon him, he still felt largely ignored:

Everything was happening without my participation. My fate was being decided without anyone so much as asking my opinion. There were times when I felt like breaking in on all of them and saying, ‘Wait a minute! Who’s the accused here? Being the accused counts for something. And I have something to say!’ But on second thought, I didn’t have anything to say.

Meursault experiences this exclusion as a profound injustice; how can it be that the world around him could not first defer to what he, Meursault, needs and desires? Yet the same time, he recognizes that, even if given the opportunity, he could do nothing to alter the circumstances or the direction in which those circumstances were now leading him. In this manner Meursault finds himself doubly exiled: he is excluded from the community of those who now judge him, but at the same time he recognizes that any action he might be permitted to undertake would not change his predicament in any fundamental way; ultimately, Meursault is exiled to the periphery of his world and left as an outsider who can only watch his own fate unfold. To his earlier realization of the utter inconsequence of one action over another, you could “either shoot or not shoot” or “stay or...go, it amounted to the same thing,” Meursault adds that in any case, either choice can lead as easily to condemnation as to contentment:

As I was leaving the courthouse on my way back to the van, I recognized for a brief moment the smell and color of the summer evening. In the darkness of my mobile prison I could make out one by one, as if from the depths of my exhaustion, all the familiar sounds of a town I loved and of a certain time of day when I used to feel happy. … [I]t was the hour when, a long time ago, I was perfectly content. What awaited me back then was always a night of easy, dreamless sleep. And yet something had changed, since it was back to my cell


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54 Ibid., 84.
55 Ibid., 98.
that I went to wait for the next day...as if familiar paths traced in summer skies could lead as easily to prison as to the sleep of the innocent.\textsuperscript{56}

Exile has become for Meursault both an underlying condition and its symptom, a cause and a result of the identity that Meursault has assumed. Because he felt cut-off from the world and that his choices and actions had no real bearing on his existence, Meursault assumed a position of indifference with respect to himself, the world, and ultimately his interactions with the world. Yet it was precisely this indifference which literally cut him off from his world, completing his isolation through his judgment at the hands of others, his removal from society, and ultimately his condemnation to death. Ironically, it was precisely this condemnation to death, directly resulting from the attitude of isolation and difference that he had assumed regarding existence and the world, which ultimately justified his assumption of that position; in the end Meursault was correct to believe that nothing really mattered, because in the end nothing he could have been or done would change the fact that he would, at the end of it all, die. The certainty of death was, for Meursault, that which undermined everything, the origin and consummation of his experience of exile; as such, it mattered not when death would come, as his exile was dependent not on the time of death but simply on the fact that it was eventual and inescapable:

\begin{quote}
Everybody knows life isn’t worth living. Deep down I knew perfectly well that it doesn’t much matter whether you die at thirty or at seventy, since in either case other men and women will naturally go on living—and for thousands of years. In fact, nothing could be clearer. Whether it was now or twenty years from now, I would still be the one dying. At that point, what would disturb my train of thought was the terrifying leap I would feel my heart take at the idea of having twenty more years of life ahead of me. But I simply had to stifle it by imagining what I’d be thinking in twenty years when it would all come down to the same thing anyway. Since we’re all going to die, it’s obvious that when and how don’t matter.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Thus in his cell, convicted, and waiting for his certain death, the portrait of Meursault’s exile is

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 97.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 114.
complete, the “exile of an isolated individual who lives unwaveringly in a present he scarcely understands but to which he refused to attribute a non-existent meaning.”

It was not until Meursault received his death sentence that he was finally forced to reckon with life, a life which he was now certain to lose. The only certainty that is revealed in the absurdity of existence is death; death presents itself as the final and permanent end to individual existence, an end toward which one is ever moving. “[The individual] admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end. He belongs to time, and by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy.” This is the final component of a full realization of the absurd, as Camus conceives it; in exile, without connection with, meaning in, or direction from the world, the only certainty available to the individual is one’s own mortality. Death is the end toward which existence is directed, thus asserting and ultimately actualizing the finitude of that existence, acknowledged but not accepted: “[The absurd] is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death.”

Thus, “men die, and they are not happy.” This is the great truth that the Camus’ depiction of the Roman Emperor Caligula has discovered, the truth around which he plans to structure his life. In the play Caligula, Camus introduces yet another lucid man who has recognized the absurdity of his existence, though the ways in which Caligula responds to this realization are quite different from the reactions of Mersault (of A Happy Death) and Meursault (of The Stranger).

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60 Ibid., 54.

Death, according to Caligula, is just and does not discriminate; all will die, and all will die equally. All individuals are therefore equal in their condemnation, as there is no way to avoid one’s supreme fate. If this is indeed the case, then Caligula is perfectly justified in thereafter treating life in the manner in which he does; thus, his recognition of the truth that human existence has no meaning, that all die, and that, in fact, all are not happy. To remedy this condition and attain a happiness that seems impossible, Caligula resolves to accomplish some single, concrete task, itself deemed impossible, in order to demonstrate that such impossibility can be overcome from within the finitude of human existence. While those around him think that his reasoning is perverted and that he is mad, Caligula insists that he is now finally seeing things clearly and as they truly are.

I’m not mad; in fact I’ve never felt so lucid. What happened to me is quite simple: I suddenly felt a desire for the impossible. That’s all. Things as they are, in my opinion, are far from satisfactory… That’s why I want the moon, or happiness, or eternal life—something, in fact, that may sound crazy, but which isn’t of this world.”

If Caligula were to achieve this feat and attain the impossible, then he would be asserting himself over life and its finitude, against the absurd and meaningless existence of which he has suddenly realized himself to be a part. If he could achieve one impossibility, if he could make the moon his own, then he could achieve the greater impossibility of abolishing the absurdity which qualifies existence; the possibility of happiness would be allowed, as would the potential to overcome death. “[W]hen all is leveled out, when the impossible has come to earth and the moon is in my hands, then, perhaps, I shall be transfigured and the world renewed; then men will die no more and at last be happy.” Life has no value in itself, and in order to gain the power to assign it value, to permit happiness and challenge death, Caligula must first conquer

62 Ibid., 8.
63 Ibid., 16–17.
the impossible. Hence his struggle against the absurd is doomed from the outset, and he is
destined for the nihilism into which he finally falls. As the possibility of finding or preserving
any meaning rests entirely in accomplishing the impossible, Caligula has left himself no way to
create anything. Meaning, at the hands of Caligula, has met the same fate as so many of his
subjects and is left to decay with the rest of the lives that Caligula has discarded in the name of
his absurd liberty. In the final moments preceding his death, Caligula finally glimpses the folly
of his response to the absurd and realizes that he has left no alternative for himself but to fall
into nihilism.

All I need is for the impossible to be. The impossible! I’ve searched for it at the
confines of the world, in the secret places of my heart… I have chosen a wrong
path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn’t the right one… Nothing, nothing
yet. Oh, how oppressive is this darkness!… The air tonight is heavy as the sum
of human sorrows.  

Caligula, as Camus presents him, accurately detected the absurdity of existence, as had
Camus’ other heroes of this period, Mersault (of A Happy Death) and Meursault (of The
Stranger). Yet unlike the other two, who persisted in their desire to attain happiness within the
terms of their exile and the absurdity of existence, Caligula appealed to something outside. The
only choice remaining for Caligula was to wish for the impossible, and only through the
impossible did he see any capacity to create meaning. In this manner Caligula abandoned his
lucidity in favor of an absurd hope, which ultimately led him to despair and death.

Facing a similarly looming death as the consummation of his own absurd existence,
Mersault of A Happy Death maintains his lucidity without appeal. He knows that he is dying,
and it is in his approach to death that Mersault illustrates the full meaning and significance of
“conscious death.” Accepting the finitude of his existence and the finality of his death, Mersault
surrenders himself to the truth of existence; death has revealed itself to Mersault as the one true

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64 Ibid., 73.
certainty that the world allows an individual to realize. Through the realization of this fate, Mersault discovers acceptance, and he begins at last to find peace in his existence:

At this hour of night, his life seemed so remote to him, he was so solitary and indifferent to everything and to himself as well, that Mersault felt he had at last attained what he was seeking, that the peace which filled him now was born of that patient self-abandonment he had pursued and achieved with the help of this warm world so willing to deny him without anger.65

Mersault has realized the futility of any attempt to find inherent meaning in his existence in the world and accepted the firm but detached silence with which the world announces his exile. In this acceptance of the world as it presents itself to him, along with the acceptance of his death as that which will seal his existence, Meursault finds a way to be happy.

Motionless now, Mersault felt how close happiness is to tears, caught up in that silent exaltation which weaves together the hopes and despairs of human life. Conscious yet alienated, Mersault realized that his life and his fate were completed here and that henceforth all his efforts would be to submit to this happiness and to confront its terrible truth.66

Mersault has reconciled himself with the conditions of his existence by accepting the logic of the absurd, preserving the tension between his own desires and the world which cannot fully satisfy them, and sublimating his will and accepting the world and his place in it. The world will not open itself to Mersault or reveal its eternal truths, thus Mersault will remain in exile from an essential connection with, and understanding of, his world. What’s more, the certainty of death exiles Mersault from hope for an eternity that might somehow overcome this exile. All that is left to Mersault is to engage the portion of existence that he is permitted, to live in harmony with the world as he experiences it, in all its silence and indifference toward him. Mersault’s lucidity allows him to achieve happiness, as he has seen the world for what it presents itself to be for him, what it can only ever be for him, and he is completely conscious of his fate within

65 Camus, A Happy Death, 138–139.

66 Ibid., 140.
that world. Thus the “terrible truth” that remained for Mersault to confront was his death, and he felt ready to face this truth lucidly and happily. After accepting his position in exile, confronting the absurdity of his existence, and creating happiness within that existence, Mersault’s last remaining need was to lucidly await and experience the “encounter between his life—a life filled with blood and health—and death.” Thus what began as a simple desire for happiness culminates in Mersault’s insistence on experiencing a conscious death. The lucidity which had allowed him to attain happiness is maintained to the very last, as it is his lucidity which allows him to endure the final truth.

This notion of conscious death is prevalent throughout Camus’ work, inexorably connected with lucidity and the absurd. In the aforementioned essay “The Wind at Djemila,” Camus expresses his own desire for conscious death:

I want to keep my lucidity to the last, and gaze upon my death with all the fullness of my jealousy and horror. … Creating conscious deaths is to diminish the distance that separates us from the world and to accept a consummation without joy, alert to rapturous images of a world forever lost.

This personal expression of the desire for a conscious death, so much more revealing than the manner in which Camus allows Mersault to articulate, is filled with the acknowledgment of exile as the root of the absurd as well as that which compels the need for a conscious death. Here Camus presents exile, the “distance that separates us from the world,” as that which must be confronted and overcome; one desires a conscious death so that one might narrow the gulf between oneself and the world. At the same time, Camus likewise acknowledges a permanent aspect of exile that can seemingly never be bridged. The world one hoped to know, the world which revealed itself fully to the individual and thus made full connection and understanding

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67 Ibid., 143.

possible, is revealed in the absurd as an illusion; this is the “world forever lost.” At the same time, because there is nothing more to come after death, the only world one can ever know, that of silence, indifference, and impermanence, is likewise “forever lost.” Yet the recognition of this second meaning of “a world forever lost,” that death is the complete and total end, ought to remove any last constraint that the lucid individual may have allowed to be placed upon existence. The role of an absolute, eternal aspect beyond this finite life has definitively been eliminated, thus allowing true liberty to live and create within exile and the absurd. As Camus confided in his Notebooks, as the possibility of a world which follows and justifies death in this world is undermined, so too are the values and constraints which traditionally characterize and direct existence in this world:

The only liberty possible is a liberty as regards death. The really free man is the one who, accepting death as it is, at the same time accepts its consequences—that is to say, the abolition of all life’s traditional values.\(^{69}\)

Ultimately, this is the way in which Mersault was able to face his life and his death. As he falls ill and eventually reaches the brink of passing, he achieved full lucidity with respect to his world and full happiness within that world. The limited understanding of the world that his position in exile afforded him was enough, and his lucidity and acceptance of the absurd allowed him to attain a degree of harmony in exile, right up to his death:

That heavy approach of tears, a mingled taste of life and death…, an exultant certainty of sustaining consciousness to the end, of dying with his eyes open… He was not afraid of weakness… He had played his part, fashioned his role, perfected man’s one duty, which is only to be happy… What did it matter if he existed for two or for twenty years? Happiness was the fact that he had existed.\(^{70}\)

In A Happy Death, Camus illustrates the role that death ultimately plays in the existence of

\(^{69}\) Camus, Notebooks: 1935–1942, 95.

\(^{70}\) Camus, A Happy Death, 149.
the lucid individual. All that Mersault does, including his quest for happiness and insistence on full lucidity to the very end, is undertaken within an acute awareness of death. While *A Happy Death* clearly demonstrates how the specter of death affects the lucid individual, *The Stranger* presents a better-articulated vision of a complete, individual response to that impending fate. As *The Stranger* concludes, Meursault is left to consider all that has happened and to confront the fate to which he has been condemned. In being sentenced to death by the court, Meursault realizes that he has always been sentenced to death by existence: to be alive, to exist, is to serve a death sentence. In his particular case, he now realizes just how short his life would be compared with that of others in the world; but in the end it would amount to the same thing, and he would be forced to a death which he could not elude: “Since we’re all going to die, it’s obvious that when and how don’t matter.”

Once he is officially condemned, Meursault knows that nothing could lift his death sentence; even if he were exonerated of his crime, his death sentence would not truly be lifted. What remains for Meursault is to choose the manner in which he will confront his certain death and evaluate the existence that led him to this point. A priest is sent to him to support him in this task, with the intention of pointing Meursault to God to help him through this “terrifying ordeal”; yet as he had done before while being questioned by the examining magistrate, Meursault declines to follow any urging to devote himself to God or to eternity. In spite of the continued insistence of the priest, Meursault refuses to place his hope in God or a grace that would enable him to attain salvation beyond his death. To the last, Meursault maintains his lucidity, placing all of his belief and hope in the physical world: “According to [the priest], human justice was nothing and divine justice was everything. I pointed out that it was the

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72 Ibid., 117.
former that had condemned me.”\textsuperscript{73} The value of life for Meursault has to be determined solely on the strength of its merits in this world; there can be no appeal to anything outside of it. As a final effort, the priest implores Meursault to own up to his need for a connection with something beyond himself, desperately suggesting that there is still hope for Meursault to realize such a connection and through it to attain salvation:

The priest gazed around my cell and answered in a voice that sounded weary to me. ‘Every stone here sweats with suffering. I know that. I have never looked at them without a feeling of anguish. But deep in my heart I know that the most wretched among you have seen a divine face emerge from their darkness. That is the face you are asked to see.’\textsuperscript{74}

Even this final gambit fails for the priest, however; Meursault concedes that there had been a time when he looked desperately for the face of comfort and salvation in the cold and dirty stones of his prison cell, though he is adamant that the face he sought was never that of the Divine:

I said I had been looking at the stones in these walls for months. There wasn’t anything or anyone in the world I knew better. Maybe at one time, way back, I had searched for a face in them. But the face I was looking for was as bright as the sun and the flame of desire—and it belonged to Marie.\textsuperscript{75}

In this final declaration, Meursault reconfirms his devotion to this world in his quest for happiness, satisfaction, and salvation.\textsuperscript{76}

As he is left alone to await his execution, Meursault attains the complete lucidity unto death.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 118.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 118–119.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 119.

\textsuperscript{76} It should perhaps be noted here that Meursault’s devotion to the world is a very narcissistic devotion. While Marie holds a particular place of value for Meursault, he does not consider her own quest for happiness, satisfaction, and salvation in choosing his particular course toward the same. Marie was, after all, a vital component of his world, as were his mother, the Arab, and various others whom he was unable or unwilling to fully consider as independent beings similarly situated in an absurd existence.
that Mersault had himself attained in similar circumstances. He realizes why he had always felt that nothing mattered and that no particular choice or action necessarily held any privilege over any other: in each case, no matter what he chose, nothing would fundamentally alter his course towards death. It was the ever-present quality of this death which was awaiting him that had stripped any possible inherent meaning from actions or choices, as they would all lead to the same thing. In this manner, Meursault executes a great leveling off of his options at any instant, realizing fully an absurd liberty. What’s more, this lucidity not only served to explain his existence and his indifference toward it, but it opened the door for Meursault to be happy. He was going to die, but he was going to die no matter what, and nothing could ever change that.

With that knowledge, in the clarity and liberty of that insight, Meursault finally sees the world as it really is, with the false meanings stripped away, leaving everything bare and beautiful in its essential qualities:

I had lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another. I had done this and I hadn’t done that. I hadn’t done this thing but I had done another. And so? It was as if I had waited all this time for this moment and for the first light of this dawn to be vindicated. Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. So did [the priest]. Throughout the whole absurd life I’d lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living. What did other people’s deaths or a mother’s love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me when we’re all elected by the same fate, me and billions of privileged people like him who also called themselves my brothers? Couldn’t he see, couldn’t he see that? Everybody was privileged. There were only privileged people. The others would all be condemned one day. And he would be condemned, too. What would it matter if he were accused of murder and then executed because he didn’t cry at his mother’s funeral?77

Just as Mersault had surrendered himself to his position in exile from an essential connection with and understanding of his world, Meursault here similarly surrenders himself to his own

77 Ibid., 122.
exile from the possibility of any inherent direction or meaning which could guide or justify any action or choice that he had undertaken; further, just as Mersault had, Meursault here is able to find peace and happiness in this surrender, which ultimately allows him to accept his position and his looming death. Finally, through this surrender, as Mersault had before him, Meursault is able to attain a degree of harmony with his world despite his exile, in that the world, as he now understands it, presents to him a reflection of himself: “For the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt I had been happy and that I was happy again.” By ceasing the struggle against the world and his fate, Meursault was able to understand, if only in a limited way, the world and his place in it, accepting the absurdity of his existence while still achieving happiness.

In these the final moments of Meursault’s life, Camus presents a much more clear, and much more meaningful, picture of a partial reconciliation of the position in exile. Whereas Caligula obviously failed because of his insistence on pursuing an impossibility and thus appealing to something beyond the aspect of the world that he could know and experience, Mersault of A Happy Death followed the course that was more readily available, accepting the world as what it is despite its refusal to open up completely to him, and thus he achieved some measure of comfort and happiness. In the closing pages of The Stranger, Camus presents the condemned Meursault in a similar fashion, yet the depiction here of an individual confronting his position in exile as the source of the recognition of the absurdity of existence is more explicit. Meursault of The Stranger is decidedly more cut-off than his counterpart in Camus’ earlier work; this quality in the latter Meursault is evident from the outset and throughout the

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78 Ibid., 122–123.
text, in the emptiness of his reaction to the death\textsuperscript{79} and funeral of his mother,\textsuperscript{80} his assessment of his ongoing relationship with Marie,\textsuperscript{81} and finally his complete detachment from his arrest, trial, and condemnation.\textsuperscript{82} Even after reaching a final and complete understanding of his position, Meursault remains cut-off in a fundamental way. In his cell, longing to see the face that could bring him comfort, he is unable to summon Marie. Further, despite the obvious fact that Meursault does not share the priest’s convictions regarding the grace of God and the possibility of an eternal life with God, there is more at stake in the final confrontation; in summarily dismissing the appeals of the priest, Meursault rejects not just the priest’s God but the compassion, understanding, and brotherhood of the priest as well. Satisfied for the moment with the realization that through a shared indifference the world is like a brother to him, Meursault fails here, as he has throughout Camus’ portrayal, to recognize and act upon an opportunity to more fully connect with, rather than merely note a resemblance to, something outside of himself. Even his final thoughts, as they are given to us, reflect this fundamental separation between Meursault and the others around him, perhaps even all of humanity: “For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate.”\textsuperscript{83} In this final desire, Meursault voices his hope to somehow bridge the gulf between himself and the world to thus “feel less alone,” yet his recognition that such a connection could only be reached through

\textsuperscript{79} “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know.” (Ibid., 3)

\textsuperscript{80} “Maman was buried now, … I was going back to work, … and really nothing had changed.” (Ibid., 24)

\textsuperscript{81} “A minute later she asked me if I loved her. I told her that it didn’t mean anything but that I didn’t think so.” (Ibid., 35)

\textsuperscript{82} “Everything was happening without my participation.” (Ibid., 98).

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 123.
their cries of hate seems to be a simultaneous admission of the ultimate impossibility of the realization of this hope. His act of unthinking murder has wholly and completely cut him off from others, and there can be no going back; Meursault will finally die alone because he has so thoroughly and consistently defined himself as alone. Despite the fact that he has seemingly achieved a degree of harmony with the world by refusing to appeal to anything beyond what he can know and experience, this final wish by Meursault perhaps suggests an implicit awareness that even within an absurd existence a greater reconciliation could have been possible.

Caligula, Mersault, and Meursault, Camus’ ‘heroes of the absurd,’ all failed to progress beyond this compromise with the absurd in a partial resolution of exile; this is where Camus’ ‘cycle of the absurd’ concludes. Without diminishing the relative victories that Mersault and

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84 English Showalter makes a similar point regarding the implication of Meursault’s final wish: “Meursault…will die for his refusal of human solidarity. The crowd will hate him not simply as a murderer, but as a cold-blooded murderer, and the difference is critical. He condemns himself, in a sense, for failing to respect life and the living.” English Showalter Jr., The Stranger: Humanity and the Absurd (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989), 109.

Without going so far as to agree that Meursault is here explicitly acknowledging and judging the disregard for humanity of which his murder of the Arab is evidence, there does seem to be an implicit recognition by Meursault that he’s been missing a connection with others all along while simultaneously conceding that a true connection is no longer possible for him as a result of his identity as a whole, and not only because of his single act of murder.

85 The absurdity of existence is generally presented by Camus as both a ‘truth’ of existence and a starting point which must be surpassed; he intended to (and succeeded, as will be seen in the following chapter) demonstrate how the despair of the absurd could be overcome without diminishing or ignoring the absurdity itself. With this in mind, Robert Solomon suggests that perhaps Meursault is illustrative of the position that recognizes the absurd while failing to see the manner in which one can get beyond it: “it is not Camus’ aim…to get us beyond the Absurd or cure us of its oppressiveness. He even insists, in the name of a curious mix of philosophical integrity, obstinacy, mock heroism, and defiance, that we ‘keep the Absurd alive.’ Nevertheless, the point is to go beyond it, which Meursault surely does not do.” Robert Solomon, Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts: Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre, 38.

86 Camus at various times outlined a plan of his work, which was to be divided into stages addressing particular themes as if part of a greater trajectory. The first and second cycles each comprised an essay, a novel, and a play: the absurd cycle included The Myth of Sisyphus, The Stranger, and Caligula, whereas the cycle on revolt included The Rebel, The Plague, and The Just. Following an interlude with The Fall and Exile and the Kingdom, the third cycle was to deal with love and Nemesis, had Camus’ work not been cut short by his early death in 1960. See, e.g., Albert Camus, Notebooks: 1951–1959, trans Ryan Bloom (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), 172.
Meursault enjoyed over death and the absurd, it must be suggested that Camus ultimately recognized that more could be achieved against exile, against the absurd, and even against death. Although none of these ‘heroes of the absurd’ were able to break through to gain even a finite transcendence of their respective exiles and absurdities, the examples given by each, in conjunction with Camus’ more explicit account in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, present an indispensable starting point toward determining and attaining a deeper reconciliation and [re-]union.

**Between Yes and No: Absurdity or Exile?**

Although ‘exile’ is explicitly treated throughout Camus’ writings discussed to this point, nowhere in these texts does Camus use the term to name or describe the condition of human existence in general at its most fundamental level; instead, he chooses to characterize human existence as ‘absurd.’ Despite this distinction, the designation ‘exile’ accurately and precisely accounts for the conditions which foster the individual recognition of the absurd.

As Camus explains, the absurd is a product of the individual’s realization of one’s alienation in the world; the individual is thrown into the world with no direction and no clear course to follow, with no God or other objective Absolute to guide one’s actions or to guarantee one’s identity. Further, the physical world in which one finds oneself makes no effort to communicate with or to embrace the individual, thus further confirming and securing the individual’s separation from and isolation in the world. At the confluence of these absences and disjunctions stands the individual who recognizes fully the absurdity of existence: “a stranger to [one]self and to the world.”

Thus the absurd, which Camus describes as originating in “the confrontation of [the] irrational [world] and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart,” is best understood as the sensation which arises once the recognition of oneself as

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exiled—from the world, from a necessary identity, and from inherent meaning—has been fully attained. The absurd, which Camus contends is a fundamental condition of existence, is thus not originary; human existence comes to be seen as absurd only when the exile which characterizes existence (existential exile) is wholly recognized and fully accepted as such.

Nowhere is the primary position in exile more evident than in Camus’ descriptions of the manner in which a sense of the absurd arises in the human confrontation with nature. As was suggested throughout the preceding discussion, the questions and themes which would become the focus both of Camus’ philosophical and artistic writings often arose in his own personal and urgent confrontations with his own existence and the world around him. Camus’ first visit to Italy, in 1936, saved him from the alienation and despair that he had encountered in Prague while simultaneously emphasizing that nature as well, though without bitterness, would always spurn his desire to connect with it. Camus second visit to Italy, which occurred during the following year, only reiterated for him this realization:

Millions of eyes, I knew, had gazed at this landscape, and for me it was like the first smile of the sky. It took me out of myself in the deepest sense of the word. It assured me that but for my love and the wondrous cry of these stones, there was no meaning in anything. The world is beautiful, and outside it there is no salvation. The great truth that it patiently taught me is that the mind is nothing, nor even the heart. And that the stone warmed by the sun or the cypress tree shooting up against the suddenly clear sky mark the limits of the only universe in which ‘being right’ is meaningful: nature without men. And this world annihilates me. It carries me to the end. It denies me without anger.

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88 As Kurt Weinberg contends, the individual encounters with the absurd which Camus’ characters represent can only be fully understood with regard to their situation, if not origin, in exile: “Each one…is exiled in this universe of absurdity and revolt which with the death of God has lost its unity, and in which all communication appears to have become impossible: because vertically, it is cut off from nature, and horizontally, man is severed from man.” Weinberg, “The Theme of Exile,” 35.

89 This insight is presented by Camus in his essay “Death in the Soul”; for a discussion, see the section “Death in the Soul: The Encounter with the Absurd” above.

Here Camus grasps the beauty of the landscape *for the first time*, recognizing not only its superiority over what is human but also its complete independence from what is human; the beauty of the world wholly transcends, in fact “annihilates,” the individual. To further the connection between this sudden understanding of the world and the emergence of the realization of the absurd, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus notes the following:

> At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these tress at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. … The world evades us because it becomes itself again. That stage scenery masked by habit becomes again what it is. It withdraws at a distance from us. … [T]hat denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd.  

It was noted earlier in the present chapter that descriptions such as this emphasize the ‘strangeness’ of the world and the manner in which this unintelligibility gives way to a recognition of the absurd. It must be emphatically noted here that this strangeness and unintelligibility is, precisely, the experience of existential exile; it is the failure to realize a capacity for relation which renders the experience of not being-at-home in the world. Precisely because human existence is taken up in exile, such an existence must be described as absurd.

At the same time, if it can be concluded that the absurd arises within the position in exile, it must likewise be noted that, once recognized, the absurd only further emphasizes and exacerbates the human position in/as exile. As David Sprintzen contends, “the ‘absurd’ [is] an attitude that both engage[s] and separate[s] the individual from the world.”  

Camus notes that the human inclination is to seek clarity and understanding with respect to the world; connections must be established and maintained, and meaning must be unearthed and cultivated. The individual who realizes the absurdity of existence, however, knows that these connections and

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meanings do not inherently exist and that such clarity is an illusion. All that is left, the only certainty that the world will concede, is that of death. Meursault of The Stranger stands as Camus’ most complete illustration of an individual who acknowledges the absurd and thus knows the complete tale: he is an outsider in a world that has no feeling for him and makes no concessions for him, and he is ceaselessly moving towards a death which he can neither stall nor prevent. Thus the absurd, which arises from a recognition of one’s original position in exile, ultimately heightens and deepens the sensation of exile from which it sprang. Exile begets alienation and absurdity begets greater exile, the difference in the latter being that it is accompanied by a greater acknowledgment of the condition as a manifestation of the fundamental condition of human existence.

Yet as was suggested above, perhaps this recognition of, and resignation to, the absurdity of existence need not be the end of the tale. The absurdity of existence is for Camus not merely a characterization but also a challenge to live in spite of the condition, a “lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert.”93 The desert is thus not a terminal point but a stage on the way toward finite transcendence. What’s more, Camus suggests that this particular desert is a necessary stage; not only must one find a way to live and create in this desert, but one must first know this desert in order to be able to live and to create.

[W]hen we reach a certain stage of awareness we finally acknowledge something which each of us, according to our particular vocation, seeks not to understand. This clearly involves undertaking the survey of a certain desert. But this strange desert is accessible only to those who can live there in the full anguish of their thirst. Then, and only then, is it peopled with the living waters of happiness.94

If the original experience of exile breeds little more than a realization of the absurdity of

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existence, then perhaps the absurd, through its heightening of the experience of exile, better equips the individual to create a path toward transcendence.

The question which remains unanswered by Camus to this point is thus centered around what the appropriate response to the absurd may be. In the three fictional works discussed above, there does not seem to be a satisfactory answer given; Caligula clearly failed, whereas Mersault and Meursault only attained a modest victory and limited salvation, which in each case bore subtle hints of that which still had not been attained but perhaps could have been. There are, however, clear indications from Camus of how one ought not proceed. The two options that immediately present themselves as possible responses to the absurd, according to Camus, are hope or despair. Hope consists of the prospect of overcoming the absurd by finding some future absolute meaning or reward to life, which may either be of this life or beyond. In hope, one recognizes the absurd as a present condition of existence while maintaining that it may be overcome by something beyond that which one can immediately know and experience.

Despair, meanwhile, is the acknowledgment that a life without any inherent meaning or justification is too much to bear and is thus not worth continuing. The path through despair that Camus discusses leads inevitably to suicide. As Camus explains, suicide is the ultimate expression by the individual that this life is unendurable and is in fact not worth living. If there is no inherent meaning to existence, and if there is no escaping or overcoming death, one must find a way to justify one’s existence within these terms. In his essay “Between Yes and No,” Camus dramatically characterizes this hopelessness and despair:

How far will it go, this night in which I cease to belong to myself? There is a dangerous virtue in the word simplicity. And tonight I can understand a man wanting to die because nothing matters anymore when one sees through life completely.  

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But hope and despair, according to Camus, are both a wrong course for their failure to follow the logic of the absurd. He argues that neither option is a necessary result of the acceptance of the absurdity of existence. Appealing to hope destroys the absurd as the tragic reality of the absurd is cancelled out. Moreover, despair leading to action also destroys the absurd, as it is a method of escape from, rather than a method of confrontation with, the absurd. In addition, Camus claims that there is no necessary connection between the lack of essential meaning in life and the consequential decision to flee that life. This notion of “[believing] that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living” is therefore in error. Realizing the former, according to Camus, does not necessarily and inevitably lead to the latter.96 There must then be a way to elude hope and overcome despair, an appropriate way in which the lucid individual is to confront exile and the absurd.

When we are stripped down to a certain point, nothing leads anywhere anymore, hope and despair are equally groundless, and the whole of life can be summed up in an image… Since this hour is like a pause between yes and no, I leave hope or disgust with life for another time… What wells up in me is not the hope of better days but a serene and primitive indifference to everything and to myself. I need my lucidity.97

If is, after all, precisely this lucidity which is necessary to not only realize the absurd, but to direct one’s action in response to the absurd. Hope corrupts this lucidity, as perception of reality is clouded in favor of a preferable vision. Despair darkens lucidity as well, as life becomes too much to bear and masters the individual. If the absurd cannot be surmounted through either hope or despair and therefore remains as an essential condition of human existence, then the ultimate value of such an existence must be determined within the terms dictated by that absurdity.

The question of the value of such a life necessitates a return to the starting point of The

96 Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, 8

Myth of Sisyphus, where Camus’ poses the question of whether or not life, as it is now to be understood, is worth living. Camus questions the sentiment voiced by Leo Tolstoy in his A Confession, as quoted by Camus in his Notebooks: “If life is not infinite, it is quite simply absurd, it is not worth living, and we must rid ourselves of it as soon as possible by committing suicide.” While Tolstoy cites the finitude of life as definitive of its absurdity, Camus adds its lack of intelligibility and the impossibility of realizing an inherent understanding of or connection with the world (experienced as existential exile) as equally and essentially characteristic of that absurdity. Despite this realization, Camus does not allow such a life to condemn itself to death. What is called for in response to the absurd is action driven by lucidity. Camus quotes Tolstoy further: “The existence of death compels us either to give up life of our own free will, or to change our life in such a way as to give it a meaning which cannot be taken from it by death.” Tolstoy, for his part, changed his life through a renewal of his faith in God. While accepting that he could never attain any certainty regarding either God’s existence or God’s plan for him, Tolstoy realized that he could justify and maintain his faith in God simply by engaging in an earnest and unceasing quest for God: “‘Live in search of God and there will be no life without God!’ And more powerfully than ever before everything within and around me came to light, and the light has not deserted me since. And I was saved from suicide.” Camus similarly experienced the moment of crisis that results when faced with the absurdity of existence, yet against the option of acquiescence to despair or hope in an Absolute he posited an alternative course:

Once you have had the chance to love intensely, your life is spent in search of the

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99 Ibid., 203.

same light and the same ardor. To give up beauty and the sensual happiness that comes with it and devote one’s self exclusively to unhappiness requires a nobility I lack. But, after all, nothing is true that compels us to make it exclusive. Isolated beauty ends in grimaces, solitary justice in oppression. Anyone who seeks to serve the one to the exclusion of the other serves no one, not even himself, and in the end is doubly the servant of injustice. A day comes when, because we have been inflexible, nothing amazes us anymore, everything is known, and our life is spent in starting again. It is a time of exile, dry lives, dead souls. To come back to life, we need grace, a homeland, or to forget ourselves.”

For Camus, the saving “grace” which can equip one to not only accept but also to live and create within the absurd is home; to transcend the absurd, it is necessary to [re-]turn home. Camus thus does not follow Tolstoy’s path to God and a divine, eternal transcendence of the absurdity of existence, insisting instead that the absurd must be confronted wholly within the terms that the world permits: “Knowing whether or not one can live without appeal is all that interests me. I do not want to get out of my depth. This aspect of life being given me, can I adapt myself to it?” Yet it may rightfully be asked whether Camus’ conception of a homeland, though what that conception entails remains to be clarified, may not stand as an object of religious faith in the manner that God stands as the object of Tolstoy’s faith. In the next chapter, both questions suggested here will be addressed: the texts that constitute Camus’ cycle of revolt, as well as the writings that followed, will be discussed in detail to more fully explicate the appropriate response to the absurd and reveal the character of this ‘home’ which may stand as a possible venue for salvation; further, and to return to the conception with which the present study began, it will be determined whether and how Camus’ comprehensive treatment of existential exile and the absurd may be characterized as religious ‘faith.’

101 Camus, “Return to Tipasa,” *Summer*, in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 165; emphasis added.

In one of his earliest published works, Camus described the lucid encounter with the absurdity of existence as “a pause between yes and no,”\(^1\) emphasizing the priority of the middle position between the polar extremes of hopeful affirmation and despairing negation. As was discussed in detail in the previous chapter, while hope and despair present themselves as mutually-exclusive possible responses to the absurd, Camus contends that “hope and despair are equally groundless”\(^2\) and that these are not the only, and thus not the necessary, responses to the absurd; there are always alternatives that may be pursued in any ontological situation, particularly with regard to the absurd. Rather than commit wholly to one extreme or the other, Camus contends that a more appropriate path leads between the two toward “grace” and “a homeland,”\(^3\) and the preceding discussion of Camus’ engagement with exile and the absurd therefore culminated in the declaration that the way to reconcile with the absurd and with existential exile is to [re-]turn home. Still it remains unclear how and of what this ‘home’ is to be constituted, as does the manner in which this ‘home’ is to be reached.

For Camus, the decisive movement to respond to exile and the absurd must begin with the decision to revolt: the individual, faced with an existence which is defined by its absurdity, must rebel against that absurdity and resist appealing to consolations that do not exist. Once one has understood the nature of one’s existence as absurd and answered the challenge of persevering in

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\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Albert Camus, “Return to Tipasa,” Summer, in Lyrical and Critical Essays, 165.
the search for meaning in the face of the possible meaninglessness of existence, then one is able to create value in life, regardless of the circumstance. As Camus states in the introduction to the first American edition of his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism… [This essay is] a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert.”

Yet an individual recognition of and reckoning with the absurd in the individual act of revolt is, according to Camus, itself only a beginning point. In this sense, Camus’ ‘desert exile’ as starting point for the confrontation and engagement with human existence is akin to Jacques Derrida’s notion of *chora*, the ‘desert space’ which is “the condition for everything to take place, for everything to be inscribed…. It is irreducible to all the value to which we are accustomed—values of origin, anthropomorphism, and so on…. Chora receives everything or gives place to everything.” For Derrida, *chora* is the place of the separation, “the place of the one who…goes into exile in the desert, who withdraws from all inhabited, inscribed, and well-marked places, who solicits, invites, and suffers the disappearance of the [direct route].” Just as *chora* stands, for Derrida, as the appropriate space and situation from within which individual freedom is realized and identity determined, the exile in the desert of the absurd stands, for Camus, as the space and situation from which the profound separation of exile may begin to be transcended. The individual’s solipsistic confrontation with existence, though necessary to attain an understanding of that existence, must be carried forward to embrace the existence of

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7 Ibid., 51.
the rest of the world, as it is within this world and in relation to it that one truly exists. As Camus notes in his essay “The Minotaur,” “there are no more deserts. There are no more islands. Yet one still feels the need of them. To understand this world, one must sometimes turn from it; to serve men better, one must briefly hold them at a distance.”

Thus Camus’ personal examination of individual human existence, which arose through his own very personal confrontation with exile and the absurd, evolved into a consideration of humanity. The conditions which characterize the absurd as such are, after all, shared conditions of human existence; though the individual may rightfully regard oneself as an exile in the world, one is not thereby alone in that role. To complete the movement of revolt which Camus prescribes as the appropriate response to exile and the absurd, the individual act must somehow be superimposed upon humanity as a whole in the form of solidary rebellion.

This movement from concern for the individual to humanity as a whole is not, however, merely an exaggeration of any particular or general individual experience or anxiety. Following his examination of the individual in “the very midst of the desert,” Camus was forced by the specific conditions of his time to leave the desert and his concern for the individual for the sake of the preservation of the humanity to which the individual is inexorably connected. Just as the individual faces a silent and indifferent world and the exile and absurdity of existence within that world, Camus was forced to recognize similar absurdities perpetrated against humanity as a whole. Yet at its heart, the confrontation is the same: where the individual realizes through the absurd the lack of necessary meaning or value inherent in existence, the individual now attains a similar realization of the absence of a transcendent, metaphysical ethic which guides the world. Just as the individual is called upon to struggle against the absurd to create meaning and value for oneself, it is now up to the same individual to fight for justice for oneself and for humanity

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as well. Yet here again, the pursuit which begins in the movement of revolt is no longer a solitary struggle but one which is now characterized by solidarity. To complete the movement of revolt, which begins for Camus in the individual confrontation with the conditions of human existence, it is therefore necessary to expand the focus of one’s concern to engage all that is outside of the individual yet still within, and thus essential to, existence as a whole. Finally, in the completion of the movement of rebellion in the transcendence of the strictly individual engagement with existence, a final and decisive confrontation with the ontological situation emerges: the original condition of exile, engendered in the absence of relation and understanding which fostered the recognition of the absurd and the subsequent compulsion to revolt, necessitates the turning outward which leads ultimately toward a final transcendence of existential exile and an acceptance of the absurd in the [re-]turn home.

While the preceding chapter introduced Camus’ explication of the absurd as the beginning stage in a comprehensive confrontation with existential exile, the present chapter will complete the account by positing Camus’ conception of revolt as the culmination of that confrontation. Following the pattern of the previous chapter, the notion of revolt will be introduced first as a product of Camus’ own personal experience, followed by an examination of his philosophical and artistic attempts to present a complete picture of the necessary progression from solitary revolt to communal rebellion. The trajectory of revolt will then be discussed with respect to the original condition of existential exile, toward the revelation of relation as both the end goal and achievement of revolt as well as the construction of ‘home’ from within which existential exile may be transcended.

**Love of Life: The Compulsion to Revolt**

In September of 1937, Camus made his second visit to Italy. His first visit the year before
had immediately followed, and ultimately saved him from, the despair and alienation he experienced while alone in Prague.⁹ As Camus recounted in the essays comprised in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, the preceding travels of 1936 had emphasized for him, among other things, the unbridgeable gulf between himself and his world; this constituted for Camus the experience of exile and the absurd.

Yet as he confronted and engaged these experiences, Camus had begun to recognize that the absence of any intrinsic meaning or connection is not sufficient to diminish the value of living in such a world without appeal to something that is fundamentally absent. By the time of his second visit to Italy, Camus had begun to arrive at a more formal articulation of his personal response to the absurd, which allowed neither resignation nor hope: this was the conception of Camus’ notion of revolt. Writing of his 1937 visit to Italy, Camus describes his struggle against the opposing temptations toward the despair of absolute death and hope in an eternal absolute, as he personally experienced each among the monuments to the dead at Santissima Annunziata.

Children had invaded the cloister and were playing leapfrog over the tombstones that strove to perpetuate their virtues. Night was falling, and I had sat down on the ground, my back against a column. A priest smiled at me as he went by. In the church, an organ was playing softly, and the warm color of its pattern sometimes emerged behind the children’s shouts. Alone against the column, I was like someone seized by the throat, who shouts out his faith as if it were his last word. Everything in me protested against such a resignation. “You must,” said the inscriptions. But no, and my revolt was right. This joy that was moving forward, indifferent and absorbed like a pilgrim treading on the earth, was something that I had to follow step by step. And, as to the rest, I said no. I said no with all my strength. The tombstones were teaching me that it was pointless, that life is “col sol levante, col sol cadente.” But even today I cannot see what my revolt loses by being pointless, and I am well aware of what it gains.¹⁰

As an alternative to hope or despair, Camus proposes revolt as the manner in which one can create a meaningful existence in the face of the absurd, thus living lucidly and harmoniously in

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⁹ See Chapter 3 for a discussion of these experiences.

the world. Again it is lucidity, the awareness of the absurd maintained, which allows for meaning to be created. “At this moment the absurd, so obvious and yet so hard to win, returns to a man’s life and makes its home there…[The] path now emerges—daily life. It encounters the anonymous impersonal pronoun ‘one,’ but henceforth man enters in with his revolt and his lucidity.”

Revolt, according to Camus, against the absence of an inherent meaning and hope in existence is the means by which the individual can claim that very existence, make it one’s own, and live it in such a way that happiness is still possible; revolt allows for the affirmation and preservation of the absurd, in which the essence of human dignity lies. Through revolt, the individual asserts oneself above the conditions that threaten to engulf or to exile one permanently, removing the yolk bestowed by the absurd and finally cultivating one’s own meaning and creation. The absurd is not ignored, but rather maintained; it is this maintenance of the absurd, the acceptance of the absence of inherent meaning, followed by an insistence on thereby creating meaning, which allows for the coexistence of the two. By preserving the absurd while asserting one’s revolt, one earns the authority to create meaning. Death and the absurd still exist as such, but living, within these parameters, is justified:

The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in the consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance.

In recognizing the absence of an absolute source and arbiter of meaning, one likewise recognizes the absurd liberty within which human existence is undertaken. Through freedom, one is unconstrained, liberated from the need for an ‘absolute’ meaning or purpose to existence,

11 Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, 52.

12 Ibid., 55.
and left instead in a place where all meaning is possible. Yet this freedom is not absolute; as Camus notes, the recognition of the absurdity of existence is the recognition of severe limits to one’s freedom. Because the only certainty of human existence is its end in death, Camus asks: “What freedom can exist in the fullest sense without assurance of eternity?” However, the insistence that there is an underlying meaning to human existence, or the maintenance of a particular hope for meaning, presents its own constraints upon the individual’s existence; the removal of such hope thus liberates one to an “inner freedom.” The individual is no longer subjected to the constraints imposed by consideration of any possible absolute governing existence; though one is still fundamentally limited by the presence of death, one is more fully free to act within the limits imposed by death. What’s more, the acceptance of life within the terms of its absurdity is likewise a manifestation of a particular freedom of will.

The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.

Absolute meanings are no longer necessary; hope is dismissed, and despair is overcome. Acceptance defines the absurd realization: acceptance of the absurd, acceptance of death, and acceptance of the silent world in which one finds oneself. Above all, it is the lucidity of all of these circumstances, attained and maintained, which allows the individual to overcome the absurd: “Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was

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13 Ibid., 57.
14 Ibid., 58.
15 Ibid., 60.
an invitation to death—and I refuse suicide.”

To give depth to this preliminary account of revolt against the absurd, Camus offers a paradigmatic illustration of the absurd hero with the mythological figure of Sisyphus. Sisyphus defied the gods and death; he put death in chains, leaving the world in peace and security while imposing silence and emptiness upon the world of the dead. Following his own death, and at his behest, Sisyphus’ wife had cast his unburied body in the town square; so that he might punish her for the profound transgression of not properly burying his body, Sisyphus asked death to let him return to the world of the living. However, once he had rejoined the world, finding himself again able to enjoy the warmth of the sun and the beauty of life, Sisyphus resolved not to return to death. He eluded death in this manner for some time, ignoring the calls of the gods to return. This disregard and disobedience finally earned him the punishment and task for which he is known: for all eternity he is condemned to roll a boulder to the top of a mountain. Once he reaches the top, the boulder will roll back down to the foot of the mountain, and he must begin again; so his fate is to be for all eternity. Sisyphus is, therefore, the absurd hero on all counts: his love of this life, his refusal of death, his scorn of the gods, the impossibility of hope, and the punishment that ultimately defines him.

The true tragedy of his fate lies, according to Camus, in Sisyphus’ awareness of his condition. He knows that, once he reaches the top of the mountain, his rock will again plummet to the bottom. It is this very awareness that forever dismisses hope, as Sisyphus knows that success is not possible. Yet just as this lucidity defines the tragic nature of his fate, it also sets the stage for his victory. Before revolt is possible, before meaning can be created, the challenge

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16 Ibid., 64.
17 Ibid., 120.
18 Ibid., 121.
of the absurd must be taken up; Sisyphus’ lucidity with respect to his fate allows him to revolt.

“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.”¹⁹ Sisyphus knows there is no absolute or intrinsic meaning to his action, and he has no illusions or hope of ever truly completing his task. Yet in this knowledge, Sisyphus owns his fate.

As he descends the mountain, returns to his rock, and prepares to begin again, Sisyphus knows his fate and his punishment, but he also knows his victory. It is his lucidity, his acceptance of a life under the conditions of absurdity, which allows him to create his own meaning and thereby justify his toil. The only thing outside of Sisyphus’ control is his death; between the present moment and that moment in the future when his fate is consummated, everything else is in his own hands. This is enough to motivate Sisyphus to live.

There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning to his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory’s eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling.²⁰

All that he needs, Sisyphus finds in himself. Revolt, the spirit of defiance, is enough to return him to his task. Death is inevitable and beyond his control, but it has not yet arrived. Until then, life must be lived, and revolt must be sustained. The absence of God or a world that reaches out to him does nothing to deter Sisyphus; that the world is, and that he is a part of it, is enough. His struggle within that world and that life asserts his existence, and in that, Sisyphus creates his

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¹⁹ Ibid., 121.

²⁰ Ibid., 123.
own justification. Through all of this, Sisyphus achieves happiness.

Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks… The universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.  

In the movement of revolt exemplified by Sisyphus, Camus offers the means by which the absurdity of individual human existence may be accepted, happiness may be created, and living may be justified. Through insight and lucidity, the individual is thus able to conquer the silent, indifferent world in all its absurdity and make life one’s own. This victory, won for the individual through revolt, appears to be an appropriate and complete response to exile and the absurd: the individual asserts the value of human existence in accord with the conditions within which that existence is begun and lived. However, it is reasonable to ask whether such revolt and all that it can potentially accomplish for the individual are enough; despite his victory and his happiness, Sisyphus is after all still an exile. This demonstration of the individual in revolt is, for Camus, only a first step.

Late in the year 1942, under the heading “Development of the absurd,” Camus confided the following in his notebook: “1) If the basic concern is the need for unity; 2) if the world (or God) cannot suffice. It is up to man to forge a unity for himself, either by turning away from the world, or within the world.”  

There is here a sense of uncertainty regarding the direction one’s response ought to take, and perhaps Sisyphus may be best understood as an example of the former: one who undertakes to forge a unity within oneself. However, despite the uncertainty that Camus seems to voice here, whichever direction one takes (that is, toward or away from the world), the

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21 Ibid., 123.

attempt by the individual to forge a unity for oneself is ultimately an act of revolt. Yet this is not enough—to fully realize the potential of revolt, an additional step must be taken. This is the step outside of oneself and toward the world. Roughly two months after the notation cited above, and in the same notebook, Camus seems to suggest this need to turn toward others and the world:

The thing that lights up the world and makes it bearable is the customary feeling we have of our connections with it—and more particularly of what links us to human beings. Relations with other people always help us to carry on because they always suppose developments, a future—and also because we live as if our only purpose were to have relations with human beings. But the days when we become aware that this is not our only purpose, when we realize that our will alone keeps those human beings attached to us (stop writing or speaking, isolate yourself, and you will see them melt around you), that in reality most of them have their backs turned (not through malice, but through indifference) and that the remainder always have the possibility of becoming interested in something else, when we imagine in this way the element of contingency, of play of circumstances, that enters into what is called a love or a friendship, then the world returns to its night and we to that great cold whence human affection drew us for a moment.23

With this articulation, Camus seems to have recognized that the silence and indifference with which the natural world greets the individual’s longing for understanding and connection are characteristic of the world of humanity as well; in each case, there is nothing beyond the contingent, nothing essential, which unites the individual with the world or with others. At the same time, and despite this realization, Camus likewise seems to contend that only the establishment of some connection “lights up the world” and makes living within that world meaningful. This fundamental need for connection and the seeming impossibility of such is, of course, the experience of exile which fostered Camus’ characterization of the absurd. However, it is equally apparent here that, beginning with the individual act of revolt against the absurdity of existence, there is perhaps a way, through a similar act of revolt, to re-embrace the world and attain some measure of reconciliation and thus a transcendence of existential exile. Yet for this to occur, what began as an individual act must become a collective, communal struggle; this is

23 Ibid., 57; emphasis added.
the consummation of Camus’ notion of revolt.

**Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Philosophical Explication**

Individual human existence is undertaken in exile and defined by its absurdity; this is Camus’ starting point. Against this one can hope to find some intrinsic and absolute meaning which could justify everything, one can despair the absence of such and give in to the inevitability of death, or one can follow the middle path through revolt toward truly living and creating, happily. This third choice is that which Camus both lived and articulated as the better choice for the individual and as the only appropriate means by which the absurd may be accepted and exile transcended. Yet individual revolt does not wholly address the reality of existence; it is not enough to engage only the implications for a single solitary individual. Instead, one must engage the reality of exile and absurdity both for oneself as well as for existence as a whole, “first with courage and lucidity, then with solidarity.”  

An individual’s insistence on clarity and understanding in a world in which such clarity does not exist and where such understanding is not possible leads one to a realization of the absurd. The absurd individual, with all the lucidity that one has attained, revolts against this condition and against death. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus extols this, the necessary response to the absurd:

> One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own absurdity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second. … Revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.  

With his 1951 essay *The Rebel*, Camus further clarifies the notion of revolt introduced in *The

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Revolt embodies a stubborn resolve in spite of the absurd; it is the individual’s insistence on overcoming the absurd injustice which characterizes existence, and an urgent demand that “what had up to now been built upon shifting sands should henceforth be founded on rock.” At the same time, revolt is also a response to the inescapable fate which the individual finds in approaching death. The protest raised by the individual in revolt is ultimately a protest against death, the “universal death penalty” which is a necessary condition of existence. Yet it is not merely death itself against which the individual rebels, but the impact that such death imposes upon life, as death seemingly robs life of any essential meaning. The rebel, then, is not simply fighting for life but also for the possibility of meaning for that life:

The rebel does not ask for life, but for reasons for living. He rejects the consequences implied by death. If nothing lasts, then nothing is justified; everything that dies is deprived of meaning. To fight against death amounts to claiming that life has a meaning.

This notion, expressed in *The Rebel*, is not a new element of Camus’ philosophy; as discussed above, Sisyphus has already demonstrated that an existence without inherent meaning and doomed to death can be reclaimed through a creation of meaning and a revolt against death.

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27 Ibid., 10.

28 Ibid., 100.

29 Ibid., 101.
Where *The Myth of Sisyphus* demonstrated the path of the individual in search of meaning and justification, *The Rebel* shows the implications that such a path can ultimately hold for both the individual and the community in which and for which such an individual exists and rebels. While *The Myth of Sisyphus* presents life, in all its absurdity, as worth living, *The Rebel* looks at whether life, in spite of its absurdity, is worth preserving for others as well as for oneself. Thus Sir Herbert Read concludes in his foreword to Anthony Bower’s translation of Camus’ essay, “if we decide to live, it must be because we have decided that our personal existence has some positive value; if we decide to rebel, it must be because we have decided that a human society has some positive value.”

In contrast to his consideration of suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus investigates the possibility of justification for murder in *The Rebel*. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus concluded that existence, in all of its absurdity, in the midst of a universe defined by silence and indifference, must be preserved against the consensual surrender of that existence. The value of life, according to Camus, is to be found in the living of that life and in the meaning such living creates. Thus, “the final conclusion of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe.” Camus then builds upon his earlier writing by comparing this view of life with respect to suicide to a similar view of life with respect to murder:

From the moment that life is recognized as good, it becomes good for all men. … In terms of this encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe, murder and suicide are one and the same thing, and must be accepted or rejected together.

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30 Ibid., vii.
31 Ibid., 6.
32 Ibid.
In essence, revolt against suicide and revolt against murder are the same revolt: both engagements advocate the importance of life, despite its inherent absurdity. While revolt against suicide may assert the quality of individual existence, revolt against murder asserts that such a redeeming ‘quality’ may be found in existence in general, for all of humanity. In this expansion of Camus’ thought, he moves from strict consideration of the plight of the individual to that of the community in which one exists; where Camus’ original consideration of existence with respect to suicide necessarily focused solely on the individual, consideration of murder must necessarily recognize and account for the existence of the ‘other.’

In the section of The Rebel entitled “Metaphysical Rebellion,” Camus looks at the conditions that allow for the movement of revolt in the individual. At all times, metaphysical revolt consists of a value judgment made by the individual; one is aware of one’s condition and chooses to either accept it and all its implications or rebel against the specific condition and all that it entails as a condition for humanity. Such an act of rebellion is not only a revolt against that circumstance, but it consists also of an acute awareness of that rebellion and the state of affairs against which it is directed. “Awareness, no matter how confused it may be, develops from every act of rebellion…. The very moment the slave refuses to obey the humiliating order of his master, he simultaneously rejects the condition of slavery.” Through revolt for individual reasons, the individual begins to transcend one’s individuality and establish solidarity with others who share the condition; the exile and absurdity of individual existence is recognized and engaged as no longer a unique condition, exclusive to the individual. This act of rebellion forces the individual to recognize values that surpass one’s individual state of being and apply to others equally; in so doing, the individual begins to identify with those amongst

33 Ibid., 23.
34 Ibid., 14.
whom existence is undertaken. As Camus contends, “The affirmation implicit in every act of rebellion is extended to something that transcends the individual in so far as it withdraws him from his supposed solitude and provides him with a reason to act.” The rebel, then, acts not only on behalf of oneself but also on behalf of those who share the condition of exile and absurdity. “When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical.”

The experience of the absurd, as expressed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, is clearly an individual anxiety; the suffering of an individual confronting the absurdity of individual existence is that of one grappling with one’s own individual fate in exile. Yet once one rebels against this individual fate, one recognizes the common struggle into which one has entered with all of humanity. Thus, the individual recognizes in others one’s own struggles, and the burdens of such a solitary, absurd existence are seen to be shared with and shouldered by all of humanity:

The first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men, and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe.

If Sisyphus represents the lucid individual, aware of his existence and justified by his revolt, then humanity as such must be seen as a community of individuals in the image of Sisyphus. Each individual suffers one’s own rock, the burden of lucidly living out an absurd existence. What had been a defining condition of an individual experience of absurdity is finally seen to be

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 16.
37 Ibid., 17.
38 Ibid., 22.
the condition of existence for all individuals, allowing for solidarity to be created both by the conditions in which existence is undertaken and by the revolt that is demanded by such an existence. Each individual’s rock bears a resemblance to that borne by the others amongst whom one exists, thus establishing a connection between those individuals.\(^{39}\)

As a result of the realization of this shared struggle of existence, revolt against the absurd becomes a solidary endeavor. What’s more, this act of rebellion, in conjunction with the sudden recognition of solidarity with the other that it sparks, functions as an initial certainty in the same manner as Descartes’ *Cogito*. When Camus asserts in *The Rebel* “I rebel—therefore we exist,”\(^{40}\) he simultaneously recognizes the distinctly human capacity to rebel as well as the solidarity it necessarily entails; further, the individual act of revolt provides a firm foundation in **certainty** upon which all subsequent action and understanding can be grounded. Revolt by an individual is not simply a commentary by that individual on the conditions of individual existence. Rather, true revolt is rebellion against that state of existence for what it is; the individual not only revolts for purely individual purposes but also for the sake of humanity and its being. “It is for the sake of everyone in the world that the slave asserts himself when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something in him which does not belong to him alone, but

\(^{39}\) In light of this connection, then, the climax of Camus’ story “The Growing Stone” (from the collection of stories entitled *Exile and the Kingdom*) must be read as a perfect example of the solidarity of facing such an existence and the sharing of such a burden. The cook’s insistence on carrying a hundred-pound stone to fulfill a promise to Jesus is analogous to Sisyphus’ incessant rolling of his stone to satisfy the gods. In each case, the individual shoulders a seemingly unbearable burden in this world to fulfill a demand made by the world outside of man. Sisyphus earns victory over the gods by refusing to succumb to hope or despair, choosing instead to create his own meaning and happiness within his condemned existence. While *The Myth of Sisyphus* presents an example of victory over the absurdity of existence won solely and solitarily by the individual (Sisyphus) himself, “The Growing Stone” presents a similar victory won through solidarity. Much more will be said regarding this connection, and “The Growing Stone” as a whole, in the next section.

\(^{40}\) Camus, *The Rebel*, 22.
which is common ground where all men have a natural community.” Thus revolt implies a need by humanity which may only be appeased by rebelling against the conditions in which humanity finds itself.

The realization of the absurd, an insight first made within a sense of isolation and alienation constituted in exile, has thus taken the individual through the movement of revolt to a sense of unity with those around the individual. One can now see the struggle against exile and the absurd as a struggle common to all, thus opening the door to the realization of other commonalities among the individual and the balance of humanity. Camus concludes that it is not merely for oneself that one rebels, but rather for the community that shares a common plight:

The most pure form of the movement of rebellion is thus crowned with the heart-rending cry of Karamazov: if all are not saved, what good is the salvation of one only? … Its merit lies in making no calculations, distributing everything it possesses to life and to living man.\(^{42}\)

The same spirit of revolt that gave man the strength to rebel against the silent and indifferent world which guaranteed nothing but death now allows the individual to similarly rebel against injustices against humanity with the same urgency and zeal. As one realizes the value of individual existence, as created by the individual, one subsequently realizes the value of the existence of the other in their shared experience of humanity; Camus can therefore second Ivan Karamazov’s cry for universal justice for all of humanity, “not somewhere and sometime in infinity, but here and now, on earth, so that I see it myself.”\(^{43}\)

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\(^{41}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 304.

\(^{43}\) Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Vokolhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1991), 244. Its must be noted here that Ivan Karamazov’s manner of revolt is in sharp contrast to that which Camus proposes; whereas Camus rejects suicide as an appropriate response, Ivan contends the opposite through his intention to give back his “entrance ticket” through the willful termination of his own life.
As with the recognition of the absurd by the individual, Camus allows for no appeal to any power outside that of the human. Rebellion implicitly expresses a desire to make the human condition a matter to be settled solely with human answers. The question posed within such rebellion is, essentially, whether or not humanity can establish a rule of conduct that exists entirely independent of religion and its absolute values. The act of revolt, for Camus, is to supplant the act of grace; as it was with Sisyphus, the fate of the human is a matter to be settled exclusively by the human. “When the throne of God is overturned, the rebel realizes that it is now his own responsibility to create the justice, order, and unity that he sought in vain within his own condition, and in this way to justify the fall of God.” Just as the lucid individual rejects any appeal to God in order to create value and meaning for oneself, so too does the rebel similarly reject God in order to create value and meaning for the community:

The rebel thus rejects divinity in order to share in the struggles and destiny of all men. We shall choose Ithaca, the faithful land, frugal and audacious thought, lucid action, and the generosity of the man who understands. In the light, the earth remains our first and last love. Our brothers are breathing under the same sky as we; justice is a living thing.

Where the lucid individual had asserted value in defiance of the indifference of the world, such an individual now asserts similar value in defiance of the evil and injustice of the world, as such evil is perpetrated against humanity. Against the silence of the absurd world, the lucid individual chose oneself as the source of all value and meaning, living and creating in spite of that silence. Now, positioned against the evil and injustice committed against others who share one’s condition, the individual rebels to assert the value of one’s own existence as well as that of those with whom one identifies: the community of all humanity. The revolt of the individual


46 Ibid., 306.
in the face of the absurd has thus prepared that same individual, moved by a sense of solidarity with humanity, to rebel against any indignity and injustice against humanity.

**Strangers and Exiles II: Stories of Revolt**

Through *The Stranger* and *Caligula*, Camus not only presented an individual recognition of the absurd, but he concluded each work with a compelling example of the individual in revolt against the absurdity which defined existence and the death which was imminent for each individual. Meursault of *The Stranger*, for example, is a character in the same vein as Sisyphus: both love the earth and the life which they had here on this earth; both wanted to extend their lives on this earth as long as possible, while realizing that hope is of little use in this absurd world. And just as Sisyphus is able to embrace his fate and love his life in spite of his ‘torure,’ so too is Meursault able to love his life in spite of his condemnation to death. Both achieve this sort of ‘overcoming’ through revolt at the moment of lucid understanding of their situation. For Sisyphus, it is his moment of descent from the mountain: as he alights from the mountaintop to once again take his place in the depths behind his rock, he sees the whole hopeless, absurd situation for what it is, and he embraces it. Similarly, Meursault has his own moment of lucidity after his confrontation with the priest, through which Meursault arrives at a greater insight into the nature of his situation, and his existence as a whole, realizing his entire life has been little more than a ceaseless movement toward an inevitable death which renders all else meaningless. With this insight, Meursault unifies his character as it is portrayed throughout the novel; from the beginning, Meursault has been directed and defined by his revolt in the guise of indifference. He knew what made a difference and what did not, and he acted consistently with respect to that. More significantly, this dramatic realization portrays Meursault in revolt against his own death, despite the fact that it is inescapable and so near at hand. Just as Sisyphus refuses
to let his ‘torture’ own him, so too does Meursault refuse to allow his imminent death to rule him or send him into despair. Meursault revolts against it and does not allow its inevitability to ruin the happiness he is now so easily able to assign to his life. Through this revolt, Meursault conquers not only despair but also hope, and he is left only with the happiness which he has always implicitly felt toward his own life.

With Meursault, Camus illustrates a consistent awareness of and reaction to the absurd; rather than merely a terminal point in hope or despair, the absurd instead presents the opportunity to transcend the either/or of hope and despair in the movement of revolt. Yet as was suggested in the previous chapter, none of Camus’ ‘heroes’ of the absurd fully transcend the exile and accept the absurdity of their respective existence. In the end, each paradigm of individual revolt falls short precisely because each is concerned exclusively with an individual predicament; solitary revolt, while a productive and necessary first step in an engagement with exile and the absurd, does not entail the aspect of relation that is necessary for a final transcendence of existential exile. The completion of the trajectory of revolt, and the necessary culmination in relation, finally begins to fully materialize with The Plague. In The Plague, Camus illustrates the movement toward solidarity with one’s community, an expansion of the aims of rebellion as articulated in The Rebel. Camus himself noted this evolution in a letter to Roland Barthes written in January of 1955:

compared to The Stranger, The Plague does, beyond any possible discussion, represent the transition from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from The Stranger to The Plague, it is in the direction of solidarity and participation.47

The Plague tells the story of the inhabitants of Oran, an Algerian city on the Mediterranean coast, and the time they spend besieged by plague. The town is completely closed off, isolated

47 Camus, Lyrical and Critical Essays, 339.
from the rest of the world, and turned in on itself. The inhabitants of the town are thus left alone to face the plague, with only themselves to appeal to for help, while a seemingly unconquerable death force proliferates in their midst. It is against this backdrop that Camus chooses to exemplify his notion of communal rebellion. But more than that, *The Plague* also demonstrates the transition that Camus makes from an individual realization of exile and the absurd to a collective realization of evil and injustice, and the subsequent rebellion which, according to Camus, ought to ensue. To do this, he begins by introducing the plague conditions in terms that recall his examination of the absurd; the existence of plague is encountered and responded to in much the same way that an individual might respond to a glimpse of the absurdity of existence.

Before the extraordinary events of the novel begin, Oran is presented as a simple and banal place, “treeless, glamourless, soulless,” defined only by the habits of day-to-day life; that is, the life of doing business. Oran is given as representative of existence before one’s eyes are opened and lucidity is attained: though “it is difficult to die here,” all will die, many very soon. The residents of Oran do not understand existence and all that it means for them; they seem to recognize their condition as abandoned in their world, while failing to make any significant connection between themselves and their “soulless” Oran:

> Each of us had to be content to live only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky. This sense of having been abandoned, which might in time have given characters a finer temper, began, however, by sapping them to the point of futility.49

Camus proclaimed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that “it happens that the stage sets collapse,” and one is suddenly awakened from habit to confront the world as it really is, in all of its absurdity. For the residents of Oran, the rubble of their particular stage set was littered with the


49 Ibid., 68.
bodies of dead rats. As rats began to die in ridiculous numbers, and as the residents themselves began to experience the first symptoms of an unfamiliar and unexplained illness, they suddenly felt themselves naked and helpless in their newfound understanding of the true nature of their existence, in all of its absurdity. As voices began to rise, as rumor grew, and as human corpses began to rival in number those of the rats, ‘plague’ suddenly outstripped itself as a concept and began to come into its own as a true state of being:

Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always, plagues and wars take people equally by surprise.50

The residents of Oran tried to maintain their simplicity and their blindness, insisting that they were free from plague and free from death:

[They] thought that everything was still possible for them; which presupposed that pestilences were impossible. How should they have given thought to anything like plague, which rules out any future, cancels journeys, and silences the exchange of views? They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences.51

Yet freedom for the residents of Oran was only an illusion, as perhaps it always had been; death had always been present in their lives, waiting for the moment when it would open the eyes of the townspeople in time for them to watch it take hold of their lives. It was not until plague struck, however, that they began to realize their proximity to that death. And it was not until the gates to Oran were shut, and the residents became exiles in their own city, that they finally realized that they were not free but were instead condemned to death. Just as the individual’s understanding of the absurdity of existence culminates with the realization that only death is guaranteed, so too did Oran’s confrontation with existence in a state of plague attain a similar

50 Ibid., 34.
51 Ibid., 35.
realization. Once the residents of Oran understood their unequivocal death sentence, they followed the expected course through hope and despair before finally finding the strength to rebel.

As soon as the town had been sealed, and any further exiting or entering the town completely prohibited, the trauma posed by this forced alienation immediately presented itself. Those who remained in the town thought immediately of their friends, family members, and loved ones who were outside of the town, suddenly recognizing that they would now be kept apart for as long as the plague endured. In many cases, such individuals had planned only to be apart for a period of a few days; but plague strikes one unaware, and separation and exile imposed itself without warning. These individuals held to hope for a time, as they tried to imagine ways to win a return to the town for their missing relations, or secure a means of escape for themselves. As a personification of this pain of separation, and the subsequent hope to overcome this exile, Camus presents Rambert, a Parisian reporter who had just arrived at Oran to report on the condition of the Arabs in and around the town. Once plague has set in and the town had been locked, Rambert’s only desire is to return to Paris to be with his young wife. For Rambert, all that matters is the love that exists between him and his wife, and without that love his existence is meaningless. His primary goal becomes finding a way out, to return to Paris to his love and to his happiness. For many others of the townsfolk who experienced the pain of such exile, hope of reuniting with their lost relations begins to dim and fade as the plague wears on. Most of the residents abandon hope, refusing to allow themselves to look forward with longing. (Rambert, for his part, follows a more exceptional path, as Camus shows later in the novel.) The people of Oran began to see that the plague was becoming entrenched not only in their town but also in their lives, and they were doomed to live as exiles with that plague, at least for the foreseeable future:
And then we realized that the separation was destined to continue, we had no choice but to come to terms with the days ahead. In short, we returned to our prison-house, we had nothing left us but the past, and even if some were tempted to live in the future, they had speedily to abandon the idea...once they felt the wounds that the imagination inflicts on those who yield themselves to it.  

As plague continues on its course and as the full implications of the plague condition become more clear and real to the citizens of Oran, hope becomes too painful and thus they gradually become resigned to their exile and to their death sentence. Yet this resignation ought not be confused with despair, and in fact, it is in this resignation that some among the townspeople begin to find the strength to endure. By focusing only on day-to-day existence, they refuse hope and maintain a course toward a more attainable existence—that of survival:

Therefore they forced themselves never to think about the problematic day of escape, to cease looking into the future, and always to keep, so to speak, their eyes fixed on the ground at their feet.... Thus in the middle course between these heights and depths, they drifted through life rather than lived..., like wandering shadows that could have acquired substance only by consenting to root themselves in the solid earth of their distress.  

The refusal of hope and insistence on survival thus becomes the first movement of rebellion for the people of Oran. Such an abandonment of hope wins back for them the present moment, though freedom and the future remain casualties of the plague. Once the people of Oran are able to find a way to endure, to live from one day to the next, it likewise becomes possible for them to overcome their resignation and to undertake an even greater movement of rebellion, whereby they find the strength to fight against the menace that the plague has brought upon them. This spirit of revolt is best personified by Dr. Bernard Rieux, who despite the overwhelming odds against surviving such an ordeal, continues defiantly to do all that he can to ease the suffering of those around him and to save as many citizens as he can from death.

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52 Ibid., 65.

53 Ibid., 66.
Rieux is among the first to realize what is at work in the town while the plague is still in its early stages. Despite his understanding and anticipation of the horrors to come, Rieux does not despair; he is a man who is prepared for such ordeals. Rieux, in his very nature, is both a healer and a rebel. Sickness and death are, for Rieux, a condition of existence. Though he recognizes this necessary truth, he does not accept it; as a healer, he wants to ease suffering, and as a rebel, he rejects this condition of existence:

If he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him. But no one in the world believed in a God of that sort… and this was proved by the fact that no one ever threw himself on Providence completely. Anyhow, in this respect, Rieux believed himself to be on the right road—in fighting against creation as he found it. 54

Rieux sees such suffering and death as an injustice perpetrated against humanity and resolves to set himself in opposition to that injustice. This is Rieux’s revolt, his means of restoring meaning and value to life. At the same time, he maintains no illusions with respect to his revolt; he understands the Sisyphean task with which he has aligned himself, embracing it while at the same time realizing that he will never fully win. Rieux is thus akin to Sisyphus, left alone to push his rock, yet aware of his fate and his endless struggle:

“Since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn’t it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence.”

Tarrou nodded.

“Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that’s all.”

Rieux’s face darkened.

“Yes, I know that. But it’s no reason for giving up the struggle.” 55

Just as Sisyphus revolts against the absurdity of his individual existence, Rieux rebels against the injustice done to humanity within this existence. It is here that Rieux departs from the solitary revolt of Sisyphus and embarks on the communal rebellion which transcends the

54 Ibid., 116.

55 Ibid., 117–118.
individual and holds the potential to free one from exile.

As Camus shows and as Rieux has discovered, the evil of the plight confronting the individuals in Oran is a shared plight, as all of Oran faces the same struggle: “A feeling normally as individual as the ache of separation from those one loves suddenly became a feeling in which all shared alike and…the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lay ahead.”56 Just as each individual begins to feel the same threat of death imposed by the plague, there begins to surface a similar, shared sense of exile and loss of freedom. Despite vain attempts by many to assert or preserve their freedom, it becomes apparent that such freedom has long since succumbed to the plague. As a result of this loss of freedom and its replacement by the plague as the true state of existence in Oran, all, no longer free, entered into a shared fate with the rest of the town.

No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotions was the sense of exile and of deprivation, with all the crosscurrents of revolt and fear set up by these.57

Whereas the initial reactions of the townsfolk to the plague and subsequent exile concerned only their own, individual plight, they are now beginning to recognize the commonalities and potential for solidarity that this shared struggle affords them. Strengthened by this newfound connection with their fellow citizens and a new lucidity into the condition in which they have found themselves, and following the example of revolt set by Dr. Rieux, the people of Oran finally discover the courage to “root themselves in the solid earth of their distress” and to rebel.

Rieux begins by leading the effort of the doctors of the town to find the best ways to treat those suffering from the plague, while also attempting to devise a means to fight the plague

56 Ibid., 61.

57 Ibid., 151.
itself. A myriad of health and sanitation standards are set for the town in hopes of limiting the spread of the disease. While many in the town participate as a community in rebellion, several key figures personally help Rieux in his efforts against the plague. Chief among these is Tarrou, struggling to become a saint in the absence of God, who rebels out of his loathing of “men’s being condemned to death”\(^\text{58}\) as well as to further his own quest for inner peace. Like Rieux, the plague represents for Tarrou an injustice against the community. Joseph Grand, a middle-aged civil servant with the aspirations of an artist, engages himself with the humble yet dignified task of recording every statistic relevant to plague. Even Rambert, whose only thought had been to escape Oran and its terror in order to return to his home and his love, begins to feel called to rebel as a part of the community in which he is now exiled. Rambert had justified his intention to leave Oran by insisting to Rieux “I don’t belong here.” “Unfortunately,” Rieux countered, “from now on you’ll belong here, like everybody else.”\(^\text{59}\) Thus Rieux foresaw the solidarity that could arise in a community condemned together, even for those who did not readily see themselves as part of that community. The solidarity achieved by the community under siege was not about proximity or a shared past; rather, this collection of individuals was brought together by a shared struggle in the present moment. Rambert found himself in the midst of it as much as anyone else, and he too finally realized his place not only within that calamity but within the community as well. When he had finally won an opportunity for escape, after months of tireless effort and seemingly futile hope, Rambert allows the opportunity to pass, opting instead to stay and continue in the struggle with the others.

Together with those who joined him in his revolt, Rieux organizes groups to create and preserve measures intended to slow the progress of the plague. These groups set an example for

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 114.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 79.
the rest of the community, not necessarily by the success of their efforts but by their capacity to rebel. Following the lead set by Rieux and his men, others in the community likewise found the strength to rebel in kind:

These groups enabled the townsfolk to come to grips with the disease and convinced them that, now that plague was among us, it was up to them to do whatever could be done to fight it. Since plague became in this way some men’s duty, it revealed itself as what it really was; that is, the concern of all.  

Thus the realization of this shared struggle against the plague creates a sense of solidarity, which in turn gives strength to a communal rebellion. Many within the town begin to understand that to refuse to fight would not only imply acceptance of plague conditions but would ultimately advance and enhance the suffering such conditions entail.

After a year of death and exile, the plague ran its course and exhausted itself; those who remained alive in Oran seemingly emerged victorious over the disease. While this may have been true for their particular circumstance at that particular time, it is only a small part of the greater picture of existence for these survivors. Rieux, whose lucidity allowed him to see the situation for what it was from the outset, and whose resolve also allowed him to revolt against the seemingly hopeless situation, realizes that Oran’s victory over the plague is only temporary and that the success of their revolt had only suspended the sentence of exile and death that still hangs over the town. Though they have managed to survive this particular ordeal, the necessary state of existence, with all of its evil and injustice, has not changed. There will always be pain, suffering, and death, just as Sisyphus’ rock will always roll to the bottom of the mountain. As the citizens of Oran celebrate the victory, only Rieux remains pensive and reserved, for he knows that “such joy is always imperiled…and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightenment of men, [the plague] would raise up its rats and sent them forth to die in

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60 Ibid., 121.
Thus Rieux is prepared to return to his rock, further emphasizing that he has (and will continue to do so) rebelled against the injustices done to the community of humanity with full lucidity of the fact that such a revolt will never fully vanquish those injustices. Sisyphus continues to roll his rock and find happiness, while Rieux continues to rebel for the sake of the humanity with whom he identifies.

The narrative explication of revolt as depicted in *The Plague* is representative of Camus’ notions of revolt as spelled out in *The Rebel*, as both works present rebellion for the sake of humanity. In *The Rebel*, Camus claims “it is for the sake of everyone in the world that [one]…comes to a conclusion that a command has infringed on something in him which does not belong to him alone, but which is common ground where all men have a natural community.”\(^62\) Where Sisyphus and Meursault (of *The Stranger*) may be seen to be solipsistic rebels, Rieux and his group rebelled for their community; they were motivated not just by a refusal to individually give in to absurdity, exile, and death but also by their capacity to identify with, and ultimately struggle alongside and for, their fellow citizens. They could not accept the very existence of such a plague, the onset of which awakened not only their desire to survive but also their greater desire to revolt for something beyond themselves and of which they themselves are a part. As Rieux proclaimed, “What’s true of all evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves. All the same, when you see the misery it brings, you’d need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind, to give in tacitly to the plague.”\(^63\) Even when all efforts seemed to be fruitless and absurd, not to rebel would have been to accept meekly this horrible transgression. The refusal to accept such a condition, both by the

\(^61\) Ibid., 278.

\(^62\) Camus, *The Rebel*, 16.

\(^63\) Camus, *The Plague*, 115.
individual and by the community, is the essence of Camus’ notion of revolt. As he contends in *The Rebel*, revolt is the reaction not only to a specific circumstance but also to a condition that poses a threat to the community of all humanity. Rieux and his men faced the absurdity of existence, realizing fully the very real and seemingly inescapable potentiality of their impending death. It was not merely their own death that they were forced to confront, however, but also the death of all those around them in their community. Rieux and his group did not allow despair, which told them that their actions were futile, to fetter their efforts, nor were they disillusioned by hope; as their efforts increased, the terrors of the raging plague grew exponentially. They maintained their revolt because logically they had no other alternative.

The movement of revolt differentiates itself from hope by its particular focus with respect to time; specifically, revolt refuses to give up on the present for the sake of a better future which would justify the suffering of the present. Revolt must be a response to the present and directed at the present, as nothing is guaranteed beyond the present moment. Camus says in *The Rebel* that “[rebellion’s] merit lies in…distributing everything it possesses to life and to living men…. Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present.”

Such is the way that Rieux and his men attacked the injustice imposed upon them, with concern only for the present. “Without memories, without hope, they lived for the moment only. Indeed, the here and now meant everything to them…. Nothing was left us but a series of present moments.” Rieux and his men were among the privileged few who achieved the lucidity necessary to understand the situation, and that lucidity led them not into despair nor into hope but into the only alternative which affirmed the struggle for life and for their community:

[T]he essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from

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64 Camus, *The Rebel*, 304.

65 Camus, *The Plague*, 165.
dying and being doomed to unending separation. And to this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical.\textsuperscript{66}

This essential response, in that it was “nothing admirable” and “merely logical,” also illuminates the intention of Camus’ rebels. This is the manner in which their actions are solidified as rebellious acts of conscience for the mutual, shared benefit of humanity. There is no mistaking the view embodied by Rieux and his men with respect to themselves and their actions; in their own minds, they were not heroes. What separated them from others was merely their understanding and their lucidity; it was they who realized that they were each, as individuals, confronting their own death sentence and forced exile. At the same time, while seeing this struggle as their own individual calamity, they also realized that all within their community shared in this plight. They were thus able to forge a connection with their fellow citizens through this shared struggle, a connection which could not be weakened by siege or by pestilence; the attack against them as individuals became for them an attack against humanity. Once this realization was made, Rieux and the others had little choice but to rebel. They were not madmen or cowards, nor were they blind; all that was left for them was to assert themselves, for the sake of their community, against the injustice brought forth by plague. Thus it becomes clear that they were motivated by a sense of community and by a sense of love.

Rieux rose. He suddenly appeared very tired.

“…There’s no question of heroism in all this. It’s a matter of common decency. That’s an idea which may make some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is—common decency…. I don’t know what it means for other people. But in my case I know that it consists in doing my job.”

“Your job! I only wish I were sure what my job is!” There was a mordant edge to Rambert’s voice. “Maybe I’m all wrong in putting love first.”

Rieux looked him in the eyes.

“No,” he said vehemently, “you are not wrong.”\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 122.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 150.
A complete understanding of rebellion and the connection that one realizes between oneself and the community of others makes it clear that such rebellion is aroused not just by a sense of solidarity but also by a feeling of love. As Camus concludes in *The Rebel*, “rebellion proves…that it is the very movement of life and that it cannot be denied without renouncing life. Its purest outburst…gives birth to existence. Thus it is love and fecundity or it is nothing.”

As was the case with the individual realization of the absurd from which Camus’ examination began, the ultimate conclusion of his investigation in revolt was anticipated by his earlier, personal writings. Camus recognized the connections between love and revolt fourteen years earlier in his *Notebooks*, where he named love as that which allows one to maintain the seemingly hopeless pursuit of revolt. “I recognize only one duty, and that is to love. And as far as everything else is concerned, I say no. I say no with all my strength. The ledger stones tell me that this is useless…, but I cannot see what my revolt loses by being useless, and I can feel what it gains.”

The insistence on enduring the struggle of existence despite its futility, following the realization that such existence is absurd for the individual and for humanity, is the ideal of rebellion. The individual recognizes a force inherent to existence which condemns that existence to death. At the same time that this condemnation is perceived, one recognizes that it is a threat to all and as such is a threat to humanity. The spirit of revolt is awakened, not simply to protect oneself but to preserve the community of which the individual finds oneself a part.

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68 Camus, *The Rebel*, 304.

This spirit of revolt is leveled specifically at the present; its primary concern is the condition of all humanity, as it is at that present moment, and at all successive present moments. Through this realization of a shared struggle, as well as the impulse to revolt, one further establishes solidarity within the community of collectivity, discovering fully one’s place within humanity. The discovery of one’s connection to humanity suggests the definitive significance of rebellion, in that such rebellion, through its realization of solidarity and assertion of a shared struggle for humanity, allows one to fully confront, and perhaps overcome, the exile imposed by an individual existence within the absurd.

Ultimately, in spite of the multitude of conditions associated with sickness and death, The Plague is meant above all to present the condition of exile implicated therein. As was suggested above, the initial confrontation with ‘plague’ was constituted as a recognition of the condition of exile which now wholly characterized existence in Oran. In his notebooks, Camus emphasized how essential this notion of exile would be to the implicit engagement with the absurd that is presented in the explicit encounter with plague; motivated in an immediate sense by the experience of exile that arose while living under the Occupation, Camus emphasizes that the particularities of any given exile experience should not distract from the realization that any such encounter with exile is at the same time a confrontation with the inherent nature of human existence: “I want to express by means of the plague the stifling air from which we all suffered and the atmosphere of threat and exile in which we lived. I want at the same time to extend that interpretation to the notion of existence in general.”70 As Dr. Rieux explains in The Plague, it is precisely this recognition of exile which would ultimately define for the citizens of Oran their present predicament: “Thus the first thing that plague brought to our town was exile…—that sensation of a void within which never left us, that irrational longing to hark back to the past or

else to speed up the march of time, and those keen shafts of memory that stung like fire.” Yet at the same time, Rieux seems to suggest that while the condition of exile was made more apparent by the presence of plague in their midst, this new excess of evidence did not truly represent a fundamental change in their condition; rather, all that had really changed was the ease with which the condition of exile could now be recognized and the resulting diminution of opportunities to evade it. All found themselves alone, surrounded by other exiles who could not in the end share their feelings, experiences, or language:

In this extremity of solitude none could count on any help from his neighbor; each had to bear the load of his troubles alone. If, by some chance, one of us tried to unburden himself or to say something about his feelings, the reply he got, whatever it might be, usually wounded him. And then it dawned on him that he and the man with him weren’t talking about the same thing. For while he himself spoke from the depths of long days of brooding upon his personal distress, and the image he had tried to impart had been slowly shaped and proved in the fires of passion and regret, this meant nothing to the man to whom he was speaking, who pictured a conventional emotion, a grief that is traded on the market-place, mass-produced. Whether friendly or hostile, the replay always missed fire, and the attempt to communicate had to be given up.

In other words, where true depth of feeling and experience could not bridge the gap of exile, silence ultimately reigned.

Yet within this silence a new sense of commonality and identity began to emerge. Though each individual felt oneself exiled and ultimately alone in facing separation and the threat of death, and though the hope of salvation, or even full understanding from an other, continued to evade each individual, all were subjected to the same fate, the same failure, the same plague. As was suggested above, it must here be emphasized: the condition of exile, which had arisen from a fear of sickness and death on an exclusively individual level, gradually came to be recognized and confronted as a common threat against the community and, ultimately, against humanity:

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71 Camus, The Plague, 65.

72 Ibid., 69; emphasis added.
Now, at least, the position was clear; this calamity was everybody’s business. What with the gunshots echoing at the gates, the punctual thuds of rubber stamps marking the rhythm of lives and deaths, the files and fires, the panics and formalities, all alike were pledged to an ugly but recorded death, and, amidst noxious fumes and the muted clang of ambulances, all of us ate the same sour bread of exile, unconsciously waiting for the same reunion, the same miracle of peace regained.  

Thus the real plague to be confronted by the citizens of Oran was not the actual occurrence of sickness that had only recently revealed itself; rather, it was the underlying experience of exile and absurdity that the arrival of the disease brought to the surface.

In his summary assessment of Sisyphus, Camus notes that Sisyphus’ lucidity is that which ultimately allows him to overcome his punishment; thus “the lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.” The same may perhaps be said of the citizens of plague-stricken Oran as well: through the recognition that their particular ‘plague’ is essentially constituted in the experience of exile, they may finally realize the possibility of victory over plague through a confrontation with exile itself. Thus their determination to collectively resist, revolting against disease and death not just for themselves as individuals but for the sake of the community as a whole, ultimately allowed them not only to combat the plague effectively but also to take up the path toward a transcendence of their more fundamental situation in exile. The journalist Rambert, who stands as the most obvious and compelling example of the individual in exile, who began with only a desire to end his exile and return ‘home,’ likewise represents the change from concern for one’s own plight to a greater commitment to all and the shared struggle: “Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I’d no concern with you people. But now that I’ve seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or

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73 Ibid., 167; emphasis added.

74 Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, 121.
not. This business is everybody’s business.”

In the end, as already noted, the visible presence of plague is driven from the city and a collective ‘health’ is restored. However, as also already noted, this victory is recognized (for some, like Rieux) as only temporary; while it may not be immediately apparent in a given moment, plague is essentially a part of human existence and may thus return, or simply reassert its presence, at any time. In this sense, their victory over plague and death is a tenuous and conditional one. At the same time, a definitive evaluation of the character of the victory that ends *The Plague* must account for the contention that the underlying challenge faced in the bout with plague centered around exile and absurdity. In this light, the victory earned by Rieux and the community at large seems not only more firm but also more meaningful, in that by coming together to overcome plague (temporarily) they have shown the way that a transcendence of exile may be realized: through a commitment to and identification with others and the bond of relation through which such commitment and identification become possible. While each individual may have experienced and understood one’s own particular exile in a manner unlike, and therefore somewhat foreign to, the others, what was common to all was the position in exile and the need to overcome this position through a return to, or reunion with, what was lost:

Yes, the plague had ended with the terror, and those passionately straining arms told what it had meant: exile and deprivation in the profoundest meaning of the words. … Once plague had shut the gates of the town, they had settled down to a life of separation, debarred from the living warmth that gives forgetfulness of all. In different degrees, in every part of the town, men and women had been yearning for a reunion, not of the same kind for all, but for all alike ruled out. Most of them had longed intensely for an absent one, for the warmth of a body, for love, or merely for a life that habit had endeared. Some, often without knowing it, suffered from being deprived of the company of friends and from their inability to get in touch with them through the usual channels of friendship—letters, trains, and boats. Others, fewer these—Tarrou may have been one of them—had desired reunion with something they couldn’t have defined, but which seemed to them the only desirable thing on earth. For want

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75 Camus, *The Plague*, 188.
of a better name, they sometimes called it peace.\footnote{Ibid., 269.}

In \textit{The Plague}, Rieux and his fellow citizens ultimately achieved victory over both plague and exile, even if their victory could not be permanent and absolute. The eradication of plague from Oran is clearly not a final and definitive correction of human existence there, as the pestilence may at any time return. Further, the particular manner in which the plague was overcome may mean little beyond this particular encounter, as there is no guarantee that measures taken here would meet with similar success in a future confrontation with the disease. In a similar fashion, the commitment to communal revolt against the plague likewise effected a transcendence of exile in Oran; through a collective identification with and communal effort by all, the way was revealed toward a decisive response to exile, not just as one aspect of a particular occurrence of plague but also as the ontological situation of human existence. And though in each case the victory achieved may only be a finite victory, such finitude is not sufficient to undermine the immediate value in either case; lives saved and exile overcome, of only for a short time, are still of immeasurable value.

Following \textit{The Plague}, Camus completed two more major works of original fiction: the novel \textit{The Fall} (1956) and the collection of short stories combined as \textit{Exile and the Kingdom} (1957).\footnote{In addition to these works, Camus continued to write essays and adapt other work for the theater, including Dostoevsky’s \textit{The Possessed} (1959). He had also begun a new novel, \textit{The First Man}, the completion of which would be prevented by Camus’ untimely death.} While it may be contended that \textit{The Plague} presents the most comprehensive account of exile and the absurd as well as the complete movement through solitary revolt to communal rebellion which ultimately effects the transcendence of exile and an acceptance of the absurd, these latter works are equally revelatory of the character of existential exile and its transcendence.

\footnote{Ibid.}
Whereas *The Plague* depicts a successful confrontation with exile in a communal commitment against a common threat, *The Fall* presents a variant use of relation and solidarity which seems ultimately to fail to effect a transcendence of existential exile. As was the case with *The Plague*, in *The Fall* Camus portrays an individual who, prior to the ‘moment of crisis,’ had assumed himself to be wholly reconciled with the world and existence as a whole. Thus, in an early speech, the narrator and confessor Jean-Baptiste Clamence confides to his listener that “few creatures were more natural than I. I was altogether in harmony with life, fitting into it from top to bottom without rejecting any of its ironies, its grandeur, or its servitude.”  

Clamence’s attainment of lucidity, akin to Oran’s collective recognition that plague was in their midst, occurred late one night as he was returning home, in the usual fashion, from a liaison with a woman. As he crossed a bridge over the Seine, Clamence noticed a young woman standing at the rail of the bridge, facing the dark water with her back to him. Clamence was immediately drawn to the back of her pale and vulnerable neck, exposed to him in a manner that stirred him deep inside. He did not respond outwardly, however, maintaining his course past the woman and across the bridge. Yet shortly after he passed, the moment arrived which for Clamence would spell the end of the life he had known and usher in its place a time of lucidity and despair:

> I had already gone some fifty yards when I heard the sound—which, despite the distance, seemed dreadfully loud in the midnight silence—of a body striking the water. I stopped short, but without turning around. Almost at once I heard a cry, repeated several times, which was going downstream; then it suddenly ceased. The silence that followed, as the night suddenly stood still, seemed interminable. I wanted to run and yet didn’t stir. I was trembling, I believe from cold and shock. I told myself that I had to be quick and I felt an irresistible weakness steal over me. I have forgotten what I thought then. “Too late, too far…” or something of the sort. I was still listening as I stood motionless. Then, slowly under the rain, I went away. I informed no one. … The next day, and the

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days following, I didn’t read the papers.\textsuperscript{79}

In his failure to save a nameless woman from her fall, Clamence realizes his own fall from grace and ignorance into the truth of his existence. Whereas he had previously held himself above others and had always acted in a manner that emphasized and furthered his position above, he was now forced to recognize not only that he had fallen in his own esteem of himself but also that he was now subject to, and powerless to overcome, the judgment of others. What followed for Clamence was a complete undermining of his values and identity, compelling him to search in himself for some form of grace or some manner of salvation.

In the immediate aftermath of his ‘encounter’ above the Seine, Clamence recognized a new depth of isolation in his existence, forcing him to concede “I have no more friends; I have nothing but accomplices. To make up for this, their number has increased; they are the whole human race.”\textsuperscript{80} Whereas he had previously buoyed himself on the sense of pride and accomplishment earned by protecting the weak and the innocent through his practice as a public defender, after his ‘fall’ Clamence is forced to see such habit and practice as empty and unfulfilling:

\textit{I have never been really able to believe that human affairs were serious matters.} I had no idea where the serious might lie, except that it was not in all this I saw around me—which seemed to me merely an amusing game, or tiresome. There are really efforts and convictions I have never been able to understand. I always looked with amazement, and a certain suspicion, on those strange creatures who died for money, fell into despair over the loss of a “position,” or sacrificed themselves with a high and mighty manner for the prosperity of their family. I could better understand that friend who had made up his mind to stop smoking and through sheer will power had succeeded. One morning he opened the paper, read that the first H-bomb had been exploded, learned about its wonderful effects, and hastened to a tobacco shop.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 70–71.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 73.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 86–87; emphasis added.
This is Clamence’s encounter with the absurdity of existence: after his inability to act to save the unnamed woman, after his ‘fall’ from the preconceptions which defined and guided his life, Clamence is forced to recognize the groundlessness of all that had previously grounded him.

In immediate response to this realization, Clamence attempts to throw himself entirely into relationships and other endeavors which he hoped would absorb him completely, thus allowing him to forget his own failure and newfound emptiness to his existence. These efforts ultimately fail, however, as a subsequent crossing of a bridge, a few years after the original incident, finally compels Clamence to regard his predicament fully and honestly. As he crossed this latter bridge, rather than the echo of a frigid splash or a desperate shriek, Clamence heard instead a shrill laugh; in that instant, hounded by such laughter, Clamence fully felt himself judged from without for his failure. Fully realizing his guilt, Clamence can only accept that his chosen manner of revolting against his isolation and emptiness will not save him, and that the desperate cry of a forsaken woman conflated with the scornful and condemning laughter would always plague him despite his attempts to drown them out:

Then I realized, calmly as you resign yourself to an idea the truth of which you have long known, that that cry which had sounded over the Seine behind me years before had never ceased, carried by the river to the waters of the Channel, to travel throughout the world, across the limitless expanse of the ocean, and that it had waited for me there until the day I had encountered it. I realized likewise that it would continue to await me on seas and rivers, everywhere, in short, where lies the bitter water of my baptism.  

Following this realization, that there seems to be no way to escape judgment, Clamence concludes that his position in guilt is ultimately a result of his freedom; by possessing the freedom to act in the original critical moment above the Seine, Clamence was able to act or not, thereby assuming for himself full responsibility for whatever consequences followed from that
choice. By choosing not to act, Clamence had simultaneously ‘chosen’ for himself judgment, guilt, condemnation, and, ultimately, isolation. Therefore, in order to escape this new position, Clamence attempts to find a way to forego his freedom.

In short, you see, the essential is to cease being free and to obey, in repentance, a greater rogue than oneself. When we are all guilty, that will be democracy. Without counting, cher ami, that we must take revenge for having to die alone. Death is solitary, whereas slavery is collective. The others get theirs, too, and at the same time as we—that’s what counts. All together at last, but on our knees and heads bowed. Isn’t it good likewise to live like the rest of the world, and for that doesn’t the rest of the world have to be like me? … This is why, tres cher, after having solemnly paid my respects to freedom, I decided on the sly that it had to be handed over without delay to anyone who comes along.\(^8^3\)

Further, in order to fully alleviate his sense of guilt, Clamence engages others, one lonely individual at a time, compelling each to recognize his or her own guilt, thus placing all in an equal position of condemnation. To achieve this ambitious goal, the eradication of freedom and the simultaneous establishment of equality in guilt, Clamence assumes the position of judge-penitent.

Since his final realization of the perils of freedom and the power of guilt and condemnation, Clamence has practiced his ‘occupation’ as judge-penitent, holding court in the Mexico City bar in the cold, labyrinthine heart of Amsterdam. To each confidant he ensnares, Clamence begins by revealing the motivations, desires, and events that fostered and characterized his identity and ultimately led him to his fall over the Seine; from there, he details his own failed attempts to reconcile himself with existence and with the world, admitting that in the end he was forced to concede the evils of freedom and the ultimate inescapability of judgment, both from himself and from others. All of this he presents with a disarming honesty, openly judging himself and inviting his listener to do the same, thereby constructing an edifice of sincerity and understanding between himself and his new judge. Yet as he progresses deeper and deeper into

\(^{8^3}\) Ibid., 136–137.
his own penitence, he emphasizes the connection and solidarity between himself and his listener, gradually implicating his ‘judge’ in the same transgressions he himself is confessing. In this manner, while ostensibly approaching absolute contrition, Clamence condemns his listener to a judgment of guilt and condemnation that outstrips his own:

Covered with ashes, tearing my hair, my face scored by clawing, but with piercing eyes, I stand before all humanity recapitulating my shames without losing sight of the effect I am producing, and saying: “I was the lowest of the low.” Then imperceptibly I pass from the “I” to the “we.” When I get to “This is what we are,” the trick has been played and I can tell them off. I am like them, to be sure; we are in the soup together. However, I have a superiority in that I know it and this gives me the right to speak. You see the advantage, I am sure. The more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you. Even better, I provoke you into judging yourself, and this relieves me of that much of the burden. Ah, mon cher, we are odd, wretched creatures, and if we merely look back over our lives, there’s no lack of occasions to amaze and horrify ourselves. Just try. I shall listen, you may be sure, to your own confession with a great feeling of fraternity.\(^{84}\)

By compelling an other to judge him, Clamence has successfully bridged the isolation between himself and the other through a shared recognition of guilt; this association is further strengthened by Clamence’s ability to subsequently compel his ‘judge’ to likewise recognize his own guilt, thereby placing both Clamence and his listener/judge in a shared position as fallen. Finally, by revealing his position of power in this newly created dynamic of judgment, Clamence positions himself as the ultimate arbiter of judgment, thereby restoring the worth of his own life despite its profound fallenness. In this manner, no longer needing to absolve himself of guilt, Clamence has freed himself from the judgment of others:

I have accepted duplicity instead of being upset about it. On the contrary, I have settled into it and found there the comfort I was looking for throughout life. I was wrong, after all, to tell you that the essential was to avoid judgment. The essential is being able to permit oneself everything, even if, from time to time, one has to profess vociferously one’s own infamy. I permit myself everything again, and without the laughter this time.\(^{85}\)

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 140.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 141–142.
Further, Clamence is able to re-ascend to the heights where he originally soared, as defender of all who are without power and without freedom, before his inability to act struck him down and subjected him to judgment at the hands of others. In his new position as judge-penitent, Clamence alone has exclusive authority to judge himself as well as others, while constantly reaffirming the profound difference between his own acknowledged guilt and the unacknowledged guilt and ignorance of all those who surround him, those who presume to judge while reckoning themselves to be innocent. In this distinction, in his reconciliation with his role and his reaffirmation of his own personal worth, Clamence has finally regained happiness:

[S]oaring over this whole continent which is under my sway without knowing it, drinking in the absinthe-colored light of breaking day, intoxicated with evil words, I am happy—I am happy, I tell you, I won’t let you think I’m not happy, I am happy unto death! Oh, sun, beaches, and the islands in the path of the trade winds, youth whose memory drives one to despair.

This proclamation of perfect happiness here echoes that of Meursault, as he himself acknowledged and embraced all that his life had amounted to in the final moments preceding his execution. Similarly, the parallels between Clamence and Sisyphus are undeniable; both were condemned by the world around them, yet both are ultimately able to scale the heights which enable each to look down on his judges and condemners with scorn. However, the final assessment of both Meursault and Sisyphus, that their victory over exile and acceptance of the absurd are at best limited, must be applied here to Clamence as well. As both Sisyphus and Meursault had, Clamence likewise fails in completely and appropriately realizing a transcendence of his own encounter with exile and the absurd. Whereas Sisyphus and Meursault limited their revolt to the particular personal encounter, Clamence pursued his own revolt

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86 Ibid., 144.
toward reestablishing himself as separate from others and his world. Although his effort begins in each case with an attempt to establish a connection between himself and an other, whereby he emphasizes their shared plight and position as solidary human beings, this is done only so that he may then proceed to surpass the position of his new ‘brother.’ Thus what had begun ostensibly as an attempt to bridge the gulf of exile between himself and an other ends with Clamence’s reestablishment, and ultimate celebration, of his own isolated position above others and the world.

Whereas *The Fall* represents a divergence from the portrayal of exile and reconciliation that Camus depicted in *The Plague*, the stories comprised in *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus’ final completed work of fiction, return to the notion of a [re-]union in exile that was suggested in *The Plague*. Yet rather than align exile with a contingent condition precipitated by an onset of disease from without, in *Exile and the Kingdom* exile is more clearly and meaningfully suggested as a natural condition without immediate cause beyond the fact of existence itself. Further, whereas that from which the subjects in *The Plague* found themselves exiled was generally clear and namable, in *Exile and the Kingdom* it is less clear whether the subjects are exiled from something that has been lost or rather from something they have yet, but long to, attain. Finally, in these stories the period in/of exile is ultimately used by the individual as a starting point from which “the instant suspended in eternity”\(^8^7\) may be experienced and the ‘kingdom,’ *home*, may finally be glimpsed.

Each of the six stories that constitute *Exile and the Kingdom* presents exile as a particular manifestation of the fundamental condition of existence, as well as the possibility of at least a fleeting transcendence. In “The Renegade,” Camus presents a young man in a double exile that is centered around his pride at the severity of and commitment to his faith. He leaves home,

\(^8^7\) Anne Minor, “The Short Stories of Albert Camus,” *Yale French Studies* 0, no. 25 (1960): 76.
where he feels separated from those who do not wholly share his convictions, only to travel to a place where his beliefs separate him even more fundamentally from the ‘heathens’ of a city in exile. His failure to enlighten and convert the unbelievers forces him back into himself, thereby exacerbating his exile from both communities. In an effort to attain solidarity with the unbelievers, he decides to kill a missionary priest who is planning to follow him into the “city of salt,” an act which ultimately allows him a momentary glimpse of salvation and regret in the complete acquiescence to a power greater than he is, represented in the dying priest and the God who unites them both.

In “The Silent Men,” a group of skilled laborers returns to their cooperage after a prolonged, and ultimately failed, strike; their needs have not been met, and they return to their positions even more separate from the boss than they had been at the outset. Upon their return, the impossibility of bridging the gulf between themselves and the boss, their dwindling usefulness and a future of obsolescence, is somewhat mollified by the rekindling of their fraternity with each other. The sudden and severe illness of the boss’s daughter, which only further emphasizes their separation from the boss, likewise turns Yvars with greater urgency toward the connections with his fellow workers and with his own family. While the severity of the separation which ultimately defines the position of the workers will only grow, each are able to find solace, home, in a particular solidarity with each other.

“The Artist at Work” similarly presents an attempt to reconcile the distance between oneself and others that arises as a result of an individual’s vocation. The artist Jonas is constantly compelled to reassess the balance that he strikes between his painting and his time with friends.

88 “Quick, the rifle, and I load it quickly. O Fetish, my god over yonder, may your power be preserved, may the offense be multiplied, may hate rule pitilessly over a world of the damned, may the wicked forever be masters, may the kingdom come, where in a single city of salt and iron black tyrants will enslave and possess without pity!” Camus, “The Renegade,” in Exile and the Kingdom, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 58.
and family, the failure of which leaves him dissatisfied and ultimately exiled from fulfillment in either; his art, which is his true love and guiding ‘star,’ separates him from others and everything else that is meaningful to him, whereas the attention and devotion he longs to bestow on others only further separates him from his art. In the end, the only hope of reconciliation in exile lies in the realization of a transcendence between the two seemingly opposing poles of “solitary” and “solidary,” though as the story concludes it is unclear whether Jonas will be able to fully attain this position of transcendence.89

In “The Guest,” Daru literally dwells in a position in exile on a plateau between the ‘civilization’ he has left behind and the world of the Arabs beyond. Pulled into the conflict between these two worlds, Daru is forced to make a moral choice between respecting the law of his former civilization by turning in an Arab who committed murder or freeing the Arab and thereby cultivating the connection that he has begun to feel with the Arab. Though his choice to allow the Arab to freely choose his own fate allows Daru a momentary feeling of peace and reconciliation, such peace is ultimately threatened from both sides respected but ultimately forsaken by Daru’s choice.

While each of these stories adequately addresses exile and the possibility of [re-]union, the remaining stories in the collection, “The Adulterous Woman” and “The Growing Stone,” seem most worthy of consideration and in-depth discussion in this context. “The Adulterous Woman,” which opens the collection, is an account of a middle-aged couple’s travels deeper and deeper into North Africa. The husband, Marcel, is a salesman who has just resumed his travels in hopes of saving his struggling business; his wife Janine, who has agreed to travel with

89 Jonas’ final painting, which was to represent his working out of his position in exile, reveals this unresolved opposition: “In the other room Rateau was looking at the canvas, completely blank, in the center of which Jonas had merely written in very small letters a word that could be made out, but without any certainty as whether it should be read solitary or solidary.” Albert Camus, “The Artist at Work,” in Exile and the Kingdom, 157–158.
him without herself fully knowing why, finds on the journey only further reminders of how her life has not gone as she expected and how she is, ultimately, alone and waiting for something which she cannot name. In the strange faces and landscapes that they encounter she finds only difference and strangeness, forcing her further into herself.

However, in the figurative desert of her isolation and the literal desert that surrounds them, Janine is permitted a different but fleeting perspective which allows her to see, for the first time, a world that is hers. As she and her husband survey the vast, desolate landscape under the fading afternoon sun, Janine glimpses a group of lonely nomads in whom she recognizes herself and in whose home she recognizes her own:

She was looking at the nomad’s encampment. She had not even seen the men living in it; nothing was stirring among the black tents, and yet she could think only of them whose existence she had barely known until this day. Homeless, cut off from the world, they were a handful wandering over the vast territory she could see, which however was but a paltry part of an even greater expanse whose dizzying course stopped only thousands of miles further south, where the first river finally waters the forest. Since the beginning of time, on the dry earth of this limitless land scraped to the bone, a few men had been ceaselessly trudging, possessing nothing but serving no one, poverty-stricken but free lords of a strange kingdom. Janine did not know why this thought filled her with such a sweet, vast melancholy that it closed her eyes. She knew that this kingdom had been eternally promised her and yet that it would never be hers, never again, except in this fleeting moment perhaps when she opened her eyes again on the suddenly motionless sky and on its waves of steady light, while the voices rising from the Arab town suddenly fell silent.  

Although this identification and connection with the landscape and its people is immediately imperiled from the instant that she discerns it, the experience itself, and the salvation it suggests, is no less real for being temporary.

Following this too-brief [re-]union with the desert and its inhabitants, Janine returns with her husband to their hotel and to her isolation surrounded by others. That night, as she tries to sleep, Janine continues to visit in her mind that lonely vision in the desert, lost in the solitude of

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herself and trying to determine, once and for all, why she has come. Gradually she becomes aware of a wind rising from the direction of the vista from which she had experienced her vision, seeming to call her back to the experience and the lucidity it had to offer her. Heeding the call, Janine returns to the summit above the desert, this time in the blackness of night, to fully consummate her reconciliation with the world:

Before her the stars were falling one by one and being snuffed out among the stones of the desert, and each time Janine opened a little more to the night. Breathing deeply, she forgot the cold, the dead weight of others, the craziness or stuffiness of life, the long anguish of living and dying. After so many years of mad, aimless fleeing from fear, she had come to a stop at last. At the same time, she seemed to recover her roots and the sap again rose in her body, which had ceased trembling. Her whole belly pressed against the parapet as she strained toward the moving sky; she was merely waiting for her fluttering heart to calm down and establish silence within her. The last stars of the constellations dropped their clusters a little lower on the desert horizon and became still. Then, with unbearable gentleness, the water of night began to fill Janine, drowned the cold, rose gradually from the hidden core of her being and overflowed in wave after wave.91

While this return to the desert ultimately allows Janine to complete her [re-]union with the world, it is unclear whether the union attained will endure or disappear once again. In the end she returns to the hotel and to her husband, who is awakened by her sobs and her accompanying insistence that there is nothing wrong; perhaps in these closing moments she is mourning the abrupt passing of the union and transcendence she had only a short time before. Yet whether Janine’s transcendence is permanent or fleeting, it is clear that by opening herself to the world and allowing a connection with it to materialize within her, she has embarked upon the only possible path toward unity and relation and thus a transcendence of her existential exile.

Camus further emphasized this conclusion in “The Growing Stone,” the story with which he closes Exile and the Kingdom. As was the case with Janine in the first story, the engineer D’Arrast is presented as an outsider who has traveled to a place which he does not understand.

91 Ibid., 32–33.
and where he does not fully belong. The story opens with D’Arrast’s disorienting journey through the jungles of South America toward Iguape, where he is to design and oversee the construction of a dam that will prevent the town from being destroyed by a nearby river. Despite his presence in Iguape as a ‘savior,’ D’Arrast recognizes that he is an outsider and a stranger to the natives of the town, a realization that was confirmed when he tried to gain access to one of the homes of the poor natives who dwelt along the river:

[The Captain] harangued the Negroes at length, pointing to D’Arrast and to the river. They listened without saying a word. When the Captain had finished, no one stirred. He spoke again, in an impatient voice. Then he called upon one of the men, who shook his head. Whereupon the Captain said a few brief words in a tone of command. The man stepped forth from the group, faced D’Arrast, and with a gesture showed him the way. But his look was hostile.92

Gradually, however, D’Arrast is able to gain a limited access to the world of the natives, in large part by beginning a friendship with a cook who confides to D’Arrast his plan to fulfill a vow to Christ by carrying a hundred-pound stone on his head to the church. The cook had made this promise in the aftermath of a shipwreck; unable to swim and fearing that he would soon die in the waves, the cook saw in the distance a sign of Jesus’ church in Iguape and appealed to Him for salvation. As the cook explains, immediately after his prayer “the waters became calm and my heart too. I swam slowly, I was happy, and I reached the shore.”93 Though D’Arrast does not share the cook’s faith in Jesus, he does respect the cook’s convictions as well as his commitment to his promise; it is agreed between D’Arrast and the cook that D’Arrast will help the cook fulfill his oath.

However, this alliance between D’Arrast and the native cook is not itself enough to wholly bridge the gap between the two; despite the newly formed bond, D’Arrast is still recognized as

92 Albert Camus, “The Growing Stone,” in Exile and the Kingdom, 175.

93 Ibid., 183.
an outsider in Iguape. The night before the cook is to complete his task in fulfillment of his vow, D’Arrast is welcomed in to witness a native celebration. As the celebration proceeds, both the strangeness of the event and his exclusion from it become more and more clear to D’Arrast, culminating in the natives’ decision that he must depart before the celebration concludes:

D’Arrast, bewitched by the slow dance, was watching the black Diana when the cook suddenly loomed up before him, his smooth face now distorted. The kindness had disappeared form his eyes, revealing nothing but a sort of unsuspected avidity. Coldly, as if speaking to a stranger, he said: "It’s late, Captain. They are going to dance all night long, and they don’t want you to stay now.” With head heavy, D’Arrast got up and followed the cook, who went along the wall toward the door. On the threshold the cook stood aside, holding the bamboo door, and D’Arrast went out. 94

This expulsion, shocking to D’Arrast precisely because it came in spite of the bond he had forged with one of their own, fully reveals to D’Arrast the depth of his separation from the others and the world in which he now finds himself:

This land was too vast, blood and seasons mingled here, and time liquefied. Life here was flush with the soil, and, to identify with it, one had to live down and sleep for years on the muddy or dried-up ground itself. Yonder, in Europe, there was shame and wrath. Here, exile or solitude, among these listless and convulsive madmen who danced to die. 95

Present in that world and able to see and hear all that it contained, D’Arrast nonetheless remained an exile there, unable to wholly penetrate the barrier that separated him from the natives and their world.

It is not until the cook is called upon to carry his stone and fulfill his promise to Jesus that D’Arrast finally realizes an opportunity to transcend his exile and gain access into the world of the natives. When the weight of the stone upon his head becomes too much to bear, and the cook is no longer able to shoulder his burden alone, D’Arrast leaves the silence and impotence

94 Ibid., 197.

95 Ibid., 198.
of the crowd and comes to the cook’s aid, takes up the burden as his own, and ultimately claims the stone itself and the struggle it represents for humanity. Whereas the cook was carrying the stone for Jesus along a path that led to the church, D’Arrast takes up the burden in order to save his friend; he forsakes the road to the church, choosing instead to bear the stone to the cook’s village, where he finally hurls it into the fire in the middle of the cook’s hut. With this act, D’Arrast heeds the call of solidarity demanded by the shared struggle of existence by helping the cook with his specific burden. What had begun with an appeal to the Divine for salvation concludes with a reaffirmation of the priority of the human and the capacity for human relation.

By partaking of the cook’s struggle, ultimately making the cook’s burden his own, D’Arrast has established his solidarity and finally realized a place for himself amongst the others. Despite the fact that D’Arrast is a stranger in the town, and the community in which he finds himself is completely foreign to him, his act of solidarity allows him to overcome the exile which defined his existence there and his relationship to that ‘world’:

[The cook’s] brother led the cook up to the stone, where he dropped on the ground. The brother sat down too, beckoning to the others. The old woman joined him, then the girl of the night before, but no one looked at D’Arrast. They were squatting in a silent circle around the stone. No sound but the murmur of the river reached them through the heavy air. Standing in the darkness, D’Arrast listened without seeing anything, and the sound of the waters filled him with a tumultuous happiness. With his eyes closed, he joyfully acclaimed his own strength; he acclaimed, once again, a fresh beginning in life. At that moment, a firecracker went off that seemed very close. The brother moved a little away from the cook and, half turning toward D’Arrast but without looking at him, pointed to the empty place and said: “Sit down with us.”

D’Arrast is finally welcomed into the community, as the story concludes with the cook’s brother’s plea to D’Arrast to “sit down with us.” This solidarity, which in “The Growing Stone” arises in the deliberate sharing of a burden that resulted from a human bond, is the same

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96 Ibid., 212–213.
solidarity which Camus ultimately suggests arises in the individual’s realization that the exile and absurdity which define individual existence so defines that of humanity. What’s more, this solidarity which is to constitute the individual response to exile and which finds its ultimate expression in revolt for the sake of humanity as such, is likewise that which completes the confrontation and allows for the [re-]union which ultimately makes it possible to transcend the ontological condition of existential exile.

As was the case with Janine in “The Adulterous Woman,” it is appropriate to wonder about the permanence of the particular transcendence which D’Arrast is able to achieve. Because human existence is fundamentally finite, it must be acknowledge that any transcendence of exile, no matter how profound, must itself also be finite. Yet even a finite transcendence is still supremely meaningful, and its value must not be wholly undermined by its precariousness. At the same time, regardless of the duration of the experience of that transcendence, Camus seems here to offer, in this his final completed and published story, his definitive declaration on the matter: existential exile, which is a fundamental and originary condition of human existence, can only be overcome in the establishment of a unity and relation with others and the world.

**Exile and the Kingdom: Through Revolt to [Re-]Union**

In the works which followed his ‘cycle of the absurd,’ Camus presents a full articulation of what it means to rebel: for individual reasons against the absurdity of existence, as the individual revolts against death and an indifferent world, thus restoring meaning to individual existence; for individual reasons against the specific injustices of the world, as the individual rejects the evils perpetrated by humanity which threaten existence; and finally on behalf of humanity against those same injustices, as the individual recognizes that the personal struggle against injustice is a shared endeavor and thus an urgent concern for all of humanity. It is in this
manner and through this progression that Camus has created a comprehensive philosophy of rebellion. An existence without inherent, given meaning is still worth living, and it is that living which not only gives existence meaning but also justifies rebellion for its sake. In his fourth Letter to a German Friend, Camus concludes: “I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has meaning and that is man. ... He must be saved if we want to save the idea we have of life.”

Though Camus explicitly structures his contentions around what he calls the ‘absurdity’ of human existence, it should be clear from the previous chapter that the absurd arises in large part from the situation in/of exile, which is itself a manifestation of the finitude fundamentally characteristic of human existence. This experience of exile, which then fosters the recognition of the absurd, is thereby further perpetuated by the acceptance of and confrontation with the absurd, as the true absence of an inherent connection with the world for the individual is fully brought home to human understanding; an awareness of the absurd is thus constituted in the longing for home. This is the condition of existential exile, which is properly defined as the longing for a unity that is absent. The movement of revolt, which arises in Camus’ conception as a recognition of and response to the absurdity of existence, is thus in actuality a response to the more original and immediate condition of existential exile. Further, seen through to its culmination in communal rebellion for the salvation of the human community as such, the movement of revolt is that which presents the appropriate response to exile and the absurd. Yet underlying all acts of revolt is the longing for home, thus revolt against the absurd is ultimately the manner by which, according to Camus, a unity and reconciliation may be achieved. Dr. Rieux realizes and articulates this at the conclusion of The Plague:

Among the heaps of corpses, the clanging bells of ambulances, the warnings of what goes by the name of fate, among unremitting waves of fear and agonized revolt, the horror that such things could be, always a great voice had been ringing in the ears of those forlorn, panicked people, a voice calling them back to the land of their desire, a homeland. It lay outside the walls of the stifled, strangled town, in the fragrant brushwood of the hills, in the waves of the sea, under free skies, and in the custom of love. And it was to this, their lost home, toward happiness, they longed to return, turning their backs disgustedly on all else. As to what that exile and longing for reunion meant, Rieux had no idea. But as he walked ahead, jostled on all sides, accosted now and then, and gradually made his way into less crowded streets, he was thinking it has no importance whether such things have or have not a meaning; all we need consider is the answer given to men’s hope.\footnote{Camus, The Plague, 270; emphasis added.}

Existential exile can only be overcome in the establishment of a unity and relation with others and the world; this unity may have been lost or it may have never existed at all, but only such a \[re-]\union allows the exiled individual to fully realize and engage the relation which may stand as a grounding experience of human existence and thus the answer to existential exile.

Finally, after much traversing of desert terrain, the investigation has returned to its starting point. The opening discussion of finitude concluded with the contention that relation is the structural character of reality, adding that the existential commitment to such relation must be designated as faith. It has likely been apparent, from the beginning of the discussion of Camus’ work in the previous chapter, that an explicit place for ‘faith’ in Camus’ writings may be difficult to assign; his conception of the absurd arises in part from the recognition of the absence of any Absolute in which belief could be placed, and his notion of revolt is similarly motivated by a refusal to appeal to such an Absolute for a resolution of the absurdity of existence. Yet is this enough to definitively preclude an identification of Camus’ account of absurdity and revolt, exile and \[re-]\union, as a commitment in faith?

To begin to answer this question, it is worth returning, if only briefly, to two of the works discussed in the preceding section. While there are many varying themes at work in Camus’
novel *The Plague*, a central theme is the manner in which the individual responds to a condemnation to exile and a universal death sentence; further, it may likewise be suggested that some form of faith figures prominently in what Camus seems to suggest as the appropriate response.

The most obvious example of a faith-based response to plague is illustrated by Father Paneloux, whose beliefs are largely conveyed in a pair of sermons that he delivers to the people of Oran in hopes of steeling their resolve against the disease. In the first, Paneloux contends that the plague that has beset Oran is a punishment from God because they have lost their way from Him, noting however that if the people return to God earnestly and completely with obedience and love, He will undoubtedly protect them. Ultimately, Paneloux claims, true faith in God will be enough to save them from the threat of exile and death.

However, after this sermon, Paneloux was forced to witness (along with Rieux and Tarrou) the death of a young boy, the son of the magistrate Othon. The boy’s illness and eventual death were drawn out over a period of several days, during which he suffered immensely; even Paneloux, who had originally claimed that the plague was a calamity brought upon by and thus deserved by the people of Oran, had to acknowledge that it was impossible to surmise what the young boy could have done to deserve his particular fate. Therefore, to reconcile himself to this question, Paneloux clarified his position and his faith, which he presented to the people of Oran in his second sermon, reiterating that the plague must be accepted as the will of God:

"True, the agony of a child was humiliating to the heart and to the mind. But that was why we had to come to terms with it. And that, too, was why…since it was God’s will, we, too, should will it. Thus and thus only the Christian could face the problem squarely and, scorning subterfuge, pierce to the heart of the supreme issue, the essential choice. And his choice would be to believe everything, so as not to be forced into denying everything. … It was wrong to say: “This I understand, but that I cannot accept”; we must go straight to the heart of that which is unacceptable, precisely because it is thus that we are constrained to make our choice. The sufferings of children were our bread of..."
affliction, but without this bread our souls would die of spiritual hunger.\textsuperscript{99}

Whether one can understand or not does not diminish the fact of God’s will nor the need to recognize and embrace that will; because it is God’s will, all who believe in God must likewise will the same. Though he wishes to curb the suffering of the sick, Paneloux does not ultimately revolt against the conditions wrought by the plague, even unto his own death.

Rieux and Tarrou, however, cannot abide this manner of acceptance of such suffering, exile, and death, forsaking the appeal to a divine will which fosters acceptance and instead insisting on maintaining their revolt while recognizing that, despite what success they may attain in any individual case, suffering, exile, and death are conditions of existence over which they will never fully triumph. Still, that recognition is not enough to quell their revolt; rather, it places the burden squarely upon their shoulders, and, as Sisyphus had similarly noted, “makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men.”\textsuperscript{100} Rieux, in his assessment of Paneloux’s position in faith, makes this clear:

I’ve never managed to get used to seeing people die. That’s all I know. Yet after all—...since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn’t it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence.\textsuperscript{101}

To this pronouncement Tarrou adds the acknowledgment that all have the capacity to transmit the plague, thus all have the capacity to exile and to kill. At the same time, all thereby have the capacity to save others by minimizing one’s participation in the transmission and perpetuation

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 203.

\textsuperscript{100} Camus, \textit{The Myth of Sisyphus}, 122.

\textsuperscript{101} Camus, \textit{The Plague}, 117–118. Camus himself voiced a nearly identical sentiment on his own behalf in his address to the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Maubourg in 1948: “I share with you the same revulsion from evil. But I do not share your hope, and I continue to struggle against this universe in which children suffer and die.” (“The Unbeliever and Christians,” in \textit{Resistance, Rebellion, and Death}, 71.)
of plague:

I only know that one must do what one can to cease being plague-stricken, and that’s the only way in which we can hope for some peace or, failing that, a decent death. This, and only this, can bring relief to men and, if not save them, at least do them the least harm possible and even, sometimes, a little good. So that is why I resolved to have no truck with any thing which, directly or indirectly, for good reasons or for bad, brings death to anyone or justifies others’ putting him to death. … Each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it. And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody’s face and fasten the infection on him. What’s natural is the microbe. All the rest—health, integrity, purity (if you like)—is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter.  

Both Rieux and Tarrou are motivated by their underlying desire to save their community from suffering, from exile, and from death; while they recognize that these are fundamental, and thus irreducible, conditions of existence, both remain committed to their revolt and the community for whom they have undertaken to revolt. By committing themselves to the welfare of the community and of humanity, they transcend, if only temporarily, the solitary and solipsistic concern for themselves to focus instead on the other and the bonds of relation that draw them together. Further, by reaching beyond their own individual concerns, Camus’ rebels simultaneously transcend the finitude of the present moment toward a future which, though not infinite, reaches beyond what each of them may experience as an individual toward a greater ‘whole’ of which each of them is only a part. As Camus had articulated in his Notebooks, and as was cited above in the preceding discussion, “relations with other people always help us to carry on because they always suppose developments, a future.”  

Both Rieux and Tarrou are wholly committed to the salvation of others in the community, however tenuous and temporary that salvation may ultimately be, and by extension they assert their commitment to the solidarity and

103 Camus, Notebooks: 1942–1951, 57; emphasis added.
relation which not only fosters their revolt but also allows it to succeed.

The second of the discussed works which seems to most clearly present a depiction of faith as an appropriate response to the ontological situation is the final story of *Exile and the Kingdom*, “The Growing Stone.” Though the threat to existence in the latter story is not as overt or as immediately imperiling as is the plague that is depicted in the earlier novel, the need for home that is illustrated in “The Growing Stone” is equally urgent and similarly responded to with a form of faith.

As was the case with *The Plague*, in “The Growing Stone” Camus presents a character who exhibits a more traditional manner of faith in an Absolute. As the cook recounts to D’Arrast the story of his salvation and his intention to carry the stone to honor his Savior, it is clear that D’Arrast does not share the cook’s faith in God. It is, however, equally clear that D’Arrast respects the commitment that the cook has made and the convictions which motivate that commitment; this respect ultimately fosters D’Arrast’s complicity with the cook and his agreement to help the cook carry out his task. Despite the fundamental difference in their beliefs, D’Arrast and the cook are able to wholly identify with each other and in the end share the promise and the burden it entails. As the cook reveals to D’Arrast, “it’s as if you had made [the promise] yourself.”

Yet despite their identification with each other, the objects of the cook’s and D’Arrast’s respective commitment remain in conflict; whereas the cook carries his burden to demonstrate his commitment to his Lord, D’Arrast assumes the cook’s burden, *after the cook has failed in his task*, to demonstrate his commitment to the cook and to the community as a whole. After D’Arrast picks up the stone where the cook had let it fall, the others in the crowd implore him on toward the church that was the cook’s intended destination. D’Arrast ignores the calls of the crowd, instead carrying the burden of his fellow man to the heart of the home of that man and

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his community, where awaits him the kind of joy and communion which surely would have greeted the cook had he reached “the good Jesus’” church with his stone:

“To the church! To the church!” was what Socrates and the crowd were shouting at him. Yet D’Arrast continued in the direction in which he was launched. … He hastened his pace, finally reached the little square where the cook’s hut stood, ran to it, kicked the door open, and brusquely hurled the stone onto the still glowing fire in the center of the room. And there, straightening up until he was suddenly enormous, drinking in with desperate gulps the familiar smell of poverty and ashes, he felt rising within him a surge of obscure and panting joy that he was powerless to name.\(^\text{105}\)

By relieving the cook of his burden and taking it as his own, D’Arrast acts for the immediate preservation and salvation of the cook. Further, by forsaking the road to Jesus for the road to the human community, he reiterates and reaffirms his commitment to the human community. Finally, by committing himself in this manner to the community from which he felt himself exiled, he is able to finally realize the relation between himself and that community and, ultimately, to attain a union, a home, therein.

The examples given by Camus in *The Plague* and “The Growing Stone” each present characters who forsake faith in an Absolute beyond what they can immediately know and experience for the attainable but equally ‘saintly’ aspiration of reconciliation and relation with the human community. In each case, the individual revolts for the sake of humanity against the conditions that plague human existence, and in so doing each forges and reaffirms the bonds of relation for which each longs and which ultimately allow each to transcend the solitary concern, existential exile, and commune with the other in the affirmation and realization of the possibility and power of relation and the achievement of meaning in the commitment to relation. This, in each case, is a commitment in faith. Yet in each case this is not a single act of/in faith which is intended to affect an infinite attainment of grace or salvation; rather, what is achieved in each case

\(^{105}\) Ibid., 211–212.
is only a fleeting transcendence of exile, a glimpse of home that rewards revolt but which cannot stand as a permanent abode. True revolt against existential exile thus requires a perpetual, constantly renewed commitment in faith; the logic of the absurd demands such rebellion, and only the commitment of faith can foster its success. While the home that is achieved and which thus saves the individual from existential exile may not be a lasting salvation, what remains permanent is the human capacity to realize the relation that is the structural character of reality. Just as existential exile remains as a fundamental and thus irreducible condition of human existence, the possibility of its transcendence through the commitment to and realization of relation is equally irreducible as a fundamentally attainable human possibility.

Here at last is the complete picture which Camus has provided: the individual begins in exile, the recognition of which cultivates the human encounter with the absurdity of existence. The appropriate response to exile and the absurd is to revolt against the absurdity and to create meaning within the conditions of exile without appeal to anything beyond. This movement of revolt is amplified in the decision to rebel not just for oneself but for others, for humanity as a whole, and through this expansion one can achieve a level of solidarity and relation amongst those with whom one finds oneself in the ontological situation. Thus, the condition of existential exile which prompted the original act of revolt likewise directs the way toward transcendence, as exile is overcome, if only fleetingly, in the realization of the human capacity for meaningful relation. In his art and in his philosophy, Camus presents this trajectory, and it is here contended that the essential aspects of this trajectory are consistent with the definition of faith, as the existential commitment that fosters a finite transcendence toward the determination and realization of meaning, with which the present study began. In the following and final chapter, it will be suggested that in the very construction of this picture, this ‘myth’ of exile and [re-]union, Camus has committed himself in similar fashion to relation as the structural character of
reality and has thus engaged himself analogously in this commitment-in-faith by affirming the possibility of meaning and the possibility of responsible participation in mystery toward meaning.
PART III

HOME
CHAPTER FIVE

FINITUDE AND FAITH, EXILE AND [RE-]UNION

In 1958, more than twenty years after the original publication of the essays that constituted his first published work *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, Albert Camus finally consented to allow their republication. In the preface which he wrote for the republished version, while explicitly noting the inadequacies which he continued to believe plagued these early essays, Camus discloses the situation which inspired and thus unites the individual essays, that of a young man out of place, struggling to find his way in a world within which he did not feel at home, his father and mother lost to death and silence, respectively, with nothing to direct him except for what, without interpretive aid, he could decipher from the world around him or find within himself. Yet with this new account, Camus does not merely emphasize the experiences which inspired his first writings; rather, he contends that these ‘original’ experiences likewise contain a key constitutive element around which all of his work, as a whole, centers. In this light, the essays comprised in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* may be seen not only as Camus’ starting point but also as the foundation upon which each subsequent work stands:

If, in spite of so many efforts to create a language and bring myths to life, I never manage to rewrite *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, I shall have achieved nothing. … In the dream that life is, here is man, who finds his truths and loses them on this mortal earth, in order to return through wars, cries, the folly of justice and love, in short through pain, toward that tranquil land where death itself is a happy silence. Here still… Yes, nothing prevents one from dreaming, in the very hour of exile, since at least I know this, with sure and certain knowledge: a man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.¹

With this declaration, written by Camus after the publication of the last of his completed works

and so near his death, Camus explicitly places his own personal experience of exile and the longing for home at the heart of all of his writing. It was contended in the preceding chapters that the individual engagement with exile is a central theme and presence in Camus’ work; it may now be equally suggested that Camus’ choice to so depict the condition of exile and possible manners of transcending the condition may itself be regarded as a deliberate and intentional attempt to engage the condition of his own experience of exile. Through the construction of stories and his concentrated attempts to “bring myths to life” as a way of engaging his own ontological situation, Camus implicitly posits the ‘act of literature’—story telling and myth making—as a legitimate manner of taking account of, and responsibility for, the meaning of the ontological situation. Further, the literature that Camus produced to both depict and stand as such an engagement likewise both depicts and stands as the act of faith through which the ontological situation is fully resolved. With the formulation and articulation of his ‘myth’ of exile and [re-]union, Camus ultimately embarked upon a unified effort, through literature and in faith, toward the transcendence of existential exile. It is toward this conclusion that the present work has been directed, and this chapter will complete the final steps of that trajectory. Following a brief discussion of the capacity of ‘story’ and ‘myth’ to create meaning, particularly within the explicit context of the exile experience, the specifically religious nature of such a creation of meaning will be discussed. Finally, a concluding evaluation of Camus’ comprehensive myth of exile and [re-]union will be offered, from which a full and final picture of the transcendence of existential exile and the meaning of home will emerge.

Creating Meaning

It was suggested early in the present investigation that one of the primary distinctions between the Modernist and Postmodernist sensibilities can be found in the respective pursuits of
absolute Truth and meaning; recognizing the persistence of fundamental human limitations and thus the impossibility of attaining an absolute humanly knowable Truth, the Postmodernist sensibility allows for the individual assumption of responsibility for the realization of meaning which can stand in place of Truth. Here it will be contended that literature, as a means of constructing and developing a particular myth, is an appropriate and effective means toward the realization of such meaning.

Hans-Georg Gadamer contends that ‘Truth’ is the flowing together of subjective and objective into one unified and unifying experience. In Gadamer’s terms, the experience of art holds the possibility of being an experience of truth precisely because the relation that is sparked between the individual and the work of art can (in fact, ought to) achieve such a unity between individual and artwork, thereby reaching a unification (and thus a transcendence) of the subjective and objective stances. The two are one; in encountering the work as object, one similarly encounters oneself in (and therefore as) the object. Both the individual and the artwork are subjectified and objectified; one becomes wholly identified with the other, and the two are thus inseparable. The truth of the work of art is the union produced in the relation. This point is suggested both by the ‘character’ of truth itself toward which Gadamer’s hermeneutic points, and by his specific consideration of art. Yet perhaps the most conclusive analysis which reveals the truth of the work of art is to be found in the notion of ‘beauty’ itself.

Gadamer’s treatment of beauty is largely informed by that of the Greeks; as Gadamer notes in his examination of beauty in art, “for the Greeks it was the heavenly order of the cosmos that presented the true vision of the beautiful.”

According to the account which Plato gives in the *Phaedrus*, the soul, when it is most perfect, is winged and thereby able to traverse the realm

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where the gods dwell and thus experience the divine nature and the Absolute forms of all things. In this realm alone is the full measure of being realized, and all that exists on earth in mortal existence is a dim imitation of that which the unfettered soul experiences in the realm of the Absolutes.

Of that place beyond the heavens none of our earthly poets has yet sung, and none shall sing worthily. But this is the manner of it, for assuredly we must be bold to speak what is true, above all when our discourse is upon truth. It is there that true being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul’s pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof.\(^3\)

While the soul’s experience of the Absolute is what illuminates all knowledge which the individual possesses, this experience does not last and the soul is returned to the mortal world of imitation. Of those condemned in this manner, Plato concludes:

> These souls who, so to speak, have lost their wings, are weighted down by earthly cares, unable to scale the heights of the truth. There is one experience that causes their wings to grow once again and that allows them to ascend once more. This is the experience of love and the beautiful, the love of the beautiful.\(^4\)

The connection which Plato makes here between the recognition of the knowledge of the Absolute and the experience of the beautiful is fundamental to Gadamer’s ultimate conclusions regarding truth and art. The underlying \textit{harmony} which is the character of the truth of art, whereby the distinctions between individual and artwork, subject and object, are transcended in the mutual self-recognition and the play of dialectic and dialogue which constitutes the relatedness and thereby calls into being each object in relation, is realized through the experience of the beautiful. Gadamer concludes:

> It is by virtue of the beautiful that we are able to acquire a lasting remembrance of the true world. This is the way of philosophy. Plato describes the beautiful as


\(^4\) Ibid., 250d.
that which shines forth most clearly and draws us to itself, as the very visibility of the ideal. In the beautiful presented in nature and art, we experience this convincing illumination of truth and harmony, which compels the admission: ‘This is true.’

In Gadamer’s view, the experience of beauty teaches that, despite the seeming separation between ‘absolute’ and ‘subjectivity,’ between ‘whole’ and ‘particular,’ each element-in-relation is what it is precisely because of its presence in the other. Plato contends that the experience of particular beauty, more than the experience of any other particular, most nearly approaches the experience of absolute beauty, in that in order for any particular entity to be beautiful it must possess some degree of absolute beauty; the beauty of any particular object is illuminated by the radiance of absolute beauty which it possesses. There is thus no distinction between the two; that which is beautiful possesses and is possessed by absolute beauty, and the experience of beauty in art is the ultimate symbol, for Gadamer, of the realization of the necessary harmony which is the underlying character of truth. Gadamer concludes:

The important message that [Plato’s Phaedrus] has to teach is that the essence of the beautiful does not lie in some realm simply opposed to reality. On the contrary, we learn that however unexpected our encounter with art may be, it gives us an assurance that the truth does not lie far off and inaccessible to us, but can be encountered in the disorder of reality with all its imperfections, evils, errors, extremes, and fateful confusions. The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real.

It is only through the experience of beauty that one is able to most fully catch a glimpse of that realm with which one had once been united; it is thus through beauty that one most fully experiences the ‘good’ and the ‘true’ as they are to be found in a reunion with the ‘whole.’ Beauty is therefore the symbol (the character) of truth and of the possibility of reconciliation. In

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5 Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” in The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). This is a translation of the 1977 essay Die Aktualität des Schönen, which itself was a revised version of a lecture entitled “Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival” (delivered 1974, published 1975), 15.

6 Ibid.
his essay *The Rebel*, Camus reached a similar conclusion:

But perhaps there is a living transcendence, of which beauty carries the promise, which can make this mortal and limited world preferable to and more appealing than any other. Art thus leads us back to the origins of rebellion, to the extent that it tries to give its form to an elusive value which the future perpetually promises, but of which the artist has a presentiment and wishes to snatch from the grasp of history.\(^7\)

The truth to be found in the beauty of art, in accord with both Gadamer’s and Camus’ conception, is revelatory of the possibility of reconciliation and transcendence.

Yet while Gadamer’s conception of the ‘truth’ of art seems to depend upon the presumption that a harmony between the ideal and real must be possible, Camus’ account rests on the declaration that even if such a harmony is presented as a fabrication, the *meaning* of that account is not thereby undermined. For Camus, art thus acknowledges the meaning that is absent in the world, while depicting the world in a new way that, though not necessarily a present or future reality, still stands as a real *possibility* if not an inevitability. Thus the unity that art is intended to portray, while not presented as a Truth, is no less meaningful by being ‘merely’ a possibility. As Camus explains, “Artistic creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world. But it rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is.”\(^8\) Art must hold as its center a recognition of the world as it is and as it is experienced, without illusion. Yet at the same time, art must likewise propose aspects of existence which, though not necessary or inevitable are also not necessarily precluded from being so. Camus further explains:

*Art, in a sense, is a revolt against everything fleeting and unfinished in the world. Consequently, its only aim is to give another form to a reality that it is nevertheless forced to preserve as the source of its emotion. … Art is neither*


\(^8\) Ibid., 253.
complete rejection nor complete acceptance of what is. It is simultaneously rejection and acceptance, and this is why it must be a perpetually renewed wrenching apart. The artist constantly lives in such a state of ambiguity, incapable of negating the real and yet eternally bound to question it in its eternally unfinished aspects. ... The loftiest work will always be...the work that maintains an equilibrium between reality and man’s rejection of that reality, each forcing the other upward in a ceaseless overflowing, characteristic of life itself at its most joyous and heart-rending extremes. Then, every once in a while, a new world appears, different from the everyday world and yet the same, particular but universal, full of innocent insecurity—called forth for a few hours by the power and longing of genius.⁹

Ultimately, that which the world is not, but which art tries to depict its capacity to be, is a place where one can be at home.

For Camus, the novel stands as the art form most appropriate and most capable of realizing the potential of art as pointing the way toward meaningful reconciliation between the individual and the world in its “ability to show at the same time a harmonious sense of fatality and an art that springs wholly from individual liberty—to present, in short, the perfect domain in which the forces of destiny collide with human decisions.”¹⁰ Yet nearly forty years before Camus was to venture this contention, Georg Lukács, in terms that could have paved the way for Camus’ eventual conception of the novel, suggested that “the form of the novel is, like no other one, an expression of transcendental homelessness.”¹¹ John Neubauer explains that Lukács’ contention was, at least in part, informed by Hegel’s conception of the novel as “the epic of a prosaic and

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bourgeois world.” In Hegel’s view, precisely because human history is headed inexorably toward a final and total reconciliation and reunion with the Divine, the novel would eventually cease to be necessary as a means of depicting or effecting such a reconciliation. Lukács, however, as Neubauer explains, did not share Hegel’s optimism regarding the inevitable course of human history; instead, for Lukács the “crisis of the arts became an index of the spirit’s general alienation,” and “homelessness in the novel came to indicate the world itself was out of joint.”

Without reference to Lukács, Camus reaches a similar conclusion regarding the place of the novel in the absence, if not impossibility, of a total Hegelian reconciliation. According to Camus’ understanding of Hegel’s conception of the fate of art (particularly the novel), because art is exclusively intended to depict the reconciliation with spirit, once that reconciliation becomes a reality there will no longer be a place, or need, for art: “According to the revolutionary interpreters of Hegel’s Phenomenology, there will be no art in reconciled society. Beauty will be lived and no longer only imagined. Reality, become entirely rational, will satisfy, completely by itself, every appetite.” Yet Camus himself, and the Postmodernist spirit in general, refused to accept the Hegelian reconciliation as necessary and inevitable, and for Camus it remains the task of art, of literature in particular, to depict such a reconciliation as a meaningful human possibility; rather than depict an essential reality (Truth) of human existence, literature is meant to present a search for meaning and a possible path toward reunion and redemption.

Camus’ conception of art as a corrective force imposed upon human reality is consistent

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13 For a discussion of Hegel’s anticipation of this reconciliation, see Chapter Two.


15 Camus, The Rebel, 254.
with, and ultimately an extension of, his theory of revolt as the only appropriate response to the absurdity of existence. Just as the position in revolt may allow the individual to accept and abide an absurd existence, art likewise creates an interpretation of the world that is more hospitable to and acceptable for the individual:

In every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it, and the construction of a substitute universe. Rebellions, from this point of view, are fabricators of universes. This also defines art. The demands of rebellion are really, in part, aesthetic demands. All rebel thought…is expressed either in rhetoric or in a closed universe. The rhetoric and ramparts in Lucretius, the convents and isolated castles of Sade, the island or the lonely rock of the romantics, the solitary heights of Nietzsche, the primeval seas of Lautréamont, the parapets of Rimbaud, the terrifying castles of the surrealists, which spring up in a storm of flowers, the prison, the nation behind barbed wire, the concentration camps, the empire of free slaves, all illustrate, after their own fashion, the same need for coherence and unity. **In these sealed worlds, man can reign and have knowledge at last.**16

Literature thus becomes, for Camus, more than merely an account of the world as it is experienced and understood in human existence. Rather, literature offers an account that allows for a re-engagement with the world, allowing for possibilities and meanings that might not otherwise present themselves to immediate human experience. As Judith Melton contends, “the task of mind [and ultimately of writing], then, is to shape external reality.”17 In this way, literature assumes the power and the responsibility of myth, as the human mind, through its capacity to create art, becomes “a great shape-maker impelled forever to find order in [itself] and to give it to the universe,”18 committed to “an attempt at explaining something about human nature and the human

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16 Ibid., 255; emphasis added.


condition.”¹⁹ For Camus, the specific and ultimate reality of the human condition which the myth is intended to explain is the experience of existential exile; mythic literature, for Camus, must therefore portray, and ultimately must realize, a particular unity in exile; it must “extract from the incessant flight of forms, by means of memory and intelligence alone, the tentative trembling symbols of human unity. The most definite challenge that a work of this kind can give to creation is to present itself as an entirety, as a closed and unified world.”²⁰

In his essay What Is Literature?, Jean-Paul Sartre seems to suggest that any human interaction with the world, whether undertaken explicitly toward the creation of art or not, contains some sense of the kind of ‘corrective’ interpretation of the world that Camus suggests literature should entail. Following from Edmund Husserl’s contention that ‘constitution,’ the generation of meaning in human reality, is ultimately a product of the manner in which that reality is experienced by consciousness and ultimately revealed to and structured for consciousness,²¹ Sartre acknowledges that all human experience of the world is shaped to some degree by the particular consciousness which experiences a relation to the world. However, Sartre likewise acknowledges that art, and literature in particular, seeks not only to present such a relation between human consciousness and the world but also to emphasize the relation as an essential quality of existence:

   Each of our perceptions is accompanied by the consciousness that human reality is a ‘revealers,’ that is, to put it differently, that man is the means by which things are manifested. It is our presence in the world which multiplies relations. … [At the same time,] to our inner certainty of being ‘revealers’ is added that of being inessential in relation to the thing revealed. One of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential

¹⁹ Ibid., 18.

²⁰ Camus, The Rebel, 265.

²¹ For a discussion of Husserl’s phenomenological conception of ‘constitution,’ see Chapter One.
in relationship to the world.\textsuperscript{22}

In Sartre’s view as it is expressed here, the artist, longing for an inherent connection with the world, attempts to both experience and portray the world in such a manner that makes this kind of relation both evident and essential.

For the exile, whether the experience of exile is literal or metaphoric, this view of literature has a particular relevance as a possible manner of transcendence. As was suggested in Chapter Two, there is a persistent and prevalent tendency to equate the position of the writer with that of exile, whether the specific writer does or does not truly and immediately find oneself literally in exile. In a recent essay on the exile experience, Roberto Bolaño, himself an exile, chose to focus on the exile inherent in the vocation of writing rather than on the conditions which precipitated or defined his own literal exile from Chili. In Bolaño’s view, implicit in all literature is an aspect of exile: “All literature carries exile within it, whether the writer has had to pick up and go at the age of twenty or has never left home.”\textsuperscript{23} To this contention Bolaño adds that, whether truly an exile or not, by choosing to write one is simultaneously choosing an existence in exile: “every writer becomes an exile simply by venturing into literature.”\textsuperscript{24}

Yet if the choice to write truly does foster a state of exile, it may likewise be said that it makes a transcendence of exile possible. To begin, simply in the act of writing, it may be possible to bridge the gap that is perceived to exist between the individual in exile and the world. This point, alluded to in Sartre’s contention that artistic creation is in part intended to present an essential human relation with the world, is more explicitly articulated by Judith Melton:


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 51.
I maintain…that transforming the experience [of exile] from memory and emotion to narrative of any kind is itself a valued and powerful imaginative response. The writing process itself creates a transformation for the exile, helping him or her to overcome the psychological trauma of the experience.\textsuperscript{25}

For Melton, the act itself of writing, independent of the actual content of that writing, may help the exile to establish the connection needed to transform and transcend the experience. At the same time, however, the content of the writing ought not be ignored; as has been suggested throughout the previous discussion, there is an immense importance in the manner in which the writer, the exile, chooses to portray human reality in created literature, as it is precisely this portrayal which is intended to foster a deeper understanding of the reality as well as its meaning. For the exile in particular, this meaning must address explicitly the condition of exile and its transcendence; as Michael Seidel contends, “the task for the exile, especially the exiled artist, is to transform the figure of rupture back into a ‘figure of reconnection.’”\textsuperscript{26} The writer, from a position alone, in exile, seeks to transcend this condition through the creation of a unifying myth, creating a world united in relation while simultaneously creating and entering into a new relation between oneself (as writer) and a reader who takes up the necessary position opposite the writer in a reciprocal dialogue; though placed at opposite poles in this newly created relationship, both writer and reader are wholly co-dependent on each other, and thus on the relation itself, for their existence. The mythic literature that is created in this fashion therefore engages the challenge of exile on two fronts: first by fashioning a story to account for the ontological situation in exile and the possibility for meaning within that situation, and second by establishing a relationship within which both poles, writer and reader, may transcend their respective positions in exile in relation to each other.

It was noted above that, for Camus, literature is intended as a corrective interpretation of

\textsuperscript{25} Melton, \textit{The Face of Exile}, xviii.

human reality, as the creation of “an imaginary world...which is created by the rectification of
the actual world.”

Though Camus does not explicitly refer to the condition of exile here, because the condition of exile is a fundamental constitutive element of both Camus’ conception of literature as well as the literature that he himself created, it may be concluded that the imaginary world that is created is one in which the meaning of the condition of exile, as well as its possible transcendence, are given over to human understanding. Writing more explicitly of the literal condition of exile, Edward Said notes, in similar fashion, that “much of the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule.”

What is consistent with both views is the exile’s/artist’s need to create a new world within which the condition of exile is transcended and some manner of reconciliation is possible. What is not explicitly stated, but which is consistently implied by each, is the inherently religious nature of the need for and attempt to create such a ‘new world’; this longing for ‘home,’ constituted as a quest for meaning in relation within the finitude and existential exile which constitute the ontological situation, is ultimately a religious quest for reconciliation and salvation. In this sense, the act of literary creation which attempts to effect a transcendence of existential exile, specifically as Camus understands and undertakes such an act, must be seen as religious in nature, thus the body of art which Camus erects to account for and respond to the condition of exile may be recognized as a unified religious myth of the human condition.

The Religious Myth

At the outset of the present investigation, it was proposed that a persistent questioning of

27 Camus, The Rebel, 264.

the meaning of human existence is an essential component of such existence itself; that is, to
exist fully is to question the meaning of the existence in which one participates. It was also
suggested that ‘religion,’ broadly characterized as the organization of stories and symbols
intended to explain the ‘whole’ of the reality of human existence, past, present, and future,
individually and collectively, likewise stands as an ever-present and effective manner of
following, of living, such questioning. Religion, in this account, stands for the attempt, however
the attempt is constituted, to engage and preserve the mystery of human existence in an effort to
achieve the possible identification of meaning.

In the discussion of the ancient Greek account of mystery and meaning offered in Chapter
One, ‘myth’ was more explicitly presented as a religious endeavor, the specific purpose of
which was to disclose a possible meaning of human existence within the limits imposed by the
fundamental condition in/of mystery. It was acknowledged that myth, constituted as a plausible
account of a particular aspect of human reality, is not intended as a statement of truth; rather,
myth stands as a metaphoric account of the search for meaning from which the first steps of a
progressive commitment toward self-identification are taken. Precisely because it fosters such
committed identification in the search for meaning, myth represents an engagement in faith.
Within this conception, the purpose of myth is twofold: it must first account for why some
aspect of human existence is as it is, and it must then reveal how one may, and ultimately
compel one to, live more fully if the account given by the myth is accepted as such. In accord
with this characterization, a transformative power of myth may be suggested in that the myth,
by superimposing a cohesive story and order onto the incomplete reality of human existence,
provides both an acceptable account of what is and has been as well as a plausible direction
toward what may be. Here, perhaps, may be seen the first signs of an unmistakable parallel
between this conception of myth and the particular conception of literature discussed above; in
each case, what is offered is an attempt to tell a complete story of some aspect of human existence that cannot possibly be completely known, thus the aspects which are doomed to remain a mystery to human knowledge are elucidated through the application of human imagination and desire. The world that exists for human knowledge and human experience is reconciled with the world which the individual longs to inhabit, in such a manner that this reconciled world becomes a meaningful possibility; this is the implicit purpose of myth as discussed above, and it is likewise the ultimate goal of literary creation according to Camus.

However, it must be emphasized that the explanatory capacity of either myth or literature is only one aspect of the religious nature of both; in addition to providing a plausible account in response to a particular question of meaning in human existence, the myth/story must also compel one to act in a particular manner. Further, by acting in a way that is consonant with the account that is conveyed by the myth, it is possible that the meaning suggested by the myth may be more fully realized as a human reality. Ernest Becker, who defines myth as “an ideal that might be worked toward and so partly realized,” sums up this contention:

As [Suzanne] Langer explains, some myths are vegetative, they generate real conceptual power, real apprehension of a dim truth, some kind of global adumbration of what we miss by sharp, analytic reason. Most of all, as William James and Tillich have argued, beliefs about reality affect people’s actions” they help introduce the new into the world. Especially is this true for beliefs about man, about human nature, and about what man may yet become. If something influences our efforts to change the world, then to some extent it must change that world.29

By participating in the myth, which entails not just an acceptance of its ‘story’ but also a determined consent to live the story oneself, one thereby attains a heightened state of being toward meaning that is inaccessible in ordinary human experience and thus realizes the religious experience of the myth. As Mircea Eliade concludes, “‘Living’ a myth, then, implies a

genuinely ‘religious’ experience, ...[whereby] one re-enacts fabulous, exalting, significant events, one again witnesses the creative deeds of the Supernaturals; one ceases to exist in the everyday world and enters a transfigured, auroral world impregnated with the Supernaturals’ presence.”

Yet this transformative, religious quality of myth is not exclusive to myth; just as the capacity to portray a ‘reconciled’ world is a quality shared with literature, so too does literature possess the potential to inspire an acute identification with the content of the story, to compel one to respond in a particular manner, and thus to provoke a profound transcendence of ordinary experience toward a religious experience. Karen Armstrong, in the concluding pages of her *A Short History of Myth*, articulates this fundamental similarity between myth and literature:

> If it is written and read with serious attention, a novel, like a myth or any great work of art, can become an initiation that helps us to make a painful rite of passage form one phase of life, one state of mind, to another. *A novel, like a myth, teaches us to see the world differently;* it shows us how to look into our own hearts and to see our world from a perspective that goes beyond our own self-interest. If professional religious leaders cannot instruct us in mythical lore, our artists and creative writers can perhaps step into this priestly role and bring fresh insight into our lost and damaged world.”

George Steiner, writing before Armstrong’s account of myth, had suggested a similar contention regarding the compelling transformative quality of literature. In *Real Presences*, a text which to an extent informed Armstrong’s conclusions, Steiner argues that “the encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious and of metaphysical experience, the most ‘ingressive,’ transformative summons available to human experiencing.” In both Steiner’s and Armstrong’s account, in terms which allude to the religious quality of myth, literature is


presented as an equally compelling account of meaning in human reality and as an equally compelling transformative force upon human existence.

It should perhaps here be explicitly noted that the preceding is by no means presented as, nor is it presumed or intended to be, a comprehensive account of the religious, transformative power of myth or of literature, nor of the parallels that are proposed to exist between the two. Given the scope and primary purpose of the present investigation, this is an unfortunate but necessary limitation that cannot here be escaped. To this all-too-brief discussion, however, one final addition may be made, which will stand as immensely important and relevant to the aims of the present study. To stand as a definitive word in the present discussion, and in terms which are wholly in accord with what has been contended throughout, Camus offers the following assessment:

It is not sufficient to live, there must be a destiny that does not have to wait for death. It is therefore justifiable to say that man has an idea of a better world than this. But better does not mean different, it means unified. This passion which lifts the mind above the commonplaces of a dispersed world, from which it nevertheless cannot free itself, is the passion for unity. It does not result in mediocre efforts to escape, however, but in the most obstinate demands. Religion or crime, every human endeavor in fact, finally obeys this unreasonable desire and claims to give life a form it does not have. The same impulse, which can lead to the adoration of the heavens or the destruction of man, also leads to creative literature, which derives its serious content from this source.

What, in fact, is a novel but a universe in which action is endowed with form, where final words are pronounced, where people possess one another completely, and where life assumes the aspect of destiny? The world of the novel is only a rectification of the world we live in, in pursuance of man’s deepest wishes.  

Here Camus reiterates much of what was discussed in the previous section, in particular the manner in which a primary aim of literature is to create a world which reconciles an ideal with a human reality; however, what Camus adds here is an explicit acknowledgement of the similarity between the impulse to create a literary account of the world and the impulse to follow the

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33 Camus, *The Rebel*, 262–263.
religious desire. In each case, according to Camus’ account, the individual attempts to assign an order and a meaning to a human reality which does not appear to have either. Further, on a more implicit level, the purpose and spirit which drive Camus’ conception of literature as well as the literature itself that he creates is clearly a product of a similar religious desire; the engagement that he consistently portrays in his works,\textsuperscript{34} as well as the engagement that he himself commits himself to through the very act of creating such literature, which emerges and is realized against the mysterious quality of human existence in the world toward both meaning and the ultimate declaration and definition of one’s place in the world is, at its heart, a religious engagement. In the vision of reconciliation which Camus imagines, and attempts to realize, between the human desire for union and relation and the human reality of silence and mystery, lies the only salvation which stands as a meaningful human possibility—the [re-]turn home.

Further, as was proposed at the conclusion of the previous chapter and may now be more fully explored here, Camus’ religious literature of the transcendence of existential exile toward a possible home in [re-]union both depicts and stands as itself a commitment in faith.

Regardless of the manner in which the question is raised and answers are attempted, the course toward meaning must follow the path marked out by religious faith; the religious desire to discover one’s place, and thus meaning, in mystery and exile is a matter which can only be resolved through a particular engagement in faith. While a more precise definition of the kind of faith that is required was fully articulated at the conclusion of Chapter One, it may perhaps now be clarified precisely how this conception of faith fits with Camus’ conception of literature as it applies to his own oeuvre. To this end, a return to Karen Armstrong’s articulation of the development of faith as a concept, as she presents this trajectory in her recent text \textit{The Case for God}, may be helpful.

\textsuperscript{34} For an in-depth discussion of specific works, see Chapters Three and Four.
Armstrong suggests that, prior to the transformation of the perceived meaning of ‘faith’ that began around the time of the European Enlightenment, ‘faith’ was meant to name a manner of practice and commitment which was actively undertaken both individually and collectively. Rather than being centered around a set of doctrines of Truths, religion instead consisted in ritual practices which were meant to not only express but also to strengthen the religious commitment of the individual and the community; as Armstrong explains, “religion…was not primarily something that people thought but something that they did.”

The philosophers of ancient Greece, who exemplified in many respects the ‘spirit’ of religion as it has been discussed here, likewise suitably represent the essential qualities that Armstrong emphasizes as most closely aligned with the original meaning and intention of religion:

[T]heir way of life required an act of faith (pistis) that had to be renewed every day. This did not, of course, mean that they had to ‘believe’ blindly in the doctrines of their school, whose truth became evident only in the context of its spiritual and moral disciplines. *Pistis* meant ‘trust,’ ‘loyalty,’ ‘engagement,’ and ‘commitment.’

Armstrong contends that religion arises in the confrontation with mystery, against questions that can only be answered with silence, in recognition of the impossibility of completeness or perfection in thought or in action. Further, in Armstrong’s terms, religion is realized in a particular way of living which accepts these conditions while constantly engaging oneself in practical and perpetual commitment to action, individually and collectively, toward a way of believing and living that is more whole. Religious faith is thus the primary human capacity which may allow one to confront the finitude within which human existence is circumscribed.

Yet over the course of her comprehensive survey of the development of religious faith, Armstrong does note that the particular aim noted above as the primary intention of religion is

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36 Ibid., 74.
not exclusive to religion alone. Setting the stage for our return to Camus and what has here been referred to as Camus’ conception of mythic literature, Armstrong similarly notes the manner in which art may intend, and perhaps even achieve, the identical goals of religion. As she explains, “Like art, religion is an attempt to construct meaning in the face of the relentless pain and injustice of life. As meaning-seeking creatures, men and women fall very easily into despair. They have created religions and works of art to help them find value in their lives, despite all the dispiriting evidence to the contrary.”\footnote{Ibid., 8.} In this sense, it may be suggested that the human tendency to create and to engage oneself with literature is motivated by the same drives and desires that motivate religious commitment. Or, perhaps more accurately, it may be suggested that the human tendency to create and to engage oneself with literature is itself the desire for religious commitment. In each case, what is desired is a story which expands in all directions, account for the meaning of both the past and present while also making meaning possible in the future; in either literature or religion, a new human reality is both desired and created. In this manner, according to Armstrong, both religion and literature converge toward a realization of such a reality: “Religious language was essentially symbolic; it was ‘disgusting’ if interpreted literally, but symbolically it had the power to manifest a transcendent reality in the same way as the short stories of Tolstoy. Such works of art did not argue their case or produce evidence but somehow called into being the ineffable reality they evoked.”\footnote{Ibid., 279.}

Here Armstrong presents this congruence, if not explicit identity, between literature and religion in terms that recall Camus’ characterizations as discussed above, such as his claim that the primary aim of art is to “give another form to a reality” in hope that “a new world
[may appear], different from the everyday world and yet the same, particular but universal, full of innocent insecurity—called forth for a few hours by the power and longing of genius.”\(^{39}\) The “ineffable reality” and “new world” to which Armstrong and Camus respectively refer is not intended to effect, nor can it ultimately effect, an overcoming of the ontological condition of human finitude. However, what can be evoked is an experience of reality whereby a particular manifestation of the ontological fact of finitude, such as existential exile, may be transcended in a finite manner and a harmony, home, realized in finitude. Both Armstrong and Camus emphasize not just the capacity of both art and literature to offer a plausible account of some facet of human reality, but also the attendant and subsequent contention that both, with sufficient commitment, can ultimately effect, if only in a finite manner, a realization of the reality that each presents. While Armstrong’s text offers a number of compelling examples of how a committed and lived faith was able to engender a new and desired human reality, perhaps the most relevant for the present investigation may be her account of the Israelites in exile:

Israel was not a people because the Israelites lived in a particular country, but because they lived in the presence of a God who accompanied them wherever they happened to be. Their present exile was simply the latest instance of the tragic uprooting that had given Israel special insight into the nature of the divine. … The exiles would create a sense of the divine presence by living as if they were priests serving in the Jerusalem temple. … [T]he exiles had [thus] become a nation of priests and must live as if God were dwelling in their midst, thus ritually creating an invisible, symbolic temple. There was a profound link between exile and holiness.\(^{40}\)

The Israelites, longing to end their period of exile from home and from God, were able to realize a transcendence of their exile through engagement, commitment, and practice, which Armstrong suggests are the primary and primordial components of religious faith. By living as

\(^{39}\) Albert Camus, “Create Dangerously,” 265.

\(^{40}\) Armstrong, The Case for God, 41.
if they were at all times at home in their original temple with God, they were thus able to realize their holiness and God’s presence. Neither reason nor direct experience can achieve such a transformation of human reality, and where art is able to do so it is because it is buoyed by a religious desire and a religious commitment in faith. In her concluding assessment of this shared intention and capacity in religion and in art, Armstrong again addresses the matter in terms which are consistent with those from Camus:

Religion’s task, closely allied to that of art, was to help us to live creatively, peacefully, and even joyously with realities for which there were no easy explanations and problems that we could not solve: mortality, pain, grief, despair, and outrage at the injustice and cruelty of life. Over the centuries people in all cultures discovered that by pushing their reasoning powers to the limit, stretching language to the end of its tether, and living as selflessly and compassionately as possible, they experienced a transcendence that enabled them to affirm their suffering with serenity and courage. … Religion is a practical discipline, and its insights are not derived from abstract speculation but from spiritual exercises and a dedicated lifestyle. Without such practice, it is impossible to understand the truth of its doctrines.41

Faith is a primordial human religious category in the human confrontation with the ontological situation. Mythic literature, which seeks to both account for and directly engage the aspects of human reality which foster and necessitate faith of this kind, is thus the performance of such faith. It has been suggested throughout the present investigation that the literature that Camus created may be characterized as ‘mythic,’ and that within his works, as well as within his intention in creating such works, Camus exemplifies the notion of faith that has been proposed herein. Perhaps now, in light of Armstrong’s articulation of the correspondence between literature and religious faith as myth, the full extent of the suggested assessment of Camus is clear: with his literature, Camus has provided not a Truth intended to rectify the ontological situation but rather an account which allows for, individually and collectively, an acceptance of mystery, limits, and existential exile while suggesting meaningful possibilities toward home. In

41 Ibid., 318.
the individual works that he created, as well as with the whole of his oeuvre considered as a unified totality, Albert Camus generated an imaginary re-enactment and recasting of the human condition, an unceremonious liturgy of exile and [re-]union.

The First Man

In his book *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur analyzed the Adamic myth in order to account for the fundamental presence of evil in humanity. In his account, as was discussed in Chapter Two of the present investigation, Ricoeur presents Adam as both the ‘first’ (i.e., ‘original’) man as well as the first man to commit sin; in this way, Adam represents the original manifestation of the human capacity for evil. Ricoeur concludes that Adam is a representation not just of what happened originally to humanity but also what will continue to happen as a continuous and essential part of human existence; as such, Adam is not just the first human but also the archetypal human. As Ricoeur argues, “If Adam is not the first man, in the naïvely temporal sense of the word, but the typical man, he can symbolize both the experience of the ‘beginning’ of humanity with each individual and the experience of the ‘succession’ of men.”

With this account, Ricoeur concludes that the human capacity to commit sin, which he names ‘evil,’ is an essential component of human character. Further, if evil truly is a fundamental human capacity, then the consequence of that capacity must likewise be an equally fundamental component of human character. The Adamic myth, therefore, by Ricoeur’s account, reconciles not just Adam’s being as an individual but likewise points the way toward a deeper understanding, and similar reconciliation, for humanity as a whole; all of this is accomplished, Ricoeur concludes, through the creation and perpetuation of a story:

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The myth tries to get at the enigma of human existence, namely, the discordance between the fundamental reality...and the actual modality of man.... The myth accounts for this transition by means of a narration. But it is a narration precisely because there is no deduction, no logical transition, between the fundamental reality of man and his present existence, between his ontological status as a being created and good and destined for happiness and his existential or historical status, experienced under the sign of alienation. Thus the myth has an ontological bearing: it points to the relation—that is to say, both the leap and the passage, the cut and the suture—between essential being of man and his historical existence.\textsuperscript{43}

In this way, Ricoeur concludes, the myth depicts and creates a unified whole, a world with a reconciliation of human reality at its center. While Ricoeur’s explicit primary concern is with the human reality of evil, there is likewise within Ricoeur’s account an implicit place for the human reality of exile. Adam, as both the first human as well as the paradigmatic human, realizes his humanness precisely through his act of evil and his subsequent exile from the Garden; therefore, to be human is to be in exile.

The explication of existential exile offered in Chapter Two of the present study concluded with the contention that exile is experienced as a discontinuity, disconnection, or disorientation. It was likewise suggested that, because of the condition of existential exile and the ontological situation of human existence that is encountered as/in exile, a comprehensive myth such as that with which Ricoeur is concerned may be an appropriate, and perhaps necessary, response. As Karen Armstrong suggested in \textit{A Case for God}, the historical transformation of the meaning of ‘faith’ has begun to return back to its original conception (as practice and commitment), as it was intended in such formulations as that of the ancient Greeks. In parallel, the underlying purpose which guided the construction and perpetuation of myth to account for meaning is no less present and relevant in the Postmodernist concern than it was in that of the ancient Greeks; without presuming to declare the human need for

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 163; emphasis added.
meaning as a necessary Truth of existence, such need may perhaps rightfully be characterized as a necessary constitutive step in the realization of the highest human capacity and possibility. It is in this context that the need for a myth of exile and [re-]union emerges, a need which is ultimately fulfilled in the works of Albert Camus.

It may perhaps be appropriate to begin an account of Camus’ ‘myth’ by returning to *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The explicit treatment of Sisyphus with which the text concludes presents a compelling myth of the ontological situation and the appropriate manner of living in response. Condemned to ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only to watch it roll back to the bottom each time and have to begin again, Camus’ Sisyphus is the epitome of the individual who lives, and recognizes, the absurd: he knows that there is no underlying purpose to his labor, and thus there is no ground for hope that he will eventually succeed in his task. Yet Sisyphus also recognizes that his rock, and thus his fate, is always in his hands, and through this understanding he is able to accept and live his fate, with happiness: “All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing.”44 From the example of Sisyphus, Camus concludes that anyone who finds oneself similarly situated in the absurdity of existence may equally respond with acceptance and happiness: “Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. … The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days.”45 Equipped with the lucidity which allows one to recognize and accept the absurdity of existence, along with the conviction that, despite its absurdity human existence may still be lived *meaningfully*, Camus’ mythic hero of the absurd can endure all aspects of the

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45 Ibid.
ontological situation, including the crushing weight of a rock that will always fall:

At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning to his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory’s eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling.46

Despite the unintelligibility and limits which characterize human existence, despite the struggle, turmoil, and despair which will inevitably result, Sisyphus is given as Camus’ mythic evidence that one can not only endure but live meaningfully and happily; thus Camus concludes his myth of Sisyphus by suggesting that, despite the absurdity which ultimately defines the ontological situation, “[t]he struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”47

With this myth, Camus offers one possible example of a particular manner of recognizing, accepting, and living within the absurdity of human existence. However, given the preceding discussion of mythic literature, it may perhaps be contended that this particular myth does not offer a complete enough story, while also perhaps not fully addressing the condition of exile or the possibility of reconciliation in relation and a [re-]union in home. Yet Camus’ ‘myth’ of Sisyphus is but one component of the complete myth that Camus created; there is an unmistakable common thread among Camus’ individual works which unites them together as a single account. Throughout, the experience of exile, which Camus both experienced personally throughout his life and also recognized at the heart of the absurd, weaves the discrete stories together into a cohesive, intentional account of exile and [re-]union. As this overarching and unifying myth unfolds in Camus’ literary works, what began in the experience of exile and the

46 Ibid., 123.
47 Ibid., 123.
absurd begins to find resolution, particularly in later works such as *The Plague*, *The Fall*, and *Exile and the Kingdom*, in the realization of relation as the possibility of transcending exile toward meaning, reconciliation, and, ultimately, salvation. This body of work that constitutes Camus’ myth of exile and [re-]union, from *A Happy Death* to *Exile and the Kingdom*, fully explores and sufficiently answers the challenge inherent in the ontological situation; further, given what Camus offers in his nonfictional essays, whether such essays are of a more personal nature (such as those which constitute *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* and *Nuptials*) or a more objective and philosophical nature (such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*), there is enough evidence to legitimately see in Camus’ literary accounts a profound connection between the ontological struggle at the center of his art and his own personal experience. Yet it is not until Camus’ final work, which has to this point remained largely undiscussed in the present study, is considered that the full intentionality of Camus’ work precisely as a myth becomes fully clear.

In his treatment of writers in exile, Andrew Gurr contends that exile is in many ways a universal condition of all writers. To this Gurr adds that the instinctual response of the writer in exile, whether the exile is literal or metaphoric, is to attempt to find, through the act of literature, a compelling and fortifying conception of home:

> The basic response to [deracination, exile, and alienation] is a search for identity, the quest for a home, through self-discovery or self-realization. … The orderly and exact record of home is all such an exile can or will allow himself. The freedom of exile works paradoxically as a constraint, a commitment to create a fresh sense of identity through the record of home.

This characterization applies perfectly to *The First Man*, the novel on which Camus was

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48 This is, of course, not a new or unique assertion; for discussion, see above.

working at the time of his death in January of 1960. Because the novel was unfinished and largely unedited by Camus, any conclusions drawn from the draft that survives must be undertaken with caution. However, what seems strikingly clear is that this work, which was more overtly autobiographical than any other of Camus’ fictional works, may be characterized as an essential part of Camus’ myth of exile and [re-]union, if not itself a comprehensive single re-articulation of the individual components of the myth to this point. With *The First Man*, Camus details the origins and the development of the individual in exile, while clearly intending to present in full a development in exile which would culminate in an account of the individual realization of identity and home within exile. Just as Adam stands in Ricoeur’s account as both the original and the paradigmatic human being, Camus’ ‘first man’ is given to represent in mythic fashion the condition of exile, as an essential component of human existence, and the human possibility and capacity for meaning and transcendence within the condition of exile.50

*The First Man* is intended to portray the exile in full, one for whom the following may be said:

All that was left was this anguished heart, eager to live, rebelling against the deadly order of the world that had been with him for forty years, and still struggling against the wall that separated him from the secret of all life, wanting to go farther, to go beyond, and to discover, discover before dying, discover at last in order to be, just once to be, for a single second, but forever.51

In the notes that accompany the published version of Camus’ draft of *The First Man*, Camus succinctly declares that, with this novel, “I am going to tell the story of an alien.”52

50 It is perhaps worth noting here that a hint of this possible interpretation of ‘first man’ as archetype is given in the title of the novella which preceded, Camus’ *The Fall*. In this sense, perhaps *The First Man* is intended to pick up where *The Fall* was forced to conclude; as has been shown, Clamence of *The Fall* recognizes fully his own fall and exile, yet he is unable to move beyond this recognition and realize his own human capacity to transcend and ‘rise again.’ In contrast, Camus’ ‘first man’ begins in a similar position of exile yet is able to commit himself to the struggle in faith toward relation and reconciliation.


52 Ibid., 304.
Camus begins the novel with an exploration of his childhood, where the first seeds of exile may be seen to sprout. In remembering his family from his earliest days, Camus notes that, despite the seemingly odd manner in which his family understood and engaged life, it was he himself, and not them, who was different: “they were set in their ways, and they looked on life with a resigned suspicion; they loved it as animals do, but they knew from experience that it would regularly give birth to disaster without even showing any sign it was carrying it. [But were they after all aliens? No, he was the a.]” This early recognition of his not belonging, of being an exile, only intensified when Camus left the poverty of his family and his immediate neighborhood to attend school. Although the young Camus had earned a place at the school on the strength of his work and his intelligence and thus truly ‘belonged’ there, his sense of himself as an outsider and alien only intensified:

When shadows rose so rapidly on the mountain slopes and from the neighboring barracks the bugle began to throw the melancholy notes of curfew into the enormous silence of this small town lost in the mountains, a hundred kilometers from any really traveled location—the child felt a limitless despair rising in him and in silence he cried for the destitute home of his entire childhood.

Yet this exploration of childhood is primarily driven by, and ultimately interwoven with, the attempt to find the father, the absence of whom is the primary focus of Camus’ position in exile and the characterization of himself as ‘the first man.’ As Camus explains in his notes to the text, during the trip to Mondovi he finds “childhood and not the father. He learns he is the first man.”

In the third and final volume of Camus’ published Notebooks, there is an account given of Camus’ visit to the grave of his father which begins to reveal the meaning, for Camus, of ‘the

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53 Ibid., 133.
54 Ibid., 146.
55 Ibid., 308.
first man.’ As Camus explains in the notebook entry, “At age 35 the son goes to the grave of his father and finds out that he died at the age of 30. He has become the elder.”56 This experience is central to the story of The First Man, in which, without having known his father nor enjoyed the influential authority of having a father, Camus portrays his ‘first man’ as tossed into the country that would be his home, “as if he were the first inhabitant, or the first conqueror,”57 and “born in a land without forefathers and without memory.”58 Ironically, Camus presents this position as ‘first man,’ without a father, without an origin that he could know and understand, and without direction, as a sort of shared origin, in that despite his recognition of himself as ‘first’ he is likewise aware of the many ‘first’ who came before him, who likewise longed for a settlement and a home where they could belong and cultivate roots:

And the sons and the grandsons found themselves on this land as he himself had, with no past, without ethics, without guidance, without religion, but glad to be so and to be in the light, fearful in the face of night and death. All those generations, all those men come from so many nations, under this magnificent sky where the first portent of twilight was already rising, had disappeared without a trace, locked within themselves. … Yes, how they died! How they were still dying! In silence and away from everything, as his father had died in an incomprehensible tragedy far from his native land, after a life without a single free choice—from the orphanage to the hospital, the inevitable marriage along the way, a life that grew around him, in spite of him; until the war killed and buried him; from then and forever unknown to his people and his son, he too was returned to that immense oblivion that was the ultimate homeland of the men of his people, the final destination of a life that began without roots.59

Ultimately, it is this condition as ‘first man,’ thrown into a world that was not, and perhaps never would be, home, which characterized Camus conception of himself. His own experience of exile, which began in the recognition that he was somehow different from, and thus separated from,


57 Camus, The First Man, 279.

58 Ibid., 284.

those in his immediate family and his community, which was exacerbated in his removal from that community to pursue his studies in an environment where he felt even less that he belonged, arose primarily as an echo of his original condition of abandonment in the world without a father, without a God, without some absolute to which he could affix himself for guidance, for identity, and for Truth. This is the curse of the absolute freedom afforded the ‘first man’:

[W]andering through the night of the years in the land of oblivion where each one is the first man, where he had to bring himself up, without a father, having never known those moments when a father would call his son, after waiting for him to reach the age of listening, to tell him the family’s secret, or a sorrow of long ago, or the experience of his life, those moments when even the ridiculous and hateful Polonius all of a sudden becomes great when he is speaking to Laertes; and he was sixteen, then he was twenty, and no one had spoken to him, and he had to learn by himself, to grow alone, in fortitude, in strength, find his own morality and truth, at last to be born as a man and then to be born in a harder childbirth, which consists of being born in relation to others, to women, like all the men born in this country who, one by one, try to learn to live without roots and without faith, and today all of them are threatened with eternal anonymity and the loss of the only consecrated traces of their passage on this earth, the illegible slabs in the cemetery that the night has now covered over; they had to learn how to live in relation to others, to the immense host of the conquerors, now dispossessed, who had preceded them on this land and in whom they now had to recognize the brotherhood of race and destiny.60

With this account, Camus is attempting to come to terms with the past and present reality of his own exile, toward a realization of a possible future reconciliation and determination of meaning within the condition of exile. This is the purpose which directed Camus’ myth of the ‘first man’ and, similarly, the overarching myth of exile and [re-]union depicted in his work as a whole. Through the creation of mythic literature, Camus sought to amplify his attempt at transcendence in a manner similar to that suggested by Asher Milbauer in Transcending Exile:

On the one hand, by fictionalizing their highly personal and private experiences, the transplanted writers lend shape to and give expression to problems that are close to them; they also enable the reader to understand the nuances of exiled existence and to gain a more profound insight into the

60 Ibid., 195–196.
workings of ‘transplanted minds.’ On the other hand, by reliving their own lives in their fictions, by making their characters share the burden of exile with them, they find it easier to transcend their own ‘unnatural state of existence.’ 61

By both portraying and living the myth, an image of reconciliation is intended to emerge which, while proposing such transcendence as a plausible possibility for all of humanity, more immediately effects a state of transcendence for the individual exile at the origin of the myth.

Earlier in the discussion it was suggested that the truth to be found in the beauty of art, in accord with both Gadamer’s and Camus’ conception, is revelatory of the possibility of reconciliation and transcendence. At the same time, it must be noted explicitly that the beauty which allows for such a revelation is conveyed in the language in which the work is presented and through which the work is engaged. It should not be forgotten that, according to the conception laid out by Gadamer, what constitutes the relation through which all elements-in-relation gain their being is language; as Gadamer concludes in Truth and Method, all being which can be expressed (essentially, all being) is language. Thus, as a final step in the realization of the character of truth in the work of art, for truth to be such it must be effectively brought into language; the ‘truth’ of art can only be realized in an explicit engagement through language with the work of art. Perhaps the most appropriate manner of engaging art in language is through contemplation.

Contemplation is at the heart of the Greek notion of theoria, whereby one attempts to construct a responsible account of that which one contemplates; a theory, such as Socrates’ theory of the immortality of the soul or Plato’s theory of ‘two worlds,’ is a conceptual system of interrelated ideas formulated and engaged as a witnessing of (and thereby participation in) the Divine mystery of human existence. Contemplation of a theory entails a witnessing of the liturgical spectacle that the theory presents, thereby placing the spectator in closer proximity to

the Divine. Contemplation requires that one decide for oneself whether the meaning offered by the theory is plausible, and if so, one further decides how to proceed with the insight provided by the theory. Through contemplation, one takes responsibility for what is explained by accepting the explanation and deciding on its application to one’s own existence.

The distance proper to *theoria* is that of proximity and affinity. The primitive meaning of *theoria* is participation in the delegation sent to a festival for the sake of honoring the gods. The viewing of the divine proceedings is no participationless establishing of some neutral state of affairs or observation of some splendid demonstration or show. Rather it is a genuine sharing in an event, a real being present.  

Gadamer’s description of *theoria* with respect to responsibility and participation completes the unity between ‘individual’ and ‘world’ which has been suggested throughout; contemplation is the play in language which arises between one who contemplates and that which is contemplated. While truth can only be realized in the unity and relation-in-play articulated in Gadamer’s hermeneutic conception, and while art manifests the precise manner of relating and reconciling which allows such a realization of truth, this truth itself can only be fully realized in its explicit expression through language. What’s more, the manner of that expression, to fully allow the truth to be what it is, both in relation to the specific elements-in-relation contemplated and in relation to the virtual ‘whole’ of reality called into being, must take the form of contemplation, whereby what is true (meaning) is finally revealed for its own sake and in its own terms. For his part, through his attempt to render in his art a myth of exile and reconciliation, Camus proposes a theory of existential exile and the possibility of transcendence toward [re-]union through relation. Further, while emphasizing in his particular myth the aspect of relation in the possible realization of transcendence, a parallel relation is established between Camus the artist (myth-maker) and the reader who contemplates, and thus participates in, the

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theory that has been proposed. Here, finally, the full achievement of Camus’ myth of exile is revealed: first, in the language of his literature, Camus has created a comprehensive story of exile and the manner in which, through the realization of a particular kind of relation, reconciliation may be attained; second, in the act of formulating and articulating this myth, as well as in its performance, Camus himself participates existentially in the myth, assuming for himself responsibility for the myth and its meaning (truth); and finally, in the dialogue that is implicitly constructed between Camus as myth-maker and the reader, through the medium of the myth, a relation-in-contemplation is realized whereby the content, meaning, and truth of the myth is evaluated from without, and every individual is thereby compelled to evaluate the validity of the myth and determine its relevance for one’s own ontological situation. At the heart of this threefold account of existential exile, Camus’ both depicts and exemplifies a theory of relation as the means toward a finite transcendence, a witnessing of (and thereby participation in) the mystery of the ontological situation toward the revelation and realization of home.

In the 1958 preface to his republished collection of essays The Wrong Side and the Right Side, as was discussed at the beginning of the present chapter, Camus suggests that the spirit which inspired and which characterized those essays, his earliest published work, may be found at the heart of all of his subsequent writing, as all that he had produced since was essentially an attempt to re-imagine and re-express his own personal experience of exile and longing for home. It is perhaps appropriate, then, to allow a statement from one those essays, written by the young Camus but endorsed and reaffirmed near the end of his writing career, to stand as a final word and closing assessment of Camus’ myth of exile and [re-]union. In the title essay of the collection, “The Wrong Side and the Right Side,” Camus attempts to express the fleeting moments of connection and reconciliation which enable him to realize a sacred relation between himself and the world and which thus equip him to engage and embrace the existential exile
which characterizes for him the ontological situation. Yet as he concludes the essay, Camus acknowledges the necessary, and ultimately irremediable, incompleteness of his own account:

Today is a resting time, and my heart goes off in search of itself. If an anguish still clutches me, it’s when I feel this impalpable moment slip through my fingers like quicksilver. Let those who wish to turn their backs upon the world. I have nothing to complain of, since I can see myself being born. At the moment, my whole kingdom is of this world. This sun and these shadows, this warmth and this cold rising from the depths of the air: why wonder if something is dying or if men suffer, since everything is written on this window where the sun sheds its plenty as a greeting to my pity? I can say and in a moment I shall say that what counts is to be human and simple. No, what counts is to be true, and then everything fits in, humanity and simplicity. When am I truer than when I am the world? My cup brims over before I have time to desire. Eternity is there and I was hoping for it. What I wish for now is no longer happiness but simply awareness. One man contemplates and another digs his grave: how can we separate them? Men and their absurdity? … The great courage is still to gaze as squarely at the light as at death. Besides, how can I define the link that leads from this all-consuming love of life to this secret despair? If I listen to the voice of irony, crouching underneath things, slowly it reveals itself. Winking its small, clear eye, it says: ‘Live as if….’ In spite of much searching, this is all I know.63

Camus’ contention here to “Live as if…” recalls the words which Karen Armstrong used to depict the faith of the Israelites who, by living as if they were at home in their temple in the presence of God, were able through a mythic faith to affect a transcendence of their own exile. Perhaps it is within this “Live as if…” that the myth grows and resides, the living liturgy of and in faith whereby a finite transcendence of existential exile if possible and home may be realized, finally. The ultimate accomplishment of Camus’ myth lies in its demonstration of a possible manner in which the individual human condition can be recast as part of an irreducible relation within which existential exile can be transcended and [re-]union achieved. Further, implicit in Camus’ myth is the place for religious faith in the formulation and ultimate realization of the possibility of accomplishing the relation ([re-]union) that is necessary both for a finite transcendence of existential exile and the attainment of existential ‘meaning.’ In the closing

words of The Case for God, Karen Armstrong sums up her notion of religious faith as follows:

From almost the very beginning, men and women have repeatedly engaged in strenuous and committed religious activity. They evolved mythologies, rituals, and ethical disciplines that brought them intimations of holiness that seemed in some indescribable way to enhance and fulfill their humanity. They were not religious simply because their myths and doctrines were scientifically or historically sound, because they sought information about the origins of the cosmos, or merely because they wanted a better life in the hereafter. They were not bludgeoned into faith by power-hungry priests or kings: indeed, religion often helped people to oppose tyranny and oppression of this kind. The point of religion was to live intensely and richly here and now. Truly religious people are ambitious. They want lives overflowing with significance. … They tried to honor the ineffable mystery they sensed in each human being and create societies that protected and welcomed the stranger, the alien, the poor, and the oppressed. Of course, they often failed, sometimes abysmally. But overall they found that the disciplines of religion helped them to do all this. Those who applied themselves most assiduously showed that it was possible for mortal men and women to live on a higher, divine, or godlike plane and thus wake up to their true selves.64

Though written fifty years after his death, this could have been composed as a eulogy to Camus’ religious commitment, his faith, and to his mythic literature as a pious and sacred endeavor. As Armstrong suggests, one of the main intentions of religious faith is to reveal, and to commit oneself to, a way of living which makes meaning and happiness a real human possibility, despite the presence of mystery and limits which cannot be evaded. At the beginning of the formulation of his own myth of exile and [re-]union, Camus recognized, and explicitly stated, the same. In his initial investigation of death and the absurd in The Myth of Sisyphus, after presenting his own theory of the meaning of the absurd and its possible acceptance through lucid, free, and passionate revolt, Camus then acknowledged the relative tenuousness of his contentions as ‘Truth.’ In concluding his theory of the absurd and the individual human reaction in revolt, Camus says “On this score, everything resumes its place and the absurd world is reborn in all its splendor and diversity. But it is bad to stop, hard to be satisfied with a single

64 Armstrong, The Case for God, 329–330; emphasis added.
way of seeing, to go without contradiction, perhaps the most subtle of all spiritual forces. The preceding merely defines a way of thinking. But the point is to live. In the end, regardless of the terms within which the tension of the ontological situation is described and resolved, Camus emphasizes that what is most critical is the manner of living which is fostered by that account, and the depth to which the possibility to live, in exile, meaningfully, is realized.

Transcending Exile

Simone Weil, whom Camus once referred to as “the only great spirit of our time,” in a statement perhaps more definitive and succinct than any other in the present study, anticipated the condition described here as existential exile by noting that “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” The individual human being needs to feel connected with existence and the world within which existence is taken up, to feel that, as an individual, one belongs in the world and that such belonging entails a specified purpose. Yet human existence is mysterious and ambiguous, and existential exile thus arises as a fundamental expression and experience of the ambiguity and undecidability of the question of the ultimate meaning of Being. Perhaps the question of Being could be settled if one could renounce the need for meaning or ignore the unavailability of a definitive meaning in-answer, but such settling would be provisional and, ultimately, would accomplish nothing against the experience of mystery, limits, and existential exile. Human existence is lived and must remain, until death, in-question. Existential exile is thus the position between birth and death from which some sense of meaning and reconciliation must be attempted; it emerges as a sense of groundlessness, or as Weil characterizes it, rootlessness, which in its most realized form is experienced as not

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65 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 65; emphasis added.

being-at-home in the world. Without roots, without a ground for Being, the exile is at odds with the world while longing for a place within it.

However, there is an implied relation between individual and world, as neither the individual (as part) nor the whole with which the individual is related could exist independently of their relatedness; that is, both individual and world have their being and meaning (their ‘being-meaningful’) in relation with the other. Yet this condition of existence does not necessarily guarantee that the recognition of, and responsible commitment to, that relatedness is either implicit or inherent. Existential exile is thus not merely a misunderstanding of the relatedness between individual and ground but rather a failure to realize that relatedness. The path toward transcending the condition of existential exile thus lies in a new manner of recognizing and realizing the unification of diametrically opposed poles already in relation, newly related in a manner that goes beyond their initial relation, which existed ontologically as a potentiality that was unacknowledged. This union, termed [re-]union here, conveys the appropriate sense of the reappraisal of one’s ontological situation that allows one to recognize, in the place where exile had been manifest, a sense of home. This reappraisal is ultimately the product of a distinctly religious longing and desire to disclose meaning in mystery, which can only be fulfilled in the perpetual commitment to the realization of relation in faith.

The meaning that is sought, however, can only emerge in the identification of and commitment to fulfill one’s role in relation to the whole of being, which is itself a manner of living faith. Such faith is a commitment to and affirmation of belongingness and the bonds of relation, despite the absence of a definitive and absolute escape from the finitude which constitutes the ontological situation. Faith is thus an existential commitment to relation as the structural character of reality; it is a mode of being-in-the-world, in relation, toward meaning. The fundamental expression of faith of this kind is the acknowledgment of and commitment to
both the relatedness (as necessary) and the revelation of meaning within that relation, which together constitute the declaration of home. The religious desire, discussed above as the attempt to uncover meaning while living with and in mystery, is thus the quest for home, constituted as meaning with and in mystery and exile, and the only possible manner of transcending the condition of existential exile.

Judith Melton has suggested that the “experience of exile is surmounted with the sustaining meaning of a present, individually interpreted myth.”67 The purpose of this study has been to substantiate this contention by elucidating in full the experience and condition of existential exile and the precise character of myth that is required to depict, and ultimately to affect, its transcendence. It has been suggested here, and interpreted throughout Albert Camus’ myth of exile and [re-]union, that true revolt against existential exile requires a perpetual, constantly renewed commitment in faith, which aspires to a particular salvation constituted in and as ‘home.’ While such salvation may not stand as a permanent and perfect state attainable within finite human existence, what is permanent, despite the inescapable condition of human finitude, is the human capacity to realize and engage in the meaningful relation that stands as the structural character of reality and of existential meaning. Thus, while finitude may be experienced as a fundamental and thus irreducible condition of human existence, the transcendence of exile, which is itself a particular manifestation of the finitude of human existence, through faith—that is, through a commitment to and realization of meaningful relation—will remain, in equal measure fundamental and irreducible, as a human possibility. Thus the path that begins with exile may ever lead to home. Colin Wilson, in his own comprehensive account of the artist as outsider, suggests a similar possibility:

> [T]he problem for the individual always will be the…conscious striving not to limit the amount of experience seen and touched; the intolerable struggle to expose the sensitive areas of being to what may possibly hurt them; the attempt

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to see as a whole, although the instinct of self-preservation fights against the pain of the internal widening, and all the impulses of spiritual laziness build into waves of sleep with every new effort. The individual begins that long effort as an Outsider; he may finish it as a saint. 

This possible outcome, to transcend the position of exile and attain a level of ‘sainthood,’ is a remarkably fitting characterization that accords with Camus’ own, if implicit, intention. As Karen Armstrong contended, one of the main intentions of religious faith is reveal, and to commit oneself to, a way of living which makes meaning and happiness a real human possibility. Further, it has been suggested here that this characterization of religious faith appropriately characterizes Camus’ religious commitment and his mythic literature as a pious and sacred endeavor. Yet this connection is not merely implicit; during a visit to a Franciscan monastery in 1937, Camus noted the value of the piety and deprivation, embodied by the monks who lived there, and originally advocated by St. Francis of Assisi:

> If they strip themselves bare, it is for a greater life (and not for another life). As least, that is the only valid meaning of such expressions as “deprivation” and “stripping oneself bare.” Being naked always carries a sense of physical liberty and of the harmony between hand and flowers—the loving understanding between the earth and a man delivered from the human—ah! I would be a convert if this were not already my religion.

For Camus, the attainable and meaningful consequence of such piety lies in the happiness which may result, thus Camus’ characterization of St. Francis as he who “justifies those who have a taste for happiness.” Ultimately, such happiness entails, is in fact dependent upon, the

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realization of a particular harmony in and with the world,\textsuperscript{71} and in his pronunciation of Franciscan piety as his “new religion” Camus commits himself to a manner of religious devotion as a legitimate path toward happiness, harmony, and, ultimately, \textit{home}.

\textsuperscript{71} “But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads?” Camus, “The Desert,” 101.


1964.


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