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## Camus' Quest to Confront and Overcome Nihilism

**Abstract:** Camus' essay *Nietzsche and Nihilism*, which will later go on to become a part of *The Rebel*, is an evaluation of Nietzsche's response to nihilism. This article examines Albert Camus approach to nihilism, focusing on two main aspects: the problematic of suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and secondly, the relationship between collective and murder in *The Rebel*. While both works are heavily influenced by Nietzsche, Camus is most explicitly and critically engaged with the German philosopher in the latter. Camus argues that Nietzsche's proposed total affirmation of existence as a response to nihilism would imply an incapacity to deny murder – an assumption which we would like to dispute. Nihilism deals with the apparent meaninglessness of existence after the demise of religious and transcendent ideals that previously gave direction and coherence to the individual's life, thus famously prompting Nietzsche to declare God's death. Both Nietzsche and Camus recognize the impossibility of resurrecting the dead God and instead focus on the challenges faced by the individuals living without a transcendental purpose or pre-determined set of values. While Camus' understanding of nihilism is greatly influenced by Nietzsche, works such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* offer a critical perspective and prompt a distinct response to nihilism. In this sense it is important to first examine Camus' understanding of Nietzsche.

**Keywords:** Albert Camus, Absurdity, Nietzsche, Nihilism, Revolt, Sisyphus.

This article examines Albert Camus approach to nihilism and Nietzsche's influence on Camus. While Camus' understanding of nihilism is greatly influenced by Nietzsche, works such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* offer a critical perspective and prompt a distinct response to nihilism. In this sense it is important to first examine Camus' understanding of Nietzsche. While Nietzsche presents nihilism as the outcome of the collapse of systems that provided purpose and direction in life, Camus investigates the topic from both an individual and a communal standpoint. The French philosopher deals with the question, whether nihilism could potentially invalidate life's worth and which solutions are available to the individual. These aspects are tackled in both *The Myth of Sisyphus* as it is in *The Rebel*, although nihilism is not referred to expressly. However, the author deliberately tackles the issue as he himself mentions to his publisher when

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submitting the initial draft. This is also supported by his exegetes who claim that Albert Camus “understanding of the absurd is from the beginning grounded in Nietzsche’s diagnosis of nihilism, his lucid awareness of the lack of meaning, truth and finality which results from the death of God, and his consciousness of the reality of human suffering which accompanies this silence” (Duvall, 1999, 40) and that “the conclusion of Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* sounds like a distant echo of Nietzsche” (Walter Kaufmann 1956, 21).

In Camus’ view, however, the absurd is a better suited term to render the modern experience of nihilism. In this sense we may consider the parallels between Sisyphus’ constant effort, futilely rolling his boulder, and Nietzsche’s idea of perpetual return, which indicates that the cosmos repeats itself mindlessly, rendering all human attempts appear useless. Another approach is to evaluate Camus’ similar focus on the significance of a tragic perspective of existence that acknowledges both the absurdity and suffering of life, as well as its delights, and rejects false optimism. This tragic lucidity is a means of conquering fate as “the absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing” (Camus, 1991, 123). He also argues that just confirming the universe and our being within it is enough to transcend absurdity and achieve a feeling of meaning. While *The Myth of Sisyphus* emphasized absolute affirmation as a reaction to nihilism, *The Rebel* specifically challenges this notion. Camus attempts to show how rebellion has frequently devolved into what he refers to as “revolution”, in which murder becomes prevalent and the initial impulse of revolt is betrayed. Camus’ article “Nietzsche and Nihilism” is mostly critical, despite his enormous debt to the German philosopher. Camus focuses on examining Nietzsche not just for the explicit content of his ideas, but also for the possible consequences of living with those beliefs. This method is consistent with Camus’ dedication to practical involvement in the social and political life. In this sense, Camus blames Nietzsche of developing concepts that helped form twentieth-century totalitarianism. In essence, Camus’ fundamental criticism of Nietzsche is that his reaction to nihilism, the total affirmation of existence fails to repudiate murder. Also, in *The Rebel* Camus claims that Nietzsche’s theory is to blame for the deviance of rebellion from its original purposes and its plunge into murderous revolution. Second, Camus contends that, while Nietzsche's rejection of transcendent principles appears to promote liberty, it ultimately results in slavery. As such, Camus argues that free activities need some form of guidance, limitations, and aims. His argument is founded on the notion that genuine freedom is not the absence of all constraints, but rather the opportunity to establish one’s own constraints and objectives. In the absence of such limits, universal relativism emerges, paralyzing all activity due to a lack of reasons to choose one thing over another. Camus draws from Dostoevsky in order to

demonstrate that, with Nietzsche “A profounder logic replaces the «if nothing is true, everything is permitted» of Karamazov by «if nothing is true, nothing is permitted»” (Camus 1956, 71). According to Camus, by abandoning transcendent ideals, Nietzsche opts for an unqualified embrace of the world, a dedication to the destiny and the historical fact without evaluating the world. This total affirmation leads to a passive acceptance of things’ supposed necessity and a lack of desire for change. Camus interprets this as Nietzsche’s *amor fati*. Servitude would neutralize all motivation to action and eliminate any agency. After acknowledging the widely recognized influence of misinterpreted Nietzschean philosophy on National Socialism, Camus emphasizes the necessity to vigorously defend Nietzsche against such misconstrues. Nevertheless, he asserts that Nietzsche’s work can serve as a philosophical basis for justifying murder, and to that extent, it is not blameless. In brief, his evaluation of Nietzsche is that “To say yes to everything supposes that one says yes to murder. Moreover, it expresses two ways of consenting to murder” (Camus 1956, 76).

Three potential objections to Camus’ evaluation of Nietzsche’s views on nihilism can be raised. Thus, it is necessary to briefly highlight these criticisms before delving into a more detailed analysis of Camus’ stance on nihilism and its potential benefits over Nietzsche’s. First, Camus’ references in this essay are subject to criticism for being extremely limited in scope. He primarily refers to a small section of *The Will to Power*, and as Duvall has pointed out, this material is not indicative of Nietzsche’s overall published works (Duvall 1999, 51). It is widely known that some Nietzsche scholars question the validity of using any of his unpublished writings to support his actual beliefs, and even if one allows for the inclusion of such materials, it remains highly debatable whether they can accurately represent Nietzsche’s oeuvre if separated from the rest of his published works.

Secondly, an important fact is that other fragments of Nietzsche’s published works contain arguments against revolution. Important Nietzsche scholars such as Keith Ansell-Pearson had shown that Nietzsche continuously opposed the idea of a political revolution contrary to Camus’ claims (Ansell-Pearson 1994). All in all, Nietzsche’s writings show a concern for the loss of the legitimacy of state authority based on religion and the loss of a unified religious culture. Moreover, he continually warns against conflating cultural politics with the easy answer of overturning the government. According to Ansell-Pearson, Nietzsche’s objection to revolution can be summarised as follows:

“For Nietzsche a philosophy of revolution suffers from the delusion that once a social order has been overturned, then «the proudest temple of fair humanity will at once rise up of its own accord». The modern theory of revolution is derived from Rousseau’s belief that beneath the layers of civilization there lies buried a natural human goodness; the source of

corruption lies not within man, in human nature, but in the institutions of the state and society, and in education” (Ansell-Pearson 1994, 83).

In other words, Nietzsche’s rejection of revolution is rooted in his denial of the inherent human goodness that justifies it, as opposed to the affirmation of the world as it is. Another possible criticism of Camus’ argument is that it overlooks a fundamental distinction emphasised for the first time by Gilles Deleuze in his interpretation of Nietzsche’s concept of “absolute affirmation”, which was published a decade after Camus’ essay *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (Deleuze 1983). Deleuze makes the case that Nietzsche is not blind to the logical conundrum of absolute affirmation that seems to require an endorsement of nihilism and its causes, which would only serve to perpetuate rather than resolve nihilism (as Nietzsche himself criticizes in “The Ass Festival” section of book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). By examining several of Nietzsche’s works, particularly *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Deleuze argues that Nietzsche’s notion of absolute affirmation includes a form of negation that ultimately overcomes nihilism. Although Deleuze’s interpretation does not provide evidence of Nietzsche’s explicit prohibition of murder, it does challenge the foundation of Camus’ argument that Nietzsche’s philosophy necessarily condones murder.

Camus’ reliance on a small number of unpublished works, as well as his omission of Nietzsche’s complex views on ultimate affirmation, contradicts his thesis that Nietzsche’s philosophy inexorably leads to support for violent revolution. Although Camus’ analysis of meaning of Nietzsche’s absolute affirmation is most likely flawed, it provides insight into his own perspective on nihilism, which may prove to be preferable to Nietzsche’s in some ways.

### **Democratizing Nihilism: Camus’ Response to Nietzsche’s Elitism**

Camus has surpassed Nietzsche in his thematization of nihilism by adopting a distinctly democratic approach. While Nietzsche’s political views are often perceived as aristocratic and elitist, Camus demonstrates an unwavering commitment to equality, solidarity, and compassion for ordinary people. This profound anti-egalitarian side of Nietzsche’s work cannot be supported by Camus. Although Nietzsche explicitly renounces the idea of a revolution, he does so for practical reasons and with the aim of establishing a hierarchical culture, rather than out of any concern for equality, solidarity, or compassion. Nietzsche’s views are famously protean, but from his earliest writings to his final ones, he seemed dedicated to the notion that the answer to modern nihilism and decadence could only be found in exceptional individuals, who are variously characterized in his writings as free spirits, higher types, or *Übermenschen*. Nietzsche’s endorsement of Georges Brandes’ labelling of his philosophy as

“Aristocratic Radicalism” in the 1880s supports the interpretation that his politics are elitist. Nietzsche’s political views are aristocratic because he championed for society based on an elite class, but they are also radical because he called for a new aristocratic social arrangement, rather than preserving existing arrangements, which is what the more prevalent “aristocratic conservatives” desire. Nietzsche does not present a detailed plan, legislation, or procedures for realizing this type of aristocratic society he advocates. However, he outlines it broadly in passages such as the following: “Caste-order, order of rank, is just a formula for the supreme law of life itself, splitting off into three types is necessary for the preservation of society, to make the higher and highest types possible, - unequal rights are the condition for any rights at all” (Nietzsche, 2005, 59). Nietzsche posits that inequality and exploitation are crucial and that a society divided into classes or castes is necessary for the flourishing of “superior individuals”. He argues that these superior individuals require leisure time for their creative pursuits, and such leisure is only possible in a society where the majority focuses on the labour necessary to provide material sustenance for everyone. Nietzsche succinctly expresses this idea in *Human, All Too Human*: “A higher culture can come into existence only where there are two different castes in society; that of the workers and that of the idle, of those capable of true leisure, or, expressed more vigorously; the caste compelled to work and the caste that works if it wants to” (Nietzsche 1996, 162). In other words, Nietzsche advocates for type of exploitation in which one class is subjugated by another. He acknowledges that exploitation is a negative aspect but deems it necessary. Moreover, Nietzsche argues that the existence of the mediocre is justified by the existence of exceptional individuals. The highest sense of life, according to Nietzsche, is achieved by the majority of individuals in serving these exceptional individuals. Also, he establishes a hierarchy of society based on the creative strength rather than the physical, economic, or political power. Creative strength involves honestly confronting the horrors of existence and forging a meaningful interpretation of life, whether through art, philosophy, or some other means. Nietzsche believes that the solution to the problem of declining legitimation of the State by religion is to create new legitimizing structures. These structures can only be created and legislated by individuals who tower above the masses of humanity. While Nietzsche believes that all members of society benefit in some way from the production of higher types, he emphasizes that the primary value of humanity lies in its exceptional individuals. At times, Nietzsche views the masses as dispensable. Bruce Detwiler summarizes Nietzsche’s profoundly aristocratic political position as follows “Among modern philosophers Nietzsche stands virtually alone in his insistence that the goal of society should be the promotion and enhancement of the highest type even at the expense of what has

traditionally been thought to be the good of all or of the greatest number” (Detwiler 1990, 89).

Camus, on the other hand, appears to be levelling the playing field regarding the problem of nihilism. Colin Wilson, an early promoter of existentialism in England, shared a story about his conversation with Camus, which illustrates this point. During their exchange, Wilson suggested that mystical experiences might hold the answer to the problem of absurdity, as he believed that Camus’ writings hinted at such experiences, such as Meursault’s sense of unity with the indifference of universe at the end of *The Outsider*, or the adulterous woman’s orgasmic sensation of oneness with the African night. Wilson then recounted “The idea seemed to worry Camus. He gestured out the window, at a Parisian teddy boy slouching along the other side of the street, and said: «No, what is good for him must be good for me also.» What he meant was clear enough: that any solution to this problem of «absurdity» must be a solution that would be valid for the man in the street as well as for mystics and intellectuals” (Wilson 2004, 173). Wilson challenged Camus’ assertion, likening it to the idea that Einstein should not have developed the theory of relativity because a Parisian teddy boy could not comprehend it. However, Camus maintained his position, and Wilson observed that “his basic premise seemed to be that all human beings are in the same boat” (Wilson, 2004, 174).

In contrast to Nietzsche, Camus believes that any solution to absurdity must be accessible to everyone. He demonstrates this democratic impulse in his writing in two ways. Firstly, he dramatizes nihilism by presenting it in terms of its most extreme practical consequences: suicide and murder. This makes the problem more accessible to a wider audience and emphasizes its gravity. Secondly, he emphasizes the need for rational intelligibility in responding to nihilism. The response to the problem of absurdity must be comprehensible to the average person. While Camus does not believe that human existence has a rationally intelligible meaning, he cleverly provides a thoroughly rational response to nihilism by examining the logical structure of the problem itself. Camus structures his approach to the two nihilistic questions of suicide and murder in a Cartesian pattern. As commonly understood, Camus argues that life’s absurdity is not just its lack of meaning but a conflict between objective meaninglessness and humanity’s desire for significance. For Camus, comprehension involves merging the two poles. The incapability of reason to understand the world results in the failure of unification. Moreover, it is consciousness itself, and the yearning to comprehend the world logically, that disrupts the possibility of unity. Camus contends that if we possessed the same level of awareness as the animals, there would be no separation in the world, and we would be in harmony with it. There would be no contradiction between the human desire for

meaning and the world, and life would not be absurd. Similarly, if the universe possessed the ability to think and feel as humans do, there would be no division, and absurdity would not arise.

Camus uses a Cartesian framework in his thematization of suicide, as he discovers a solution to the problem within the question's structure. Just as Descartes' doubting acknowledges the one thing that cannot be doubted "the cogito", Camus argues that the very question of suicide indicates that taking one's life is not a valid solution to the absurd, rather it is a way to evade the question by eliminating the human desire for significance. Thus, Camus contends that the only consistent philosophical stance is to persist in living, in defiance. Passionate rebellion is a crucial element of Camus' response to nihilism, but it is based on a prior rational analysis that forms the foundation of his position.

*The Rebel* also draws from Descartes' philosophy to construct a logical argument for rebellion. To rebel metaphysically, Camus posits, is to acknowledge that all humans share the same metaphysical situation of being abandoned without God or transcendent values that can give meaning and purpose to life. Rebellion, therefore, demands the recognition of a metaphysical perspective in which all humans are fundamentally equal. In order to express this idea Camus reformulates Descartes famous line *cogito, ergo sum* as: "I rebel – therefore we exist" (Camus 1956, 22). He believes that true rebellion requires solidarity with fellow humans and an absolute rejection of murder, as violence contradicts the very logic of rebellion. Only when rebellion is distorted or forgotten can it lead to revolution and the philosophical justification of murder.

Camus' use of Cartesian reasoning and his commitment to ontological egalitarianism may be related, even if he does not explicitly address the connection. In *Discourse on Method*, Descartes famously claimed that "good sense or reason, is by nature equal in all men" (Descartes 2006, 5). In contrast, Nietzsche's ontological exceptionalism states that only the rare and unevenly distributed power of value-creation possessed by higher types can provide meaning to human life. Camus, on the other hand, employs the most democratic of faculties, reason, as the creator and bearer of meaning. Sartre also alludes to the egalitarian implications of Cartesian reasoning in his book *Existentialism is a Humanism*, by suggesting that the Cartesian cogito is available to all and transcends class divisions. Sartre writes "subjectivity must be our point of departure. What exactly was produced by a craftsman who drew his inspiration from a concept: he referred both to the concept of what a paper knife is, and to a known production technique that is a part of that concept and is, by and large, a formula" (Sartre, 2007, 20-21) and "at the point of departure there cannot be any other truth than this, I think, therefore I am, which is the absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself [...]. Before there can be any truth whatever, then, there must be an

absolute truth, and there is such a truth which is simple, easily attained and within the reach of everybody; it consists in one's immediate sense of one's self' (Kaufman 1956, 302).

In a similar move to Descartes' claim that reason is equally distributed amongst all, Camus may have been motivated to use Cartesian reasoning as a means of finding solutions to nihilism that were both certain and rationally comprehensible to all. Camus' approach to the problem of nihilism is particularly praiseworthy because it makes accessible to the general public what are often discussed as abstract concepts. He does this by focusing on suicide and murder as practical consequences of nihilism, and by emphasizing the importance of reason as a universal faculty. For those who value democracy and equality, Camus' treatment of nihilism may be seen as a step forward from Nietzsche's elitist views. However, while Camus' focus on rationalism is commendable, it may also have limitations that need to be addressed. To explore this further, we will consider the treatment of the absurd by Thomas Nagel, taking a slightly circuitous route to this matter.

### **Reevaluating Absurdity: The Influence of Context and Culture**

In his article *The Absurd*, Thomas Nagel challenges the traditional arguments for absurdity and questions their validity. While the arguments he discusses are not the same as those used by Camus, they are still relevant to his approach. The first argument that Nagel examines concerns the concept of "mattering over time", which claims that life is absurd because nothing we do now will matter in the future. Nagel dismisses this argument, as he believes that nothing that will be the case in the future matters now. He argues that the fact that our actions will not matter in the future does not necessarily make them meaningless now. Nagel also questions how mattering in the future could make our present actions any less meaningless. The second argument concerns our place in the universe and claims that life is absurd because of our small size and brief existence "we are tiny specks in the infinitive vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale, let alone cosmic one; we will all be dead any minute. But of course, none of these evident facts can be what makes life absurd, if it is absurd" (Nagel 1971, 717). Nagel argues that the length of our lives does not determine their absurdity, as an eternal life would still be absurd. He also argues that our small size doesn't make our lives any more absurd, and that even if we were as large as the universe, our lives would still be meaningless. Nagel's analysis of these arguments reveals something significant about Camus' approach to nihilism, particularly his focus on rationalism.



Thus, while Nagel rejects the arguments for absurdity based on matters of space and time as bad arguments that do not convincingly establish the absurdity of life, he still believes that life is indeed absurd, and that these arguments express a natural sense of it. He suggests that these bad arguments are actually metaphors for absurdity. While I agree with Nagel's assertion that these arguments are metaphors, I do not believe that his rejection of them as arguments is entirely accurate because of their metaphorical nature. For instance, when Nagel discusses the argument based on space and time, he claims that enlarging our existence or prolonging our lives would not make them any less absurd. While this statement may seem plausible at first glance, a closer examination of the cultural history of meaning may shed light on the connection between space, time, and meaning that Nagel finds perplexing.

According to Nietzsche, the sense of meaninglessness is dependent on culture and history. This means that certain cultures and periods of time may be more susceptible to feelings of absurdity than others. Nietzsche specifically points to Western culture over the past few centuries as an example. He identifies the emergence of nihilism as a result of secularization, which is the process of replacing religious worldviews with secular ones, often through the influence of science. The loss of the religious perspective on life, which once provided a sense of meaning, has been replaced by a scientific and rational worldview that is incapable of providing the same level of meaning.

The process of secularization has had a significant impact on our understanding of the size and time frame of human existence in relation to the universe. Previously, humans believed that the earth was at the centre of the universe and that there was little beyond the earth and the heavens. However, now we understand that the earth is just a small part of an unimaginably vast universe. In addition, our previous belief that the birth and end of the human race were synchronous with the creation and end of the universe has been replaced by the understanding that the lifespan of our race will be a brief moment in the lifespan of the universe.

The argument that life is meaningless because our present actions will not matter in a million years can also be viewed in the context of the history of secularization. In a Christian interpretation of life, all of our actions are significant and have implications in terms of sin and moral goodness, with a Christian eschatology and soteriology providing meaning to our existence based on whether we earn eternal life or damnation in the after-world or the end-times. These arguments illustrate how important elements of religious explanations that gave human life meaning have been replaced by secular explanations that do not provide the same level of significance, undermining the notion of meaning that was once understood within a Christian worldview.

Nagel may not fully grasp the arguments for absurdity he discusses, as he fails to recognize their context in Christian culture. These arguments make sense only within that framework. Furthermore, Nagel's analysis highlights the difficulty of providing rational answers to the question of the meaning of life. Even seemingly rational answers, such as "life is meaningful because we are big", may appear absurd when considered in isolation. Rather, beliefs gain existential power only when knitted together into a "background horizon" of cultural context. Similarly, the arguments for absurdity gain their force not through rational explication, but through their ability to undermine the previous worldview that had given meaning to life. While Camus agrees that life cannot be rationally understood, Nagel's misunderstanding of these arguments highlights a potential problem for Camus' position. Both Nagel and Camus appear to overlook the essential role of an "irrational background interpretation" in constructing meaning. This concept has been recognized by the "Counter-Enlightenment tradition", a collection of thinkers that includes Nietzsche. To fully evaluate Camus' contribution to the interrogation of nihilism we must consider his work in the context of this tradition and explore whether his emphasis on reason causes him to miss an important response to contemporary nihilism.

### **Reassessment of Nihilism: The Rational and the Irrational**

The German Counter – Enlightenment tradition has a distinct approach to the problem of nihilism that differs greatly from Camus. This tradition, represented by philosophers associated with *Lebensphilosophie*, existentialism, and Critical Theory, argues that meaningful existence requires an irrational grounding, often expressed through metaphors of darkness in contrast to reason's light. According to Herbert Schnäbelbach these basic themes are central to the Counter-Enlightenment tradition that states that "subject and object, consciousness and what it is conscious of, are themselves seen as derivative and grounded in an antecedent whole, which it is possible to ascertain only by means of intuition. Pre-and non-objective lived experience, moods, the neutrality of what is experienced are supposed to precede all objectivity; analysis, dichotomisation, the hiatus between intuition and concept – all are supposed to come about only by means of secondary exposition of that whole, which up until Heidegger was called life" (Schnädelbach 1984, 147).

Heidegger's concept of "life" is replaced by "Being," which is a key aspect of the Counter-Enlightenment tradition that emphasizes the necessity of an irrational grounding for meaningful existence. This idea has been popularized by Dreyfus in his critique of artificial intelligence. According to Heidegger and Dreyfus, the ability to perceive significance in the world depends on a background of relationships and assignments

between things that are not easily understood by reason. This background significance is essential to providing meaning in life and attempting to rationalize it can undermine its effectiveness, leading to the oblivion of Being or nihilism (Dreyfus 1993).

In his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus characterizes absurdity as the “divorce between the man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity” (Camus 1979, 13). This notion differs from the German philosophical tradition of the life-philosophers, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, who attribute reason as the cause of the separation. According to Camus, life is absurd because it cannot be comprehended by reason, and therefore cannot be unified through intelligible thought. In contrast, thinkers like Adorno, Horkheimer, Nietzsche and Heidegger argue that the meaningfulness of existence depends on a connection with an irrational background, a context of interconnected meanings and significances that give direction to our endeavours. They suggest that the scrutiny of analytical reason on every aspect of this background is what has disconnected us from it, resulting in a reduction of its importance and a sense of displacement. The difference between Camus’ approach based on rationalism and the counter-Enlightenment tradition is emphasized by comparing the following quotes.

“To understand is above all unify. The mind’s deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man’s unconscious feelings in the face of his universe: it is insistence upon familiarity, and appetite for clarity. Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal. [...] If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled. If thought discovered in the shimmering mirrors of phenomena eternal relations capable of summing them up and summing themselves up in a single principle, then would be seen an intellectual joy of which the myth of the blessed would be but a ridiculous imitation. That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse for the human drama” (Camus 1979, 22-23).

“Formal logic was the major school of unified science. It provided the Enlightenment thinkers with the schema of the calculability of the world. The mythologizing equation of Ideas with numbers in Plato’s last writings express the longing of all demythologizations: number became the canon of the Enlightenment” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, 7).

The disagreement between Camus and the Counter-Enlightenment tradition can be seen as an “antinomy of nihilist reason” with two contrasting answers. The crux of the disagreement revolves around the value of reason and its role in shaping existential meaning. Camus believes that reason’s inability to grasp life as a unity leads to absurdity and a loss of meaning. On the other hand, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that reason’s success in unifying relations and concepts has led to nihilism. The contrast

between Camus and the Counter-Enlightenment tradition raises a question: can nihilism be solved through rational means? Camus rejects the idea that a rationally meaningful answer to the question of the meaning of existence can be given. However, he still looks to reason for a satisfactory response to our absurd condition, which he believes is available to everyone with rational capacity. Camus proposes that everyone can be an absurd being or a rebel.

### **Literature as a Democratic Response to Nihilism**

Until now, we have argued that Camus surpasses Nietzsche by making the problem of nihilism accessible to the average person. However, his rationalistic approach may be insufficient when compared to other, more compelling solutions. Furthermore, there is a strong connection between his rationalism and democratism, which raises the question of whether his democratism can be maintained if his rationalism is rejected. In essence, can there be a democracy that operates on a non-rational level?

An answer to this problem may be found in an important aspect of Camus' work that has not yet been discussed: the literary dimension. Instead of relying solely on reason, we can argue that there is a faculty more evenly distributed among people: the ability to appreciate a good story and be captivated by compelling imagery. As contemporary theorist of radical democracy Jacques Rancière suggests, "Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his 'natural' purpose by the power of words" (Jacques 2006, 39). Perhaps the resolution to the antinomy of nihilist reason can be discovered in literature. However, due to the limitations of this paper, we can only briefly explore this idea.

Literature has the potential to address the antinomy of nihilist reason by engaging both the rational and nonrational aspects of our being. In doing so, literature can complement Camus' rationalist response to nihilism and provide a more comprehensive solution to the problem. Moreover, literature has the advantage of being accessible to a wider audience, making Camus' democratic ideals more attainable. Camus' contributions to democratizing the problem of nihilism and its resolution may therefore be attributed not only to his adherence to his Cartesian legacy but also to his skill as a writer. His literary works remain widely read, and powerful images like Sisyphus's eternal struggle or the archer in *The Rebel* taking aim persist and resonate in the collective imagination.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, we have examined the problem of nihilism in the context of the Western philosophical tradition, focusing on the works of Albert

Camus and his interlocutors from the German Counter-Enlightenment. Our investigation has sought to explore and contrast their respective positions on nihilism, reason, and meaning, revealing a complex dialectic between rationalist and anti-rationalist perspectives. The goal of this analysis has been to contribute to a broader understanding of how these thinkers grapple with nihilism and to consider the implications of their ideas for our contemporary world.

We began our inquiry by outlining Camus' rationalist approach to nihilism, which is grounded in his understanding of the human condition as fundamentally absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus locates the source of absurdity in the disjunction between our desire for meaning and the indifference of the universe. He contends that in response to this absurdity, the individual must engage in a continuous act of rebellion against the meaninglessness of existence, thus affirming life in the face of absurdity. This perspective, which emphasizes the importance of reason and individual agency, forms the basis of Camus' existential humanism.

To provide a counterpoint to Camus' rationalism, we briefly explored some basic ideas of the German Counter-Enlightenment tradition, represented by philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Adorno. This tradition argues that meaningful existence requires an irrational grounding, which is often conveyed through metaphors of darkness and obscurity. In essence, the works of these thinkers propose that reason, in its pursuit of clarity and unity, can inadvertently contribute to nihilism by alienating us from the very sources of meaning and significance.

Our analysis led us to identify the "antinomy of nihilist reason" as a central tension between the rationalist approach of Camus and the counter-Enlightenment tradition. This antinomy raises the question of whether nihilism can be adequately addressed through rational means alone or whether an alternative, non-rational approach is necessary. To explore this issue, we considered the potential role of literature in addressing the problem of nihilism. By engaging with the works of Camus and his interlocutors, we have sought to illuminate the challenges and possibilities that arise in the quest to confront and overcome nihilism.

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