

“IT WAS THERE THAT IT ALL STARTED”:
MEURSAULT’S ASCENT IN ALBERT CAMUS’
THE STRANGER

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Scholarly opinion is divided about *The Stranger*. Many commentators argue that it is a work of existentialism and that its existentialism formed the foundation of Camus’ subsequent books. Others argue that although *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* are existentialist books, Camus later abandoned existentialism in works like *The Plague* and *The Rebel*. Existentialism was at most a “starting point” for Camus, something he had to pass through in order to reach a more mature philosophical position. Still other scholars – fewer, to be sure – have suggested that *The Stranger* was itself a critique of existentialism, independent of its relationship to any future changes in Camus’ philosophical attitude.

The reading of *The Stranger* I offer below falls within the purview of the last type of scholarship and perhaps contributes something new to it. It is a continuation of the analysis I began in *Albert Camus’ Critique of Modernity*. I argue that *The Stranger* is a critique of both existentialism and Christianity, but of an unusual sort. Its unusual character lies not in its literary form *per se* – its merging of philosophy and poetry – but in its use of Socrates’ image of the cave from book 7 of the *Republic* as a template for Meursault’s drama. Meursault’s absurdism is not a doctrine for Camus but an intellectual malady from which Meursault suffers and that he must overcome if he is to live well. Camus uses Socrates’ image to depict Meursault’s supersession of his most nihilistic tendencies to arrive at an awareness of his condition comparable to that of the absurd man in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that is to say, an awareness of the fact that he has become divorced from reality and that that divorce is the source of his nihilism and his inability to come into contact with life. There are hints of a movement beyond that awareness in *The Stranger*, but they are only hints. Camus leaves the reader of the book not with an answer but a clarified and critically refined statement of the problem of modernity. As

Camus wrote in a letter in 1942, the book's method is constructed intentionally to "say less (*dire le moins*)."¹

One of the difficulties scholars face when interpreting *The Stranger* is the apparent contradiction between the book's content and Camus' commentary. To state that contradiction simply, Camus was a highly moral writer who argued that his character was similarly motivated, yet Meursault himself seems nihilistically indifferent to all moral judgements, both before and after his crime. "For me therefore Meursault is not a wreck, but a poor and naked man, in love with a sun that leaves no shadows... Far from lacking all sensibility, he is animated by a profound because tenacious passion, a passion for the absolute and truth."² Camus' later commentary on *The Stranger* and his addition of an Afterword to the text seem motivated by a desire to encourage readers to reconsider the assumption of Meursault's and his own nihilism.³ And he took a similar approach to subsequent editions of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. New prefaces, explanatory essays, and even the appending of unrelated lyrical essays with very different moral orientations to the original text were all strategies employed by Camus to moderate the impression of his early nihilism.⁴ But commentaries, prefaces, and afterwords, even if prepared by the author, are written documents too, and therefore require interpretation. And so does the reissuing of books in different configurations and with additional materials appended.

Not surprisingly, scholars have interpreted these efforts and *The Stranger* itself differently. René Girard takes Camus' commentary seriously, particularly his insistence on Meursault's innocence and society's guilt. However, this does not lead him to affirm Meursault's moral character but to accuse Camus of not having any. Meursault is not Camus, of course, and Girard warns us against committing the "biographical fallacy" in which author and character are identified.⁵ Yet he also claims that

¹ Albert Camus, *Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, ed. Roger Quilliot (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1962), 1933.

² *Ibid.*, 1928.

³ See the Penguin edition of *The Stranger*. Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Joseph Laredo (London: Penguin Books, 1982).

⁴ For the appending of prefaces and lyrical essays, see Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 1976). For a subsequent explanatory essay, see "The Enigma" in Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy, ed. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

⁵ René Girard, "Camus's Stranger Retried," *PMLA*, Vol. 79, No. 5, December, 1964, 529.

Meursault's "individualistic nihilism" expresses a juvenile accusation of "society" that reflects Camus' own latent resentment. Meursault's "living hell" – "no intellectual life, no love, no friendship, no interest in anyone or faith in anything" – was Camus' own, one to which, "rightly or wrongly, [he] felt condemned in the years of *L'Étranger*." According to Girard, Camus' response to that situation was predictable – he became resentful. But in Camus' case this resentment became active. "A young man who feels doomed to anonymity and mediocrity is compelled to repay with indifference the indifference of society. If he is very gifted, he may create a new and radical variety of romantic solipsism; he may create a Teste or a Meursault."⁶ In other words, if you, society, deprive me of the recognition and honour I demand, I will create a surrogate who is as indifferent to you as you are to me, yet whom you will recognize and honour in my place and in defiance of your own principles. In this way, I will conquer you.⁷

For Girard, Camus recasts his mediocrity as superiority and uses it, with the bad faith inherent in all forms of resentment, to invert the natural scale of values. And in order to make it clear which values he believes are at stake, Girard equates Camus' resentment with Kierkegaard's religious account of despair in *Sickness Unto Death*. "To hope in the possibility of help, not to speak of help by virtue of the absurd, that for God all things are possible – no, that he will not do. And as for seeking help from any other – no, that he will not do for all the world."⁸ Meursault, like Camus, refuses grace. Yet the resentment to which that refusal commits him is so overwhelming that not even Camus' art can conceal it entirely. For Girard it becomes most apparent in Meursault's final outburst. But what is a mediocrity like Meursault to do? "A Christian cannot help feeling that the answer is close at hand: '...thou art inexcusable, o man, whosoever thou art that judgest; for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself.'⁹ In Girard's reading, Camus' subsequent commentary extolling Meursault's virtues is simply the same deception and bad faith employed

⁶ *Ibid.*, 528.

⁷ For a contrary account from Camus himself, consider the following remarks, made in 1959: "As an artist, for example, I began by admiring others, which in a way is heaven on earth. (The current custom in France, as everyone knows, is to launch and even to conclude one's literary career by choosing an artist to make fun of.) My human passions, like my literary ones, have never been *against* others." Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 533.

in *The Stranger* once more, only grown even more brazen with time and notoriety.¹⁰

Harold Bloom nods to the subtlety of Girard's interpretation and admits to feeling Meursault has lost a good deal of the stature he once seemed to possess. But he stops short of accepting Girard's twin charges of philosophical inconsistency and moral turpitude.¹¹ *The Stranger* might be "much slighter than we thought it to be. But it is not morally flawed or inconsistent."¹² "In [The Stranger's] cosmos, guilt and innocence are indistinguishable, and Jewish and Christian judgements are hopelessly irrelevant. Meursault is not, as Girard says, a juvenile delinquent, but an inadequate consciousness dazed by the sun, overwhelmed by a context that is too strong for him."¹³ For Bloom, this inadequacy is not a moral failing on Meursault's part but a consequence of the world's nature. The world is not amenable to human endeavours and concerns. It does not care if you murder someone or go for a swim or smoke at your mother's funeral or desire to live after being sentenced to death. These are human drives and moral conventions with no support in nature. Meursault's final insight is simply the recognition that his own persistent indifference to human affairs matches perfectly the indifference of the world. This is why he claims, "I'd been right, I was still right, I was always right" and why he feels the world "so fraternal."¹⁴

This is not nihilism, at least not the resentful form described by Girard. Bloom finds in Meursault's final outburst not cunning evasion but anguished acceptance. This is why he compares *The Stranger* to Melville's *Moby Dick* rather than to Sartre's *Nausea* or even Girard's Nietzsche.¹⁵ "The cosmos of *The Stranger* is essentially the cosmos of *Moby Dick*; though in many of its visible aspects Meursault's world might seem to have been formed in love, its invisible spheres were formed in fright."¹⁶

¹⁰ According to Girard, Camus' original audacity lay in making his innocent also a murderer. *Ibid.*, 525. As to his later attitude, one could imagine Girard's Camus thinking: 'If they bought that, then why not the claim that Meursault was animated by a moral passion for the truth?'

¹¹ Harold Bloom, *Novelists and Novels* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 117.

¹⁵ The identification of the absurd and *Moby Dick* is one that Camus himself made during an interview in 1951: "If a painter of the absurd has played a role in my idea of literary art, it is the author of the admirable *Moby Dick*, the American, Melville." Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 355.

¹⁶ Harold Bloom, *Novelists and Novels*.

This world is ultimately tragic. The white whale takes Ahab's leg and leads him to madness; the white sun causes Meursault to murder the Arab and in consequence destroys his life. Accept it or not, celebrate it or not, the lesson is that the world will crush all human endeavours and achievements with no regard for humanity's moral sensibilities.

Though Bloom claims that the cosmology of *The Stranger* and that of Camus' later fiction is essentially the same, he does note a change in Camus' response to that cosmology. Rieux in *The Plague* is aware and stoically accepts that his work will amount to nothing more than a "never-ending defeat," yet he continues nonetheless to "struggle with all [his] might against death."¹⁷ Meursault's acceptance or resignation becomes in Rieux a form of active fatalism, without Camus' fundamental insight undergoing any substantial change.

This is the conventional interpretation of Camus, popularized by Sartre in his essay "Explication of *The Stranger*," in which he fashioned Camus' absurdism in the image of his own existentialism: the world is meaningless, but human beings must contend with it heroically through the exercise of their will.¹⁸ Bloom's admiration for Sartre's "keen judgement" leads him also to accept Sartre's interpretation of Camus' absurdism and even to employ Sartre's language in doing so.¹⁹ Without going into details, we can at least point to one significant limitation with which all such interpretations must contend: Camus consistently and explicitly repudiates being or ever having been an existentialist.²⁰

¹⁷ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 108.

¹⁸ To give only one example, Sartre says that the absurd for Camus is a "fundamental absurdity." Jean-Paul Sartre, "Explication of *The Stranger*" in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Germaine Brée (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 109. Camus, for his part, says the absurd is a misrelation between a human being and the world. This is what he means when he calls the absurd a "divorce." Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 33.

¹⁹ Bloom writes: "In [*The Stranger's*] cosmos, guilt and innocence are indistinguishable, and Jewish or Christian judgments are hopelessly irrelevant." Harold Bloom, *Novelists and Novels*. Sartre writes: Camus' "hero was neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral. These categories do not apply to him." Jean-Paul Sartre, "Explication of *The Stranger*," 108.

²⁰ See Camus' assessment of Sartre's book *Nausea* in Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 201: "It is a failing of a certain literature to believe that life is tragic because it is wretched. Life can be magnificent and overwhelming – that is its whole tragedy." See also Camus' 1945 interview with Jeanine Delpech: "No, I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names linked.

For Germaine Brée a better name for Meursault's indifference is "estrangement," which she calls an "error" or moral failing on his part, not a philosophy, as it is for Bloom, or a resentful expression of Camus' own mediocrity, as it is for Girard.²¹ Brée finds evidence for this judgement in the fact that Meursault undergoes an "inner transformation" as a consequence of his murder of the Arab and subsequent arrest and imprisonment.²² For her, Meursault's condition is not static but evolving. His final, reflective account of life is superior to his original, unreflective one. Brée claims that interpretations like Bloom's and Girard's are inadequate because they fail to account for this dramatic character of the story in formulating their respective interpretations of Camus' absurdism and his assessment of Meursault's character. This omission leads them to attribute to and then attack a position Camus himself criticizes and demonstrates dramatically to be deficient.

As to her explanation of the substance of Camus' critique, Brée suggests that Meursault's last confession indicates that he has overcome the nihilism and estrangement that earlier led him to participate in Raymond's "violent drama," and ultimately to murder the Arab.²³ This "final revelation" comes through his encounter with the chaplain, which teaches him that there is no hope, no afterlife, nothing that needs "redeeming" – all familiar tropes in Camus' books.²⁴ "The stranger has in his prison cell, on the brink of death, found his kingdom: the irreplaceable, every-moment life of an ordinary human being who by an inexplicable decree of fate is destined to death."²⁵ Though Brée never makes the connection explicitly, her argument suggests that this "revelation" is the insight that finally allows Meursault to overcome his nihilistic indifference. It teaches him to ask questions, to engage reality rather than "passively just to exist." This is for her the message of *The Stranger* and of Meursault's drama in particular: "To fail to question the meaning of the

We have even thought of publishing a short statement in which the undersigned declare that they have nothing in common with each other and refuse to be held responsible for the debts they might respectively incur." Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 345. One could also mention the quarrel between Sartre and Camus that followed the publication of *The Rebel* and its review in *Le Temps Modernes*.

²¹ Germaine Brée, *Camus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 112.

²² *Ibid.*, 114.

²³ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

spectacle of life is to condemn both ourselves, as individuals, and the whole world to nothingness."²⁶

I am sympathetic with Brée's approach to the text. I share her concern with the dramatic character of *The Stranger* and the importance of examining this as an essential element of any successful interpretation of the book. I also think she is right to see movement in Meursault's attitude over the course of the novel and to emphasize his repudiation of the Christian eschatology. However, I think her interpretation of Meursault's final revelation and the highly approbative sense she gives it is not supported by the text. Indeed, Brée must appeal to alternative readings of certain key passages of *The Stranger* and obscure aspects of the actual text in order to sustain her reading.²⁷ It is true that Meursault does gain insight and make a measure of progress over the course of the novel. But not nearly as much, and perhaps not of the same type, as Brée suggests. For instance, Meursault's final comments are a mixed bag, sometimes correcting and sometimes confirming his initial indifference.²⁸ When the latter occurs, his confirmation leads him to defend his earlier, very poor judgements, not to repudiate them, though in a sense his attitude is even more compromising now because he seems to know better. "What did it matter if he was accused of murder and then executed for not crying at his mother's funeral? Salamano's dog was worth just as much as his wife. The little automatic woman was just as guilty as the Parisian woman Masson had married or as Marie who wanted me to marry her. What did it matter that Raymond was just as much my mate as Céleste *who was worth more than him?*"²⁹ These remarks are troubling not simply because they are inconsistent with Camus' commentary, but because of the extraordinary

²⁶ Ibid., 117.

²⁷ As to the former, Brée appeals to variants of Meursault's assessment of the murder in which the sense of moral violation is more pronounced. For example, "I understood that I would be punished for having destroyed on a dazzling beach the unusual silence which was a revelation that I should have understood and which made me happy." Or, "I understood that I had done wrong to destroy on a dazzling beach the unusual silence which made me happy." Ibid., 114, n4. As to the latter, in a passage in which Meursault indicates that the fraternity he feels with the world is a consequence of their shared "indifference," Brée deletes Meursault's reference to his own indifference through the use of ellipses. See Ibid., 116.

²⁸ "As if this great outburst of anger had purged all my ills, killed all my hopes, I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world. And finding it so much like myself, in fact so fraternal, I realized that I'd been happy, and that I was still happy." Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 117.

²⁹ Ibid., 116. My emphasis.

lack of love or attachment they demonstrate, the very sort of lack that Brée claims characterizes Meursault's pre-arrest life.

Though I believe these readings of *The Stranger* to be inadequate, I think the interpretive problems they address are important. These problems are far more acute and complex than any of these authors suggest. Not only is there a disparity between Camus' commentary and the text, there is a disparity within that commentary itself. In 1955, Camus claimed that what he intended to portray in Meursault was a highly reflective human being who, far from acquiescing to the nihilism of his day, was animated by a deep and tenacious passion for "the absolute and truth (*l'absolut et la vérité*)."³⁰ Yet ten years earlier, during an interview with Jeanine Delpech, Camus seems to say just the opposite. In response to a question about whether the similarity between *The Stranger* and the novels of American writers such as Steinbeck and Faulkner was a coincidence, Camus replied: "No. But the technique of the American novel seems to me to lead to a dead end. I used it in *The Stranger* because it suited my purpose, *which was to describe a man with no apparent awareness of his existence*. By generalizing this particular technique, we would end up with a universe of automatons and instincts. It would be a considerable impoverishment."³¹ Meursault, the self-reflective seeker of truth of Camus' later commentary, is here an impoverished, unreflective automaton.

To make matters worse, there is the additional question of *The Stranger*'s unusual relationship to the works that preceded it, *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, *Nuptials*, and *Christian Metaphysics and Neo-Platonism*.³² All three works speak about the types of experience undergone by Meursault and analysed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Yet the peculiar thing about these early books is they do not suffer from the philosophical and moral excesses of *The Stranger* and *The Myth*. For instance, in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, both Camus and those he encounters experience the absurd. Yet the absurd is never taken by them to be the only thing they experience; nor is it ever considered in isolation from the full range of human experience in order to produce a philosophical doctrine about the meaninglessness of existence and the indifference of the world. Indeed, in a book like *Nuptials* the opposite is true. According to that work, though the world has its rough moments, for the most part it heals, calms, delights and restores all those who encounter it. The last thing it is is indifferent.

³⁰ Albert Camus, *Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, 1928.

³¹ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 348. My emphasis.

³² All three works were written prior to 1938. *The Stranger* and *The Myth* were published in 1942 and written between 1938 and 1941.

The same breadth and openness regarding his depiction of the absurd also characterize Camus' analyses of rebellion, love, and even God or the sacred in these early works. For the young Camus, everything a human being experiences is worthy of reflection and must be accounted for in the context of an anthropology that is unshackled by prejudice or ideological blinders.³³ What is odd is that it is precisely such restrictions that guide Camus' analyses when he comes to write *The Stranger* and *The Myth*. For example, he claims in these works that the absurd is all he has to go on in his analysis of reality, when it is clear from the texts that he knows such an assumption is simply not true. Even in the case of *The Stranger*, a work of fiction in which one expects an exploration of the full amplitude of human experience almost as a matter of course, Camus pares down the drama to a couple of recurrent themes and preoccupations. How are we to understand this?

In his 1959 Preface to *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, Camus makes a remark that helps to explain this odd movement away from his best insights toward accounts that are palpably less satisfactory: "I merely wanted to show that if I have come a long way since this book, I have not made much progress. Often, when I thought I was moving forward, I was losing ground."³⁴ Here Camus attributes the limitations of his mature works to a failure on his part. It is a refrain that becomes quite pronounced in the notebooks of this period.³⁵ However, the notebooks also make it clear that this failure is not due simply or even primarily to error or inattention in the conventional sense, but to a structural limitation within the corpus that was intentional and therefore pursued by Camus as a matter of principle. As I have argued elsewhere, this structure concerns the three

³³ Both are objects of attack in Camus' early essay, "The New Mediterranean Culture." "There are, before our eyes, realities stronger than we ourselves are. Our ideas will bend and become adapted to them." Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 195.

³⁴ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 14.

³⁵ E.g., "I tried to reconnect, I repeated all the steps of the era. But double-time, on the wings of clamor, beneath the lashes of wars and revolutions. Today, I am through – and my solitude overflows with shadows and works that belong only to me." And, "I have taken the path of the era – with its frustrations – so as not to cheat and to affirm having shared in suffering and denial, just as I had actually felt it. Now we must transfigure, and this is what distresses me in the face of this book [*The First Man*] that I must make and that binds me." Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1951-1959*, trans. Ryan Bloom (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), 30, 232.

cycles of Camus' books.³⁶ These cycles – the absurd, rebellion, and love – were designed intentionally as a type of descent into the modern world in order to understand its character and to find a way beyond its limitations and excesses. The very notion of a descent, apparent in Camus' frequent use of classical imagery to describe the project,³⁷ indicates clearly that these efforts entailed a departure or retreat from a fuller, more adequate account. This effort was for Camus an act of fidelity to his time, a desire that “every life might be lifted into [the] light” that he himself enjoyed.³⁸

This is a fascinating project and an admirable ambition, but it was not without its dangers. The problem of getting caught in the very philosophical difficulties Camus sought to analyse and overcome was almost assured by the nature of the methodology he employed in these books. According to that methodology, Camus would limit his analyses not merely to experiences like the absurd and rebellion, but to *modern interpretations* of those experiences.³⁹ This limitation virtually guaranteed that any critical advance beyond the initial account, which was the ambition of the project as a whole, would inevitably seem unjustified because by definition underivable from the original premises. And those critical advances would be further compromised by having to exist uneasily alongside conclusions that *do* follow from those premises – the absurd man's negation of all values in *The Myth* and the metaphysical nature of all rebellion in *The Rebel*, for instance. And here we have the interpretive challenge posed by *The Stranger*: Meursault's nihilistic indifference seems to follow from the story's “premises” (Meursault's

³⁶ See my *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity*, particularly the Introduction. Ron Strigley, *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* (Colombia: University of Missouri Press, 2011).

³⁷ E.g., “The year the war began, I was to board a ship and follow the voyage of Ulysses. At that time, even a young man without money could entertain the extravagant notion of crossing the sea in quest of sunlight. But I did what everyone else did at the time. I did not get on that ship. I took my place in the queue shuffling toward the open mouth of hell.” *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁹ Two examples will suffice, one from *The Myth* and one from *The Rebel*: “[I]n a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels himself a stranger. His exile is without remedy because he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land.” Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13; Albert Camus, *Essais* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1965), 101. “The first and only piece of evidence supplied to me, within the terms of absurdist experience, is rebellion. Deprived of all knowledge, incited to murder or to consent to murder, all I have at my disposal is this single piece of evidence...” Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 10.

initial indifference to all human affairs and relationships) but appears to contradict Camus' ambition in writing the book as attested to in later commentaries, namely, to overcome that nihilism and to demonstrate its limitations.⁴⁰

It is not possible to resolve these interpretive difficulties completely. The method Camus employed in *The Stranger* and his other cyclical works, along with the real difficulty of descending into modern problems without becoming lost in them, guaranteed a measure of ambiguity. This ambiguity can be explained, but it cannot be overcome. However, by attending to the structures I have outlined and by reading the text closely, I think a more satisfactory interpretation of Meursault's achievement is possible. In the pages that follow I outline such an interpretation, one of the principal features of which is Camus' use of the image of the cave from book 7 of the *Republic* as a template for Meursault's drama. The manner in which Camus uses that image gives the reader important insight into the nature of Meursault's condition, the way in which he seeks to overcome it, the obstacles he confronts along the way, and a measure by which to judge his success.

The image of the cave was perfectly suited to both the content and methodology of the cyclical books, particularly those devoted to the absurd. It also illuminated the substance of Camus' best insights. As Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the absurd is not a "metaphysic" or "belief," but an "intellectual malady (*mal de l'esprit*)."⁴¹ That intellectual malady is due to a "divorce" from reality.⁴² How better to depict that condition than by imagining a human being confined in a dark place in which real things are eclipsed by a play of shadows and light designed intentionally to obscure the truth of the situation? And how better to convey the desire to free oneself from those shadows than through a person's gradual awakening to her condition and subsequent effort to escape it, with all the entanglements, reversals, successes and partial successes that such an effort entails? As in the *Republic*, in *The Stranger* 'the cave' is used to depict different human types or dispositions and the

⁴⁰ "What else have I done except reason about an idea I discovered in the streets of my time? That I have nourished this idea (and part of me nourishes it still) along with my whole generation goes without saying. I simply set it far enough away so I could deal with it and decide on its logic. Everything that I've been able to write since shows this plainly enough. But it is more convenient to exploit a cliché than a nuance. They've chosen the cliché: so I'm as absurd as ever." Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 159.

⁴¹ Albert Camus, *Essays*, 97.

⁴² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13.

relations between them, not philosophical positions, or worse, metaphysical or religious realms. In this regard alone, Camus already surpasses a host of Christian and modern philosophies in which the world *is* the cave. This unusual agreement between Christianity and modernity is the source of Camus' critique of both traditions. It is why he places both teachings among the shadows of the cave from which Meursault must escape.

Camus' use of the image of the cave was intentional and sustained. It appears no less than five times in his corpus. In all but one it is either directly or indirectly related to the experience of the absurd. The first instance occurs in a notebook entry from 1936 in which Camus describes a prisoner looking at the light from deep within a cave. The second is a reworking of that entry that forms part of the final chapter of the *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, published in 1937.⁴³ The third and most extended usage occurs in *The Stranger*, written between 1938 and 1941 and published in 1942. Here Camus differentiates the image even further by using it to describe several different human dispositions. The fourth appearance is in "The Enigma," an essay Camus wrote in 1950 to address his reputation as an existentialist and "prophet of the absurd."⁴⁴ The final instance occurs in *The Rebel* in 1952. Here Camus uses the image to describe the rebel's resistance to falsehood and murder and his effort to ascend toward "the light of good."⁴⁵ These dates alone suggest a serious and ongoing engagement with the image and recognition of its explanatory power regarding contemporary experiences and ideas.

In each of these cases Camus uses the image in a way that is consistent with the basic structural features of book 7 of the *Republic*. Camus or his characters find themselves in a dark, existentially unsatisfying place, sometimes forcibly constrained, sometimes not, surrounded by shadows from which they seek to free themselves by ascending to a more brightly illuminated place. This similarity alone is philosophically significant, however it does not by itself indicate the substance of Camus' account. The most important interpretive matters come into focus only when we ask what these shadows are, what it is that stands outside the cave, and how one is to move from one to the other. Answering these questions is of course not easy. And it is complicated by the fact that in his reworking of the image Camus had to account for Christian and modern traditions that have their own interpretive relationships to Plato and therefore constitute

⁴³ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 8-10.

⁴⁴ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 161.

⁴⁵ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, 286.

an additional layer of meaning that is always in the background. Nietzsche illuminates one of the more intractable interpretive problems posed by this additional layer of meaning in his famous quip that Platonism is Christianity for intellectuals.⁴⁶ Even Nietzsche's own powerful critique of the Christian teaching did not allow him to disentangle it from the Greeks, let alone bring it under the latter's judgement.⁴⁷

Fortunately for us, Camus was a better reader of Plato than both Augustine and Nietzsche. I do not mean to suggest by this that Camus developed a sustained academic exegesis of the dialogues. His familiarity with and interest in those works was far greater than is commonly assumed by commentators, but it was not scholarly.⁴⁸ Rather, what I mean is simply that Camus understood the point of the dialogues he read and of the image of the cave in particular in a way that more sophisticated readers often do not. There are many possible reasons for this ability: a lack of familiarity with interpretive canons, an affinity with the subject matter and literary form of the dialogues,⁴⁹ a native aversion to idealism, an imperviousness to the influence of Christianity and a naturally "Greek heart."⁵⁰ Whatever the case, Camus' use of the image of the cave in *The Stranger* gives us access to world more Greek than Christian or modern while also shedding a critical light on both those traditions.

In *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, Camus undertakes a "dangerous descent" into the darker aspects of human life.⁵¹ He does so because he

⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: A Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), Preface.

⁴⁷ Two good examples of this ambiguity in Nietzsche's work are *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Antichrist*.

⁴⁸ Camus' thesis for the Lycée, *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, addresses these questions. The first pages of *The Rebel* are devoted to the transition from antiquity to Christianity. And Camus' notebooks indicate that his proposed third essay, tentatively titled "The Myth of Nemesis," would explore the same subject. Albert Camus, *Notebooks, 1951–1959*, trans. Ryan Bloom (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008).

⁴⁹ "People can think only in images. If you want to be a philosopher, write novels." Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935–1942*, 10. See also "Helen's Exile": "Whereas Plato incorporated everything – nonsense, reasons, and myths – our philosophers admit nothing but nonsense and reason, because they have closed their eyes to the rest. The mole is meditating." Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 151.

⁵⁰ "The truth is that it is a hard fate to be born in a pagan land in Christian times. This is my case. I feel closer to the values of the classical world than to those of Christianity. Unfortunately, I cannot go to Delphi to be initiated!" Ibid., 357.

⁵¹ "I no longer want to undertake such dangerous descents. It is true, as I take a last look at the bay and its light, that what wells up inside me is not the hope of better

wants to understand the true character of life and because he does not want “to cheat.”⁵² By the final chapter of the work, Camus finds himself contemplating the insights he has gained on his journey while gazing out a window on which light and shadow play in a manner that reveals the world outside. The language of the passage suggests the image of the cave. There is a wall, above that wall there are objects that intervene and cast shadows on the window’s curtains, and “higher still” there is the sun, which is the source of this light. In Camus’ notebooks there exists a version of the passage that is virtually identical to the one published in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, with one notable exception: in the notebook version Camus says explicitly that he is in a cave. “A prisoner in a cave, I lie alone and look at the shadow of the world.” And a little later: “Moment of adorable silence. But the song of the world rises and I, a prisoner chained deep in the cave, am filled with delight before I have time to desire. Eternity is here while I was waiting for it.”⁵³

Camus’ use of the imagery is consistent with the *Republic*, though he adjusts it to suit his purpose. In *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* the darker parts of life explored by Camus are simply given. Few if any are willed. There is a natural darkness or deprivation in life, just as there are light and plenitude. Camus explores both and concludes that this dual truth is insuperable and must therefore be accepted: “The great courage is still to gaze as squarely at the light as at death.” “There is no love of life without despair of life.” “I do not want to choose between the right and wrong sides of the world, and I do not like a choice to be made.”⁵⁴ Camus bends the image to his purpose in order to convey this insight. Though he may be a “prisoner” in the cave, there is no evidence of coercion. And more important, he is not one of those staring blankly at the play of shadows on the wall with his back to the mouth of the cave and the world beyond. Camus’ image makes it clear that he is looking *outside* the cave, past a wall (the partition on which the puppet masters stage their shows?),⁵⁵ toward things that really exist. Indeed, he knows that these

days but a serene and primitive indifference to everything and to myself. But I must break this too limp and easy curve.” Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 39.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, 9, 10.

⁵⁴ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 61, 56, 61.

⁵⁵ “Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets.” Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 514b.

things exist and that entering into and even becoming one with their movement is his truest fulfillment as a human being.⁵⁶

Camus has already completed the "turning around" of his "whole soul" to look at "that which is and the brightest part of what is" described by Socrates in the *Republic*.⁵⁷ The only barrier he experiences is the curtain – a veil that mediates his perception of the world to some extent but does not obscure it. However, because he does not want to forget the darker places he has witnessed, he chooses not to leave the cave entirely, preferring instead to find a vantage point that allows him "to gaze as squarely at the light as at death" – to look both ways, as it were.

In Camus' iconography, the cave in all its features is an image of life itself. Outside the cave is the world, and Camus makes it clear that he desires no other. "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 this moment, my whole kingdom is of this world."⁵⁸ This is already closer to Plato, for whom that which lies outside the cave is not the "invisible" or the "ideal," but the world itself, replete with its visible and invisible aspects.⁵⁹ Yet for Camus what is inside the cave is also the world, and he hesitates to leave those who languish in its particular misery or deprivation to do so by themselves while he delights in the world's riches. These are the characters that fill the pages of *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* – the old woman who has been left behind by the young, the silent mother, the dying grandmother, and the irrelevant old man. Later on, Camus will render this dual obligation in a formula: "Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever the difficulties the enterprise may present, I would like never to be unfaithful either to the one or the other."⁶⁰

Though it departs somewhat from the image of the cave in the *Republic*, Camus' iconography remains faithful to the spirit of Plato's account. Like Socrates, Camus knows that the world is not comprised of mere shadows and of "men who fight over shadows with one another and

⁵⁶ "Be this ray of sunlight in which my cigarette burns away, this softness and discreet passion breathing in the air. If I try to reach myself, it is at the bottom of this light." Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 60.

⁵⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 518c.

⁵⁸ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 60.

⁵⁹ For a reading of this type, see Zdravko Planinc, *Plato's Political Philosophy: Prudence in the Republic and Laws* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992). For an idealist interpretation, see Allan Bloom's Interpretive Essay in *The Republic of Plato*.

⁶⁰ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 169-170.

form factions for the sake of ruling, as though it were some great good.”⁶¹ That view is something like existentialism, and perhaps like modern philosophy more generally, but it is not Camus’. Camus also knows that it is not enough to save himself alone. Those who manage to ascend (and they are the majority for Camus, as for Plato.⁶² As Meursault says in *The Stranger*, we are all “privileged people”⁶³), they must go down once again and assist those who have not been able to make their way out of the darkness.⁶⁴

These same structures are apparent in *The Stranger’s* reworking of the image of the cave. There is still the need to assist others, though as with all the cyclical books, this is not so much a feature of the story itself as of the ambition of the work taken as a whole.⁶⁵ And the world still has its darkness, its caves and its deprivations. But something new has been added to the image in *The Stranger* that in some ways brings it even closer to Plato’s account. Whereas in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* the shadows and darkness associated with the cave were features of life and therefore in some sense natural and even normal,⁶⁶ in *The Stranger* there are caves that depict human dispositions that are chosen or willed rather than merely endured. For Plato too there is darkness in life that is simply given. Even outside the cave there is night and shadows.⁶⁷ But the *Republic* also describes caves that are willed, created by people who enjoy the darkness, the manipulation of shadows, and the power these things

⁶¹ Plato, *Republic*, 520c.

⁶² After repeated attempts to cure Glaucon of his condemnation of the many, Socrates tests him. He asks him whether anyone, having ascended from the cave, would be willing to return there, or whether they would be “affected as Homer says and want very much ‘to be on the soil, a serf to another man, a portionless man,’ and to undergo anything whatsoever rather than opine those things and live that way” (*Republic*, 516d). If Homer is right, then there are serfs outside the cave, not just intellectuals like Glaucon.

⁶³ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 116.

⁶⁴ Explaining Socrates’ various ascents and descents in the *Republic* is a complex interpretative matter, but it is clear at the very least that part of his effort is to help others escape. Consider only his attempt to heal Glaucon of his dangerous idealism. See Planinc, *Plato’s Political Philosophy*, for a groundbreaking analysis of the cave icon in the *Republic*.

⁶⁵ In other words, it is Camus’ ambition in telling the story, not necessarily Meursault’s in living it.

⁶⁶ Death is clearly one form of darkness with which Camus is concerned. See Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 29, 50, 59, 60.

⁶⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 516ab.

afford them.⁶⁸ There are also people (less pernicious ones, to be sure) who are willing simply to watch the show as staged by the others. In *The Stranger* both types of dispositions are present, and Camus uses Meursault's drama to illuminate them. As to Meursault himself, he does not fit neatly into either camp. Though extremely passive, he clearly dislikes being manipulated; but he demonstrates little or no interest in manipulating others. Nonetheless, there is something lacking in him and in the social world that surrounds him. Camus uses the image of the cave as a template for the story of his imprisonment, trial, and death sentence in order to shed light on both deficiencies.

If estrangement or divorce from reality is the mark of both Socrates' prisoners and Camus' absurd human being, then Meursault is in the cave from the moment we meet him in the novel.⁶⁹ What occurs after his arrest is not a change of condition, but rather a nascent awareness of its nature, a sense that Camus reinforces by having Meursault remark repeatedly during his incarceration that he ought to have taken more care to understand the things that are now happening to him. A brief consideration of two events that occur prior to Meursault's arrest – the conspiracy with Raymond and the murder of the Arab – will help to shed light on the nature of this estrangement.

Even a cursory reading of these events and actions makes it clear that Meursault's problem is not simply that he acts unreflectively or innocently.⁷⁰ That is certainly true in some instances. However, there are others in which he knows precisely what he is doing – lying, for example – yet he does it anyway. But even the charge of wilful dishonesty does not get us to the bottom of Meursault's character. Meursault is willing to lie for Raymond in order get him off the charges his mistress brings against him for assaulting her. However, what is worse is that he is willing to conspire in the original plot, in full awareness of its ambition, to the point

⁶⁸ The cave of the “perpetual prisoners” is quite different from what Socrates describes as our “common dwelling” (*Republic*, 516e, 520c). See Planinc.

⁶⁹ George Heffernan is right about this aspect of Meursault's “awakening”: “For after his crime [Meursault] does not so much discover a new worldview as uncover the same one that he entertained before his crime, in that he displays a low degree of introspection but not a high level of reflection.” George Heffernan, “Rein, rien n'avait d'importance et je savais bien pourquoi” (Nothing, nothing mattered, and I well knew why): The World According to Meursault – Or, A Critical Attempt to Understand the Absurdist Philosophy of the Protagonist of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*,” *Journal of Camus Studies*, 2012, 94.

⁷⁰ For a good discussion of the problem of reflection in *The Stranger*, see *ibid.*, 86-124.

of writing the letter that will seduce the woman into coming to Raymond's flat where the assault will later occur. That makes him, legally, an accessory to the crime. Whether or not the woman had cheated on Raymond is immaterial, of course. Indeed, appeals to such justifications are themselves very troubling. Even in the low moral growth of this type of 'justice,' it is important to point out that Meursault has no evidence that such a betrayal actually occurred. Indeed, his remarks concerning his statement to the police strongly suggest that he doubts it ever did.⁷¹ And all this without even mentioning the fact that Meursault was fully aware of Raymond's reputation as a pimp.⁷² Had Meursault wanted to improve his judgement about his "mate," he could have simply consulted Marie. Her response to the beating is as powerful as it is unambiguous – this is terrible, go get the police – and her unwillingness to speak to Raymond afterwards and her awkwardness in his presence speaks volumes about *her* character.⁷³ Consider those responses in comparison to Meursault's assertion, *before the fact*, that he "had no reason not to please [Raymond]."⁷⁴ Really? None?

Meursault's murder of the Arab reveals the same mixture of self-awareness and indifference that characterize the episode of the assault and subsequent cover up. When Meursault first approaches the Arab it becomes clear that the latter has no intention of resuming the fight. He sits up slightly when he sees Meursault, puts his hand in his pocket, presumably to reach for his knife, but does nothing more. In fact, almost immediately he lays back down, signally that he has no interest in another confrontation.⁷⁵ And why should he? In the eye for an eye world of *The Stranger*, the Arab has received satisfaction. Raymond beat his sister, and he has injured Raymond. The matter is settled, and so he lies down. Moreover, he has no gripe with Meursault. Raymond, not Meursault, is the one who abused his sister;⁷⁶ and during the first altercation, Meursault does not participate. He does not even throw a punch. And from the response of the Arabs when he first arrives in prison – they laugh at him –

⁷¹ Meursault notes that he had testified at the police station that the woman had "cheated" on Raymond, and adds, "they didn't check my statement." Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 50.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁶ This is a factual matter. Had he known about the letter, he would have thought differently about Meursault.

apparently he does not look like he could.⁷⁷ What threat? What could he possibly do?

What most compromises Meursault in the situation is that he knows what he is doing will bring harm, yet he does it anyway. "I realized that I only had to turn round and it would all be over."⁷⁸ The "sun" may have been a factor in Meursault's actions subsequently, though it is difficult to believe that light and heat, even severe light and heat, could have robbed him so completely of his reason. Be that as it may. The real cause of the murder is Meursault's foolish decision not to walk away. Instead, he takes a few steps forward, and then another. Only at that moment does the Arab draw his knife. But even then it is clear that he wishes for nothing more to happen, *because he still does not stand up*. In other words, he is threatening Meursault in order to deter him; he is not escalating the situation but attempting to bring it to an end. To no avail. At a distance of roughly twenty-two feet, which means that he had to aim,⁷⁹ Meursault raises his arm and fires. And then he fires four more times.

When Meursault later tells the court that he had not intended to kill the Arab, he is telling the truth. However, when he adds that the real reason for his action was "because of the sun," he is telling a half-truth at best. Gross negligence and stupidity are much closer to the truth.

Camus crafts his story so that Meursault is confronted with a legal problem (the murder charge) that raises greater, more important moral and existential questions about his character and about the human condition generally. Though the events of the trial and sentencing are what drive the action of the book, the moral and existential questions are the ones that interest Camus most. It is no crime to be a nihilist, certainly not in France. But it is a crime to commit murder, regardless of whether one is a nihilist.⁸⁰ Camus uses the murder to raise questions about Meursault's character and about the fact that human life is bound by death.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁷⁹ A simple calculation can be used to determine the distance. Initially Meursault is ten yards from the Arab, or thirty feet. He takes a total of four steps before firing, which means he is standing roughly twenty-two to twenty-four feet from the Arab. At that distance, with a handgun, one has to aim.

⁸⁰ As to the legal situation, Meursault confesses to shooting the Arab so there is no question about the fact of the killing. What is at stake in the trial is rather his motive, whether he planned to commit the act and is therefore guilty of first-degree murder, or whether he was provoked and is therefore guilty of second-degree murder or perhaps even manslaughter. The prosecution attempts to prove the former, the defense the latter. The circumstantial and character evidence is heavily

First the legal question. Meursault likely did not deserve the death penalty. Though the account of his motives offered by the prosecution certainly distorts the facts in some measure, it is not completely inaccurate. Meursault does everything the prosecutor says he does. The only difference between the prosecutor's interpretation and the one available to the reader of the story is that the reader knows Meursault did not return to the beach intentionally to murder the Arab. That is enough to absolve him of the charge of first-degree murder and thus to settle the question of his legal standing before the court vis-à-vis the death penalty.⁸¹ However, it is not enough to settle the question of his character and of its significance as a measure of the human condition. In this regard the reader knows things that the prosecutor does not know. She knows for example that Meursault is radically indifferent to the people he encounters and to the consequences of his actions – so indifferent indeed that on at least two occasions he knowingly acts in ways that will cause harm to others simply because he is unable to find a reason not to. The law has a name for that type of action too – criminal negligence. But this term does not settle the matter of Meursault's character either. This is especially so when the questions of guilt and innocence are broadened to encompass the human condition itself, as Camus wishes them to do.

Meursault's indifference is his real prison and the cave from which he must free himself. That is the drama of *The Stranger*. His estrangement from reality is so extreme that even brutal acts like murder and assault elicit from him only feelings of inconvenience and annoyance.⁸² He is not malicious; he simply does not care. His arrest is the consequence of this estrangement, but it is also an opportunity. It affords Meursault a chance to escape his complaisance and reflect more seriously on his and others' lives. But how is he to do this? What are the obstacles he encounters, personal and otherwise, that he must assess and overcome?

As in the *Republic*, in *The Stranger* the cave is not a single thing, nor does it appear only once. Meursault finds himself in different caves at different times. In each one he encounters people who act differently toward him. Some attempt to help him overcome his estrangement, while others confirm him in it. Still others attempt to seduce him into exchanging one form of imprisonment for another, one form of

weighted in the prosecution's favour. In the end, it prevails, not because it is right, but because it is more persuasive, and Meursault is sentenced to death.

⁸¹ By "settled" I refer only to the truth of the matter. The outcome of the trial itself is a different matter, as Camus himself has remarked.

⁸² Meursault's response to his mother's death and funeral is to find it inconvenient. Annoyance is what he feels about his murder. *Ibid.*, 9-22, 69.

estrangement for another. And there is also the matter of Meursault's own responses to his predicament. Meursault has moments of real improvement and genuine insight, but he has difficulty sustaining them. The final pages of the novel thus present us with a mixture of nihilism and serious criticism that is difficult to disentangle. But I anticipate the argument.

Camus employs the cave image twice in Part 2 of the novel to convey different aspects of Meursault's and others' character and to illuminate the nature of their thoughts and actions. The first occurs when Marie comes to visit Meursault early on in his imprisonment. The second is evident during Meursault's conversation with the chaplain in the final pages of the novel. I will discuss the encounter with Marie first, and then Meursault's conversation with the chaplain. Marie is Meursault's real ticket out, the chaplain only apparently so.

When Meursault is ushered in to the visitors' room to meet Marie, he is momentarily blinded. He says his "cell was much quieter and darker" than the current room, so "it took [him] a few seconds to adjust."⁸³ The remark is taken directly from book 7 of the *Republic*, in which Socrates describes two kinds of "disturbances of the eyes" – one caused by going from a brighter to a darker place, the other by going from a darker to a brighter place.⁸⁴ Meursault clearly suffers from the latter disturbance, so it seems that he is moving in the right direction. Yet there are barriers to his ascent, the most important of which have to do with his own character.

Meursault is quickly ushered into the visitors' room. Camus' description of it reproduces the general features of the cave in the *Republic*. The room is similarly divided. The prisoners are all in a row, separated from the others by a space of about ten yards. On each side of this space is a row of bars that prevents movement between the two groups – the road and partition that Socrates says divides the prisoners from the puppet-handlers.⁸⁵ However, in Camus' image those on the other side of the partition are not puppet-handlers but guests who come from "outside" to speak with the prisoners.

Apart from the Arabs and one mother and son, communication in the room is difficult and chaotic due to the noise constantly echoing off the bare walls.⁸⁶ In the *Republic* there is a similar problem, though the

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 518ab.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 514b.

⁸⁶ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 72. Plato, *Republic*, 514c-515b: "And what if the prison also had an echo from the side facing them? Whenever one of the men passing by happens to utter a sound, do you suppose they would believe that anything other than the passing shadow was uttering the sound?"

prisoners draw different conclusions from it. In Socrates' cave, the puppet-handlers utter sounds as they pass back and forth along the partition. These sounds echo off the wall in front of the prisoners and therefore appear to be related to images visible there. Indeed, the prisoners take them for utterances made by the shadows themselves. As to the light that creates these shadows, in the *Republic* it is a fire within the cave that is maintained by the puppet-handlers in order to stage their show. In *The Stranger*, the light that fills the room is not manufactured but natural. It comes from a bay window through which the sun itself shines. The light that infects Meursault's eyes is natural.

The imagery in *The Stranger* is interesting both for what it appropriates from the *Republic* but also for what it alters or omits. From the account thus described, Meursault clearly appears to be on his way out of the cave, even though he faces significant physical impediments to doing so. But there is also something ambiguous about Meursault's encounter with Marie that suggests he is not as determined to escape his imprisonment as we normally tend to assume.

Marie, along with the rest of the visitors, stands in the place of the puppet-handlers of Plato's image. Yet clearly this is not her or their role. The puppet-handlers are sophists who employ a mixture of force and fraud to seduce and enslave those before them.⁸⁷ This is not the case with the visitors, and it is certainly not the case with Marie. Her function is just the opposite of the puppet-handlers, and it is not difficult to find her counterpart in the *Republic*. She is Socrates' unnamed helper who assists the prisoners in their efforts to ascend beyond the emptiness and sophistry of the cave.⁸⁸ This is a role she has had with Meursault from the beginning, and she continues it now that he is in prison.⁸⁹ Her love for Meursault has brought her into this dark and untoward place. She is there to remind him of what he has lost and to encourage him not to lose hope. As in the case of her earlier marriage proposal, she is encouraging him to abandon his narcissistic indifference and to "turn around" and move toward the light, even if she is unable to get him all the way out. How does Meursault respond to her efforts?

Though he is up against the bars of his cell "straining toward the light" when the warder comes to notify him of the visit, when he is given the opportunity to ascend to a more brightly illuminated place his preference surprisingly is to return to his cell. It is true that he wants to see Marie, but

⁸⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 520cd.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 515c.

⁸⁹ The fact the she visits Meursault only once will be explained momentarily.

the “noise” and “harsh light” of the visitors’ room makes him “ill” and he longs to return to a darker place. Camus’ imagery is compelling and clear, and jars the reader by its reversal of our expectation.⁹⁰ In the *Republic* not all ascents from the cave are successful. As we learn from Socrates, there are those who, after being “compelled ... to look at the light itself,” will “flee, turning away to those things that he is able to make out and hold them to be really clearer than what is being shown.”⁹¹ The description is too close to Meursault’s behaviour to be coincidental. This is Camus explaining to the reader the meaning of Meursault’s intransigent indifference.

So much for the imagery. How does it square with the substance of Meursault’s conversation with Marie? The first thing to note is that there is not much conversation. Apart from a little small talk, they do not appear to say much to each other. However, there is one revealing exchange that is notable for its content and detail. At the moment when Marie is telling Meursault not to lose hope, he is clearly distracted by her beauty. “At the same time I was looking at her and I wanted to squeeze her shoulders through her dress.” It is plain from this remark what Meursault is thinking. Yet it is not a passing moment and so it leads him to offer a rather strange interpretation of Marie’s remark. “I wanted to feel the soft material and I didn’t quite know what else I was supposed to keep hoping for. But that must have been what Marie meant because she was still smiling.”⁹² Remember the context in which this is said. The man Marie loves and to whom she has proposed marriage has been arrested and charged with murder. She has not seen him since his arrest and now she is there to visit him for the first time. In order to help him keep up his courage in dire circumstances, she tells him not to lose hope. How remarkable that Meursault would interpret her meaning as an anticipation of sex. Good thing Meursault did not actually share his interpretation with her. Had he done so, she might not even have made the trial. According to Plato, the ascent from darkness to light is essentially an erotic one, even a form of erotic madness.⁹³ But Meursault does not appear up for it, or at least not all of it. As he says, for him immediate physical sensation blots out everything else. Though there is nothing wrong with physical things and certainly nothing wrong with sex, Meursault’s enslavement to the

⁹⁰ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 72.

⁹¹ Plato, *Republic*, 515e.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁹³ Socrates asks Glaucon: “Nothing that’s mad or akin to licentiousness must approach the right kind of love?” The question is highly ironic. Plato, *Republic*, 403a.

sensations these things afford him causes him to forget the things themselves and leads him to become too detached and self-interested for his own good.

Commentators like Brée and Thody see Meursault's imprisonment as a turning point in his life that causes him to overcome his indifference and being to reflect on human existence more seriously and fully. This is true in some measure, though as we have seen from his interview with Marie, it takes him a while to get started. When he does, however, the consequences are what we might expect. In a very general way, he begins to think. He tells us that his "main problem" is still how to "kill time," but in doing so he slowly begins to engage in other types of activities that lead him away from his indifference. For instance, he acquires a memory and starts to do rudimentary dialectics in which he compares objects and ideas for their consistency.⁹⁴ Both activities are necessary for Socrates' prisoners to escape the shadow images of the cave.⁹⁵ When he looks at his reflection in the skylight he notes that it is "serious." He also discovers that the voice he has been hearing over the weeks and months is his own.⁹⁶ In this instance, talking to himself is not a sign of continued narcissism but an initial recognition of his profound need for others. So deep is the human desire for others that we would rather speak to "nobody" than not to speak at all.

There is an interesting episode that occurs at about this time that helps to shed light on Meursault's state of mind. Meursault discovers a scrap of newspaper beneath his mattress. It contains the story of a young Czech man who returns home with his wife and child having made his fortune.⁹⁷ When the son realizes that his mother does not recognize him, he decides to conceal his identity in order to sweeten the surprise of his return. The son's mother and sister own a hotel, in which he lets a room. Having noted that he is a man of means, the mother and sister conspire to murder him that night and steal his fortune. In the morning his wife comes to the hotel looking for him and inadvertently divulges his true identity. The mother and sister respond by killing themselves.⁹⁸

Meursault says that he must have read the story "a thousand times." At times he thinks it "improbable." At others, he finds it quite natural. In the

⁹⁴ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 77.

⁹⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 515c-516c.

⁹⁶ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 79.

⁹⁷ This story becomes the plot of Camus' second play, *The Misunderstanding*. This fact alone attests to its importance.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

end, he settles on an interpretation: "I decided that the traveller had deserved it really and that you should never play around."⁹⁹

The symbolism of the story is open to a number of interpretations. One has to do with religious parallels. The son of the story is Jesus, the messianic son, who returns to his family, humanity, but conceals his identity through allusive and ambiguous speech. Whose son is he? He is the Son of Man but also the Son of God. This allusiveness and ambiguity are what cause his death. The implication seems clear. Had he spoken clearly and frankly the outcome may have been more favourable. Similarly in the case of the Czech story. Had the son not "played around," his reunion with his family would likely not have been so fateful.

This interpretation is plausible.¹⁰⁰ It implies a tragic or bitter outcome, not to say a cynical one. According to this reading, Meursault is clearly in the place of the son. Camus himself lends credibility to the comparison by calling Meursault "the only Christ we deserve."¹⁰¹ However, unlike the son of the story and unlike Jesus, Meursault does not play around. He does not conceal his identity but rather tells the truth about himself. Yet this does not save him. Indeed, it is what assures his condemnation. He admits publically that he feels no regret for his crime but only annoyance, and this assures him of an unfavourable decision.¹⁰² Meursault "says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings and society immediately feels threatened."¹⁰³ And perhaps it should. In this reading of the episode, salutary illusions and truth are equally dangerous and ineffective.

There is another possible interpretation of the text in which the parallels drawn by the first are reversed. Our latent Christianity gives the above reading a good deal of its credibility. But if we actually compare the characters' deeds, a rather different picture emerges. Meursault is not the son but the mother and sister. Like them, he is a murderer. When Meursault says the son deserved what he got, he is speaking from the perspective of the mother and sister, only with this important difference: he is far less honest and moral than they are.¹⁰⁴ Once the mother and sister realize what they have done – kill their own son/brother – they pay for their crime with their lives. We do not know whether they do so only because they have killed one of their own, or because of their horror of the

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ It might also be the key to Camus' second play, *The Misunderstanding*, in which the story is used as a template for the plot.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., Afterword, 119.

¹⁰² Ibid., 69, 97.

¹⁰³ Ibid., Afterword, 118-119.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 78.

act itself. In terms of the comparative question it does not matter, because Meursault's response does not even come close to either. The mother and sister experience such remorse for the murder that they take their own lives. Meursault kills a man and all he feels is "annoyance."

Like all people who experience but cannot bear the workings of their conscience, Meursault attempts to free himself from guilt by shifting responsibility for the act to the victim. By saying that the son deserved what he got, Meursault is saying by implication that the Arab too got what he deserved. This is pure evasion. Like the son of the story, the Arab was innocent. His mistake was only one of foolishness. First, he foolishly returned to the place of the original encounter. Then, he foolishly counted on Meursault to behave reasonably. But he was not responsible for the murder. Meursault was. And one can feel the latter's bad faith in the uncharacteristically uncharitable remark he makes about the son getting what was coming to him.

Read in this way the episode is very compromising for Meursault. However, bad faith itself suggests a conscience and therefore indicates a measure of progress. Even a hypocritical accusation belies a nagging sense of responsibility.

The second use of the cave image in *The Stranger* occurs during Meursault's interview with the chaplain. This is the point at which the conflict between two different illusions or shadows – Meursault's nihilistic existentialism and Christianity – are brought into the light and Meursault is given the opportunity to overcome both. It is a fascinating scene, perhaps the most compelling in the book. In it the reader witnesses the culmination of Meursault's drama; but she also witnesses Camus' own titanic effort to overcome two traditions that he considered responsible for the distortion of our moral and intellectual sensibilities.¹⁰⁵ This effort was by no means easy or straightforward, however. It was complicated by the fact that the apparent antithesis and at times antipathy between the two traditions had obscured the deep commonality between them. For Camus neither tradition offered an adequate account of the world's moral order, existentialism because it denied that such an order exists, Christianity because it replaced it with a supernatural order to which natural values were at best subordinate and at worst antithetical. Camus does not make this argument in full in *The Stranger*. That comes later, in books like *The Rebel* and *The Fall*. But through Meursault's struggle he gives an artful and compelling account of its contours and a possible way beyond it, and

¹⁰⁵ For an analysis of that effort, see my *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity*.

he does so by employing an image from a tradition foreign to Christianity and existentialism alike – Socrates' cave.

Meursault's nihilism is one of the caves apparent in *The Stranger*. It is an "existentialist" cave in that one of its fundamental tenets is that the world has no moral order. All lives are of equal worth, regardless of whatever other attitudes might be deduced from that fact. However, Meursault's existentialism begins to break down because of its inability to account adequately for his experience of life. As his estrangement from life abates, his attachment to it grows, one of the most important signs of which is his desire not to die.¹⁰⁶ This change of disposition is not without its obstacles, however. Because of the death sentence that hangs over him, Meursault's desire to live causes him a terrible anguish from which he desperately tries to free himself. One of the ways he attempts to do so is by returning to his original nihilistic premise that life "is not worth living" and then "reasoning" about his situation from that starting point. "I'd always assume the worst: my appeal had been dismissed. 'Well, then I'll die.' Sooner than other people, obviously. But everybody knows that life isn't worth living. And when it came down to it, I wasn't unaware of the fact that it doesn't matter very much whether you die at thirty or at seventy since, in either case, other men and women will naturally go on living, for thousands of years even."¹⁰⁷ Nothing was plainer, in fact. It was still only me who was dying, whether it was now or in twenty years' time."¹⁰⁸ But Meursault cannot sustain this reasoning, because neither his soul nor his mind will cooperate. "At that point I'd feel my heart give this terrifying leap at the thought of having another twenty years to live."¹⁰⁹ "Given that you've got to die, it obviously doesn't matter exactly how or when. Therefore (*and the difficult thing was not to lose track of all the reasoning which that 'therefore' implied*), therefore, I had to accept that my appeal had been dismissed."¹¹⁰ Though the conclusion follows logically from the premise it violates both Meursault's desire and his reason, the latter understood as an apperception of reality that runs deeper than the one afforded by the mere logical consistency of sentences.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 114.

¹⁰⁷ This is the meaning of immortality as the absurd man defines it in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

¹⁰⁸ This assertion, however, is in direct opposition to the teaching of *The Myth*, in which the loss of twenty years of life is an irreparable one. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 61.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 109. My emphasis.

In such moments Meursault even manages to overcome his initial indifference to Marie. The face of the world he wishes to see is hers.¹¹¹ This too is in perfect accord with the teaching of the *Republic* and the *Symposium*, in which the great engine of the ascent from darkness to light is love or eros.¹¹² It does not even matter what one loves. Any naturally existing thing will do, so long as one loves it genuinely. After his long incarceration, itself a poignant image of his divorce from life, Meursault begins to experience this type of love. It is his finest moment and the clearest indication we have that he is on the way to overcoming his estrangement from reality and its latent nihilism. It is also the moment at which he encounters the chaplain. This is no accident. Meursault is finally on his way out of the cave in which he has lived for the better part of the story and the claustrophobic atmosphere begins to lift.¹¹³ The reader feels this. But not everyone wishes him well in his pursuit or understands it to be the advance that he does.

The chaplain, like the court, is critical of Meursault's character. However, unlike the court, the chaplain appears genuinely concerned for Meursault's betterment. It is strongly suggested in the book that had Meursault been willing to pay lip service to conventional pieties during his trial the outcome would have been much more favourable.¹¹⁴ He might even have got off, which speaks volumes about Camus' assessment of the justice of French colonial policy.¹¹⁵ In this sense the court is not concerned with Meursault's real condition, deeming even cynical, calculated obeisance sufficient for its purpose of maintaining social and legal order. However, Meursault refuses to "play the game"¹¹⁶ and in this regard he is similar to Socrates in the *Apology*. Of course, Meursault is not innocent of the charges against him, as was Socrates. However, like Socrates, he is

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹¹² Plato, *Symposium*, 211c. Plato, *Republic*, 403a.

¹¹³ This change was commented upon by Camus himself in his early commentary on the story. In response to an unnamed interlocutor, Camus writes: "You have not noticed that [Meursault] confines himself to answering questions, those of life and those of men. Thus he never affirms anything. I have given only a negative snapshot. Nothing allows you to prejudge his profound attitude, save precisely for the last chapter." Albert Camus, *Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, 1933.

¹¹⁴ The initial interview with the Magistrate and subsequent discussions with his lawyer make it clear that an expression of remorse by Meursault would have softened the sentence considerably and undercut the prosecution's argument.

¹¹⁵ See David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹¹⁶ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, Afterword, 118.

unwilling to pander to the jury in order to secure his release, and in this precise sense he is superior to those who would judge him.

As I have said, the chaplain is differently motivated. His concern for Meursault's salvation is more persistent and he is unsatisfied with either frank rejection or feigned acceptance.¹¹⁷ But this does not mean that he is better than the court. The chaplain insists that Meursault *believe* things that the court merely wishes him to *say* and therefore could be said to aspire to a far greater type of control than that of the legal system. The chaplain wants Meursault to think a certain way, the court merely to talk and act a certain way. The nature of the chaplain's control and the end to which it aspires is illuminated by Camus' use of Socrates' image of the cave.

First the most obvious features of the account. Meursault is confined in a prison cell that restricts his movements, though not absolutely. There is a bunk on which he sleeps that also serves as a bench when the chaplain arrives, and an opposing wall in front of the bunk on the other side of the cell on which light and shadow play. As in the case of the visitors' room, the source of the light is natural. The sun shines through a barred window above the bunk and casts images on the far wall. And there are arguments about the meaning of those images too, questions about what they are and whether or not they actually exist. And there we have it: Socrates' cave with all its basic elements – light, darkness, images, walls, and prisoners. But what does it mean?

Again it is best to begin with the obvious. Meursault is clearly one of Socrates' prisoners. He is forcibly confined to his cell, though as in the *Republic*, his condition is not absolute. Socrates' prisoners are “by nature (φύσις)” able both to understand their confinement and participate in their release.¹¹⁸ So too Meursault. One bit of evidence for the provisional nature of his incarceration is that he has appealed his sentence, which means that the judgment against him is not necessarily final. It may be overturned. But even more important in this respect is that when the chaplain arrives Meursault is not sitting on the bunk but rather standing. And he remains standing for the duration of their exchange.¹¹⁹ At the time when Meursault first meets the chaplain, he already knows where he is, why he is there, and that he wants out. In other words, he has already undertaken the task of “turning around (περιαικτέον)” that for Socrates is the condition of any

¹¹⁷ Meursault feigns acceptance with the Magistrate to good effect. Had he been willing to do it a second time, things might have gone very differently for him. *Ibid.*, 68-69.

¹¹⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 515c.

¹¹⁹ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 111.

ascent from the darkness of the cave.¹²⁰ And as we have already noted, this movement is apparent not only in the physical features of the image but also in Meursault's gradual abandonment of his nihilistic indifference. But what about the chaplain? What is his role? The puppet-handlers that were missing from Camus' first use of the image here assume a central role, and the chaplain is one of them. But the structure of that role is complex and requires explanation.

Readers sympathetic to the chaplain's religious teaching may be tempted to interpret his role as being similar to that of Marie – he is one of Socrates' unnamed helpers who assists the prisoners in their effort to escape the cave. While it is true that the chaplain considers Meursault's relationship to reality to be deficient and therefore considers him in need of some type of release, it does not follow from this either that the account he offers in its place is superior to the one it purports to replace or that he has properly understood Meursault's condition. Indeed he is wrong on both counts, and this is apparent in the manner in which Camus reworks the image.

When the chaplain arrives, the first thing he does is to sit down on the bunk. That is to say, he assumes the position of one of the prisoners. But he does not remain seated. Over the course of their conversation he stands up twice. The first time he does so briefly and then sits down again. The second time he remains standing until the guards free him from Meursault's grasp. When people are speaking calmly, no one feels the need to stand, unless for some benign reason. People stand when they are agitated or attempting to assert themselves. The chaplain and Meursault's conversation is no different. While the chaplain is seated he forgoes convention and addresses Meursault informally, calling him "my friend."¹²¹ Though he is always attempting to persuade Meursault of the truth of something – his teaching, the inadequacy of Meursault's own views – when seated his manner of speech is neither unreflective nor accusatory. At one point Meursault even comments that it was "almost as if [the chaplain] were talking to *himself*."¹²² More important still, when the chaplain takes his seat before the wall he invites Meursault to join him, an invitation Meursault refuses for reasons that should by now be obvious.¹²³

When the chaplain stands his manner changes, as does the content of what he says. In both instances he becomes significantly more aggressive, even resorting to rather cheap intimidation tricks that leave Meursault

¹²⁰ Plato, *Republic*, 518c.

¹²¹ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 112.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 111. My emphasis.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

completely unmoved because he has used these same tricks on friends for amusement.¹²⁴ As to the content of his speech, while seated he talks about belief in God, the uncertainty of human things, the possibility that Meursault is in despair, and the fact that death is a fate that awaits us all. He even attempts to reassure Meursault, commenting that he believes his appeal will be granted.¹²⁵ However, when standing he addresses him as “my son”¹²⁶ – a subordinate position – and his remarks shift to the Christian teaching about immortality and to the menace of the last judgement. Meursault is a hard case. When the chaplain fails to secure his assent through more fraternal means, he turns to the threat of eternal punishment and the fear it inspires. What do these changes mean in terms of the image of the cave?

The chaplain is a puppet-handler who attempts to seduce Meursault into assuming once again his proper position – seated before the shadows on the wall – and he does so initially by suggesting sweetly and companionably that we are all inescapably prisoners in the cave. Why does he do this? Because as we have seen, Meursault is on his way out of the cave. This is something puppet-handlers cannot tolerate, because the illusion of their power rests on the submission of those who watch their show. But Meursault is not having any of it. He resists the chaplain's initial efforts and the chaplain is therefore compelled to resort to more drastic means. When even these methods fail to work, the chaplain attempts to block Meursault's passage by sophistically attempting to persuade him that the world outside the cave is itself a cave from which escape is possible only by believing the Christian teaching about immortality. In a remarkable use of the image, Camus makes it clear that this teaching also is just another shadow image in the cave from which Meursault must free himself.

Immediately after Meursault's admission of guilt and his subsequent assertion that he is paying for his crime and that nothing more could be asked of him, the chaplain says to him “there is more that could be asked of you. And may well be asked of you... You could be asked to see'.” To which Meursault replies: “To see what?”¹²⁷ The charming narrative that follows is taken straight from the *Republic*. The chaplain's response is a vivid example of the puppet-handler's sophistry. He turns to the wall of the cell and declaims that those stones fill his heart with anguish because

¹²⁴ I refer to the chaplain's “game” of staring down his interlocutor, in this instance, Meursault. *Ibid.*, 112.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 113

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

of the suffering that oozes from them. But then he says that it is not only suffering that he sees there. “[D]eep in my heart I know that even the most wretched among you have looked at [these walls] and seen a divine face emerging from the darkness. It is that face which you will be asked to see’.”¹²⁸ Meursault is beginning to make his way out of his prison. Camus depicts that movement by having him turned completely away from the shadows of the cave and toward the light. “By now I had my back right up against the wall and my forehead was bathed in light.” But the chaplain is not giving up. He makes one last effort to prevent Meursault from escaping by attempting to persuade him that the reality he longs for can be found precisely in the darkness he seeks to escape. When Meursault dissents, claiming that he has been looking at these particular walls for months and has “‘never seen anything emerging from any oozing stone’,”¹²⁹ the chaplain attempts to block all remaining paths of egress by suggesting that the world itself is a cave from which no escape is possible save through him and the teaching he offers. “He turned and walked over to the wall and ran his hand slowly across it. ‘Do you really love this earth as much as that?’ he murmured.”¹³⁰ The scene that follows is both poignant and comic. Meursault refuses to answer. What could he possibly say? After his long experience he knows that a prison is a prison, and a wall is a wall, and that the world beyond both that he desperately seeks to re-join is yet something else. Love this? A wall? What in the world is this guy talking about?

The chaplain tries to persuade Meursault one last time, asking him whether he has not ever wished for another life. Meursault admits that naturally he has, but he adds that such a desire is no different than “wishing [he] was rich or could swim fast or had a better-shaped mouth. It was the same kind of thing.”¹³¹ In other words, the desire for immortality is nothing other than the desire for this life in all its fullness. And when the chaplain in his obtuseness asks for still further clarification – and how do you imagine this life? – Meursault begins to lose his patience and shouts at him: “One which would remind me of this life.”¹³²

Only after this final attempt to make the chaplain understand fails does Meursault lose his patience completely. He then assaults and verbally abuses the chaplain. A lamentable response on Meursault’s part perhaps, though understandable given the circumstances. In any event, the only

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 114.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

compromising excess it leads him to commit is to return to his initial nihilism, at least in speech. Meursault rejects the chaplain's sophistry only to fall prey to his own. To the chaplain's affirmation of a total meaning, he can find no other response than a complete denial of meaning. Christianity or nothing, the modern dialectic. "Nothing, nothing mattered and I knew very well why. He too knew why."¹³³ So much for Meursault's desire to return to the world and for his nascent love for Marie, and so much for his growing awareness of the nature of his crime. In one grand pronouncement everything is washed away.¹³⁴ His visceral response to the chaplain gets away from him and almost immediately he is repeating the same banal nihilism that characterized his earlier life.

The value-neutrality that haunts the analysis of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is also present in *The Stranger*.¹³⁵ Like the absurd man, Meursault recognizes that he is estranged from reality. He also understands that no "other world" is necessary to overcome that estrangement. This is merely another set of shadows in the cave he wishes to leave behind. But in the end he cannot quite manage to sustain the insight that his own repudiation of value is itself a natural consequence of his estrangement. So Camus leaves Meursault at the edge of the shadows and on the verge of new and finer discoveries yet to come, as he had intended. The way is now paved for the rebel, who will have his own shadows to contend with.

¹³³ Ibid., 115.

¹³⁴ The universe is as indifferent as I am. Ibid., 117.

¹³⁵ "Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary." Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 59.