

## 2. Why Meursault is an Outsider

There was always an air of ambivalence about the relationship between Camus and Sartre, long before it exploded into the famous row in the pages of *Les Temps Modernes* and their never speaking to one another again. They had become friends in 1943. A year before, Sartre had written a highly praising review of *The Outsider*, though Camus had been irked by its occasional critical remarks. A few years before that, Camus had written glowing, though not uncritical, reviews of Sartre's novel *Nausea* and collection of short stories *The Wall*. They recognised one another as kindred spirits, though their literary styles were very different. This engendered a rivalry that was perhaps exacerbated by Sartre being older than Camus and having achieved a higher academic distinction at a more prestigious university. For many years, there was a competitive flavour to their regular socialising together. They both endorsed violent resistance to the Nazi occupation, but Sartre was simultaneously more keenly in favour of it and less engaged in it than his younger rival.

How deeply did their differences run? The development of their personal and political disagreements has been very well charted (Aronson 2004; Martin 2013). But these chronological treatments leave unclear whether the thinkers grew apart as a cumulative effect of myriad disagreements over daily political developments, or whether those disagreements had been driven all along by a deeper contrast between their philosophical outlooks. This chapter will argue that even before Camus had met Sartre and Beauvoir, he already disagreed with the idea that they were soon to identify as the fundamental tenet of their existentialism. When he denied in an interview in 1945 that he was an existentialist, this was not merely an attempt to assert his independence as literary figure. He was reporting, entirely correctly, that he did not share their view of human existence at all.

It is this disagreement that grounds their political differences right from the start. The ferocity of the public dispute in 1952 reflects not only years of growing antagonism since the war, but also a mutual incomprehension. Perhaps being too eager to view Camus as

one of them, Beauvoir and Sartre had failed to notice the deep contradiction between the outlook expressed in his published works and their existential philosophy. This explains why they viewed his political development as a betrayal and why he was bemused that they took his political thought so personally. To see this, we need to turn first to the novel that Camus published in the year before he met Sartre and Beauvoir. For in *The Outsider* he already commits himself to views that are incompatible with the central claim of their existentialism.

### 1. Meursault's Emotional Strangeness

It is easy to overlook just how strange Meursault, hero of *The Outsider*, really is. The emphasis in the second part of the novel on his resistance to the demands of his society can give the impression that he is an outsider only in the sense that he does not conform to the prevailing local social norms. But he is more deeply estranged than that. For he seems to depart not merely from arbitrary social conventions, like the expected forms of dress or speech on a particular occasion. What stands out most about him, particularly in the first part of the novel, is his lack of the kind of inner emotional life that seems to run deeper than mere convention. He even lacks any understanding of why people find this odd. Not only does he seem happy and carefree the day after his mother has died, for example, but he finds it puzzling that his girlfriend Marie is surprised by this. Not only is he entirely emotionless at his mother's funeral, which is not merely a matter of contravening a social expectation, but he does not understand why people find this lack of emotion on this occasion strange.

His strangeness is not limited to this kind of awkward social interaction. He is generally quite passive, often responding to events wholly reactively, without any independent motivation of his own. He agrees to marry Marie only because she asks him to, for example, and says that he would have accepted the same invitation from any other woman. He becomes Raymond's friend and agrees to commit perjury to defend him, explaining this only by saying that he had no reason not to. This passivity is not, however, a pervasive feature of his character. At the first fateful encounter on the beach, it is Meursault who suggests to Raymond a plan to fight their opponents. In the second part of the novel, Meursault actively resists the demands his society make through the legal process and through the prison chaplain.

In a preface written in 1955, Camus emphasises this resistance to social pressure, saying that Meursault is condemned because 'he refuses to lie'. How can this be correct, given that Meursault readily commits perjury? 'To lie', Camus continues, is 'above all to say more than is true, and, as far as the human heart is concerned, to express more than one feels' (PS: 336). Meursault does indeed refuse to pretend to have feelings that he doesn't have. Even when his lawyer makes it clear that he could save his life by saying that he controlled his feelings at the funeral, Meursault replies: 'No, because it isn't true' (TO: 69). But this refusal to lie about his feelings does not fully account for his strangeness. If the trial jury could have understood his lack of tears in the context of his particular relationship with his mother, then why did Meursault not explain the context? Is it that Meursault does not understand other people sufficiently well to make his lack of tears at the funeral comprehensible to them? Or does his relationship with his mother not explain that lack of tears? When we consider his feelings more generally, it becomes clear that both of these suggestions are correct.

For his indifference to his mother's death is matched by his indifference to the death of the man he murdered. It is echoed in various places in the story, including his attitudes to the sadness of his mother's friends at the wake and to Marie's feelings when she asks whether he loves her and will marry her. These are not instances of a overall lack of feelings. Meursault enjoys the pleasures of sea, sun, and sex, and is pained by boredom, effort, and the demands that people make of him. Neither is he unable to perceive other people's feelings. He tells us that Marie was annoyed, Perez cried tears of frustration and anguish, Raymond was pleased, Salamano was angry with his dog, the journalist betrayed no discernible emotion, the prosecutor was furious, and the judge passed sentence bearing an expression of respect. What is strange about Meursault is that other people's feelings do not register with him as reasons for his own actions. The callous tenor of his narration across the novel is due to this lack of emotional engagement with the feelings of other people.

This same lack explains why his experience is so superficial. This is not, as has been suggested, because he lives without reflecting on his experiences and reasons for action (Solomon 2006: 15-17; Sherman 2009: 64-76). He does reflect, often giving poetic phenomenological descriptions of his experience. He tells us, for example, that as soon as he had committed the murder, 'I realized that I had destroyed the natural balance of the

day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I had once been happy' (TO: 63).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, his whole account of the scene leading up to the murder is replete with his reflective thoughts at the time on his experience and his reasoning about what to do. Throughout the novel, he reflectively reports his feelings of being judged by the various people he deals with (King 1964: 61). When he says earlier that he does not think anything of Raymond beating up a prostitute except that it is interesting, he is reporting the findings of his reflection: that he has no emotional response to the obvious distress of the victim. When he responds to Marie's question of whether he loves her by saying that he does not think so and anyway it does not mean anything, this is because love essentially involves an affective concern for the other person's happiness and wellbeing. Reflecting on his feelings, Meursault does not find anything distinctive about the ones he has towards Marie. Indeed, his total lack of emotional engagement with the feelings of other people means that he cannot even understand what it would be to love someone.

Meursault's failure to understand why people are surprised by his apparent indifference to his mother's death is also the result of this lack of genuinely other-directed emotion. He cannot empathise with their perception of his behaviour because their perception is shaped by their pervasive experience of a kind of emotional response that he has never had. This is evident in his response to his lawyer's question of whether he grieved at the death of his mother: 'I replied that I'd rather lost the habit of analysing my emotions' (TO:

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations are from the recent translation by Sandra Smith (Penguin, 2012), because this is the first single edition available across the English-speaking world. This translation, however, has sacrificed some of the lyrical fluidity of Meursault's reflective descriptions that was best rendered into English by Joseph Laredo in his edition now out of print. The murder scene ends, for example, with Meursault telling us that '*c'était comme quatre coups brefs que je frappais sur la porte du malheur*', which Smith renders as 'it was as if I had rapped sharply, four times, on the fatal door of destiny' (TO: 64), where Laredo has 'it was like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness'. Perhaps more importantly, Smith's translation implies that Meursault has been attacked before he fires the shots: 'All I could feel was the sun crashing like cymbals against my forehead, and the knife, a burning sword hovering above me. Its red-hot blade tore through my eyelashes to pierce my aching eyes.' (TO: 63). The original is clear that the 'burning sword' (*épée brûlante*) here is not the knife itself, but the light reflected by the knife, '*le glaive éblouissant jaillie du couteau toujours en face de moi*', 'the dazzling spear still leaping off the knife in front of me' as Laredo puts it. Meursault is dazzled by light, not knifed in the eyes.

69). This contrasts sharply with his response to the chaplain soon afterwards that he knows without having to reflect on it that he does not believe in God. In the case of his emotions towards his mother, he seems unaware that he is expected simply to know whether he felt grief, not to find out by analysing himself. He seems equally unaware that his audience have a good intuitive understanding, grounded in their own experience of emotions that he lacks, of what it is to love someone. This failure of empathy extends to his narration of the novel itself. Camus has succeeded in writing a story told by someone who does not empathise with the reader. This is at the heart of why Meursault seems so strange. He does not see that the reasons he is giving for his behaviour are not ones that his audience can empathise with. Why has Camus done this?

## 2. Meursault as a Hero of Absurdity

One of the rhetorical purposes of *The Outsider* is to present an extended example of a hero of absurdity, giving a richer case study than is possible within the confines of the philosophical essay on absurdity, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that Camus published very soon after the novel and intended to be read alongside it. When he introduces his 'heroes of absurdity' in that essay, Camus tells us that 'an example is not necessarily an example to be followed', and so these 'illustrations are not, therefore, models' (MS: 66). It is each character's affirmation of absurdity itself that Camus means to extol, rather than the particular way that they each make this affirmation. Meursault's particular affirmation of absurdity is bound up with his strange lack of emotional concern for other people, but this lack of concern is not itself explained by his role as a hero of absurdity. To see this, we need first to consider exactly what Camus meant by claiming that life is absurd.

For it is misleading to claim simply that for Camus 'the absurd arises because the world fails to meet our demands for meaning' (Nagel 1971: 721). That would leave open the option of escaping absurdity by ceasing to make those demands. There would be two ways of doing this. One would be to accept that everything is meaningless. The other would be to seek the meaning of our lives within our lives themselves, rather than out there in the world. Camus does not recommend either of these ways of trying to escape absurdity. Rather, he argues that they are both equally futile because he considers absurdity to be an inescapable structure of the human condition (MS: 34).

The problem of absurdity arises, according to Camus, because we have a fundamental 'appetite for the absolute and for unity' that could be satisfied only by reducing the world,

indeed the whole universe, to 'a rational and reasonable principle' that would make it fully intelligible (MS: 51). It is the mismatch between this fundamental appetite and the meaninglessness of the world that generates the problem; 'what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart' (MS: 26). This absurdity 'lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation' (MS: 33). Camus does not consider this problem to concern only our relation with the world. The same problem, he argues, is found when we turn our attention towards ourselves. My own mind and motivations fail to meet my expectations of rational intelligibility, with the effect that I cannot understand myself any more than I can understand the rest of the universe. 'This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me'; I will always remain 'a stranger to myself' (MS: 24).

Should we read this instance of 'stranger' (*étranger*), echoing the title of the novel, as alluding to the underlying principle of Meursault's character? The failure to understand oneself, Camus has claimed here, is an essential aspect of the human condition. So it cannot itself be what sets Meursault apart, what makes him an outsider. But it is consistent with this that what marks Meursault out is that he has understood that one can never really make sense to oneself, that one's own mind and motivations will evade any search for rational order within them, and so has relinquished the aim of making sense of himself. We have seen that it is not exactly right to say that he does not reflect on his experiences and motivations. But his reflections do have a strangely detached flavour, as though the experiences and motivations he is describing are not really his own or even all those of one person. Might this be explained by his acceptance that the search for order and meaning here, as in the world at large, will be fruitless?

Since he is intended as a hero of absurdity rather than as an illustration of one of the futile strategies for evading absurdity, Meursault cannot have given up on the search for rational meaning. In order to affirm the absurd, he must affirm the longing for intelligibility as well as the ineluctable frustration of that longing. He must be understood as living 'without appeal' to anything that would resolve this problem (MS: 53). Camus describes Don Juan as a hero of absurdity, for example, because he understands the rituals of love as expressing a basic human desire for a particular kind of stable order that can never be satisfied and affirms both the desire and its disappointment. This is why, according to Camus, Don Juan loves each woman that he loves 'with the same passion and with his whole self' even though he loves countless women and his love never lasts long (MS: 67). How, then, does Meursault affirm the demand for rational intelligibility in himself and in

the world? What is his distinctive way of combining this with affirming that neither the world nor one's own mind can meet that demand?

### 3. Meursault's Progress

The answer to this question can be approached through a puzzle that arises at the end of the novel. It is clear that Meursault has learned something through the trial and his preparation for execution, but it is difficult to see exactly what he has learned. He tells us in the final few pages that 'I'd been right, I was still right, I had always been right' to think that 'nothing mattered' and yet he also tells us that 'standing before this symbolic night bursting with stars, I opened myself for the first time to the tender indifference of the world' (TO, 127, 129). How can he be accepting 'the tender indifference of the world' for the first time if he has always, or at least for many years, correctly maintained that nothing matters? One way to read this is to see his final acceptance of the indifference of the world as his relinquishing the search for intelligible meaning that has animated the novel up to this point. That search was manifested in a particular form of nihilism, his insistence against the preferences of his society and at considerable cost to himself that nothing really mattered.

For this insistence is not the only possible response to the lack of objective meaning. Another response would be to conclude that it simply does not matter what anyone thinks of the meaning of the world or the meaning of their own minds. Meursault could have affirmed the objective lack of rational order by simply going along with the expectations and beliefs of his society, whatever they happen to be. After all, someone in his position might reason, since there is no objective meaning to life it does not matter whether or not one goes along with social expectations. But to take this option would have been to deny his own drive for intelligible meaning in favour of simply accepting whatever meanings his society provides. So this option is not an affirmation of absurdity, but one of the strategies for evading absurdity. Rather than take this option, Meursault affirms his own drive for order by insisting on his nihilism, by insisting that the lack of objective order should be recognised and accepted. The lack of objective meaning is itself the objective truth that satisfies his longing for order. Meursault is a hero of absurdity precisely because he resists the social pressure to act as though there is some rational intelligibility to life, even as he accepts that there is no objective meaning that would require him to resist this.

This allows us to make sense of Meursault as a hero of absurdity across the novel up to the final few pages, but nevertheless it does not seem quite right. One difficulty is that on this reading the culmination of the tale is Meursault giving up on his insistence on nihilism, effectively therefore relinquishing his role as a hero of absurdity rather than maintaining it to the bitter end. If he is going to relinquish this role, then why does not he not attempt to do so in a way that would save his life? A second difficulty is that it is unclear just why Meursault should relinquish this role at this point. Clearly, he has had some sort of epiphany as a result of the trial and imprisonment. But just what is it that he has come to realise and why? It cannot be some revelation of a deep truth about human existence if it leads only to his abandoning his truthful insistence that nothing really matters. A third difficulty is that this reading leaves Meursault's lack of emotional engagement with the feelings of others entirely incidental to his role as a hero of absurdity. The centrality of this lack to the structure of his character and to the development of the narrative suggest that it is rather integral to the theme of absurdity and its resolution in his final thoughts.

We can solve these problems by refining this reading of the novel in a way that integrates Meursault's emotional strangeness into his particular way of being a hero of absurdity. For the first part of the novel, Meursault affirms his own drive for intelligibility by insisting on moral nihilism. His honesty about his own feelings is part of his affirmation of the lack of objective order in the world and in his own mind, including the order his society expect to find in him, while his general dishonesty is part of the moral nihilism that he sees as part of that lack of objective order. What he learns across the second part of the novel, however, is that there is a source of moral value despite the lack of intelligibility that confronts our demands for meaning. Moral value has its source, he comes to realise, in the emotional concern for other people that arises naturally for everyone else, but which he lacks.

His first glimpse of this comes after the director and caretaker of the home where his mother died have testified at the trial about his lack of emotion on the day of the funeral. He tells us that he could feel the indignation and hatred felt towards him by the jury and other people in the courtroom and 'for the first time, I realized I was guilty' (TO: 94). But at this point, he does not yet understand what his guilt amounts to. He tells us that he agreed with every word of the prosecutor's summary of the case against him, which essentially set out Meursault's emotional strangeness, but that 'I didn't understand how the qualities of an ordinary man could be turned into overwhelming proof of his guilt' (TO: 105). It is only through his confrontation with the priest in the final chapter that Meursault

comes to realise that these are not the qualities of an ordinary man. 'Why should the death of other people or a mother's love matter so much?', he yells at the priest (TO: 127). He takes the lack of objective meaning to imply that these things do not matter, because there can be no objective reason why they should. But through his outburst, he finally comes to see that these things matter simply because people care about them.

Part of what he comes to realise is that he is not alone in his guilt. He realises that everyone in the story is guilty of making a common error, though he makes it in a different way from the others. The common error is to think that moral value must be grounded in some intelligible meaning of life, such as religion or the structure of society. For everyone else, this takes the form of mistaking the value that is actually grounded in their own hearts for an objective order of the universe. Because he lacks the relevant kind of emotions, Meursault has made the error in the opposite direction: although he has been right about the lack of objective meaning, he has been wrong to insist on moral nihilism. Where he previously thought of everyone else as guilty simply of a false belief in objective morality, he now has a deeper understanding of their mistake, one that implicates his own form of this guilt. Rather than affirm his drive for order by insisting on moral nihilism, he now affirms it by accepting that moral value is grounded in a kind of emotion that he lacks but that people generally do have. And he affirms the general human longing for order in his diagnosis of the mistaken moral objectivism of his society, all while affirming the lack of an objective meaning to life. He remains a hero of absurdity, but has come to see the absurd in a new light. This is why he ends with the wish to be greeted at the guillotine by a crowd shouting their hatred of him: such a scene would confirm his new view of the place of moral value in a universe lacking any objective meaning.

#### 4. The Origin of Meursault's Estrangement

Meursault's emotional strangeness is therefore integral to his role as a hero of absurdity. For his role is not simply to embrace absurdity, but to disclose the source of moral value in an absurd universe. It is a mistake, therefore, to think that *The Outsider* is intended merely to dramatise the absurd attitude described in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, or to draw out implications of that absurdity itself without attempting to move beyond it (Foley 2008: 13). The novel goes beyond the essay in presenting the falsehood of moral nihilism against the backdrop of absurdity. The picture of moral value that it presents is rather unfocused and suggestive. It falls very short of the precision that we would expect from a philosophical treatise in metaethics and no clear rational argument for it can be

formulated on the basis of the novel. But this is exactly what we should expect. Our demands for rational intelligibility are frustrated, Camus argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, because life is always richer and more nuanced than any abstract thought designed to capture it. Literary fiction can present 'in images rather than in reasoned arguments' what is 'simultaneously relative and inexhaustible knowledge' (MS: 92-3).

The novel does convey, however, with admirable concision, a fairly sophisticated position on the origin of moral value. For the logic of its narrative carries implications about the origin of the emotional engagement with other people that it presents as grounding moral value. To see this, we need to consider Beauvoir's comments on this novel. For she recognises that Meursault's strangeness consists in his lack of emotional concern for other people, arguing that he lacks these emotions as a result of lacking any projects in life. 'Only I can create the tie that unites me to the other', she wrote in her analysis of *The Outsider*, and 'I create it from the fact that I am not a thing, but a project' (P&C: 93). Her comments here are ambiguous. They can be read as an analysis of the character of Meursault as Camus has presented him or as showing how some aspects of his behaviour could illustrate her own view of the origins of emotional concern for other people. How plausible are these comments as a reading of the novel itself?

If we read *The Outsider* in this way, then Meursault's strangeness echoes Roquentin's strange experiences in Sartre's first novel *Nausea*, published four years earlier. Towards the end of this novel, Roquentin starts to experience the world and his own body as mere matter lacking any structure or meaning beyond those he chooses to give them. The tram seat he is sitting on 'could just as well be a dead donkey, for example, swollen by the water and drifting along, belly up on a great grey river', the bark of the chestnut tree could be 'boiled leather' partly covered in rust (N: 180, 183). 'Things have broken free from their names', he tells us, and 'the diversity of things, their individuality' has 'melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, in disorder' (N: 180, 183). These experiences come about after the only projects that have given Roquentin's life any shape and purpose, his relationship with Anny and his work on a biography of the obscure M. Rollebon, have come to an end. This is the first draft of an idea that will become in *Being and Nothingness* the core of Sartre's existentialism. At this stage, the idea is that the meanings we experience in the world are manifestations of the projects that we choose to engage in. Sartre develops this, as we will see in the next chapter, into the theory that while the meanings of objects are generally socially determined, the value we experience them as having depends on our projects.

Should we accept Beauvoir's presentation of Meursault as exemplifying the idea that our emotional concern for other people is likewise grounded in our own projects? Camus was inspired by *Nausea* in writing *The Outsider*. In his review of *Nausea* four years before *The Outsider* was published, Camus praised its philosophical ambition in presenting the absurdity of life through literary images, but argued that it fell short of the ideal of philosophical literature in its reliance on Roquentin explaining and analysing his experiences rather than allowing their philosophical import to shine through the experiences themselves (SN: 199-202). These comments are echoed in the comments in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that philosophical reasoning abstracts away from the rich nuance of existence that can be preserved in literary treatments of the same themes. However, it does not follow from this that Camus is merely attempting to provide a superior literary presentation of precisely the same ideas found in *Nausea*.

Moreover, there is little direct textual evidence to support Beauvoir's comments as a reading of *The Outsider*. It is true that Meursault drifts along in life without any clear sense of direction. He does not seem to mind whether or not he marries Marie. When offered the opportunity to move to Paris with his job, he says that he does not care one way or the other. 'When I was a student, I was very ambitious about having a career', he tells us, but 'when I had to give up my studies, I realised quite soon that none of that sort of thing mattered very much' (TO: 45). But this is not because he is lacking in commitments. He loves the pleasures of the sea and the sun and prefers not to give them up for a career move to Paris. His indifference about marrying Marie is a symptom of his general lack of emotional engagement with other people. Perhaps most importantly, the whole story rests on his commitment to absurdity, along with his consequent commitments to moral nihilism and to honesty about his own feelings. These are the projects that structure his life through the novel.

Rather than assimilating Meursault's emotional strangeness to the experiences recorded by Roquentin towards the end of *Nausea*, as Beauvoir suggests, we can make more sense of *The Outsider* by understanding this strangeness as essential to Meursault's personality. The prosecutor gets it right when declares that Meursault 'had no soul, and that nothing that makes a man human, not a single moral principle, could be found within' him (TO: 106). Meursault's lawyer disagrees, but the positive characteristics that he lists do nothing to counter the prosecutor's point that Meursault lacks the psychological foundations of moral value. Earlier, the magistrate had likewise recognised that Meursault's moral nihilism was a manifestation of a deep deficiency at the core of his being, which more than

Meursault's atheism is why the magistrate calls him 'our Antichrist' (TO: 75). This too is why Meursault ends the novel feeling that the indifferent universe is 'so like me, so like a brother, in fact' (TO: 129). He has realised that his inherent lack of emotional engagement with other people's feelings sets him apart from other people by making him as coldly indifferent as the universe whose lack of meaning he had always recognised. Meursault is an outsider not only to his society, but to everyone, including his readers.<sup>2</sup>

## 5. A Literary Moral Cogito

Meursault's emotional strangeness is thus essential to his being the particular hero of absurdity that he is, but is not essential to embracing absurdity itself. There is no contradiction between affirming the human longing for rational intelligibility, accepting that this longing is inevitably frustrated, and being emotionally concerned with the feelings of others. Indeed, the rhetorical purpose of the novel is precisely to recommend this combination of attitudes. Camus has presented this tale told by a narrator who cannot empathise with the reader in order to bring us to see something about ourselves that is lacking in Meursault. The novel is a literary attempt at the moral cogito that Camus dedicates *The Rebel* to elucidating (TR: xi-xii, 10). Just as Descartes employed his famous cogito argument to secure the foundations of knowledge against the backdrop of universal doubt, Camus intends the tale of Meursault to demonstrate the foundations of moral value against the backdrop of an objective lack of meaning. Through showing the grounds of moral value despite the problem of absurdity, Camus intends not only to show the falsity of moral nihilism but also to show the error that leads to that falsehood.

Meursault comes this conclusion gradually across the second part of the novel, with its culmination in his rant at the priest. He later feels as though 'this great release of anger' has 'purged me of evil, emptied me of hope' (TO: 129). This feeling is right. It has purged

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<sup>2</sup> This reading is in agreement with Philip Thody's claim that Meursault has been explicitly and reflectively aware of the absurdity of life throughout the novel, but does not agree with his conclusion that at the end of the novel Meursault simply comes to publicly proclaim what he had always privately held (1961: 37-41). Brian Masters is right to criticize this conclusion as failing to account for Meursault's progress from apathetic, insensitive bewilderment to passionate, assertive lucidity (1974: 32). Thody and Masters, however, both fail to see that Meursault's progress here concerns his understanding of the place of moral value in an absurd life.

him of his moral nihilism, since he now recognises the ground of moral value. He has realised that everyone shares in the moral guilt of mistaking the moral value grounded in their emotions for an objective meaning. But we should not conclude that he has recognised an existential guilt common to us all (Sherman 2009: 78). On the contrary, he has recognised an existential guilt that is uniquely his: that he is incapable of the kind of emotion that others possess and that grounds moral value. His recognition that he is incapable of it, rather than simply currently lacking it, explains why he has been emptied of hope: there is no prospect of rehabilitation. It is this recognition of his status as an existential outsider that would be confirmed by crowds at the guillotine shouting their hatred of him.

Although this literary moral cogito operates through Meursault's progress and final understanding itself, the purpose of presenting it is to bring about a parallel recognition in the reader. Although his honest indifference may bring us to admit to ourselves that we do not always care about the lives of others as we think we should, Camus wants to convey a more significant point. We are to see Meursault as unlike us, as lacking the grounds of moral value that we possess even in an indifferent universe. Camus tells us this story to bring us to realise the deep moral significance of our natural emotional engagement with the feelings of other people. Camus indicates this purpose of the novel in his famous description of Meursault as 'the only Christ we deserve' (PS: 337). This is hardly perspicuous, given that two thousand years of Christian theology have provided a wide variety of understandings of what that title might mean. But it does seem that he thinks that reflecting on the story of this character can save us from the evil of moral nihilism, just as Christians might think that reflecting on the life of Jesus can save us from sin.

None of this is meant to deny that Camus intended to convey some more immediate social critiques through this novel. At least two aspects of the injustice of the trial and sentencing embody important moral concerns. One is the stark presentation of the lack of value accorded to the lives of the colonised people by the French colonial system. The novel has been criticised for denying the reality of colonialism by presenting the court as treating the colonised equally with the colonisers (O'Brien 1970: 26). But this criticism overlooks that Camus has portrayed the court as far more concerned with whether Meursault cried at his mother's funeral than with his murder of one of the colonised people, and that the murder victim remains nameless throughout the trial. The court treats the murder merely as an excuse to try, convict, and sentence Meursault for being an outsider. This embodies the novel's second social critique. It is not exactly right to say that Meursault is condemned

for his lack of social conformity (Foley 2008: 14, 17-22). It is rather because he genuinely lacks the capacity for emotional engagement with the feelings of others. He is rejected by society and condemned to death on grounds of an inherent part of his personality. These two specific moral aspects of the novel contribute to the larger ethical message that Camus intends it to bring. It is through our emotional engagement with these fictional characters that we come to see the moral problems here, if we do see them. It is through their commitment to their imagined objective meanings of life that Meursault's society fail to see these problems.

## 6. Why Camus Is Not An Existentialist

We can now see more clearly why Camus did not want to be classified as an existentialist. He rejected the label at the time of what Beauvoir calls 'the existentialist offensive', during which Beauvoir and Sartre published articles and books and gave lectures and interviews using the recently coined term 'existentialism' to expound their shared philosophy. Their core claim is summarised in their slogan 'existence precedes essence'. This is the idea that each person's set of goals and values is ultimately the result of their own choices and actions. Although, as we will see in more detail across this book, Beauvoir and Sartre disagreed at this point over the precise meaning of this slogan, what they agreed upon was enough to exclude Camus from the existentialist category. For what the slogan summarises is their view that there are no inbuilt desires, values, or personality traits that explain any part of an individual's behaviour. It follows that there are no inbuilt desires, values, or personality traits that all or nearly all people have in common, which could constitute a basic human nature.

Camus, by contrast, believes in human nature. The idea that he wants to convey in *The Outsider* is that a kind of emotional fraternity is inherent in human nature, that we naturally possess an emotional engagement with the lives of one another. It is perhaps not surprising that the literary presentation of this idea contains some ambiguities. In particular, it is unclear whether Meursault is intended as an impossible character, someone lacking a trait that Camus considers strictly essential to human existence and presented merely to illustrate that essentiality, or whether Camus would allow that people can lack this trait, just as people can lack other normal features of human existence. But either way, his position contradicts the basic tenet of existentialism. For the difference between Meursault and the rest of his society is a difference in their inbuilt traits, which is therefore a difference that cannot be accepted within the confines of existentialism. This is

why Beauvoir had to ascribe Meursault's emotional strangeness to a lack of projects in order to use him as an illustration of existentialist philosophy. Whether she realised this or not, Camus is using that strangeness to convey his idea that natural human emotional concern for other people is the ground of moral value.

How deep is this difference between Camus and the existentialists? We have seen that Meursault's emotional strangeness is so central to the narrative and narration of *The Outsider* that without it there simply could not be this novel. But does the idea that existence precedes essence require the rejection of this idea that emotional concern for others is part of human nature? Could there be a form of existentialism that held all particular human motivations to be grounded ultimately in each individual's choices and actions within the constraint of a natural emotional concern for other people? It might be argued that this move could be made for the other personality trait that Camus postulates in *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the inescapable drive to make rational sense of things. For it seems perfectly coherent to think that this is simply the structure of the human mind, which by its nature categorises and seeks explanation, and is therefore a purely formal trait that sets no further limits on the possible goals and values that the individual may have.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a similar view is often ascribed to Sartre. On this reading, the motivation he calls 'the desire to be God', which has the impossible aim of retaining the features of the conscious mind while taking on the unchanging nature of nonconscious objects, is an essential structure of human existence. The claim that existence precedes essence, on this reading, can be rewritten as the claim that our choices determine exactly what kind of unchanging conscious thing we aim to be. I have argued against this reading, offering instead the view that 'the desire to be God' is the fundamental form of bad faith that Sartre thinks we can and should overcome (Webber 2009: ch. 8). It may be that the more common reading of 'the desire to be God' has its appeal partly due to Camus and Sartre often being classified together as existentialists. This kind of reverse exegesis is one of the dangers of categorising a diverse group of thinkers together without any clear definition governing the category. It is also found, for example, in the idea that Meursault is an exemplar of Sartrean bad faith, even though *The Outsider* was published before Sartre had published his thoughts on bad faith and before Camus had met Beauvoir and Sartre (Sherman 2009: 70-76; Solomon 2006: 33).

However, a natural emotional concern for other people would not be purely formal, since it places substantive value on the happiness and wellbeing of other people, at least in the subjective sense of their feelings of happiness and wellbeing. An argument would be required to explain why human nature can include this substantive trait but no others. Moreover, a substantive trait constrains the range of other goals and values an individual could have. To the degree that it does so, the scope of the claim that existence precedes essence would be eroded, perhaps to the point at which it is merely the uncontroversial and unexciting claim that many of our motivations result from our choices.

A more significant reason why the message of *The Outsider* cannot be accommodated within existentialism concerns not the claim that Camus makes about human nature itself, but the moral significance that he ascribes to it. For existentialism is not simply a theory of what it is to be human. It is an ethical theory. It is a form of humanism that holds the structure of human existence, that existence precedes essence, to itself be the ground of moral value (Sartre EH: 51-3). Camus makes precisely the opposite claim that moral value is grounded in motivations that are natural to human beings. In his first presentation of this idea through *The Outsider*, moral value is grounded in our emotional concern for one another. Ten years later, he refines this in *The Rebel* into the idea of natural human solidarity. These are works of existential ethics, since they aim to ground ethics in the structures of human existence. But within that category, Camus stands opposed to the existentialism of Beauvoir and Sartre on the fundamental question of the kind of structures of human existence that ground moral value. For him, moral value is grounded in substantive traits of human nature. For them, it is grounded in there being no substantive traits of human nature.

## 7. Human Nature and Political Violence

Camus had first expressed his existential ethical outlook in *The Outsider*, published a year before Beauvoir and Sartre first presented their idea that existence precedes essence in *She Came To Stay* and *Being and Nothingness*, two years before the first detailed statement of the ethical outlook of existentialism in Beauvoir's *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, and three years before Beauvoir and Sartre widely publicised their philosophy under the name of existentialism. From the outset, Camus was already fundamentally opposed to their existentialist theory of human existence and its grounding of ethical value. He outlined his view of natural human solidarity as the ground of moral value in an anonymous article published in *Combat* just before the liberation of Paris in 1944, where he contrasted the

Nazi attempt to impose meaning on a meaningless world with the morally right expression of the natural human concern for one another manifested in the Resistance (LGF: 26-32). It is hardly surprising, then, that Camus should reject the label 'existentialist' just as Beauvoir and Sartre were busy defining it as the claim that existence precedes essence with the entailment that there is no human nature (IJD: 345).

By the time Camus published *The Rebel* in 1952, his thought had developed into a general endorsement of the motivations of personal emotional attachment as grounds for revolt or rebellion against totalising political systems that attempt to impose meaning on the world. Violence can be justified, he argued, only as part of such a rebellion grounded in our natural human solidarity. Camus refined his idea in explicit contrast with existentialism, which he claimed made history the sole determinant of human action. This might at first seem to misrepresent existentialism. Beauvoir and Sartre emphasise the role of freedom in motivating action through each individual's pursuit of chosen projects that structure their experience of situations. History provides the context in which projects are formulated and undertaken in the first place and continues to provide the physical and social environment that are then articulated by those projects. Even though the existentialists deny that history fully determines the individual's action in this way, Camus is right that there is no place in their picture for his view of human nature as a ground of moral value that transcends history. He first contrasts the existentialist view with his account of human nature in his notebooks soon after the existentialist offensive (CN: 136) and this contrast is prominent in *The Rebel*, the book that finally ignited the mutual resentments between Camus and Sartre into an explosive public dispute (TR: 4, 240-1).

Just as Camus was finalising *The Rebel*, Sartre had reached his own conclusion that revolutionary political violence is required to bring about a world in which the value of human freedom can be fully realised (Aronson 2004: 112-3). It is not surprising, then, that Sartre did not approve of *The Rebel*. But it might seem surprising that Sartre viewed it as a kind of betrayal of its author's earlier work. 'Where is Meursault, Camus? Where is Sisyphus? Where are those Trotskyites of the heart who preached permanent revolution?', asked Sartre in his defence of the negative review of *The Rebel* written for *Les Temps Modernes* by his colleague Francis Jeanson. 'Murdered, no doubt, or in exile', he concludes (P: 125). Meursault is alive and well in the pages of *The Rebel*, however, because he never was intended to preach permanent revolution of the heart. He was the first attempt that Camus made to present the grounding of morality in an unchanging human nature, the same idea elaborated in *The Rebel*. In his review of *The Outsider* almost ten years earlier,

Sartre had understood Meursault simply as experiencing life as a meaningless sequence of events and then coming to recognise this absurdity explicitly at the end of the novel. Sartre was unsure whether to chastise Camus for misrepresenting the phenomenology of experience, or whether to read the misrepresentation as an ironic satire (OE: 173-180).

Sartre's error there had been to attribute to Camus his own obsession with the phenomenology of experience. This led him to overlook that for Camus the absurd is not the lack of meaning itself, which might be found in Meursault's experience, but the clash between the lack of meaning and the inescapable human desire for meaning. Had he kept sight of this richer conception of absurdity, Sartre would have had to look into Meursault's particular character and motivations in order to unravel his role as a hero of absurdity, which should have led him to Meursault's emotional strangeness. By failing to see this dimension of the novel, Sartre has overlooked from the outset the deep difference between the existentialist philosophy he shares with Beauvoir and the sharply contrasting existential ethical outlook that Camus presents in *The Outsider*. He has instead read Camus as agreeing with the existentialist idea that value is dependent on human projects, then a decade later been shocked to find a contradiction of this in *The Rebel*. This also explains why Camus was puzzled by Sartre's reaction to *The Rebel*, which was after all primarily an explication and refinement of the ideas that Camus had been publishing since before he and Sartre had even met.

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