

Between Nihilism and Transcendence: Camus's Dialogue with Dostoevsky

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Abstract: This article examines the influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky on Albert Camus's political philosophy of revolt. The aim is to clarify Camus's reactions to the problems of absurdity, nihilism, and transcendence through an analysis of his literary and philosophical engagement with Dostoevsky. I make three related claims. First, I claim that Camus's philosophy of revolt is informed in crucial ways by Dostoevsky's accounts of religious transcendence and political nihilism. Second, that Camus's conceptualization of the tension between nihilism and transcendence corresponds to and is personified by the dialogue between Ivan Karamazov and Father Zossima in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Finally, that Camus uses his novel *The Plague* to bridge the moral and metaphysical divide between these two characters. In particular, I argue that Camus offers a distinct vision of revolt in *The Plague*, which clarifies both the practical implications of revolt and his philosophical rejoinder to Dostoevsky.

Introduction

Given his artistic disposition, it is not surprising that Camus was drawn to Dostoevsky. Like Camus, Dostoevsky preferred the medium of art to formal philosophy, which demanded order and coherence. Opposed to abstractions and theory, Dostoevsky wanted his art to reflect reality, which is tentional and uncertain. Camus was no different in this respect. His writings are replete with antinomies—justice or freedom, immanence or transcendence, being or becoming. No attempt is made to resolve these paradoxes; they are simply affirmed and accepted as part of life. For both Camus and Dostoevsky, human living implied certain contradictions. Whereas philosophy (and occasionally politics) seeks to resolve those contradictions, art adds aesthetic value to life without dogmatically narrativizing or interpreting reality.

The most enduring antinomy in Camus's and Dostoevsky's thought concerns nihilism and transcendence. For both writers, nihilism implied a negation of higher principles, particularly moral principles. Nihilism entails a rejection of transcendence, as transcendence (as Camus and Dostoevsky understood the term) refers to knowledge or values beyond the realm of experience. It is

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important to clarify this distinction at the outset. In the context of this study, nihilism denotes the negation of a ground for values (beyond the individual) and transcendence denotes the affirmation of a ground for values outside of immediate experience. The tension between nihilism and transcendence thus revolves around a foundation for meaning, judgment, and action.

On Dostoevsky's view, nihilism followed from the collapse of metaphysics. In his writings, nihilism is linked to the Enlightenment project, which spawned a wave of progressive political and scientific revolutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a result of these movements, transcendent standards lost their moral and intellectual authority. Dealing with the consequences of this loss was the definitive crisis of late modernity, according to Dostoevsky. Camus was perpetually engaged with this problematic in Dostoevsky's texts. From Camus's perspective, Dostoevsky illuminated a tension at the heart of modernity, namely, the loss of transcendence and the concomitant relativization of metaphysical principles. This tension permeates Dostoevsky's political novels, notably *The Possessed*, which Camus placed among the "four or five supreme works" in all of literature.¹ This article argues that the connections Dostoevsky draws between metaphysical and political nihilism anchor much of Camus's subsequent political thought, and, further, that Camus's response to absurdity, specifically revolt, is influenced by Dostoevsky's existential defense of religious transcendence. The essential claim is that Camus's problematization of the tension between nihilism and transcendence mirrors the dialogue between Ivan Karamazov and Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and that Camus offers the protagonist of *The Plague* as a model of how to live and act within this tension.²

Dostoevsky's influence on Camus has been the subject of several commentaries. Thomas Hanna, for instance, has explored the centrality of Dostoevsky's

¹Camus quoted in Olivier Todd's biography, *Albert Camus: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 395.

²It is worth noting that Camus appears much more engaged with Ivan Karamazov than with Father Zossima in virtually all of his works. Indeed, there is but one direct reference to Zossima (Zossime in French) in Camus's *The Rebel*, notably in the chapter entitled "The Rejection of Salvation." By contrast, there are countless references to Ivan in Camus's essays, literature, and notebooks. However, the claim here is not that Camus is exclusively in dialogue with these two characters (though there is good reason to suppose that he is); rather, I argue that he is in dialogue with the themes and attitudes represented by them, and, moreover, that the tension between these two figures offers a unique way to frame Camus's conceptualization of the corresponding tension between nihilism and transcendence. In addition to clarifying the terms of the problems against which Camus is reacting, this also helps to illuminate the motivating concerns of Camus's project. In any case, despite the dearth of explicit references to Zossima, we know that Camus read *The Brothers Karamazov* with passionate attention for much of his adult life, and thus it seems likely that the figures and the motifs in this text informed his political philosophy of revolt.

Ivan Karamazov to Camus's early moral thought.³ More recently, Mark Orme has traced Camus's humanism to several of Dostoevsky's literary figures.⁴ One of the more penetrating discussions of Camus and Dostoevsky can be found in Maurice Friedman's *Problematic Rebel*. In particular, Friedman contextualizes the dispute between Camus and Dostoevsky concerning transcendence and experience by clarifying Camus's emphasis on solidarity and suffering in *The Plague*.⁵ Here I extend Friedman's analysis by contrasting the image of revolt in *The Plague* with Ivan and Father Zossima from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. To date, the most exhaustive study of the Camus-Dostoevsky relationship is Ray Davison's *Camus: The Challenge of Dostoevsky*. Davison offers a richly detailed account of Camus's engagement with Dostoevsky's literary characters.⁶ Davison's contribution is to elucidate the appeal of Dostoevsky's fiction to Camus. His analysis also offers some clarification concerning Dostoevsky's role in shaping Camus's conception of the problem of the absurd, particularly at the level of the individual.

This study adds to the literature on Camus and Dostoevsky in two ways. First, I examine not just the degree of Dostoevsky's influence on Camus but also the specific aspects of Dostoevsky's thought to which Camus responds in his own works. This goes beyond merely framing Camus's philosophy in terms of its engagement with Dostoevsky. The second innovation is in the attempt to analyze Camus's broader political dialogue with Dostoevsky. To the extent that connections between these writers have been discussed, it has been in the general context of modern thought or it has focused on overlapping literary themes. This work is similarly focused, but emphasis is placed on the political dimensions of these connections. In particular, I illustrate the ways in which Dostoevsky crystallizes Camus's account of the political implications of man's ontological and epistemological situation. Although Camus rejects Dostoevsky's appeal to religious transcendence, Dostoevsky remains central to Camus's effort to recover a moral ground for politics beyond the confines of transcendent religion and positivist science. Davison, for example, points to Ivan Karamazov's "everything is permitted" as the cardinal theme of Camus's writings on the absurd and on revolt. However, Davison does not adequately address Camus's philosophical response to Ivan. This is a significant omission, as Camus considered Ivan's declaration only a point of departure:

³Thomas Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Camus* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 85.

⁴Mark Orme, *The Development of Albert Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont, 2007), 159.

⁵See Maurice Friedman, *Problematic Rebel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 492.

⁶Ray Davison, *The Challenge of Dostoevsky* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 51.

The truly free person is the one who accepting death as it is, accepts simultaneously the consequences—namely the overturning of all traditional notions of values in life. Ivan Karamazov's "Everything is Permitted" is the only expression of coherent freedom. But it is imperative to get to the bottom of the statement.⁷

Camus claims that Ivan's declaration is an injunction to create and affirm new values. Wrestling a moral imperative from Ivan's "everything is permitted" is thus a principal aim of his political thought. As explained below, the question of which values are possible for the rebel remains somewhat unclear. At minimum, Camus argues that rebellion, as an expression of human nature, gives birth to one value, namely, life. Indeed, the very act of rebellion is meant to defend the dignity of human life.⁸ In any case, Davison recognizes that Camus is engaged with "Ivan's dilemma" in this way, but he does not examine Camus's efforts to build a philosophy of revolt on the basis of Ivan's logic. This study aims to do precisely that.

The approach of this article is to follow Camus's dialogue with Dostoevsky as it unfolds in three of Camus's texts: *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Rebel*, and *The Plague*. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, Camus analyzes the political and metaphysical dimensions of absurdity and nihilism. He then lays the theoretical groundwork for an authentic politics of revolt. This vision of politics is given dramatic representation in *The Plague*, in which the protagonist, Dr. Rieux, personifies the ethics of Camusian revolt. Rieux, I argue, is similar to Dostoevsky's rebellious protagonists but also different in crucially important ways. In analyzing these differences, along with the theoretical claims in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, I illustrate Camus's efforts to respond to Dostoevsky's most essential metaphysical and political challenges.

Dostoevsky's Challenge

In Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), absurdity is a psychometaphysical problem born of the "confrontation between the human need [for meaning] and the unreasonable silence of the world."⁹ In this early text, Camus holds that life is absurd but nonetheless worth living. In later works, however, the absurd is problematized in much broader terms. Initially a life-affirming revelation, absurdity is now both a cultural and political crisis. This movement can be seen most clearly in the evolution from *The Myth of Sisyphus* to *The Rebel* (1951). In the former, Camus affirms the value of an individual life, but he offers no justification for human solidarity or moral limits at the

⁷Albert Camus, *Notebooks, 1935–1942*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Knopf, 1963), 118.

⁸Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 274.

⁹Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 28.

collective level. In an article for *Combat* around the time he was writing *The Rebel*, Camus addresses this failure:

We believe that the truth of this century cannot be discovered unless its tragedy is explored to the bitter end. If the age is afflicted with nihilism, it is not by ignoring nihilism that we will discover the morality we need. True, not everything can be summed up by the words "negation" or "absurdity." We know this. But negation and absurdity must be posited as ideas because our generation has encountered them and we must learn to live with them.¹⁰

Camus links the metaphysical problem of absurdity to the cultural challenge posed by nihilism. He regards his age as "afflicted with nihilism" because it "encountered" the absurd but did not go beyond it; that is, it failed to find a ground for human values once metaphysical principles lost their authority. Camus arrived at this conclusion largely as a result of his engagement with Dostoevsky, whose novels forced him to reconsider both the nihilistic implications of absurdity and the necessity of affirming shared values.

Dostoevsky's influence on Camus's absurdism first emerges in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which absurdity and the individual are central motifs. This is to be expected, since Dostoevsky treats the absurd mostly as a metaphysical problem facing the individual. In various works, Dostoevsky concedes that life is absurd but holds that many people prefer suicide to living *consciously* in the presence of death and meaninglessness. Camus disputes this claim in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, but he is actively engaged with Dostoevsky's assertions about the effects of absurdity on psychic well-being. Especially important is Dostoevsky's view that suffering ought to be seen as a concomitant of consciousness, in particular consciousness of absurdity. The clearest example of this is Dostoevsky's Underground Man, who famously laments that "to think too much is a disease, a real, actual disease."¹¹ In this text, a preponderance of thinking leads inexorably to isolation and self-doubt. In the opening pages of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus echoes this sentiment: "Undermined. . . a more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined."¹² In the broader context of Camus's thought, this is a crucial point. In Camus's early works, absurdity is an ontological situation. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, however, he is addressing not so much the *feeling* of absurdity as the consequences of conceptualizing it. Awareness is such that thought begins to "undermine" the thinker. Camus thus associates the absurd with a break between the individual mind and the world.¹³ This is suggested in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "If this myth

¹⁰Albert Camus, *Camus at Combat*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 100.

¹¹Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. Jessie Coulson (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 17.

¹²Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 4.

¹³*Ibid.*, 51.

is tragic, that is because its hero [Sisyphus] is conscious."¹⁴ Here Sisyphus is conscious not of his immediate surroundings but of the ultimate futility of his life and work. Camus, I argue, encountered this distinct vision of suffering in Dostoevsky's novels. "Probably no one so much as Dostoevsky," Camus writes, "has managed to give the absurd world such familiar and tormenting charms."¹⁵ Thus, while Camus's response to absurdity is decidedly different from Dostoevsky's (which I address below), they share a common conception of the problem; specifically, they understand absurdity as a *conscious* awareness of the felt absence of meaning and of death more generally.¹⁶ To the extent that Dostoevsky explores the origins and implications of this experience, he is a precursor to Camus's philosophical project.

Part of Camus's task in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is to challenge Dostoevsky's claim that awareness of absurdity leads to suicide. Indeed, Camus's analysis of suicide revolves around Kirilov, a character from Dostoevsky's novel *The Possessed* who kills himself as a logical response to his absurd condition. Thomas Epstein has suggested that Camus's account of Kirilov functions as a rejoinder to Dostoevsky. "Unlike the Kirilov that Dostoevsky gives us," Epstein writes, "Camus's absurd man does not want to become God. . . he wants to become a man, a man, who thus must not kill himself. . . . He will be lucid and happy, like Sisyphus."¹⁷ Epstein is justified in claiming that Camus argues against Dostoevsky's logic in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. At the same time, however, Camus continues to struggle with Dostoevsky's arguments concerning absurdity and suicide. Consider, for instance, the following two passages from Dostoevsky and Camus in which the logic of suicide is described in strikingly similar terms. First, Dostoevsky:

I condemn this Nature, which so brazenly and unceremoniously inflicted this suffering, to annihilation along with me. . . . Since I am unable to destroy Nature, I am destroying only myself, solely out of the weariness of enduring a tyranny in which there is no guilty party.¹⁸

¹⁴Ibid., 121.

¹⁵Ibid., 110.

¹⁶Lev Braun has pointed to this overlap as well, noting that Camus considered Dostoevsky's literature a universal articulation of the problem of the absurd. In *Witness of Decline*, for example, Braun argues that the reason Camus adapted so many of Dostoevsky's works for the theatre was that he believed Dostoevsky was "no less accessible to an intelligent and sensitive worker than to any member of the educated classes" (239).

¹⁷Thomas Epstein, "Tormented Shade," in *The Originality and Complexity of Albert Camus's Writings*, ed. Emmanuelle Anne Vanhome (New York: Palgrave Martin, 2012), 148.

¹⁸Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *A Writer's Diary, Volume 1: 1873–1876*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (London: Quartet Books, 1994), 656.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus similarly writes:

Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.¹⁹

If nothing else, these passages emphasize the degree to which Camus develops his absurdity arguments in Dostoevskian terms.

Dostoevsky's political thought stems from his concern with metaphysical consolation. Indeed, Dostoevsky's defense of transcendence was at the core of his support of Christianity and Russian nationalism, both of which were threatened by the spread of European socialism at the turn of the century. But Dostoevsky refused to defend his orthodox positions on epistemological grounds. Instead, he insisted that individual meaning and social order were tied to a web of shared transcendent (typically religious) beliefs. Hence many of his novels, particularly *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, highlight the individual's inability to live meaningfully without such guiding principles. In *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, the modern, alienated soul is linked to the decline of traditional sources of order (specifically Christianity) and to the subsequent rise of revolutionary ideologies. Although he rejected Dostoevsky's vision of transcendence, these works had a significant impact on Camus's understanding of modern politics.

In the above novels, Dostoevsky attributes the loss of certain metaphysical principles to the atomization of modern society. Describing this decline was the explicit aim of *The Possessed*. Here in particular, Dostoevsky implies that transcendent values are indispensable insofar as they provide the foundational standards through which man gleans meaning and on the basis of which he acts. Unsurprisingly, most of the characters in *The Possessed*, having rejected such values, either fall into a state of ennui or give themselves over to crime. Camus wrestled continually with this aspect of Dostoevsky's thought as he examined the relationship between absurdity and political nihilism. This is suggested in a notebook entry in 1951, written just before the publication of *The Rebel*, in which Camus sums up Dostoevsky's argument as follows: "Dostoevsky's Thesis: The same paths that lead the individual to crime lead the society to revolution."²⁰

This Dostoevskian insight defined the political dimensions of Camus's absurdist thought. In short, Dostoevsky challenges Camus to deal with the problem of values and limits in a world without transcendence or "the aid

¹⁹Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 5–6.

²⁰Albert Camus, *Notebooks, 1951–1959*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), 94.

of eternal values."²¹ The absurd, as Camus asserts in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, undermines external sources of meaning. In *The Rebel*, Camus takes this as his entry point; he assumes that life is worth living on its own terms and then seeks a foundation for action in a world divested of absolute standards. The following section claims that Camus responds to Dostoevsky's challenge specifically through his philosophy of revolt.

Camus's Dialogue with Dostoevsky

Camus and Dostoevsky agree that modern politics is animated primarily by a struggle for identity, meaning, and values. This struggle accounts for the crisis of nihilism and the ubiquitous (if implicit) demand for transcendent standards. For Dostoevsky in particular, nihilism (moral and political) followed from the individual's encounter with meaninglessness. Ivan Karamazov, who reasons that if God is dead, "everything is permitted," expresses the logic of this movement most vividly. Camus took Ivan's declaration seriously. But he insisted that it was only a beginning: "we must follow out all the consequences of his remark."²² Camus later adds to this observation in *The Rebel*, noting that the absence of eternal laws authorizes nothing, as "there must also be values and aims in order to choose another course of action."²³

Part of Camus's task in *The Rebel*, then, is to identify a nontranscendent ground for human values. This search begins in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, wherein Camus asserts that if a man decides to live, it is because he has judged life valuable.²⁴ By extension, he writes in *The Rebel*, "if we decide to revolt, it must be because we have decided that a human society has some positive value."²⁵ Revolt is thus a natural progression from absurdity in that it makes a universal value of the individual's affirmation of life. In this way, Camus uses the logic of *The Myth of Sisyphus* to reject both suicide and murder. But Camus also recognizes that revolt does not supply definitive rules for action. The problem of foundations and limits, posed initially by Dostoevsky, remains unresolved.

In *The Rebel*, this problem undergirds Camus's critique of ideological violence, and Dostoevsky's influence is clear throughout. For instance, Camus begins *The Rebel* with the following observation:

There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic. The boundary between them is not clearly defined. . . . We are living in the era of premeditation and the perfect crime. Our criminals are no longer helpless children who could plead love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults and they

²¹Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, v.

²²Camus, *Notebooks, 1935–1942*, 95.

²³Camus, *The Rebel*, 71.

²⁴Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 54.

²⁵*Ibid.*, viii.

have a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose—even for transforming murderers into judges.²⁶

Ideologies (and the philosophies from which they spring) are central to Camus's analysis because they supply the theoretical justifications for murder. Dostoevsky was similarly concerned with the antecedent causes of political violence. In a rejoinder to critics, he wrote that his intent in *The Possessed* was to understand "how is it possible in our changing and astonishing society of today to have not a Nechaev but *Nechaevs*?"²⁷ Here Dostoevsky is referring to the revolutionary nihilist on which *The Possessed* is based. But his larger aim in this and other works was the same as Camus's in *The Rebel*: to understand the arguments by which murder and political violence are justified.

Dostoevsky approaches this question in the context of nineteenth century Russia, which he claimed was "infected" by an influx of European socialist principles.²⁸ Among the most pernicious was belief in the progressive power of reason and positivist science. Under the sway of "European progressives," Dostoevsky argued, socialism emerged as a corrective to Christianity, a modern means to universal harmony. He attributed the rise of political crime, in fact, to a belief in the purifying power of these ideas:

in my novel [*The Possessed*], I attempted to depict those diverse and multifarious motives by which even the purest of hearts and the most innocent of people can be drawn into committing such a monstrous offense. And therein lies the real horror: that in Russia one can commit the foulest and most villainous act without being in the least a villain! . . . This trait is the most unhealthy and melancholy one of our present age. The possibility of considering oneself—and sometimes even being, in fact—an honorable person while committing obvious and undeniable villainy—that is our whole affliction today!²⁹

Dostoevsky also identifies certain Europeans—Mill and Darwin, for instance—as emblematic of the modern devotion to logic and utility. These Enlightenment-inspired thinkers were committed to theoretical truth but blind to the pathologies and existential needs of human beings. They also failed to acknowledge the limits (in the epistemological and moral sense) of critical reason.

Dostoevsky's account of political violence pervades Camus's analysis of revolutionary ideologies in *The Rebel*. There, considerable attention is paid to the capacity of reason to justify murder and crime. However, Camus does not reject reason so much as impose limits on it. Reason is seen as a useful conceptual tool, capable of justifying action but not of grounding it.

²⁶Camus, *The Rebel*, 3.

²⁷Dostoyevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, 1:279.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 1:286.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 1:286–87.

Thus when he describes the “All or Nothing” mentality of historical rebels, Camus writes:

Just as the movement of rebellion led to the point of “All or Nothing” and just as metaphysical rebellion demanded the unity of the world, the twentieth century revolutionary movement, when it arrived at the most obvious conclusions of its logic, insisted with threats of force on arrogating to itself the whole of history. . . . Now that God is dead, the world must be changed and organized by the forces at man’s disposal.³⁰

In *The Possessed*, this totalizing attitude is expressed almost verbatim by the character Chigalev. A scientist and a revolutionary, Chigalev reasons his way to a perfectly harmonious society. Believing he has solved the problem of freedom and equality, he announces his findings to his fellow anarchists:

Dedicating my energies to the study of the social organization which is in the future to replace the present condition of man, I’ve come to the conviction that all makers of social systems from ancient times up to the present year. . . have been dreamers, tellers of fairy-tales, fools who contradicted themselves, who understood nothing of natural science and the strange animal called man. . . . But, now that we are all at last preparing to act, a new form of social organization is essential. In order to avoid further uncertainty, I propose my own system of world-organization.³¹

As I clarify below, what is most significant for Camus is Chigalev’s inattentiveness to present experience. Like the historical rebels he condemns in *The Rebel*, Chigalev is obliged to act in the name of a theoretical hope. His actions are directed toward the future, toward the realization of some obscure freedom.

Against the backdrop of their political thought, Camus’s and Dostoevsky’s resistance to reason is clearer. Translated to the modern political realm, the methods (and language) of positivist science—reason, empiricism, and logic—become handmaidens to more fundamental drives for meaning and certainty. In effect, though, these tools avoid the problem of the absurd by presupposing that life is reducible to reason. For Camus this was particularly manifest in Nazism. “The systematic and scientific aspect of the Nazi movement,” he maintains, “hides an irrational drive that can only be interpreted as a drive of despair and arrogance.”³² Under the guise of reason, the Nazis found scientific justifications (however duplicitous) for overtly metaphysical aims. In this way, Camus believed, Nazism illustrates the consequences of divorcing science and politics from an external value system.³³ It also

³⁰Camus, *The Rebel*, 107.

³¹Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics), 409.

³²Camus, *The Rebel*, 184.

³³In the concluding chapter of *The Rebel*, Camus again emphasizes the consequences of this development: “Science today betrays its origins and denies its own acquisitions

demonstrates the ease with which totalizing ideologies imbue the negation of nihilism with the individual's passion for transcendent meaning. And this is precisely the vision of nihilism foreshadowed in Dostoevsky's works. Thus when Camus writes that Dostoevsky's characters "prefigure our nihilism," this is likely what he had in mind.

In his analysis of totalitarianism, Camus also asks why modern revolutions tend to betray in action what they affirm in theory. It was critical for Camus to understand how rebellion reached this point of extreme contradiction. He begins by understanding it as a function of the absolutist quest itself. The pursuit of absolute freedom, he argues, collapses into contradiction because such freedom is possible only through totalitarian means; that is, through absolute negation. Camus therefore claims that "complete freedom can only exist and justify itself by the creation of new values identified with the entire human race. . . . The shortest route to these new standards passes by way of total dictatorship."³⁴

Camus's admonitions concerning absolutist pursuits are anticipated in Dostoevsky's works, particularly *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Indeed, in *The Rebel* Camus devotes an entire section to the legacy of Chigalev, whose system he compares to the totalitarian defenders of state terrorism in the twentieth century.³⁵ According to Camus, it is the "implacable" nature of Chigalev's mind that marks him as a precursor to modern revolutionaries. The premise of Chigalev's scientific system, for example, is unlimited freedom. "I am perplexed by my own data," he says, "and my conclusion is a direct contradiction of the original idea with which I started. Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrive at unlimited despotism."³⁶ On Chigalev's view, therefore, "there can be no solution of the social problem but mine."³⁷ A similar theme is expressed in *The Brothers Karamazov* through the Grand Inquisitor. Here, however, the uncertainty of freedom is replaced by the stability of slavery. Like Chigalev, the Inquisitor's arguments are rooted in a purely objective view of human nature. To stifle doubt, he claims, men have

set up gods and challenged one another, "Put away your gods and come and worship ours, or we will kill you and your gods!" And so it will be to the end of the world, even when gods disappear from the earth; they will fall down before idols just the same. Thou didst know, Thou couldst not

in allowing itself to be put in the service of State terrorism and the desire for power. Its punishment and its degradation lie in only being able to produce, in an abstract world, the means of destruction and enslavement. But when the limit is reached, science will perhaps serve the individual rebellion. This terrible necessity will mark the decisive turning-point" (ibid., 295).

³⁴Ibid., 175.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 409.

³⁷Ibid.

but have known, this fundamental secret of nature, but Thou didst reject the one infallible banner which was offered Thee to make all men bow down to Thee alone—the banner of earthly bread; and Thou hast rejected it for the sake of freedom and the bread of Heaven. Behold what Thou didst further. And all again in the name of freedom! I tell Thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quick to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born.³⁸

The Grand Inquisitor fancies himself a redeemer. Convinced that men crave coherence more than freedom, he offers them a respite. But the inquisitor is essentially a simplifier; he relieves men of the burden of choice. “Didst Thou forget,” he asks, “that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil?”³⁹ According to the inquisitor, men are suited to slavery despite their rebellious nature. Hence he regards the tyrants of the world as “the unconscious expression” of man’s “craving for universal unity.”⁴⁰ For Camus, the pursuit of this illusion obscured the ambiguities of life and, invariably, produced a totalitarian brand of politics.

At the very least, then, Camus is influenced (if not quite convinced) by Dostoevsky’s view that shared transcendent values promote order in society. However, Camus resisted the idea of a transcendent ground on account of its susceptibility to foundationalist claims of certainty. This was antithetical to Camus’s thought for several reasons. To begin with, foundationalist systems are incompatible with Camus’s absurdism; that is, they presuppose that absolute knowledge is possible. Indeed, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus accuses Dostoevsky of betraying the absurd by positing Christian metaphysics, particularly the belief in the immortality of the soul, as a viable and necessary solution.⁴¹ While foundationalism has more to do with certainty than transcendence, Camus’s concern was that both emerged from the same essentialist impulse for absolute truth. In addition, foundationalist systems, because of their distance from lived experience, often fail as checks against human excess. Ideologies, for instance, while not necessarily transcendent, are deeply foundationalist in character. They look either to history or some other metaphysical construct to explain reality and justify action. On Camus’s view, this is both false and dangerous.

Thus it is not surprising that Camus was equally dissatisfied with the ideological alternatives to transcendent religions, particularly Communism. In a letter to his mentor, Jean Grenier, Camus expresses his frustration:

³⁸Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Random House, 1996), 263–64.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 264.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 267.

⁴¹Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 110.

And as for me, am I so confident? If there are no eternal values, Communism is right and nothing is permitted, human society must be built whatever the price. If it is wrong, then the Gospel and Christianity must be followed. Never before has this dilemma been given an image more distressed and insistent than today. And men like myself who dream of an impossible synthesis, who refuse violence and lies without having to justify their opposite, and who, nevertheless, cannot keep from screaming, are going crazy.⁴²

Camus was clearly torn between Christianity and Communism. Christianity seemed to impose a limit on human aspiration and knowledge, but it could not be reconciled with absurdity. Communism, although more worldly than Christianity, seemed uniquely susceptible to totalitarian excesses.

Father Zossima and the Problem of Foundations

Before examining Camus's engagement with foundationalism, it is important to define the term, and to distinguish it from transcendence. Here foundationalism refers to the belief that truth claims require external justification. On this approach, values are epistemically dependent on other values. Transcendence (as Camus uses the term) denotes a kind of otherworldliness, which asserts a ground for meaning and values above or beyond experience. Thus the challenge of foundationalism, as Camus understands it, is to identify a nonmetaphysical and experiential locus for values (and limits). This was the purpose of *The Rebel* in particular and Camus's political thought in general.

As noted, Camus's search for foundations was informed by Dostoevsky's defense of religious transcendence.⁴³ Part of Camus's resistance to Christianity, it is worth recalling, was practical. He did not think it was possible to reconcile faith with modern knowledge. To uphold the doctrines of Christianity, Camus wrote in a 1942 notebook entry, "we should have to act as if our acquired knowledge had ceased to exist, as if we had learned nothing, and pretend in short to erase what is inerasable."⁴⁴ Reason, in other words, had undermined faith and therefore such beliefs were deprived of their motive force. Indeed, as Patrick Hayden recently observed, Camus insisted that all forms of foundationalism (be they metaphysical or

⁴²Albert Camus, *Correspondence, 1932–1969*, trans. Jan F. Rigaud (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 93.

⁴³Although he does not examine it at length, Phillip Rein points implicitly to this connection: "In much the same way that Dostoevski proves through Christianity that values do exist," Rein argues, "Camus sets out to prove that revolt in its true meaning is man's only recourse in a world void of religious faith" (Rein, *Albert Camus* [Boston: Twayne, 1969], 79).

⁴⁴Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942–1951*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), 15–16.

epistemological) had been “discredited in our time due to a series of historical, political and social events and catastrophes as well as the influence of new intellectual and artistic movements.”⁴⁵ However, Camusian revolt can be seen as a more moderate and immanent foundational construct, which functions in much the same way the Christ ideal did for Dostoevsky. That is to say, both serve as guides for action and experiential sources of order. The difference is that Camus’s rebellious ethos preserves a sense of limits that foundationalist systems separated from experience are unable to provide. Describing the mechanics of this ethos is the aim of the concluding section of this article. There I suggest that the image of revolt in *The Plague* demonstrates Camus’s commitment to action and limits without metaphysical supports. Particular attention is paid to Ivan Karamazov and Father Zossima in this section, as these characters (or the dispositions they embody) define the parameters within which revolt is situated. Before turning to *The Plague*, however, it is important to clarify the existential significance of Christ or belief in God in Dostoevsky’s view.

At first glance, Dostoevsky’s Christ ideal seems divorced from experience. But to understand Christ in this way is to misunderstand Dostoevsky’s essential point. Dostoevsky held that one’s *experience* of reality was inextricably linked to one’s *ideas* concerning reality. What one regards as real, in other words, is often a function of one’s ideas or beliefs. Bruce Ward distills Dostoevsky’s idea nicely in the following remarks:

For Dostoevsky. . . human order. . . depends upon an idea of the ultimate meaning or purpose of existence—an idea which is not consciously perceived as “idea” but is simply and unquestioningly accepted as “reality” itself. In the ordered human being this fundamental, though largely implicit, idea of life seeks and finds outward expression in the concrete world. The human need for order is thus a two-fold need for an idea of the ultimate meaning of life, and a way of living out one’s daily life in accord with this idea.⁴⁶

Christ is thus not so much an idea as a mechanism by which one experiences reality; through it one’s orientation to others and the world is transformed. The idea of Christ is therefore secondary to the living faith made possible by belief in Christ.

Dostoevsky’s experiential account of belief is best expressed through Father Zossima of *The Brothers Karamazov*. In a series of exhortations, Zossima laments the loss of foundations in Russia as well as the efforts to replace Christ with reason. Bourgeois Russians, he says, “want to base justice on reason alone, but not with Christ, as before, and they have already

⁴⁵Patrick Hayden, “Albert Camus and Rebellious Cosmopolitanism in a Divided World,” *Journal of International Political Theory* 9, no. 1 (2013): 197.

⁴⁶Bruce Ward, *Dostoevsky’s Critique of the West* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1986), 36–37.

proclaimed that there is no crime, that there is no sin. And that's consistent, for if you have no God what is the meaning of crime?"⁴⁷ Zossima is implicitly referring to Ivan, whose internal love of mankind and justice founders without God. Having lost the idea that bound him to others, Ivan's experience of reality is marred by doubt and contradiction. Zossima describes the torments of Ivan and his contemporaries thus:

Unable to love. . . they live upon their vindictive pride. . . they are never satisfied, and they refuse forgiveness, they curse God who calls upon them. They cannot behold the living God without hatred, and they cry out that the God of life should be annihilated, that God should destroy Himself and his own creation. And they will burn in the fire of their own wrath forever and yearn for death and annihilation.⁴⁸

Ivan's inertia follows from the absence of an idea concerning the meaning of life. Affirming only what he can see, Ivan remains unable to understand himself as part of a whole. Zossima's alternative to Ivan's atheistic humanism is rooted in Christianity, but I want to suggest that it is entirely consistent with (and perhaps a model for) Camus's experiential account of revolt.

Camusian revolt and Zossima's religious ethos both aim at the same thing, namely, solidarity. There are, however, two differences. First, Camus replaces the symbol of Christ with the image of the Rebel. Second, as Avi Sagi claims, revolt seeks to create "a just world instead of a world of divine grace."⁴⁹ This is significant because, as Sagi also notes, divine grace requires an active God whereas "creating a just world is a human task."⁵⁰ Revolt also represents the shared nature of experience. In this sense, Christ and the Rebel are both symbols grounded in the reality of human experience. They merely justify human solidarity and love in different ways. In the case of Christ, solidarity is the result of man's equality before God. In the case of revolt, solidarity is born of a simultaneous denial and affirmation. As mentioned, in *The Rebel* Camus insists that the choice "to live is, in itself, a value judgment."⁵¹ Furthermore, because the affirmation of life is a "collective experience" with implications beyond the individual, revolt also asserts the value of life as such.

Zossima's active love is different from Camusian revolt only in its religious dimension. Yet it can be argued that Zossima's ethical injunctions do not require external compulsion. This is suggested in Zossima's own remarks, which are cloaked in divine language but amount to a worldly call to action. Zossima, for example, holds that all love is but a reflection of divine

⁴⁷Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 244.

⁴⁸Ibid., 338–39.

⁴⁹Avi Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 156.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Camus, *The Rebel*, 8.

love. "Love a man in his sin," he says, "for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it."⁵² Later, however, he urges men to

seek no reward, for great is your reward on this earth: the spiritual joy which is only vouchsafed to the righteous man. Fear not the great nor the mighty, but be wise and ever serene. Know the measure, know the times, study that. . . . Love to throw yourself on the earth and kiss it. Kiss the earth and love it with an unceasing, consuming love. Love all men, love everything. Seek that rapture and ecstasy.⁵³

Zossima's decree contains nothing of the otherworldly and, in fact, is reminiscent of Camus's momentist affirmations of nature. Zossima says only that loving and acting is its own reward. His statements reflect his (and presumably Dostoevsky's) belief that God embodies the interdependence of all things. Since acknowledgment of such interdependence is the basis of Zossima's active love, God is central to his vision. Although Camus does not invoke God, his philosophy of revolt is practically indistinguishable from Zossima's ethos. Indeed, both seem to affirm the interconnectedness of experience, self-transcendence, and value.

The question we must ask is whether Camus is able to identify an experiential ground for his philosophy of revolt. For Zossima, divine love (symbolized by Christ) is manifested through individual acts of love. Hence the act of love is itself creative of value.⁵⁴ Revolt, as I explain below and as expressed in Camus's novel *The Plague*, can be seen as a worldly (nontranscendent) alternative to Zossima's ethos. Just as Christ's love becomes a basic reality through affirmative acts, in Camus's thought the choice to side with man and life reveals the existence of a common value. Here, to side with man and life is to reduce human suffering and to affirm the dignity of life by refusing to justify murder. In doing these things, Camus suggests, one can bring value into the world (if only the value of life) simply by affirming it in practice and in conjunction with others. Although Camus does not invoke transcendence or God in the way that Zossima does, he nevertheless posits an ethical vision consistent with Zossima's vision of active love.

Dr. Rieux and the Ethics of Revolt

The Plague is set in the Algerian city of Oran; it follows a group of citizens as their town is beset by a plague. The protagonist, Dr. Rieux, mirrors Ivan

⁵²Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 334.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 337.

⁵⁴In *Problematic Rebel*, Maurice Friedman similarly notes that, by Zossima's logic, to love all things equally is to move "toward a whole and genuine way of life, a reciprocally confirming relationship with other men and with nature" (275).

Karamazov in his orientation to suffering. Rieux's hatred of suffering rivals Ivan's, but Rieux is able to channel that outrage into ethical action because, as Camus writes in *The Rebel*, "Ivan's drama. . . arises from the fact that there is too much love without an object."⁵⁵ Two things thus distinguish Rieux from Ivan: his acceptance of ignorance and his commitment to action. It is this commitment to action that I want to contrast with Ivan in particular.

A key theme of *The Plague* is the conflict between individual happiness and moral obligation. Each character in *The Plague*, as Robert Solomon has noted, struggles "to come to terms not so much with imminent death as with their own happiness in conflict with their sense of obligation."⁵⁶ Rieux exemplifies the spirit of revolt because he privileges action and healing over ideas and personal freedom. Referring to this aspect of Camus's thought, Hayden suggests that revolt "amounts to a solidarist disposition on behalf of all human beings."⁵⁷ Hayden's claim is consistent with the arguments proffered here. Rieux appears to illustrate the movement by which the solipsism personified by Ivan can be transformed into what Avi Sagi has called an "interpersonal we."⁵⁸ More than any other character, Dr. Rieux symbolizes this shift in consciousness. Indeed, this transformation is central to the ethics advanced in *The Plague*. As Roger Quilliot observes, the characters in this story "are revealed to us as the scourge comes to them or they go to meet it."⁵⁹ By defining each character thus, Camus emphasizes the importance of human volition, of one's orientation to suffering. As the characters soon discover, no one escapes the torments of the plague. But those who revolt against it, who reduce the suffering of others, are able to find meaning in their struggles. Those who yield to diversions or abstractions or self-interest only exacerbate matters.

Camus also uses events in *The Plague* to awaken the collective consciousness of the Oranais. Sagi has made a similar case regarding Camus's intentions in *The Plague*. Here, Sagi writes, Camus implies that a "solipsistic description of human experience does not exhaust the human condition, which is intersubjective by definition."⁶⁰ This is a critical point. Confronted by crisis, the majority of Oranais are made to understand their shared fate. But the plague dramatizes a permanent (and universal) truth about the human condition, namely its susceptibility to suffering and death. In *The Plague*, in fact, it is identification with the other's suffering that leads to

⁵⁵Camus, *The Rebel*, 18–19.

⁵⁶Robert Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 118.

⁵⁷Hayden, "Albert Camus and Rebellious Cosmopolitanism," 208.

⁵⁸Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, 168.

⁵⁹Roger Quilliot, *The Sea and Prisons* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1970), 140.

⁶⁰Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, 2.

solidarity.⁶¹ Camus thus sought to harness the power of pathos; and he uses the absurd (symbolized by the plague) to communicate the proper orientation toward suffering and, more importantly, to highlight the fragility of human life. The ethical implications of this are considerable. In the first place, these facts cultivate a sense of the contingency of life, which in turn points to a basic human equality.⁶² As Camus writes in his notebooks for *The Plague*, "People live according to different systems. The plague abolishes all systems."⁶³ Second, it encourages mindfulness. Robert Zaretsky has referred to this as Camus's "ethics of attention."⁶⁴ Zaretsky's description is apt. For Camus, the only meaningful choice one can make concerns the proper response to absurdity. This is the principal lesson of *The Plague*. Acting honorably is the work of attention and care. Rieux accepts the reality of the plague and *consciously* stands "with the defeated."⁶⁵

To further distinguish Rieux's revolt, let us return to *The Brothers Karamazov*. This will help to clarify the dispute between Camus and Dostoevsky on the question of transcendence. To begin, there is a shared impulse at the root of Ivan's and Rieux's revolt. Ivan, for example, rejects God on account of the injustice of innocent suffering, particularly the suffering of children:

But then there are the children, and what am I to do about them? That's a question I can't answer. For the hundredth time I repeat, there are numbers of questions, but I've only taken the children, because in their case what I mean is so unanswerably clear. Listen! If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me, please! It's beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony.⁶⁶

Rieux likewise invokes the imagery of children suffering. "I refuse to love a scheme of things," he tells Father Paneloux, "in which children are put to

⁶¹In his final novel, *The First Man*, it is precisely this sort of imaginative identification with the other that leads to solidarity and self-transcendence. For example, the protagonist Jacques discovers solidarity via his denial of moral distinctions between men; instead all are regarded as "victims." And the transcendence to which he aspires is not otherworldly; rather, it is achieved the moment he imagines himself "reborn in the eyes of others" (Camus, *The First Man*, trans. David Hapgood [New York: Vintage Books, 1996], 216).

⁶²In a revealing notebook entry from October 1946, just before *The Plague* was published, Camus references this aspect of the absurd: "My effort: show that the logic of revolt rejects blood and selfish motives. And that the dialogue carried to the absurd gives a chance to purity—through compassion (suffer together)" (*Notebooks, 1942–1951*, 125).

⁶³Camus, *Notebooks 1935–1942*, 193.

⁶⁴Robert Zaretsky, *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 86.

⁶⁵Camus, *The Plague*, 255.

⁶⁶Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 253.

torture."⁶⁷ The impetus for Ivan's and Rieux's revolt is thus hatred of suffering. By pointing to the suffering of children, they highlight human innocence. But the capacity to identify with another's suffering is paramount, and in fact becomes a precondition for the creation of a community of revolt. Commentators such as Thomas Hanna have noted the appeal of Ivan's peculiar humanism to Camus, but as yet there is no exhaustive account of Camus's efforts to imbue Ivan's revolt with a positive content.⁶⁸ Nor is there a broader discussion of Camus's engagement with these issues in such Dostoevsky works as *The Possessed*. Here I attempt to do this through a comparative analysis of these texts and Camus's *The Plague*.

In *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux's ethical posture resembles Ivan's, but Rieux's humanism is less abstract. Suffering is always a concrete problem for Rieux, not a theoretical paradox. In this sense, Rieux is closer to Zossima, whose living faith inspires by example. Ivan, however, appears to hate suffering more than he loves life. For all his indignation, Ivan's rebellion remains internal and static. This dichotomy between Ivan and Zossima is central to *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan and Zossima represent two ways of being. Zossima goes the way of grace and love; Ivan revolts and condemns. But the choice between Zossima and Ivan is crude. It implies, as Maurice Friedman argues, that one must "choose between rebellion and submission, social and spiritual freedom, social and spiritual equality, individual consciousness and cosmic solidarity."⁶⁹ In the figure of Rieux, Camus destroys this dichotomy; that is, Rieux combines the moral outrage of Ivan with the living love of Zossima.

Rieux presents an alternative to Dostoevsky's false choice between nihilism (negation) and transcendence (otherworldliness). It is common to Dostoevsky's rebels, for example, either to deny transcendence altogether or to become mired in internal confusion. Rieux is different in this regard. He does not agonize over the existence of suffering; he accepts it without resigning himself to it, and he has no desire to anchor his actions in some higher metaphysical order. In this way, Rieux represents a recurring theme in Camus, which is avoidance of abstraction on behalf of human action. Further, Rieux rejects the attempts of others (notably Father Paneloux) to make a virtue of suffering; for this is an abnegation of one's responsibility to heal and to pay attention to the sick. Instead, Rieux insists that one is obliged to engage and resist. More importantly, Rieux suggests that one can go the way of Christ (as Dostoevsky urges) without transcendent injunctions. His fellowship with men is rooted in the reality of human suffering and in his sympathy for the living. To quote Friedman once more:

⁶⁷Camus, *The Plague*, 218.

⁶⁸See Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Camus*, 85.

⁶⁹Friedman, *Problematic Rebel*, 444.

In Doctor Rieux. . . Camus offers us a third alternative to his own—and to Dostoevsky’s—god-man and man-god. Rieux neither submits to reality as objectively meaningful, as does Paneloux, nor rebels against it on the ground of pure subjectivity, as does Tarrou. His rebellion is neither that of the Modern Promethean nor of the Modern Sisyphus, but of the Modern Job.⁷⁰

Rieux’s decision to act suggests that morality (and by extension, revolt) is neither a metaphysical nor a religious precept but rather an experiential injunction arising naturally out of life with others. This can be seen in the following exchange between Rieux and Tarrou:

“It comes to this,” Tarrou said almost casually; “what interests me is learning how to become a saint.” “But you don’t believe in God.” “Exactly! Can one be a saint without God?—that’s the problem, in fact the only problem, I’m up against today.” Tarrou said in a low voice that it was never over, and there would be more victims, because that was in the order of things. “Perhaps,” the doctor answered. “But, you know, I feel more fellowship with the defeated than with saints. Heroism and sanctity don’t really appeal to me, I imagine. What interests me is being a man. . . . Yes, we’re after the same thing, but I’m less ambitious.”⁷¹

The desire to be only a man is especially important. In Camus’s thought, to be a man means to live an absurd life and to share this condition with others. Rieux is an authentic rebel because he “knows it’s an absurd situation,” but insists that “we’re all involved in it, and we’ve got to accept it as it is.”⁷² Ivan falters because he deifies what he rejects. Rieux avoids the abyss of negation by focusing on the concrete and the immediate; the contradictions of an absurd existence are immaterial. By means of this affirmation, Rieux moves beyond the nihilism of Ivan. This is the sort of worldly transcendence to which Camus refers, and while it is certainly not Dostoevsky’s, it is nonetheless rooted in a common experience.

Several commentators have recognized the political and foundational implications of *The Plague*. Most notably, David Sprintzen has argued that the outbreak of plague in Oran symbolizes “the social order” being put “to the metaphysical rack.”⁷³ The people of Oran were “no longer able to take tradition as a self-evident guide to action, they had to reconstitute their sense of the meaningful. . . they were forced to attend to the present.”⁷⁴ Sprintzen makes an important point. By dramatizing the universality of the human condition in experiential terms, Camus emphasizes the primacy of the present. Here,

⁷⁰Ibid., 430.

⁷¹Camus, *The Plague*, 255.

⁷²Ibid., 118.

⁷³David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 90.

⁷⁴Ibid.

too, we can see Camus's response to the problem of thinking described above. Implicit in Camus's writings is an opposition between thinking and presence. When Camus writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that "beginning to think is beginning to be undermined," he is referring to a particular kind of thinking, namely, thinking that leads inward and away from the present moment.⁷⁵ Thought, by its very nature, is solipsistic; it directs attention away from the world and from others. For this reason, Camus prefers attentiveness to experience rather than a preoccupation with ideas or truth. Hence in *The Plague* death is accepted and the future and the past are dismissed as abstractions; only the present is real and shared. Suffering, in turn, is removed from the theoretical realm and made concrete. As a result of this shift in orientation, human solidarity emerges organically. Cecil Eubanks has referred to this as Camus's "prototype for a politics of foundations without foundationalism."⁷⁶ Eubanks is right to emphasize the undeveloped nature of Camus's vision. The substantive implications of Camus's philosophy of revolt are somewhat nebulous. However, it is worth recalling that Camus was not a systematic thinker; his philosophical approach was that of an artist. His primary concerns were suffering and limits. The ethics and aims of Camusian revolt reflect these practical concerns.

Camus's humane pragmatism can be seen in his response to the political crisis in Algeria. Here we have a concrete example of the attitude and spirit of revolt. During the Algerian War of Independence, Camus consistently called for moderation and dialogue. He tried desperately to avoid the ideological posturing on all sides. This exasperated his fellow activists, many of whom decried his high-mindedness. But Camus's commitment was always to action, not to ideas. The choice between competing certainties was anathema to his philosophy of revolt, as it neglected the complexities of political life and discouraged productive discourse. In Algeria, Camus was widely criticized for his inability to side either with France or the Algerian rebels. Yet Camus's silence was not the result of paralysis. Indeed, he worked feverishly behind the scenes on behalf of many political prisoners. Camus refused to choose sides because he believed that neither faction had a monopoly on justice. "I want Arab militants to preserve the justice of their cause by condemning the massacre of civilians," he wrote, "just as I want the French to protect their rights and their future by openly condemning the massacres of the repression."⁷⁷

Camus was not interested in a meaningless victory for France or the Algerian independence movement; that is, one that failed to break the cycle

⁷⁵Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 4.

⁷⁶Cecil Eubanks, *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 178.

⁷⁷Albert Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 142.

of violence and retaliation. Hence, as a recent article concludes, Camus continued to hold that “a third way between colonial oppression and Algerian independence was possible.”⁷⁸ This third way involved a commitment to dialogue and nonviolent resolution. In “Letter to an Algerian Militant,” Camus explains his reasoning well:

But I know from experience that to say these things today is to venture into a no-man’s-land between hostile armies. It is to preach the folly of war as bullets fly. Bloodshed may sometimes lead to progress, but more often it brings only greater barbarity and misery. He who pours his heart into such a plea can expect only laughter and the din of the battlefield in reply. And yet someone must say these things, and since you propose to try, I cannot let you take such an insane and necessary step without standing with you in fraternal solidarity. . . . The crucial thing is to leave room for whatever dialogue may still be possible, no matter how limited. It is to defuse tensions, no matter how tenuous and fleeting the respite may be. To that end, each of us must preach peace to his own side. The inexcusable massacres of French civilians will lead to other equally stupid attacks on Arabs and Arab property.⁷⁹

Camus understood that a victory—for either side—won through terror would result not in freedom but in further destruction.⁸⁰ Such was the cyclical nature of violence without limits.⁸¹ Instead, Camus pushed for a more pragmatic and peaceful resolution, one that secured political and economic justice for Algerians and respected the rights of the French settlers.

In another letter on the crisis, Camus issues a final plea:

I therefore propose that both camps commit themselves publicly and simultaneously to a policy of not harming civilian populations, no matter what the circumstances. For the time being, such a commitment would not change the situation. Its purpose would simply be to make the conflict less implacable and to save innocent lives.⁸²

⁷⁸Thomas Meaney, “The Colonist of Good Will: On Albert Camus,” *The Nation*, September 2013, 41.

⁷⁹Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, 114–15.

⁸⁰The postwar history of Algeria suggests that Camus’s concerns were more than justified. For instance, as soon as Algeria won its independence in 1962, the new president Ahmed Ben Bella began violently purging the FLN of elements he believed were willing to negotiate with the French during the war.

⁸¹Camus elaborates on this time in a speech he gave in Algiers on January 22, 1956: “The hideous face of this solidarity can be seen in the infernal dialectic according to which what kills one side also kills the other. Each camp blames the other, justifying its own violence in terms of its adversary’s. The endless dispute over who committed the first wrong becomes meaningless. Because two populations so similar and yet so different, and each worthy of respect, have not been able to live together, they are condemned to die together, with rage in their hearts” (*Algerian Chronicles*, 153).

⁸²Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, 138.

These are not the words of a disconnected moralist. Camus was never blind to the political realities in Algeria; on the contrary, he accepted the necessity of violence and struggle. He merely enjoined each side to recognize certain limits, and to do so not for moral reasons but because the alternative was interminable conflict. "How can one condemn the excesses of the repression," he argued, "if one ignores or says nothing about the extremes of the rebellion?"⁸³ Camus's moderation was thus a response to the poverty and hopelessness of absolutist politics. In his writings on Algeria, it is clear that Camus's intent was to end the escalation and to establish the basis for a third way. Camus's fidelity to a measured justice (which is the best a politics of revolt can hope to produce) prevented him from adopting the totalizing attitudes that defined his historical moment. This is evident in his comments on Algeria just as it is in his critique of historical revolt in *The Rebel*. While this position alienated Camus from many of his intellectual peers, his moral clarity continues to resonate in our own time, particularly with those seeking justice in a world without apparent meaning or limits.

Conclusion

In this article, I suggested that Camus's engagement with the problems of nihilism and transcendence is illuminated through and personified by the tension between Ivan Karamazov and Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Additionally, I argued that the protagonist of Camus's *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux, is best seen as a manifestation of the spirit of revolt. As a bridge between the attitudes of Ivan and Zossima, Rieux also offers a concrete depiction of the practical ethics of revolt. In this way, Rieux helps to clarify the larger philosophical dispute between Camus and Dostoevsky.

The central claim of this study is that Camusian revolt is an attempt to establish an experiential ground for moral and political life. On Camus's view, a return to experience was the only way to avoid the excesses of modern politics. Nihilism was destructive of all value and thus had to be countered. At the same time, appeals to transcendence were both undermined by absurdity and too disconnected from experience to serve as reliable guides for action. The question, however, is whether revolt, as an affirmation of life, is a practicable ground for moral and political decision-making.

Several commentators have suggested that revolt is too vague or unsystematic to guide action in the world. Ronald Srigley, for example, held that Camus's "methodological skepticism" constrained his analysis because it prevented him from exploring "experiences that went beyond the limits they prescribed."⁸⁴ Srigley is right to emphasize Camus's skepticism, but it is untrue

⁸³Ibid., 142.

⁸⁴Ronald Srigley, *Albert Camus's Critique of Modernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 82.

that Camus was prevented from exploring such experiences. Camus does not go beyond the limits of his presuppositions because that would exceed the bounds of absurdity. Again, Camus's aim is to impose limits on action.⁸⁵ He advocates an epistemological skepticism because it is ideas (of God, of history, of human nature) that give intellectual cover to violent actions. Hence he resists all claims to ultimate truths concerning reality or purpose. But this does not mean that Camus was closed to experiential truths. Instead he sought to reinvigorate those truths through the medium of art and fiction.

Critics have also claimed that Camus's unwillingness to commit politically rendered his thought practically insignificant. A recent example of this critique can be found in Tony Judt's *The Burden of Responsibility*, which treats Camus as an important but largely apolitical thinker. "Not unconcerned with public affairs or uncaring about political choices," Judt writes, Camus was nevertheless "by instinct and temperament an unaffiliated person."⁸⁶ According to Judt, Camus's reluctance to take sides reflected the ambiguity of his thought. Camus's most vociferous critic, Jean-Paul Sartre, castigated Camus on similar grounds. Following the publication of *The Rebel*, Sartre dismissed Camus's thought as unclear and ahistorical. On Sartre's view, a political philosophy that failed to address historical conditions amounted to "an abstract, introspective search for principles to solace our metaphysical unhappiness."⁸⁷ Whereas Camus looked to the metaphysical origins of revolt, Sartre approached the problem from the perspective of the worker. Against Camus's metaphysical analysis of revolt, Sartre argued: "The circumstances which bring about the crystallization of the masses into revolutionary mobs can with good reason be called historical: they arise from the social, economic and political transformations of the continent."⁸⁸ Sartre rejected Camus's call for limits because of the rebel's asymmetrical relation to the power structure.⁸⁹ Indeed, for Sartre, a moderate revolt was a contradiction in terms. By virtue of his circumstance, the rebel confronts an order he cannot defeat conventionally. André Breton, a prominent poet and surrealist of the era, raised a similar objection to Camus:

⁸⁵"If rebellion could found a philosophy," Camus writes in *The Rebel*, "it would be a philosophy of limits, of calculated ignorance, and of risk" (289).

⁸⁶Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 104.

⁸⁷Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Knopf, 1963), 36.

⁸⁸Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Communists and Peace*, trans. Martha H. Fletcher and Phillip R. Berk (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 209.

⁸⁹Political rebels, Sartre argues, cannot so much as "budge without shaking society. . . they are revolutionary by virtue of their objective situation" (*The Communists and Peace*, 226).

What is this phantom of revolt that Camus is trying to credit, and behind which he takes shelter, a form of revolt into which moderation has been introduced? Once the revolt has been emptied of its passionate substance, what could possibly remain? I have no doubt that many people will be duped by this artifice: it is a case of keeping the word and eliminating the thing itself.⁹⁰

Though hyperbolic, Breton's (and Sartre's) appraisal raises an important question. Without a willingness to take extraordinary action, what becomes of revolt? Is it possible to retroactively impose upon revolt the kinds of unclear limits Camus propounds in *The Rebel*?

It must be remembered that Camus's concern with limits stemmed from his desire to undermine theoretical justifications for violence. Camus condemned the totalizing tendencies of religious and historical movements obsessed with truth or justice; and he was particularly disturbed by the capacity of intellectuals to justify crime on ideological grounds. Critics like Sartre and Breton misunderstand (or deliberately neglect) this aspect of Camus's thought. Revolt should not be seen as an attempt to explain reality or prescribe political action.⁹¹ Camus was drawn to figures like Ivan Karamazov because he understood metaphysical revolt as a negation of reality. However, as Eubanks and Petrakis observe, such negation can lead "to a form of exile in which human beings are fundamentally unable to make judgments."⁹² This inability to make judgments (impose value) was the cardinal problem of revolt for Camus. To historicize or idealize action is to separate it from experience; it also divorces the rebel from absurdity—indeed it forces him into a position in which his rebellion is contingent upon his nonrecognition of reality; he must live in and constantly reorder the false world he has created. This has disastrous consequences for human life. It sets up a conflict between reality and the system purporting to explain it; and too often, Camus believes, it is reality that must give way.

Camus is thus not so much interested in defining revolt as he is in moderating its effects. He contends that revolt, whatever its origins, can lead either to solidarity or suffering.⁹³ In defense of solidarity, Camus sought a proximate

⁹⁰André Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 178.

⁹¹Nor should it be seen as ignoring material circumstances. In *The Rebel*, for instance, Camus writes that "if rebellion exists, it is because falsehood, injustice, and violence are part of the rebel's condition" (304). Contrary to the objections of Sartre and others, then, it is not true that he was oblivious to these realities. The question for Camus was always how best to respond to these conditions; their existence or justness was never in dispute.

⁹²Cecil Eubanks and Peter Petrakis, "Reconstructing the World: Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," *Journal of Politics* 61 (1999): 310.

⁹³Eubanks and Petrakis make this point well. If appropriately moderated, they claim, revolt "may serve to dignify and enhance human existence and even to evoke

form of rebellious politics that acknowledged the limits of human action. Jeffrey Isaac has offered what seems to me a much better understanding of Camus's political aims. According to Isaac, it is a mistake to accuse Camus of ignoring history or of treating revolt as a purely metaphysical undertaking. Responding to critics who charge Camus with misrepresenting the nature of political struggle in *The Plague*, Isaac writes:

They correctly saw that the rebellion depicted in *The Plague* is not a class struggle, that it involves no political parties or mass movements and has neither grandiose ideological ambitions nor any deep interest in state power. But they were wrong to conclude that it therefore represents a kind of pristine and moralistic political withdrawal. Rather, it depicts new kind of politics. . . . In no way does it abandon history. But it refuses any kind of grand historical justification like that found in Marxism. . . . Rieux lives thoroughly in the present. This does not make him indifferent to consequences. It is just that he chooses his ends and means soberly, and justifies them not in terms of a grand narrative but in terms of an active solidarity.⁹⁴

Here Isaac captures the essence of revolt. From an ethical perspective, Camus aims only to establish a pluralistic framework within which actions can be provisionally measured and judged.⁹⁵ It lacks the certainty of metaphysical systems because this is what an absurd life with others demands. Values are self-constituted products of a political community; to be binding they must emerge from and be guided by dialogue and experience. This is what it means to participate in political life, and Camusian revolt cannot be understood apart from this fact.

a community of shared pathos" (ibid., 293). If it is not moderated, it leads instead to the rejection of life and living man.

⁹⁴Jeffrey Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 156–57.

⁹⁵Sprintzen has also described Camus's ethical thought in terms appropriate to Camus's intent. Within Camus's framework, he explains, "we do not deduce rules of action; ethics is not mathematics or even law. Rather, we grasp limits to humane action and recognize that certain commitments cannot go together with others. This approach reveals limitations intrinsic to the realm of values, establishing binding hypotheticals, constraints of action within particular frameworks. Thus value claims should take an *if-then* form: *if* that is wished, *then* this must be taken into view. But the need to act in accordance with any specific ethical or human framework—with the *if*-clause of the hypothetical—can never be deduced" (Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, 131).