

# **The Death of God: An Analysis of the Existential Solutions to the Problem of Nihilism**

by

Reece Tackley

A Master's Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Humanities

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

HPPH7014 MA Philosophy Dissertation

Word count: 16,487

In

MA Philosophy and Religion

30/09/2024

### **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like to take the opportunity to thank my dissertation supervisor Dr Rebekah Humphreys for supporting throughout my research, providing me with essential guidance and resources to guide me throughout this process.

Secondly, I would like to thank the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's Digital library services and access to the countless resources which have made this dissertation possible.

I would also like to also take the opportunity to thank my fellow friends and colleagues, who have kindly been willing to discuss and debate my research area and allow me to gain insight into my chosen field of study.

Finally, I would like to thank my family members for the continued support throughout my dissertation and proving me with the support of proof reading throughout the process.

## **The Death of God: An analysis of the Existential solution to the Problem of Nihilism**

**Abstract:** The problem of nihilism has plagued individuals, philosophers, and wider society throughout history. Nihilism is most understood as the process in which our beliefs and values become meaningless or devoid of value. The rise of Nihilism can be traced to the nineteenth century when scientific advancement and societal shifts away from religion caused people to become sceptical of the religious paradigm which grounded their society. Friedrich Nietzsche most famously alerted the world to the problem of Nihilism stating that ‘God is Dead’. Nietzsche ignited and revolutionised the study of Nihilism, influencing future discourse on nihilism. However, Nietzsche’s solutions to the problem of nihilism fall short of providing a valuable way to combat these nihilistic tendencies. Nietzsche’s works influenced many of the existential and existentialist works in the twentieth century. One of these existentialist writers is Jean-Paul Sartre, who clearly defined existentialism, stating that ‘existence precedes essence’. Sartrean existentialism provides an answer to the nihilistic problem by giving the reader a positive outlook on life by expressing their ‘radical freedom’. Unlike Nietzsche, Sartre advocates for personal responsibility and freedom. Like Nietzsche, Albert Camus did not consider himself an existentialist, but his works are existential in nature, and deal with many similar themes to Sartre. Camus focuses on the absurdity of life and stresses the importance of living in the physical world. In his famous works, ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ and ‘The Stranger’ Camus presents his characters as Absurd heroes. Unlike Sartre, Camus focuses on one’s absurd existence and suggests that trying to give it meaning is akin to ‘philosophical suicide’. This dissertation argues that taking an existential position towards the problem of nihilism proves a valuable way to navigate the world and avoid the threats of nihilism presented by Nietzsche.

**Contents**

**INTRODUCTION .....4**

**CHAPTER 1: A HISTORY OF NIHILISM.....6**

**CHAPTER 2: FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE AND THE DEATH OF GOD.....13**

**CHAPTER 3: NIETZSCHE’S SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF NIHILISM .....18**

**CHAPTER 4: IS NIETZSCHE AN EXISTENTIALIST? .....24**

**CHAPTER 5: JEAN-PAUL SARTRE: THE EXISTENTIAL SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF  
NIHILISM .....26**

**CHAPTER 6: SARTRE AND AUTHENTICITY: HOW TO LIVE AN EXISTENTIAL LIFE .....32**

**CHAPTER 7: ALBERT CAMUS: THE ABSURD HEROES .....37**

**CHAPTER 8: AN ABSURDIST OR EXISTENTIALIST SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF  
NIHILISM? .....46**

**CONCLUSION.....49**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY .....51**

## Introduction

Meaning provides a quintessential part of how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. For example, everything we do, any action, any goal or motivation is based on our inherent meaning and values. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) argued that modern society was built on the foundations of religious beliefs and values.<sup>1</sup> Religion has played a significant role in the history of society, especially Christianity in terms of building Western civilisation. For example, many of the laws, and values we hold in modern society can be traced back to a fundamental religious belief which has been translated to use in a secular context.

The question arises, what will happen if we lose that meaning in our lives? Philosophers such as Nietzsche warn us of the upcoming threat of Nihilism with his proclamation that 'God is dead!'.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche suggests that in Modern society people have outgrown god, and may now be atheists, but still cling to the fundamental beliefs and values which govern our lives, even though they are based on religion which has been discarded. The problem with this is that all our beliefs and values are put into question and become meaningless. This despair is often referred to as Nihilism, the process in which our beliefs become empty, and devoid of value or meaning for the individual.

The problem of nihilism has plagued philosophers and academics for centuries since its coinage. If we fail to sufficiently deal with the concerns of nihilism, we will be left in a state of decay, a world in which our values have no grounding, and all meaning is lost. One solution to this problem is to promote an existential approach to life. These philosophies are often classed as anti-nihilist because they provide solutions to the problem of nihilism by creating meaning in our lives.<sup>3</sup> These solutions provide similar, but differing ways we can create meaning, including the value of personal responsibility and freedom in creating values.

This Dissertation will begin by providing a background to the history of nihilism, what we mean by nihilism, and how can it be defined for our analysis. Which includes an analysis and discussion of the varying elements which cause nihilism to arise. In the second chapter, I will focus on the announcement of the death of God by Nietzsche, providing an analysis of 'The

---

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Thomas Common, Paul V. Cohn, and Maude D. Petre (Dover Publications, 2006). pp.89-90.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (2006). pp.90-91.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Cox, *The Sartre Dictionary* (Continuum International Publishing Group, Bloomsbury, 2008). p.148.

Madman' and the serious implications of nihilism. In the third Chapter, we will address Nietzsche's solution to the problem and address some critiques of his philosophy. In the fourth Chapter, I will bring attention to the subtle differences between existential and existentialist philosophies and to which category Nietzsche falls into. In the fifth Chapter, we will analyse the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, focusing on his two most famous works: *Being and Nothingness*, and *Existentialism and Humanism*. We will address the commonalities and differences between Sartre and Nietzsche. In the final chapter, we will compare Sartre's approach to that of Albert Camus, whose existential philosophy is often called absurdism. Camus differs from Nietzsche and Sartre by denying that creating our meaning will solve the feeling of nihilism. In this dissertation, I will argue that the existential method allows us to develop a meaningful way to understand the world around us and can allow us to develop a deeper understanding of the world around us through applied existential study and phenomenology.

## CHAPTER 1: A History of Nihilism

To present the problem of Nihilism, it is first important to create a clear understanding of what Nihilism is. This will allow us to be clear on what we mean when we refer to nihilism in our later chapters which will focus on how each philosopher deals with the issue of nihilism. In this chapter, we will define what nihilism is, what are the key features of nihilism, and how it arises. And what are the problems of nihilism in society?

The origin of nihilism can seem somewhat unclear, the etymological origin can be taken from the Latin 'nihil' which can be translated as the lack, or absence of anything that exists.<sup>4</sup> While this literal definition gives us a sense of what nihilism is in definition, the origins of nihilism in the context of written works are much less clear. Many academics disagree on the origins of nihilism in this context.

Some scholars cite Jacob Herman Obereit, who in 1787 used the word nihilism to describe Kantian epistemology in his book '*The Recurring Vitality of Desperate Metaphysics*'.<sup>5</sup> There are also various examples in literature of writers using the term nihilism such as its inclusion of the 1862 novel 'Fathers and Sons' by Ivan Turgenev, in which nihilism was used by his character Bazarov who followed a creed of 'total negation'.<sup>6</sup>

What is worth noting here, is that the various interpretations of nihilism in various disciplines are vast and there is no clear origin. Nietzsche, while often cited as one of the founding philosophers who popularised and brought the concept of nihilism to the public sphere, was not the first person to use nihilism in a similar context. This is a common misconception in the study of nihilism, no one definition can be easily categorised and understood from coming from one person. Nihilism can be better understood by defining it as an intellectual movement, a term that arises out of societal and cultural changes. This goes further to suggest that we cannot simply cite one cause or origin of nihilism.

It has been noted that the idea of nihilism is made up of various parts. For example, Jon Stewart identifies five main areas where a feeling of nihilism can arise. These are Death, Fear of being forgotten, Suffering, Atheism, and Ethical and Value Relativism.<sup>7</sup> These categories

---

<sup>4</sup> Alan Pratt, 'Nihilism', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://iep.utm.edu/nihilism/>> [accessed 2024].

<sup>5</sup> Juan Luis, 'Nietzsche's Shadow: On the Origin and Development of the Term Nihilism', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 47.10 (2020), p.1200.

<sup>6</sup> Pratt, 'Nihilism', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Stewart, *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2023) pp.2-10.

can be split into two distinct sections: Fears relating to human mortality, and advancement in science and understanding.

Let us begin by focusing on our first area which feelings of nihilism can arise. This category focuses on the fears man can have regarding human morality and its consequences. That is, the knowledge that we will die, that we are not immortal beings that shall live forever, and the understanding that one day we will not exist and cease to be. This understanding causes man to feel anguish, suffering and existential pain. The questions of our mortality make us consider and critique our very existence. “What is my purpose?” can be heard from all those who fear their death. The numerous examples of people who have changed their lives after being close to death reaffirm the grip that existential dread holds on people. Our Fascination with death and its consequences are at the heart of nihilism. Stewart suggests that the nihilistic urge of man is visible throughout human history, nihilism existed way before a word for this feeling had been coined in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

The Latin proverb ‘Memento Mori’ encapsulates this fascination with death. Memento Mori is most associated with the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the phrase can be translated as ‘to remember your death’. Or in other words, to remember that you will die.<sup>9</sup> The concept of Memento Mori reinforces the idea of the impermanent nature of mortality. That is, life is temporary and at one point, everyone will die, and frames death as inevitable. Throughout the medieval period, Memento Mori was used by the Catholic church to support their religious beliefs of life after death, especially the idea of purgatory.<sup>10</sup> During the Middle Ages, the concept of purgatory was further developed, by 1180 purgatory was defined not simply, as an idea of an in-between of heaven and hell. Not merely a metaphorical realm, but a physical one. The differentiation is important because it impacted Catholicism and the way the Catholic Church played a role in the reconciliation of its members before and after death.<sup>11</sup> The concept of Purgatory was heavily criticised in the sixteenth-century Reformation by Protestants and others who started to criticise the Catholic Church.<sup>12</sup> The criticism stems from

---

<sup>8</sup> Stewart, *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century* (2023) p.2.

<sup>9</sup> Dina Khapaeva, ‘The Social and Historical Perspectives’, in *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), p.65

<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/10.3998/mpub.9296915.5>> [accessed 13 May 2024].

<sup>10</sup> Khapaeva, ‘The Social and Historical Perspectives’, (2017), pp. 62–65.

<sup>11</sup> Paul O’Callaghan, ‘The Purification of the Elect’, in *Christ Our Hope* (Catholic University of America Press, 2011), p. 297. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt3fgq3j.15>>

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p.297.



the Catholic Church creating a system of ‘indulgences’, a system which told members of the church that they could for a price, pay for dead family members to help escape purgatory. Through the system of indulgences, it is evident that the concept of Memento Mori can be seen in the ways of the Catholic Church and other religious organisations. To return to our focal point of nihilism, Memento Mori makes people aware of their death and attempts to create hope for those who have passed, by giving them peace in the idea of life after death. This section reaffirms Stewart’s claim that our fear of death has existed throughout the age of man.<sup>13</sup>

Stewart himself mentions various historical and mythological examples of people who have experienced this fear of death. Stewart gives the example of ‘*The Epic of Gilgamesh*’ from Mesopotamian Sumerian mythology.<sup>14</sup>

*The king Gilgamesh experienced a crisis of meaning when his beloved friend Enkidu died. For the first time he feels anxiety in the face of death... These events cause him to realise the finitude of his own existence and reflect on his own death. The threat of death evokes great fear in him, and he becomes obsessed with finding means to avoid it... This is thus the story of a rich and powerful king who has everything that he wants yet is deeply vexed since he knows that one day he will die. The anticipation of death deprives him of all joy in his life.*<sup>15</sup>

This example provides an apt example<sup>14</sup> of how the fear of our human mortality influences and gives rise to nihilism. Gilgamesh does not only fear his death, but he emotionally suffers from the fear of his death. This suffering causes him to lose his purpose in his life, he no longer desires the material wealth, fame, and status that his life had previously revolved around. Gilgamesh was now set on a purpose, to try and find a way that he could escape his death. While it could be argued that Gilgamesh never reached the stage of nihilism because his search for immortality could be read as a new purpose. The tale of Gilgamesh nonetheless provides an apt fear of man which can lead someone down the path of nihilism and lack of meaning in their lives. Stewart uses Gilgamesh’s plight to reinforce the first category for the rise of nihilism, especially the fear of being forgotten. The death of Enkidu made Gilgamesh realise his mortality, that one day he will also die and may be forgotten. The concept of

---

<sup>13</sup> Stewart, A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century (2023) p.2.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart, A History of Nihilism (2023) pp.2-3.

memento mori can be seen in the plight of Gilgamesh, he was extremely concerned about his death, and he would do anything to try and stop it from happening. Both examples demonstrate the power that death holds over people, and the pain and suffering this brings to people.

Let us now move towards the second grouping of the reasons for nihilism, that is the rise of scientific understanding and worldview. The role the Enlightenment plays an important role in Stewart's thesis, he argues that the scientific developments since the Enlightenment created an environment where science had led people towards atheism and non-religious explanations of the world and the universe.<sup>16</sup>

Many scholars have argued that Nietzschean ideas of nihilism arose from the twentieth century especially the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust.<sup>17</sup> This can especially be seen in the Works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. However, Stewart places greater importance on the effect of the Enlightenment and the social and cultural changes which occurred during this time. The rise of nihilism can be seen as a consequence of the scientific enlightenment which swept through the Western world in the seventeenth and eighteenth Centuries.<sup>18</sup> The Enlightenment period is often called the 'Age of Reason', a period of history where religious belief and traditional superstitious behaviour were beginning to be questioned.<sup>19</sup>

The Enlightenment played a pivotal role in Nietzsche's focus on the problem of nihilism. In the age of reason, scientific developments took centre stage, new understandings, people were encouraged to challenge religious dogmatism, and new scientific understandings of the world vastly changed how we understood the world around us.<sup>20</sup> The most significant example of this is the Copernican Revolution. Copernicus discovered the heliocentric model of the universe, which no longer placed the Earth at the centre of the universe.<sup>21</sup> The Copernican revolution was not only significant for discovering this understanding of the

---

<sup>16</sup> Stewart, A History of Nihilism (2023) p.20.

<sup>17</sup> Stewart, A History of Nihilism (2023) p.17.

<sup>18</sup> Robert R. Williams, 'Nietzsche on the Death of God and Eternal Recurrence', in *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God*, (2012), p. 263.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Rockmore, 'Enlightenment and Reason', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 84.11 (1987), p.699.

<sup>20</sup> Rockmore, 'Enlightenment and Reason', (1987), p.699.

<sup>21</sup> Sheila Rabin, 'Nicolaus Copernicus', ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023)  
<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/copernicus/>> [accessed 4 March 2024].

universe but the general acceptance of this as the prime understanding of the nature of the universe. The Copernican revolution is often recognised as one of the major elements which contributed to the rise of the scientific revolution.<sup>22</sup> Throughout this period, various people began to think differently about the world. For example, Edmund Halley (1656-1743) researched the way we thought of space and the size of the universe, being on a much greater scale than we had previously thought.<sup>23</sup> Halley's discoveries also put into perspective the shortness of human life, in comparison to the amount of time life had existed on Earth.<sup>24</sup> This reinforces our previous discussion of the mortality of human life and its impermanence. Nihilism arises from this realisation, scientific discoveries in the Enlightenment period, made people more aware of how small the life of Man and the earth is in comparison to the magnitude of the universe. People were beginning to realise that the Earth was not as important in the grand scheme of the universe.

The scientific discoveries in the Enlightenment changed the role and importance of religion in the Western world. Modern science increasingly became a competitor to religion in the way we understood the world around us, many religious ideas started to be criticised due to newly discovered scientific ideas.<sup>25</sup> This process was further accelerated due to the rise of Protestantism.<sup>26</sup> This change was monumental in the fall of the religious groundwork which influenced everything people did. For example, no longer was religion the sole way to understand the world. There was an element of choice, you could decide how to understand the world you lived in.

Stewart argued that the Enlightenment directed people to a form of relativism, the free choice in Protestantism to no longer be bound by a single authority i.e. the Catholic Church made people have the power to decide for themselves. This led to relativism in Protestantism with various versions of the religions sprouting up.<sup>27</sup> Religion for the individual became less about the institution or strict dogmatism, but how you wanted to believe in God. The link between relativism and nihilism must be further explained to understand the relationship between the two. For example, the loss of the dogmatic Catholic worldview to many people,

---

<sup>22</sup> Rabin, 'Nicolaus Copernicus', (2023)

<sup>23</sup> Stewart, A History of Nihilism (2023) pp.20-21.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp.20-21.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, 'Nietzsche on the Death of God and Eternal Recurrence', (2012), p. 263.

<sup>26</sup> Stewart, A History of Nihilism (2023) p.30.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p.30.

and the new freedom of religious practice in the form of various offshoots of Protestantism. This religious turmoil simply added to the other factors of the Enlightenment.

Scientific naturalists such as Charles Darwin (1809-1982) popularised the idea of evolution through natural selection. In his book, '*The Origin of species*' Darwin argued that all lifeforms, and more importantly humans evolved from single-cell organisms but adapted and evolved to better adjust and survive in their environment.<sup>28</sup> Darwin's work was and continues to be highly influential throughout history since its publication. The most notable consequence of his theory was the change in how people understood or thought the world began. Natural selection is not dependent on a god or spiritual being to determine the cause of our existence. This brings evolution into conflict with religion because evolution proposes a naturalistic solution to why we exist. We exist, and all other sentient creatures exist in the form that we see today, as a result of advantageous mutations which led to our and their survival. This leads people to pose the question of why God is needed anymore?

The relationship between scientific advancement (especially the work of Darwin and other evolutionary biologists) and nihilism is clear. The major issue that arises from this change in people's perception of religion as the sole grounding of the world is that the lack of God deprived people of their value system. Enlightenment authors such as Cicero highlighted the fear of moral decay and atheism in his plays such as '*Nathan the Wise*'.<sup>29</sup> He argued that atheism and a lack of religious belief in God made people immoral, that morality comes from the idea of God, and without it a person is left without values which society is based on.<sup>30</sup> The lack of God leaves people in a state of value relativism, a world without concrete values grounded in the divine, but up to the individual to choose what they want to believe. Many philosophers detest the idea of value relativism because it can be seen as a cause of societal destruction. As Stewart notes:

*The concern is that this loss of the divine grounding of ethics will lead to chaos and mayhem. Some people might take this realisation of the absence of God opportunistically to justify all*

---

<sup>28</sup> Stewart, A History of Nihilism (2023) p.23.

<sup>29</sup> Stewart, A History of Nihilism (2023) p.12.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p.12.

*kinds of wicked actions...if everything is relative, then evil actions can be argued for just as well as good ones.*<sup>31</sup>

This demonstrates the fear of nihilism perfectly, without a stable and concrete understanding of the world that religion provides for society. A meaningless world, a world where people have the freedom to believe what they want without repercussions because the idea of good is subjective. The question we must ask ourselves then is if religious belief is to be doubted, and arguably false, what do we do to prevent the rise of nihilism and value relativism?

In this chapter, we have developed an understanding of the origins and meanings of nihilism and the various causes for this feeling. By looking at the two defined categories: Fears of human mortality, and advancements in science and understanding we have discussed the various causes of nihilism why and how they arise. This will provide us with a solid basis for understanding how existential philosophers have tried to deal with the issue of nihilism.

---

<sup>31</sup> Stewart, A History of Nihilism (2023) p.12.

## CHAPTER 2: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Death of God

To present the problem of Nihilism, a chronological account of existential thought should begin by looking into the philosophical contributions of Friedrich Nietzsche. Although predating existential thought, Nietzsche provided the groundwork for existential thought later developed by influential existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. To remove the opportunity for confusion, it must be stated that while many parts of Nietzschean philosophy could be defined as having elements of existential thought, Nietzsche would not have considered himself an existentialist. Partly because the term had yet to be used during his lifetime. But more evidently because Nietzsche was very critical of the idea of ‘Radical Freedom’, he thought that our freedom to do as we want to be rather limited.<sup>32</sup> The concept of radical freedom will be discussed further in our chapter discussing Sartre, but for now, what is important is that Radical freedom is a major part of existentialist thought, especially for Sartre. This puts Nietzsche at odds with the existential tradition. However, it is important to remember that to some extent the focus of Nietzsche’s philosophy was the threat of Nihilism. In 1882, Nietzsche published ‘The Gay Science’, in which he first outlined his infamous proclamation of The Death of God. In this chapter, I will set the scene for existentialist thought, by focusing on the Death of God, and the resulting rise of Nihilism and the impact this has on religion and belief in God.

The most reasonable place to start when discussing nihilism in regard to Nietzsche is his most notable declaration that ‘God is dead!’ in Aphorism 125 of the Gay Science.<sup>33</sup> The aphorism is most known as ‘The Parable of the Madman’. Nietzsche presents his argument for the death of God in a parable where a madman visits a public marketplace filled with people of varying beliefs in God, especially those who no longer believe in God and the madman cries out towards the people that:

*“I seek God! I seek God! ... “Where has God gone?” he called out. “I mean to tell you! We have killed him, -you and I! we are all his murderers! ... God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!”<sup>34</sup>*

The death of God is not a declaration that we have killed God in a physical understanding of the phrase, but rather we have killed the idea and value of the existence of God. As the

---

<sup>32</sup> Ariela Tubert, ‘Nietzsche’s Existentialist Freedom’, *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 46.3 (2015), p. 409

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (2006). p.90.

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (2006). pp.90-91.

madman goes through the marketplace, he is mocked and is perceived as insane by the people around him. Nietzsche states that, *'He caused a great deal of amusement. Why! Is he lost? Said one.'*<sup>35</sup> The mocking tone and amusement of the villagers serve as a metaphor for the reader to the ignorance towards the threat of nihilism. This is further seen by Nietzsche's choice of the word 'lost'. Lost is a key element of the feeling of nihilism. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, nihilism arises when someone loses all meaning in their lives. Synonyms for lost include gone, missing, absent and vanished, to name a few. These words all emphasise the lack of something. The same can be said for nihilism, the feeling only arises when the values and beliefs of a person or society are brought into question. For the villagers, this is but a taunt, to mock the madman for thinking that God exists or that he has gone anywhere. But Nietzsche is planting the seeds that nihilism has not yet been realised by the people. At the end of the parable of the madman, the madman states: *"I come too early," he then said, "I am not yet at the right time. This prodigious event is still on its way, and is travelling, it has not yet reached men's ears"*.<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche informs the reader that people are still oblivious to the fact that God is dead, or rather that the people have not realised the impact of the death of God, while the people in the marketplace may mock god, the madman is aware of the importance and despair this will cause humanity. This is why the madman fears that he is too early, people are still oblivious to the idea that while they have stopped believing in an idea of God, society and humanity have been shaped and built upon the idea of God.

*Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from its sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move? Away from all suns? Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness?*<sup>37</sup>

This quote by Nietzsche epitomises the feeling of nihilism, the feeling that without the structure of God and religious belief, we are lost. In the last chapter, we referred to the work of Jon Stewart who echoed the thoughts of nihilism as a force for "chaos and mayhem" and would lead to the justifiability of all actions.<sup>38</sup> The madman is lost, his life has become

---

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (2006). p.90.

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (2006). p.91.

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (2006). p.90.

<sup>38</sup> Stewart, *A History of Nihilism* (2023) p.12.

meaningless, and he no longer can see the world like he used to. He has become disillusioned with the reality. The imagery relating to death and murder makes Nietzsche's intentions clear with this parable. There is an emphasis on the unknowing or ignorance of the coming of nihilism. Nietzsche asks the reader many questions, most notably the question '*what did we do to when we loosened this earth from its sun?*'<sup>39</sup> This seems to be referring to the Copernican revolution we mentioned in our last chapter. Here Nietzsche is demonstrating the role that the Enlightenment had in leading to this time of neurosis. The imagery of the earth and its sun also demonstrates the separation between religious worldviews and the ever-growing scientific society.

Michael Ure argued that the death of God is "*symptomatic of the collision of a religious worldview with an emergent nineteenth-century scientific naturalism and its project of naturalising humanity*".<sup>40</sup> As we mentioned in our last chapter, the rise of nihilism can be attributed to the Enlightenment and scientific naturalism due to the changing way that people thought and understood the world around them. The role of the death of God is to alert people, more specifically people who no longer believe in God that nihilism is a serious problem that must be overcome. Nietzsche argues that he does not need to spend time in the *Gay Science* to try and provide an argument for why God does not exist, it is the inevitable course of history.<sup>41</sup> This makes the target audience of the Death of God change, no longer is it targeting Christians and religious believers but rather those who have accepted scientific naturalism. When interpreting the parable this way, it is clear why Nietzsche informed the reader that many of the people in the marketplace did not believe in God.<sup>42</sup> The reason that this is significant is that the main message Nietzsche presents is that the madman has realised the threat of nihilism and that his life has become meaningless.

Nietzsche purposefully used the madman to represent the fear of nihilism, someone who has become disillusioned with the state of Western society and has realised the fear of nihilism. As Nietzsche later writes in aphorism 377:

---

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (2006). p.90.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Ure, 'Shadows of God', in *Nietzsche's the Gay Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> Ure, 'Shadows of God: Book 3' (2019), p. 116.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (2006). p.90.



*We children of the future, how could we be at home in the present? We are unfavourable to all ideals to which could make us feel at home in this frail, broken-down, transition period.*<sup>43</sup>

The Madman is mocked and not taken seriously when he declares the death of God, this further highlights the difference in perspectives and world view that the villagers and the madman have. Nietzsche emphasises the fact that once people have realised the coming of nihilism, they will not be able to laugh like the people in the marketplace. This is what separates the madman from the other people in the parable, he cannot go back. This is Nietzsche's true audience, those who no longer believe in God, but have yet to realise the role that Christianity has in the inner workings and systems within Western society. For example, Nietzsche emphasises that many of the morals and justifications these people have and how they lead are based on Christian morality and values.<sup>44</sup> For example, our societal rules are often interpreted from biblical and religious roots such as the Ten Commandments which provide a structure for many societal laws. Nietzsche brings attention to that while the people in the parable believe they have left religion behind; this is not true. The problem this poses for society is that their belief systems are based on something they have rejected as untrue.<sup>45</sup> This misunderstanding of thinking they have fully outgrown God, and religion is one of the main causes of the feeling of nihilism. Our whole lives become subject to question, if our morals and values can be attributed to a belief in God, how shall we live in a world without God? Nietzsche argues that we cannot escape this idea of God:

*After the Buddha was dead people showed his shadow for centuries afterwards in a cave, - an immense frightful shadow. God is dead: but as the human race is constituted, there will perhaps be caves for millenniums yet, in which people will show his shadow. - And we—we have still to overcome his shadow!*<sup>46</sup>

In Aphorism 108 of the Gay Science, Nietzsche argues that the problem of God can be seen in how people mourned the death of the Buddha, even after his death, he was treated as a spiritual being, where they visited his cave to hold onto his memory and spiritual teachings. Nietzsche proposes a similarity in how people will try to hold onto the image of God. The

---

<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (2006). p.192.

<sup>44</sup> Ure, 'Shadows of God' (2019), p. 117.

<sup>45</sup> Ure, 'Shadows of God' (2019), p. 117.

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (2006). p.81.

image of God is not simply a belief in God, but the values and systems which religion acted as the foundation for. For example, Nietzsche argues there will be academics and atheists who have cast God from their minds, but will still claim moral superiority over others, and believe they are good people, but these assumptions are based on religious foundations.<sup>47</sup> This is what Nietzsche means when he refers to the ‘Shadow’ of God, even if we no longer believe in God, we are unconsciously unwilling to disregard the parts of God which benefit or hold up Western society.<sup>48</sup> The issue this causes is that if people who have accepted the death of God realise that they are unable to hold on to the morality and foundations of the world, they will have nothing of value to their lives anymore. Nietzsche suggests that nihilism and emptiness the lack of God causes people to want to replace it with something similar. In aphorism 151, Nietzsche uses the example of another world, when we dispose of the belief in God, we are left in a state of nihilism, a state of emptiness, an ‘*uncomfortable void*’.<sup>49</sup> This uncomfortableness is what Nietzsche argues is why many people unconsciously wish to hold onto the shadow of God, why let go of God when you can maintain this façade, but maintain the value in your life? Nietzsche further suggests that even when you cast the shadow of God outside your mind, there is a desire to replace it with something similar, for example, another world, just not a religious one.<sup>50</sup> Ure argues that this clinging to the ideals and values of God, is what makes people unwilling to cast the shadow of God out of their minds.<sup>51</sup>

In this chapter we have discussed the death of God first presented in the parable of the madman and analysed the clues that Nietzsche left the reader regarding the purpose and warnings of continuing on the path towards nihilism. From this, it should be clear why Nietzsche warns us, the reader of the upcoming nihilistic future of Western civilisation. This emptiness brings into question all our fundamental beliefs and the whole of society. Nietzsche therefore argues that we must dispose of the idea and shadow of God no matter how hard of a task this is.

---

<sup>47</sup> Ure, ‘Shadows of God’ (2019), p. 117.

<sup>48</sup> Ure, ‘Shadows of God’ (2019), p. 117.

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (2006). p.116.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p.116.

<sup>51</sup> Ure, ‘Shadows of God’ (2019), p. 117.

### CHAPTER 3: Nietzsche's Solution to the Problem of Nihilism

The time has come to address one of the most important and focal parts of our discussion, the solution to the issue of nihilism. While the Nietzschean solution of nihilism has some commonality with that of existentialism, there are some major differences. In this chapter, I will focus on Nietzsche's solution to the problem of Nihilism, which involves the complete disregard for our morality and value systems. In response to his solutions, I will address the critiques of Nietzsche's solutions and ask ourselves if this solution provides a valuable answer to the problem of nihilism and if not, what should we use instead?

It is important to remember that the Death of God for Nietzsche is bittersweet. Nietzsche argues that religion is an illusion and should and must be dispelled, however, he knows that the fall of God has serious repercussions for all of humanity.<sup>52</sup> This is what we focussed on in the last chapter, the issue is that we must sacrifice our deeply ingrained Judeo-Christian values which underpin all elements of our lives, to truly rid ourselves of the 'shadow of God'.<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche is not unaware of the challenge which he has identified, he is aware of how ingrained these ideals are, but it is a task that must be completed. However, the death of God proposes a fresh start for civilisation, as Nietzsche writes in aphorism 343:

*We philosophers and "free spirits" feel ourselves irradiated as by a new dawn by the report that the "old God is dead"; our hearts overflow with gratitude, astonishment, presentiment and expectation. At last the horizon seems open once more...our ships can at last put out to sea in face of every danger; every hazard is again permitted to the discerner; the sea, our sea again lies open before us; perhaps never before did such an "open sea" exist.*<sup>54</sup>

While the death of God can lead to nihilism, Nietzsche argues that the event provides a great opportunity, or an 'open sea' to change how we perceive the world.<sup>55</sup> For example, Nietzsche argues that the death of God is almost a new beginning, a chance for civilization and its individuals to create their values, not an objective understanding based on religion.<sup>56</sup> This is a clear difference from the current system which Nietzsche posits is based on religious values

---

<sup>52</sup> Lawrence J. Hatab, 'Nietzsche, Nihilism and Meaning', *The Personalist Forum*, 3.2 (1987), p.93.

<sup>53</sup> Ure, 'Shadows of God' (2019), pp. 117-18.

<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (2006). p.156.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.156.

<sup>56</sup> Jon Stewart, 'Nietzsche's Vision of the Past and the Future of Nihilism', in *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 275-276.

and belief in God. For example, Nietzsche suggests that we must dispose of the idea that there is an objective truth or set of values to be found or understood. Instead, he places pressure on the individual to create and develop their own set of values based on their own will.<sup>57</sup> The change from an objective set of values to a subjective set of values is a clear departure from the norm, and reinforces his statement that *'every hazard is again permitted to the discerners'*.<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche implies that the religious groundwork of society has limited the potential and only by stripping this away that the individual can understand the world around them.

Nietzsche's solution to the problem of nihilism provides some problems that we briefly mentioned in our first chapter. By placing the authority and responsibility of creating our own set of values and beliefs, we allow the possibility of utter chaos and anarchy. If responsibility now sits on the shoulders of an individual, and not on the society or civilisation we no longer are constrained by an idea of what is good, or what is morally correct. Nietzsche emphasises the importance of the individual rather than the collective society. For example, the values and morals which are upheld in the law of Western civilisation are based on religious fundamental beliefs such as the Ten Commandments. Murder and theft are prime examples of laws translated from religious belief. From the perspective of a collective society, it should be clear why these actions should be detested and named immoral, but for the individual, this may not be so clear. A collective society should denounce theft as wrong because it negatively affects the societal and financial impact of its citizens. Based on a religious framework such as Christianity, we should not steal, because Jesus Christ told people to treat others how they wish to be treated themselves. Based on the religious worldview, this is wrong because it is a statement from God, and thus should be adhered to. However, if we strip religion and kill God from this equation, the idea and moral value of the act of theft are more obscure.

For example, in Daybreak Book II aphorism 102, Nietzsche writes:

*Is the origin of all morality not to be sought in the detestable petty conclusions: 'what harms me is something evil...what is useful to me is something good...what harms me once or*

---

<sup>57</sup> Stewart, 'Nietzsche's Vision of the Past and the Future of Nihilism' (2023), p. 276.

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (2006). p.156.

*several times is the inimical as such and in itself; what is useful to me once or several times is the friendly as such and in itself.*<sup>59</sup>

Nietzsche here seems to be suggesting that morality is to some extent subjective, but more importantly subjective to the individual. He suggests that what is 'evil' or bad for one person is someone or something useful for the individual. Here Nietzsche shows elements or defining features of pragmatism, this is the belief that what is true, is what is useful to me.<sup>60</sup> While our definition or understanding of Pragmatism has changed, if we take how William James originally defined Pragmatism, there seems to be a clear disconnect between what Pragmatism is. For example, Neil Sinhababu suggests that pragmatism as defined by James, is incompatible with Nietzschean pragmatism because James argues that if it has value, it would be true. Nietzsche denies this because he accepts that some false beliefs can be valuable.<sup>61</sup> Notice that in our quote above Nietzsche does not say that these actions are true, but that they are 'good'. This is a clear distinction, just because something is good, does not necessarily mean that it is true. Nietzsche does not reject beliefs based on them being true or false, but rather based on the impact it has on a person's will.<sup>62</sup> This provides evidence that while Nietzsche's statement may at first seem Pragmatic, it is much more radical than that. Anything can be useful to Nietzsche, which could make it good from the perspective of Nietzsche, but it does not have to be true. This exemplifies the individuality of Nietzsche's works, that nihilism can be conquered by rejecting the concepts of truth and falseness. But instead, we can take concepts no matter, if they are true or not, if they are useful for achieving the will to power and to allow someone to become their full potential.<sup>63</sup>

One critique of Nietzsche's philosophy and his solution to the problem of nihilism is that he is aware that not everyone will be able to achieve the will to power, to develop and overcome God. For example, Ken Gemes points out that Nietzsche is not trying to 'liberate' everyone, but rather a selected few whom he has acknowledged as 'fit for liberation'.<sup>64</sup> This limits the

---

<sup>59</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Book II', in *Nietzsche: Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.59.

<sup>60</sup> Bawden H Heath, 'What Is Pragmatism?', *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 1.16 (1904), pp.423-424.

<sup>61</sup> Neil Sinhababu, 'Nietzschean Pragmatism', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 48.1 (2017), p.58.

<sup>62</sup> Ken Gemes, 'Nietzsche's Critique of Truth', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52.1 (1992), pp.57-58.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.57-58.

<sup>64</sup> Gemes, 'Nietzsche's Critique of Truth' (1992), p.57.

extent to which we can say Nietzsche provides a valuable solution because, so few people are up for the task which Nietzsche has set us. However, he is fully aware of this criticism but does not reject this criticism but instead concedes that this is something that his philosophy cannot do, it cannot be a large-scale movement for all of humanity.<sup>65</sup> While this criticism does not mean that Nietzsche's philosophy is less valuable, it does mean that we, or at least the majority of the population will be unable to follow his philosophy to solve the issue of nihilism. However, it should be said that Nietzsche is not writing to everyone, he is writing to an audience he hopes can combat this nihilism.

It is clear to me that Nietzsche's philosophy and solution to the problem of Nihilism is not something that should be emulated, something that can be used as a method to gain meaning in their lives. Nietzsche detests the idea of the herd mentality and suggests that his work should be instead used as a source to inspire an individual to be liberated.<sup>66</sup> Nietzsche suggests that his philosophy is not something that can be 'systemised' or used on a mass scale.<sup>67</sup> What is important here is that he is asking us not to use his works as a path to finding meaning, or a way that everyone can become liberated, but to use what he has written as inspiration, once a person is 'liberated' it is up to the person to decide what is best for them to develop their will and make themselves the best version of themselves.<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche suggests that by developing and cultivating themselves as a 'higher being', the individual will be able to create a positive meaning for their lives.<sup>69</sup> He suggests that by becoming liberated, the individual will be aware of what is best for them. This is a very positive outlook on how one overcomes nihilism, when you reach the level, you will intuitively know what values and meaning to create which will positively impact their lives.<sup>70</sup>

Stewart argues that Nietzsche places a lot of faith in the newly anointed higher beings so that they will be able to overcome nihilism. He writes:

*the end of absolute values led people to a state of weakness, inertia, and helplessness. They could not imagine how to go on without these absolutes. Any value that they tried to posit on*

---

<sup>65</sup> Stewart, 'Nietzsche's Vision of the Past and the Future of Nihilism' (2023), p. 276.

<sup>66</sup> Gemes, 'Nietzsche's Critique of Truth' (1992), p.59.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.59.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.59.

<sup>69</sup> Stewart, 'Nietzsche's Vision of the Past and the Future of Nihilism', (2023), p.276.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.276.

*their own seemed ridiculously insignificant since it was deprived of any objective truth or validity...Nietzsche seems to think that the higher men will be able to do this on the strength of their own will, but it is unclear where their motivation and conviction will come from if they remain relativists at heart.*<sup>71</sup>

For Stewart, the main issue that Nietzsche is faced with is the question of whether higher beings can overcome despair. Nihilism is not simply something that can be easily overcome, it is a fully mental breakdown of all values and beliefs. As Stewart notes, '*any value they tried to posit on their own seemed ridiculously insignificant*'.<sup>72</sup> He claims that replacing the values and meaning of their lives is not as easy as Nietzsche might claim. Once the individual has created new values, they do not need to justify or provide a reason, or motivation for these values.<sup>73</sup> If they did need to provide a reason, they would still be chained by the ideas and values of logic related to the old-world view. Stewart argues that this is one of the trickiest problems for Nietzsche because, if you do not need to justify your actions, the outcome seems to be complete relativism.<sup>74</sup>

Nietzsche could potentially respond to this statement by arguing that once the individual has transcended and become liberated, he will know how to develop meaningful values. From this perspective, the Nietzschean solution is a positive one, or even an optimistic one. Nietzsche presents the prospect of becoming a higher being as one of hope, that once liberated it does not matter, they will have the power to create meaning for themselves which will allow them to be the best version of themselves. But the question remains, is this response reasonable? As Stewart suggests, there seems to be an assumption that the higher beings would not fall to relativism, but why is this the case? Stewart points out that tasks would be lacking motivation, if you are free to do what your will suggests is best, why would you stay motivated? He describes it as:

*One would end in a flippant disposition, ever moving from project to project, constantly changing goals and interests, without ever accomplishing anything.*<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Stewart, 'Nietzsche's Vision of the Past and the Future of Nihilism', (2023), pp. 276-267.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.276.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.276.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.276.

<sup>75</sup> Stewart, 'Nietzsche's Vision of the Past and the Future of Nihilism', (2023), p.277.

Stewart argues that not having to justify the beliefs and values which you hold, would not provide sufficient motivation for a person to complete a task or goal.<sup>76</sup> Stewart is presenting a contradiction which Nietzsche faces, how can we rationalise or create meaning in our actions when we must deny all values and laws that we have used to create any value? For example, we can create whatever values and systems govern our lives, however, if we have nothing to ground these values, such as rationality or natural laws, we are lost. Therefore, Stewart suggests that we will constantly change the goals and aspirations that give purpose to our lives because none of these will fill the gap which the old worldview filled. This leads him to suggest that Nietzsche's philosophy on nihilism will lead to relativism, which cannot provide the same meaning that the religious worldview brought.<sup>77</sup>

In this chapter, we have discussed the solutions to the problem of nihilism posited by Nietzsche. Nietzsche emphasises the idea that the only way to stop the threat of nihilism is to reject the notion of God, and to accept his 'death'. Nietzsche provides us with a few examples and ways in which this is achievable. One way he suggests that this is possible is through the destruction of objective truth and values which religion propagates. However, the solution which Nietzsche devises includes promoting the self rather than the collective society, and the threat of total anarchy. It is important to reinforce that Nietzsche is not suggesting this is an easy task, at the time of his writing, he argues that most people are still unaware, and only those whose wills are powerful enough to escape God can overcome nihilism.<sup>78</sup> I have also presented the critique of Nietzsche's solution to nihilism, that even once they can overcome God, they may not be able to fully create meaning in their lives without certain beliefs and truths essential to the way we see the world.

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p.277.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.277.

<sup>78</sup> Stewart, 'Nietzsche's Vision of the Past and the Future of Nihilism', (2023), p. 276.



#### CHAPTER 4: Is Nietzsche an Existentialist?

Before we move on, it is important to clarify the difference between existentialism and existential thought. This will also allow us to clarify where we can situate Nietzsche in the field of existential solutions to Nihilism. In this transitional chapter, I will compare how Nietzsche could be classed as an existential writer, but that is not to say he is an existentialist.

While much of Nietzsche's philosophy can be called existential, he would have not considered himself an existentialist. There seems to be a divide in the field of existential literature which constitutes an existentialist and a work which is existential in nature. On the surface, it would be easy to think that an existential position would be existentialist. However, I believe that there is a discreet difference between the two. Stewart Greenstreet argues that all existentialists do not necessarily have to have accepted the label of an existentialist. For example, he notes that Sartre was the only existentialist to truly accept the label of being an existentialist.<sup>79</sup> There are various reasons for their denial of the existentialist label, including the term not being defined during their time, or that the label did not sufficiently encapsulate their belief.<sup>80</sup> For example, Albert Camus denied that he was an existentialist, but his role in the development of existentialism is clear.

Nietzsche seems to share many of the common traits of existentialism, such as, the individual creating their values and morals to live their lives. By this definition, I would suggest that Nietzsche can fall under the umbrella of existential. In the last chapter, we focused on the solutions which Nietzsche posited, especially his emphasis on stepping away from the herd, to see oneself as an individual who can create meaning and values in their life. This seems extremely existential, and Nietzsche shares the sentiment of many existentialists (especially those of French existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre) regarding the importance of discarding religion and belief in God.<sup>81</sup> However, on the issue of personal responsibility and freedom Nietzsche and existentialism provide more serious disagreement. For example, Nietzsche's philosophy often appears to purport a form of determinism, this comes into contrast with the Sartrean existentialism which places personal responsibility and radical freedom at the centre of his philosophy. Sartre instead suggests that people have free will and

---

<sup>79</sup> Stewart Greenstreet, 'On Being an Existentialist', *Philosophy Now*, 2016  
<[https://philosophynow.org/issues/115/On\\_Being\\_An\\_Existentialist](https://philosophynow.org/issues/115/On_Being_An_Existentialist)> [accessed 20 September 2024].

<sup>80</sup> Greenstreet, 'On Being an Existentialist', (2016)

<sup>81</sup> Robert C Solomon, 'Nietzsche on Fatalism and "Free Will"', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 2002, p. 63  
<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/20717781>> [accessed 26 September 2024].

a responsibility to act to avoid what Sartre called ‘bad faith’.<sup>82</sup> Nietzschean philosophy denies the personal autonomy which existentialism is known for. This difference is very important when deciding where to place Nietzsche because we cannot deny his involvement and the influence, he had on future existentialists such as Sartre. But Nietzsche’s denial of the radical free will which is essential for Sartre’s definition of existentialism, makes it difficult to retroactively define Nietzsche as an existentialist.<sup>83</sup> Richard Schacht responds to the question by suggesting that there are two options, either, he was using existential ideas to create his system, or that Nietzsche has simply created an alternative version of existentialism not found in Sartre.<sup>84</sup>

The study of the existential, or the term existentialism, is not an all-encompassing term which can neatly be placed under the umbrella of ‘existentialism’. It is not simply a philosophical system or a ‘school’ of philosophical thought, Thomas R. Flynn describes it as an ‘attitude and manner of living’.<sup>85</sup> Existentialism is not dogmatic in the sense that there are clear guidelines to define if something is existentialist, its method is more important. For example, Flynn suggests that one of the defining features of existentialism can be traced back to the philosophy of Socrates with the study of how to live one’s life.<sup>86</sup>

In this way, it is possible to define Nietzsche as an existentialist in the way that he shares the message of creating meaning in their life, especially in the search for meaning in a possible meaningless world. While this allows us to possibly define Nietzsche as an existentialist, but by doing so, we are merely redefining existentialism to fit more than what Sartre intended. Is this wrong? Not necessarily, However, by doing so are we taking away what Sartre originally defined existentialism as? Possibly. For this reason, I propose we make the distinction between existential philosophies and approaches such as Nietzsche and Camus, and the existentialist approach propagated by Sartre.

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.63.

<sup>83</sup> Greenstreet, ‘On Being an Existentialist’ (2016)

<sup>84</sup> Richard Schacht, ‘Nietzsche: After the Death of God’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. by Steven Crowell (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.134–35.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521513340.007>>.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas R Flynn, ‘Existentialism: The Fruit of Liberation’, in *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 230.

<sup>86</sup> Flynn, ‘Existentialism: The Fruit of Liberation’ (2018), p. 230.

## CHAPTER 5: Jean-Paul Sartre: The Existential Solution to the Problem of Nihilism

The existentialist solution to the problem of nihilism is most notably recognised in the form of Jean-Paul Sartre's account to the problem of Nihilism. In 1943 Sartre published his most famous philosophical work '*Being and Nothingness*' in which he clarified and fully presented his ideas of existentialism and phenomenology.<sup>87</sup> In this book, he defined the existential method as 'existence precedes essence'.<sup>88</sup> This was later echoed in his book, '*Existentialism and Humanism*'. In this Chapter, we will analyse the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, identifying the clear differences between Sartre and Nietzsche, and evaluating the benefits of Sartre's philosophy in comparison to Nietzsche.

To begin, it is important to know the origins and reasons for placing his life on the pursuit of existentialism and the solution to a meaningless world. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre reveals his fondness for the Cartesian method of doubt. William Barrett argued that Sartre was a Cartesian who had read Heidegger and came to realise that the philosophical explorations of Heidegger were much more impressive and insightful than Descartes' work in the seventeenth century.<sup>89</sup> The reason for this can be explained by the differing social and historical times in which these philosophers lived. For example, Sartre lived in Modern France where Atheism was more widespread, and the religious worldview had lost its power.<sup>90</sup> Sartre may have denied the Cartesian argument for the existence of God and denied his solution to the argument of doubt, but the Cartesian argument from doubt remains essential to his philosophy. For example, Sartre wrote:

*What first appears evident is that human reality can detach itself from the world-in-questioning, in systematic doubt, in sceptical doubt...only if by nature it has the possibility of self-detachment. This was seen by Descartes, who is establishing doubt on freedom when he claims for us the possibility of suspending our judgments.<sup>91</sup>*

What is significant in this quote by Sartre is that the Cartesian method of doubt provides him with a grounding that enables him to separate himself from his beliefs. For example, if we

---

<sup>87</sup> Cox, *The Sartre Dictionary* (2008). p.6.

<sup>88</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (Routledge, 1998). p.568.

<sup>89</sup> William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (Anchor Books, 1990). p.242.

<sup>90</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990). p.243.

<sup>91</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1998). p.25.

accept that it is possible to doubt everything, all our morals, and values are brought into question.<sup>92</sup> The importance of the argument from doubt is that it places Descartes in a void of nihilism, the only thing that he can be sure of is that '*I am, I exist*' is necessarily true whenever it is stated by me or conceived in my mind'.<sup>93</sup> For Descartes, this is easily solved by the introduction of God as a necessary being, but for Sartre who has denied the existence of such a higher being, we are left in a state of nihilism. However, For Sartre, this is good, because it gives us the ultimate freedom to create our meaning.<sup>94</sup> Like Nietzsche, Sartre suggests that the way we can overcome this despair is by having the ability to metaphorically become our own God, with the freedom to become whatever we will to be.<sup>95</sup>

Sartre's idea of freedom is quintessential to understanding how existentialism solves the issue of nihilism. For example, Sartre argued that people are '*radically free*' and have a personal responsibility to create authentic meaning and value in their lives.<sup>96</sup> Here Sartre differentiates himself from Nietzsche by denying that there is an element of determinism which can explain our innate urges. For example, In *Human, all too human*, Nietzsche suggests that we cannot change our nature, '*Man can be accountable for nothing, not for his nature, not for his motives, nor his actions, nor for the effect he produces*'.<sup>97</sup> Here we can see that for Nietzsche, the idea of free will is not something that he is willing to concede. Nietzsche brings to our attention the 'fixed individual nature', which means that there are only a select number of options we can choose, because of our innate natures.<sup>98</sup> The main point to take away from this is that 'we cannot create ourselves out of nothing'.<sup>99</sup> Unlike Sartre, Nietzsche does not think that we are radically free, our innate nature cannot be stripped away, we are not a blank slate, and these urges will inform our future decisions, values and morals. In this way, Nietzsche denies the free will of the individual.

In contrast, Sartre condemns the determinist denial of freedom supported by Nietzsche. Determinism is a denial of our free will, our ability to change outside our predestined self. For example, Sartre writes that:

---

<sup>92</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man* (1990). pp.243-44.

<sup>93</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings* (Penguin UK, 2003). p.24.

<sup>94</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man* (1990) p.244.

<sup>95</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man* (1990). p.244.

<sup>96</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1998). p.378.

<sup>97</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Quoted in Ariela Tubert, 'Nietzsche's Existentialist Freedom', *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 46.3 (2015), p.410.

<sup>98</sup> Tubert, 'Nietzsche's Existentialist Freedom' (2015), p.411.

<sup>99</sup> Tubert, 'Nietzsche's Existentialist Freedom' (2015), p.412.

*The ultimate meaning of determinism is to establish within us an un-broken continuity of existence in itself. The motive conceived as a psychic fact-i.e., as a full and given reality-is, in the deterministic view...Thus the refusal of freedom can be conceived only as an attempt to apprehend oneself as being-in-itself; it amounts to the same thing. Human reality may be defined as a being such that in its being its freedom is at stake because human reality perpetually tries to refuse to recognize its freedom.<sup>100</sup>*

Sartre is suggesting that the problem with determinism is that it leads people to believe that our existence, or being cannot be subject to change. For example, as Nietzsche suggested, our prior situations and experiences plus our natural urges create a path for our future acts. Sartre suggests that this places restrictions on our freedom.

The main tenet of existentialism is that '*existence precedes essence*', that is to mean that we are placed in the world first, and it is up to the individual to later decide and cultivate their essence.<sup>101</sup> As the name suggests, existentialism places existence before the essence. But what is an essence? Sartre defines the essence as the ingredients or the parts of what makes us, us, such as our beliefs, values and experiences.<sup>102</sup> Sartre argues that this essence is what you will develop throughout your life, the essence is your being.<sup>103</sup> What makes existentialism different to other systems of thought is that Sartre places existence first. From a religious perspective, the essence is always placed before existence because, with a belief in God, humanity is created by God with an assigned purpose or nature. Sartre compares this to the essence of a knife, a knife is designed and manufactured for a purpose and created using pre-existing techniques or a recipe.<sup>104</sup> This is the same with the concept of humans created by God, for example, the religious understandings provide humans with an essence and a conception of Man. This means that religious people know what their purpose is because it can be inferred based on a religious framework.

Sartre contrasts this with the existentialist atheist outlook of existence preceding essence. For example, Sartre follows the work of Nietzsche in accepting that in the modern world, the

---

<sup>100</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1998). p.440.

<sup>101</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (Methuen, 2013). p.30.

<sup>102</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.28.

<sup>103</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.28.

<sup>104</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). pp.28-29.

death of God has been realised.<sup>105</sup> Sartre suggests that it no longer is reasonable to suggest that essence precedes existence. He writes:

*Atheistic existentialism...declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man...or the human reality.*<sup>106</sup>

In a godless world, Sartre argues that existence must come before essence because, without the religious framework or religious concepts of the nature of man, there can be nothing to define what man is. As Sartre phrases it ‘*Man simply is*’, Man simply exists, and then he is tasked to go out into the world and create his meaning.<sup>107</sup> It is worth noting that the existential method in turn denies the legitimacy of the concept of truth, more importantly, that there is something that can be known to be true prior to experiencing it.<sup>108</sup> For Sartre, objectivity is not something that is accepted by existentialism, this is because objectivity does not require any experience of the truth or belief. One of the defining features of existentialism is that existence precedes essence, this makes the concept of truth incompatible with existentialism because Sartre does not accept that we have a preconceived idea of truth.<sup>109</sup>

Sartre is keeping his philosophy limited to the individual to some degree. This is interesting as it brings parallels to how Sartre had his origins in Cartesian thought. For example, If Descartes could not provide proof for the truth of all values and the existence of others, this quickly leads to the problem of solipsism.<sup>110</sup> This is an issue that is common in existential solutions to nihilism and the search for meaning in their life. This is a similar issue we discussed in our study of Nietzsche. The critique is that existentialism is a theory which mainly focuses on the subjectivity of an individual, and their ability to freely choose what their life means to them. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre makes it clear to the reader that he is aware of this critique but justifies the focus on the subjective by suggesting that while we may have collective desires, such as joining a book club, our existence always

---

<sup>105</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.28.

<sup>106</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.29.

<sup>107</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.30.

<sup>108</sup> Stuart M Brown, ‘The Atheistic Existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre’, *The Philosophical Review*, 57.2 (1948), p.159 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2181764>>

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.159.

<sup>110</sup> Murray Miles, ‘Criticisms of Existentialism’, in *Inroads* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 579. <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/10.3138/j.ctt1287vjt.49>> [accessed 29 September 2024].

comes first. We must choose for ourselves to will to join the book club.<sup>111</sup> Sartre does not think the subjectivity critique is detrimental to existentialism but rather is one of its benefits. For example, Sartre argues that by placing the focus of existentialism on the individual and the realm of subjectivity, you place personal responsibility for your existence on yourself.<sup>112</sup> Sartre defends existentialism against the claim of subjectivism by suggesting that the practice of existentialism is something that everyone should be doing. He writes:

*Everything happens to every man as though the whole human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing and regulated its conduct accordingly. So every man ought to say, "Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do."*<sup>113</sup>

Sartre's defence of the problem of subjectivism is that our acts have a more widespread impact than what we might assume. For example, if we are acting authentically, and our actions are right for themselves, they will have a positive impact on wider society. In this way, Sartre is not suggesting we should think about our actions and how they impact wider society, but rather that this will be a natural consequence if we act in good faith.

Existentialism promotes a level of responsibility that other value systems do not ask of the individual. I would argue that this is one of the strongest benefits of the existential method, the radical freedom and responsibility make our actions much more valuable and meaningful because we are free to choose what to do with our lives.

To some extent, one could argue that Sartre provides a pessimistic concept of meaning and value. Unlike other philosophical systems such as empiricism which places ideas of truth and objectivity at the forefront of the ideas. Existentialism denies this, the denial and atheistic grounding of Sartre's existentialism can be very depressing, or nihilistic. This can be most clearly seen in his Literary novel *Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, a story which brings focus to the issue of living in a godless world and highlights the fear of nihilism.<sup>114</sup> For example:

*The whole spiritual universe is shattered and shivered, by the hand of Atheism, into innumerable glittering quicksilver, globules of individual personalities, running hither and*

---

<sup>111</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.31.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.31.

<sup>113</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.35.

<sup>114</sup> Jon Stewart, 'Jean Paul's Vision of Nihilism and Plea for the Doctrine of Immortality', in *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p.36.

*thither at random, coalescing, and parting asunder without unity, coherence, or consistency. In all this wide universe there is none so utterly solitary and alone as the denier of God.*<sup>115</sup>

How Sartre depicts the atheistic world is reminiscent of the way that Nietzsche describes the Death of God. For example, Sartre emphasises the chaos, and the lack of grounding or ‘unity’. This can be comparable to that of Nietzsche’s claim that the earth became detached from its sun.<sup>116</sup> Both sentiments share the idea that something has been lost, that without God we have become lost, and are lacking something. Sartre wants to paint a picture of utter nihilism, the worst situation which could happen. Sartre uses the example of an orphan family who has lost family members, but they cannot take any relief from the fact that they will go to heaven, but instead wail in despair that their life was meaningless, and they wasted their life believing in something false.<sup>117</sup> What is important is that Sartre is not suggesting that a world without God is worse than a world with God, but rather it is an analogy of the extent and fear of nihilism.<sup>118</sup> The analogy while absurd, and has little to no proof for the situation he is describing, does paint a picture of the most severe case of nihilism and what would happen if science had taken over religion. To relate this to the study of existentialism, this literary piece demonstrates why we need existentialism, something to make sure the lack of God does not allow people to fall into the pits of nihilism. The existential understanding and meaning of the world allow us to acknowledge the nihilistic state described in this story but allow us to overcome it by giving ourselves the freedom and personal responsibility to overcome nihilism by creating our essence and values.

In this chapter, we have discussed some of the main components of Sartre’s existentialism, comparing the main disagreements Sartre has with Nietzsche on the issue of free will and determinism, and why Sartre suggests that existence precedes essence. We have also addressed some criticisms that are raised against existentialism, including the subjectivity and pessimistic nature of existentialism. I have argued that existentialism provides a way in which we can escape nihilism by developing our meaning and value, existentialism seems also quite empowering because it places the responsibility of your existence on the individual's back.

---

<sup>115</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Flower, Fruit, and Thorn pieces*, quoted in: Jon Stewart, ‘Jean Paul’s Vision of Nihilism and Plea for the Doctrine of Immortality’, in *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p.38.

<sup>116</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (2006). p.90.

<sup>117</sup> Stewart, ‘Jean Paul’s Vision of Nihilism and Plea for the Doctrine of Immortality’, (2023), p.40.

<sup>118</sup> Stewart, ‘Jean Paul’s Vision of Nihilism and Plea for the Doctrine of Immortality’, (2023), pp.41-42.



## CHAPTER 6: Sartre and Authenticity: How to Live an Existential Life

This Chapter will focus on Sartre's concept of 'Bad Faith' and how it allows us to lead an authentic meaningful life. We will also demonstrate some critiques of his concept of bad faith. This understanding of 'bad faith' will allow us to demonstrate the benefits of Sartrean existentialism.

To truly understand what Sartre's existentialist philosophy aims to propose, we must understand what he means when suggesting that people should strive to be authentic in everything that they do. We can define the concept of authenticity as the action of taking responsibility for the entirety of one's existence.<sup>119</sup> This means that we do not make excuses, or pass the blame for the past, present, or future actions on anyone or anything else. This is what it means to be radically free, to take responsibility for our existence. If we wish to become authentic, we accept that we are responsible for ourselves and must act in a way to ensure that respect our authenticity. For Sartre, Authenticity is not something that can simply be achieved, or completed, authenticity is a project throughout one's life.<sup>120</sup>

But how do we ensure that we are acting authentically? What does it mean to act in a way that promotes the authenticity of the individual? Sartre argues that one of the best ways that we can begin to see what being Authentic looks like, we can look at what it means to be inauthentic. Sartre suggests that this is best understood through his concept of 'bad faith', or purposeful lies or deceit.<sup>121</sup> To best understand what Sartre meant by the idea of 'Bad faith', let us discuss Sartre's main account of what bad faith looks like through his example of the waiter:

*Let us consider this waiter in the cafe. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid...trying to imitate in his walk the in flexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually reestablishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behaviour seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other;*

---

<sup>119</sup> Bruce Baugh 'Authenticity Revisited', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46.4 (1988), p.478. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/431285>>

<sup>120</sup> Cox, *The Sartre Dictionary* (2008). p.16.

<sup>121</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1998). p.48.

*his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing?*<sup>122</sup>

This example provides us with a clear idea of what Sartre defines as bad faith. For Sartre, the waiter is likened to an ‘automaton’ or a robot, something that would not be considered human. The comparison draws attention to the fact that the waiter, is merely fulfilling a role, and by playing the role of the waiter, they are denying themselves their authenticity. The mechanical analogy is further exemplified when we consider the type of work that a waiter completes. When a waiter cleans a table or brings the customers their coffee, are we to assume that these are the free actions of the individual? Sartre does not think so, he writes ‘*All his behaviour seems to us a game*’, thus exemplifying the façade of the waiter, he is not actually happy to serve the customers or bring the food in the same way each time, it is an act. The role of the waiter can be compared to that of a role in a play, it is false, they do not actually like the company of the patrons at the café, but they must act like they do.<sup>123</sup>

Sartre’s use of language in this analogy deepens the comparison he intends to make. For example, the repeated concepts of automation, and the mechanical make-up of the waiter allow the reader to picture a growing realisation of the falsehood which is the waiter. The characteristics Sartre is describing can be easily attributed to a modern notion of Artificial Intelligence (AI). An AI programme works by completing a set of instructions or inputs and has limited variability in completing the requests given to it. Does this not sound like how Sartre is describing the Waiter? The importance of this comparison is how Sartre finds jobs such as the waiter as degrading, and an act of bad faith.<sup>124</sup> But why does Sartre suggest that the work of a waiter is degrading? If we return to the Comparison made with AI, why would this be degrading? What makes the work so degrading for Sartre is that it is a ‘*denial of the worth*’ of the waiters as individuals.<sup>125</sup> For example, D.Z Phillips suggests that the occupation of a waiter requires the individual to go deeper into a form of bad faith. The waiter must enact the play of a waiter, he is not an authentic individual for example, Sartre suggests that an individual would never say “My life is to wait tables”.<sup>126</sup> Sartre does not simply have a

---

<sup>122</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1998). p.59.

<sup>123</sup> D.Z Phillips, ‘Bad Faith and Sartre’s Waiter’, *Philosophy*, 56.215 (1981), pp.23–31  
<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/3750714>>

<sup>124</sup> Phillips, ‘Bad Faith and Sartre’s Waiter’, (1981), p,27.

<sup>125</sup> Phillips, ‘Bad Faith and Sartre’s Waiter’, (1981), p,27.

<sup>126</sup> Phillips, ‘Bad Faith and Sartre’s Waiter’, (1981), p,27.

vendetta against the occupation of the waiter, but occupations which degrade the individuals' possibilities of authenticity. For example, the autonomous nature of the waiter ensures that the individual continues to act in bad faith and keep up the appearance of the waiter.

Sartre's definition of bad faith is important to how we understand his solution to nihilism because it makes clear that he places action at the core of his philosophy. For example, in *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre places existentialism in contention with the philosophy of quietism, suggesting that we cannot make excuses for what we can not do or have not done.<sup>127</sup> Instead, he argues that existentialism makes no room for anything but action. Sartre writes that:

*The doctrine that I am presenting before you is precisely the opposite of this, since it declares that there is no reality except in action... "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realised himself, he is therefore nothing else the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is."*<sup>128</sup>

Sartre has no time for excuses or regretting the actions you took or did not take. If an individual regrets something they have done in their life, the action was done in bad faith, and therefore an inauthentic action. This excerpt conceptualises one of the major defining features of existentialism, that is, 'existence precedes essence'. Man is placed in the world, and from this point, his actions will define him and bring meaning and purpose to his life. Under this definition, Sartre does not allow the concept of regret to enter his morality. For example, he uses the example of a novelist such as Marcel Proust, suggesting that in Sartre's view, what made Proust a 'genius', was all the literary works he published, not the ones he could have published, or did not publish.<sup>129</sup> Here we once again are greeted by the existential ethic of taking personal responsibility for the radical freedom we possess. We do not have the option of passing the torch of blame and responsibility, it is a dimension of our state of being, and it is unavoidable, if we do try to deny this, we are acting in bad faith.<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.47.

<sup>128</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.47.

<sup>129</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.48.

<sup>130</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.48.

Sartre uses this understanding to promote an existential system of ethics. For example, applies the understanding of personal responsibility to virtues and vices. One vice he outlines in detail is that of the action of being cowardly. In *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre writes:

*But the existentialist, when he portrays a coward, shows him as responsible for his cowardice. He is not like that on account of a cowardly heart or lungs or cerebellum, he has not become like that through his physiological organism; he is like that because he has made himself into a coward by his actions.* <sup>131</sup>

Here Sartre makes it clear that existentialism does not follow the rules that traditional morality follows. For example, in terms of being a coward, most would accept that there may have been factors in your life which have made you the person you are today, and to some extent, this may have been out of your control. However, Sartre does not let us morally be irresponsible for these situations, we are instead responsible for every decision and action we have made throughout our lives. Sartre's definition of cowardice, seen in literature, is that the only thing that can define the coward is through his action. Sartre states that, 'A coward is defined by the deed he has done'<sup>132</sup> There is no such thing as an innate coward, a man can only label himself a coward, once he has committed an action which can be deemed cowardly.

Sartre takes this idea one step further by suggesting that the coward does not have to live his life as the coward, that he can become brave, and likewise, the brave hero can become cowardly.<sup>133</sup> As we have previously discussed, authenticity is not something that can be achieved by a single action, it is a never-ending project throughout one's life, at the same time it only takes a person to act in bad faith once, then they would be considered an inauthentic based on this action. This has positive and negative implications for existentialism as a method of overcoming nihilism. For example, Sartre's suggestion that we are not bound by any naturalist preconceptions of vice such as cowardice means that anyone can escape the label of being a coward and strive for self-improvement. This seems very optimistic; we have the radical freedom to develop ourselves and act in such a way that we

---

<sup>131</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). pp.49-50.

<sup>132</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.50.

<sup>133</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). pp.50-51.

learn from our previous actions. However, one could argue there is a heavy burden of responsibility on the shoulders of the existentialist. If the individual acts in bad faith, they are no longer authentic, this means that a person must continue to be authentic throughout their life. While this may seem fair, how achievable is this? How achievable is it to act in such a way that you are always being authentic? This seems like it will be difficult.

In this chapter, we have discussed Sartre's concepts of authenticity, personal responsibility, and bad faith. By looking at examples of what Sartre defines as bad faith, such as the waiter, we can gain an insight into Sartre's existential ethics, how can we live a meaningful life? Sartre's response to this is to act in such an authentic way, not to play a role, or pretend to be someone we are not. Only by accepting our radical freedom and acknowledging that we are responsible for our entire existence can we develop a meaning that allows us to develop virtues which make the individual their most authentic self.

## CHAPTER 7: Albert Camus: The Absurd Heroes

Albert Camus is placed at the epicentre of importance for an understanding of existentialism. Camus is often listed as one of the founding members of the existential movement, including Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Sartre and De Beauvoir.<sup>134</sup> However, much like Nietzsche, Camus did not consider himself an existentialist or rather tried to distance himself from the movement. As we have previously discussed, someone can be an existential thinker without being an existentialist as defined by Sartre. However, Camus' rejection of the existentialist label can be seen as a consequence of the feud between himself and Sartre on the political ideologies of Marxism and communism.<sup>135</sup> Another possible reason for Camus' dislike of the label of existentialism is because Camus outgrows existentialism, and forms his movement known as 'Absurdism', focusing on the Absurd nature of our existence.<sup>136</sup> Absurdism shares more commonality with Nietzschean philosophy than that of Sartre, and the influence of Nietzsche can be seen throughout his writings.<sup>137</sup> In this chapter, I will highlight what Sartre defines as the absurd, and how this differs from the philosophy of Nietzsche and Sartre. The main analysis of this chapter will come from two of Camus' most famous and influential writings, these are *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*. Both present stories of absurdist heroes, and how they struggle with the absurdity of life.

In the first part of this chapter, it is worth noting the main points of contention between the prior existential philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre who we have already covered in the chapters prior, and the existential or 'absurdist' view of Albert Camus. Like Nietzsche and Sartre, Camus has come to discover the 'death of god' and comprehend the threat that nihilism poses to our existence. Concerning Nietzsche, Camus saw him as a 'great liberator', who saved him from the nihilistic world that modern social movements purported.<sup>138</sup> However, the difference between the two is that Camus sought to overcome the philosophy of Nietzsche. Although Camus felt indebted to Nietzsche, he intended to go

---

<sup>134</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man* (1990), p.8.

<sup>135</sup> Harold A Durfee, 'Albert Camus and the Ethics of Rebellion', *The Journal of Religion*, 38.1 (1958), p.29.  
<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/1200377>>

<sup>136</sup> Bob Plant, 'Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter', *Philosophy*, 84.327 (2009), p.116  
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20533173>>

<sup>137</sup> George F. Seffler, 'The Existential vs. the Absurd: The Aesthetics of Nietzsche and Camus', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 32.3 (1974), p.415.  
<<https://doi.org/10.2307/428426>>

<sup>138</sup> William E Duvall, 'The Nietzsche Temptation in the Thought of Albert Camus', *Special Issue First International Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas*, 11 (1989), p.955–62  
<[https://doi.org/10.1016/01916599\(89\)902817](https://doi.org/10.1016/01916599(89)902817)>.

beyond the beliefs of Nietzsche. For example, Camus felt one of the most admirable parts of the writings of Nietzsche was that it was 'seductive'.<sup>139</sup> The works of Nietzsche gave a solution to the problem of nihilism unlike what had come before. Nietzsche was not unwilling to address the problem of living in a meaningless world and provided a solution to rise from the despair of nihilism. However, Camus was not entirely happy with the works of Nietzsche, the word seductive, already should alert us to this fact. As per the definition, what was seductive about the works of Nietzsche to Camus was its message that it was possible to create meaning in our lives. As we discussed previously, one can take the view that Nietzsche's philosophy is optimistic because it allows us the opportunity to create valuable meaning in our lives. Camus does not agree with this, he suggests that the search for meaning in a meaningless world is a mistake. This criticism by Camus is also thereby critiquing the existentialist philosophers who share the concept of creating and searching for meaning. He writes:

*Existential philosophies, I see that all of them without exception suggest escape...they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them.*<sup>140</sup>

Camus is very critical of all existential theories which posit that it is possible to find meaning. Both Sartre and Nietzsche, argue that their existential understanding can bring hope and meaning in a meaningless world. For Camus, this problem is one of the defining problems that we face, how do we find meaning in an inherently meaningless world? Nietzsche presents a misguided optimism, that we can derive meaning, or create hope, even through art which can act as an 'ivory tower' against the absurdity of our existence.<sup>141</sup> Camus does not think so.

Now that we have discussed how Camus separates himself from the previous philosophers we have discussed, we must understand why, and how this is the case. Central to Camus' writings is his idea of the absurd, and the absurdity of our existence. The idea of the absurd shares a close association with the concept of nihilism. Camus' concept of absurdism can be understood as a response or a revolt against the concept of nihilism. For example, nihilism is

---

<sup>139</sup> Duvall, 'The Nietzsche Temptation in the Thought of Albert Camus', (1989), pp.955–56.

<sup>140</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Penguin Books, 2013). p.25.

<sup>141</sup> George F. Seffler, 'The Existential vs. the Absurd: The Aesthetics of Nietzsche and Camus', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 32.3 (1974), p.419.

the belief that there is no meaning to our lives, For Camus, ‘*the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.*’<sup>142</sup> In the face of Nihilism, people desire to have a meaning to their existence, their lives and their situation. But when we face the reality of our existence, it becomes clear that meaning does not exist. Camus gives a description of what an encounter with the absurd would look like. He writes:

*From the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all. But whether or not one can live with one’s passion, whether or not one can accept their law, which is to burn the heart they simultaneously exalt, that is the whole question.*<sup>143</sup>

In this way, the absurd seems to be akin to the realisation of nihilism. In Nietzsche, we see a similar pattern, the madman too was seen as a broken man, someone who had lost all grounding and meaning in their life. Camus seems to be echoing this here with the concept of the absurd. When a person is confronted with the absurd, they must answer the question, is the meaningless life worth living? For Camus, the only way to end the absurd nature of existence is with death or suicide.<sup>144</sup> Camus argues that the absurd is only limited to our minds because it is our mind conceiving of the absurdity of our existence that allows us to identify the absurd.<sup>145</sup>

One of the major questions that Camus seeks to answer in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is whether life is worth living. The theme and topic of suicide play a central role at the start and throughout the book. For Camus, the topic of suicide is the most important fundamental question that philosophy must attempt to answer.<sup>146</sup> Suicide is the root of his investigation; he wants to give us a reason why a man should not commit suicide in the face of an absurd world.<sup>147</sup> For Camus suicide is not simply referring to killing yourself, he suggests that choosing to die is a recognition that our existence is absurd.

---

<sup>142</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). p.21.

<sup>143</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). p.18.

<sup>144</sup> Ambrose Tochukwu Arinze and Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuegwu, ‘The Notion of Absurdity and Meaning of Life in Albert Camus Existentialism’, *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 10.04 (2020), p.529. <<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2020.104037>>.

<sup>145</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Penguin Books, 2013). p.24.

<sup>146</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Penguin Books, 2013). p.5.

<sup>147</sup> Herbert Hochberg, ‘Albert Camus and the Ethic of Absurdity’, *Ethics*, 75 (1965), p.92. <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/2379406>>



*Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognised, 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.*<sup>148</sup>

Camus is identifying the nihilistic push to suicide, by killing yourself, you are admitting that the human condition is absurd, that there is no meaning behind why we exist, nor any comfort for our suffering. However, Camus is firmly against the idea that when faced with the absurdity of our existence we should kill ourselves. For absurdism, it makes no difference whether you live, or die, for example, there is nothing beyond this life, you will cease to be and nothing more. In this sense, it does not make sense to commit suicide. The absurdity does not change whether you live or die, except that there is nothing after death.<sup>149</sup> In this way, it is better to live and face the absurdity.

### **The Myth of Sisyphus**

Like Nietzsche, Camus too looks to Greek mythology to exemplify his claim regarding the absurdity of life. He uses the Greek figure of Sisyphus, a man who had gone against the Greek gods, in various ways leading to him being considered a thorn in the side of the gods, leading them to condemn him to the fate of rolling a boulder up a mountain, for it to only roll back down again for eternity.<sup>150</sup> Purposefully, the gods gave Sisyphus the most meaningless and despair inducing punishment they could conceive of. For Camus this is very important, the question he wants us to consider while reading the myth is whether Sisyphus' life is worth living. How can one continue to have a meaningful life, when it is inherently devoid of meaning? Our prior discussion of Camus' disavowal of suicide is prevalent throughout the myth. He writes:

*I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms*

---

<sup>148</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). p.7.

<sup>149</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). p.7.

<sup>150</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). p.7.

*a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.*<sup>151</sup>

The tale of Sisyphus is a tale of rebellion, from his history of rebelling against the gods, to Sisyphus rebelling against his fate. This, according to Camus, is what makes Sisyphus an absurd hero, one who defies their situation.<sup>152</sup> In such a situation it would be easy for one to give up or accept their fate, Camus imagines Sisyphus as continually defying the punishment the gods set him. Due to Sisyphus' crimes against the gods, his task was not supposed to be one of meaning or value, but of ultimate futility. In Sisyphus' escapades with the gods, he can outwit the gods using his intellect and cunningness. His punishment was a task of manual labour, something Sisyphus could not escape by the power of his mind.<sup>153</sup> For Sisyphus it is clear why this punishment was chosen for him, it should lead him to complete despair. But what is important is that Sisyphus can be seen to revolt against this fate. Sisyphus took his eternal struggle and created meaning in this situation, he accepted the absurdity of his life and rebelled against it. One of the key messages from the myth of Sisyphus is that in a world of absurdity, with no inherent meaning to exist or to be found we can still find joy and happiness in that situation by acknowledging its absurdity and enjoying the task itself.<sup>154</sup> Sisyphus does not reject the situation he is in but welcomes it. There is no way for him to escape this fate, so he resigns himself to the task but revolts against the gods by turning his despair into joy. By accepting his fate as his own, that his experience is his own, he can appreciate even the most arduous of fates.

In this conclusion, we hear Camus' most iconic line, '*One must imagine Sisyphus happy.*'<sup>155</sup> But how can Sisyphus possibly be happy? The answer is that through accepting that his situation is absurd, and instead ensuring that he makes the most of his current situation. We can imagine Sisyphus happy if he acknowledges the absurdity and creates his meaning out of this situation.

---

<sup>151</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). p.89.

<sup>152</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). p.87.

<sup>153</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). pp.87-88.

<sup>154</sup> Arinze and Onwuatuegwu, 'The Notion of Absurdity and Meaning of Life in Albert Camus Existentialism', (2020), p.529.

<sup>155</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). p.89.

Camus' use of language is also very important here, 'one must' imagine Sisyphus happy. For Camus, we have no option but to imagine Sisyphus as happy, for if we do not think Sisyphus is happy, then we are left with utter despair. If we deny the absurdity of the situation, or if Sisyphus refuses to rebel against his situation, the question of suicide arises once more. In the case of Sisyphus, the gods can laugh and mock Sisyphus for their eternal punishment is a success.<sup>156</sup> An unhappy Sisyphus is symptomatic of the state of the world, a world in which we do not accept the absurdity of our condition. A world of despair, and one which man cannot find meaning, and is tormented over such a fact. The happiness of Sisyphus demonstrates a rebellion, a revolt against absurdity, to create our meaning for the situation, but accept there is no higher meaning to our situation.

### The Stranger

We will now turn to Camus' 1942 existential novel, *The Stranger*, (sometimes translated as *The Outsider*) which provides another case study of absurdity. The story follows the life of a man named Meursault, after the death of his mother, he ends up killing a man, the book focuses on his trial and how he feels indifferent towards the world. Camus depicts Meursault as an absurd hero much like Sisyphus, someone who in the face of absurdity, rejects conformity and rebels. Sartre argues that there is a key relationship between *The Stranger* and the myth of Sisyphus, that is the myth of Sisyphus focuses on the theory of the absurd, what the absurd is. In comparison, the stranger focuses on what the absurd looks like, or what it feels like.<sup>157</sup> This difference exemplifies how Camus' writings should be studied together, as for the stranger to truly be appreciated for its philosophical purpose, a reading of his theory in the myth of Sisyphus is recommended.

In Camus' iconic opening of *The Stranger*, he begins the story with the death of Meursault's mother. He writes: 'My mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know.'<sup>158</sup> What is shocking to the audience, is Meursault's lack of empathy for the death of his mother, there seems to be a clear disinterest on his part. The first chapter focuses on Meursault giving the details of his mother's death and the proceeding funeral. Camus purposefully makes

---

<sup>156</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). p.88.

<sup>157</sup> Victor Brombert, 'Camus and the Novel of the "Absurd"', *Yale French Studies*, 1948, p.119.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2928869>

<sup>158</sup> Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. by Sandra Smith (Penguin Classics, 2013). p.3.

Meursault look like a robot, simply not caring that his mother has passed, and focussed on recalling the events in an almost scripted recollection.<sup>159</sup> Meursault's mother provides an apt example of how he is indifferent to the world. But more importantly, it reveals how the audience and the local community perceived Meursault. During his trial, the prosecution drew attention to the details of his mother's death, regarding the eeriness that he was not sad at her funeral and that he continued his life as normal as if it never happened.<sup>160</sup> From the perspective of the people around Meursault, he was immoral and did not act in a socially acceptable way. Camus wishes to draw attention to the fact that in the trial, Meursault was not condemned because he murdered the Arab, but he was condemned because of his indifference to the world, or that he did not partake in 'the game'.<sup>161</sup> The game which Camus is suggesting is that he accepted his existence for what it was, absurd.

The main act in *The Stranger* involves Meursault visiting a beach, getting into a fight with two Arabs and killing one of the men. Camus uses the death of the Arab to exemplify the absurdity of Meursault's life. Camus writes:

*I realised that I had destroyed the natural balance of the day, the exceptional silence of a beech where I had once been happy. Then I fired four more times into the lifeless body, where the bullets sank without leaving a trace. And it was as if I had rapped sharply, four times, on the fatal door of destiny.*<sup>162</sup>

What is clear in this quote is that the death of the Arab is a realisation of the absurdity of Meursault's existence, even if he was yet to understand it. Camus writes, 'fatal door of destiny' which emphasises the absurdity and meaninglessness of our existence. Destiny in this sense is not a metaphysical force, something predetermined, but rather a feature of the randomness of our existence. For example, the randomness and probability that when Meursault returned to the beach the Arab would be there. There was no inherent meaning behind the fact that he came in contact with the Arab, but he did, that is the absurd condition of our existence. The murder of the Arab also allows Camus to portray the murder as an act

---

<sup>159</sup> George J Makari, 'The Last Four Shots: Problems of Intention and Camus' "the Stranger"', *American Imago*, 45.4 (1988), p.360.

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/26303878>

<sup>160</sup> Camus, *The Outsider*, (2013). p.85.

<sup>161</sup> Makari, 'The Last Four Shots: Problems of Intention and Camus', (1988), p.371.

<sup>162</sup> Camus, *The Outsider*, (2013). p.54.

of absurdity. For Camus, Meursault does not consider if the act is morally acceptable, or justifiable, like with everything in his life, he is indifferent towards the action. The action was devoid of any inherent meaning, Morreale suggests that Meursault's act is comparable to how he confronts the world. He writes:

*The confrontation of man and his act is like the confrontation of man and the world. In either case the resulting tension created by man's desire to understand and his inability to do so is what Camus calls the Absurd.*<sup>163</sup>

During the trial, Meursault is repeatedly asked by the judge and prosecutors to explain why he killed the Arab, for Meursault, the act has no meaning, as does his existence itself. The two both reveal the absurdity of Meursault's condition. The judge and prosecutors can be inferred to be the people in society who cling to the idea that their existence has inherent meaning, as they too need an answer to why Meursault behaves as he does. But according to Camus, they fail to see how absurd this is.

The ending of *The Stranger* is where we can most clearly see Camus' personal view and his absurdist viewpoint shine through. In the final pages, he writes:

*I too felt ready to start life all over again. As if this great release of danger had purged me of evil, emptied me of hope; and standing before this symbolic night burst-ing with stars, I opened myself for the first time to the tender indifference of the world. To feel it so like me, so like a brother, in fact, I understood that I had been happy, and I feel less alone, I could only hope there would be many, many spectators on the day of my execution and that they would greet me with cries of hatred.*<sup>164</sup>

After his time in prison, Meursault could be likened to having an absurdist realisation, or a moment of clarity. In reflection he has realised the absurd human condition of man, like that of Sisyphus, he understands that the world is inherently meaningless. He is devoid of hope, he has witnessed nihilism to some degree and has reached the pits of despair. However, Camus does not portray Meursault as a victim of despair, but rather freedom. For the first

---

<sup>163</sup> Gerald Morreale, 'Meursault's Absurd Act', *The French Review*, 40.4 (1967), p.462

<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/385377>>

<sup>164</sup> Camus, *The Outsider*, (2013). pp.110-11.

time in his life, he became aware of the joy and meaning he attached to his actions throughout his life. The quote also emphasises Meursault's rebellious spirit, that he rebels against society, against the judge and jury, he refuses to allow the people to label him and define him. Nor would he plead guilty for the murder of the Arab. This is his Absurd rebellion, he wishes for people to hate him, for it does not matter how they perceive him, it is all equally meaningless.

In this chapter, we have discussed Camus' concept of the absurd and argued that unlike Sartre and Nietzsche, Camus presents that the search for meaning is inherently meaningless. Instead, we should first acknowledge that life and the search for meaning are pointless and accept the absurd nature of our existence. Only by accepting this absurdity, can I appreciate the world we live in and the beauty in our current situation. Camus illustrates the absurd hero in two of his works: the *Myth of Sisyphus* and *the Stranger*, both books present an absurd hero, someone who has overcome the absurd human condition. For Camus, only by accepting the absurdity of existence, can we come to appreciate the here and now, and our present situation, that we can appreciate and find value in our lives.

## CHAPTER 8: An Absurdist or Existentialist Solution to the Problem of Nihilism?

By looking at the philosophies of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus, we have identified a various way in which we can offset the threat of nihilism. It is my opinion, that two of the three systems provide the most benefit to preventing nihilism. I will argue that Nietzsche's solution is not as valuable as his contribution to the field of existential ideas. The death of God is a launch pad for all future existential analysis, and this research could not be complete without it. However, Nietzsche's solution is valuable in the sense that we must dispose of God, which all three have accepted as true. However, the way of creating meaning to replace the religious system does not work as well as Nietzsche had hoped. In contrast, Sartre provides an ethical system and understanding which places personal responsibility at the epicentre. Sartre can be used as a road map which others can follow to ensure that they live an authentic life. Camus takes the radical alternative with absurdism, that Sartre and Nietzsche's suggestion that we can find greater meaning in our lives is flawed, that instead, we should accept our existence as Absurd.

Let us first return to Camusean Absurdism, what is valuable in Camus' theory of the absurd? I have an inescapable reaction to the pure honesty of suggesting that the search for meaning is a useless task. Unlike Nietzsche, Camus suggests a 'philosophy of limits', where we can't know everything, or expect that one day we will know everything.<sup>165</sup> This seems very reasonable, while scientific advancement has developed at a rapid rate, there are infinite questions for which we do not know the answer for now and future questions we will yet need answers. Camus is being realistic, the same can be said for our existential questions. While as Camus aptly notes, we will always seek to understand and derive meaning from our existence, this is something which does not have meaning, or even if it did, that meaning is inaccessible to the human mind.<sup>166</sup> The question remains, why seek meaning if it is impossible to do so? In this way, Absurdism checks a box for a reasonable solution to nihilism.

---

<sup>165</sup> David Mikics and Robert Zaretsky, 'From Solitude to Solidarity: How Camus Left Nihilism Behind', *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 89.2 (2013), p.204.

<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/26446761>>

<sup>166</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013). pp.7-8.

However, while the search for meaning may be false, a world in which the meaning cannot be derived seems to be a much harsher, despair-inducing world. How can we be certain that we can acknowledge the absurdity of existence? In both of Camus' works the acknowledgement comes from a nihilistic situation, Sisyphus was condemned to a futile fate, and Meursault was sentenced to death after killing someone. My question for Camus would be how does the ordinary man overcome the absurd? What catalyst is necessary for this acknowledgement? In comparison to Camus, Sartre argues that our meaning can be derived from our concept of absolute or total freedom.<sup>167</sup> That it is possible to derive meaning from the radical freedom which we must take responsibility for. For example, by acting authentically, we can develop ourselves and give meaning to our actions throughout our lives. As we have discussed in our chapters on Sartre, there seems to be something quite optimistic regarding our ability to take responsibility for our entire existence, and that we are free to create a meaning however we desire, if this meaning does not constitute bad faith. When speaking of this optimism, we must be careful not to assume that Sartre thinks that meaning is easily obtainable, the pressure that Sartre's existentialism places on the individual should not be dismissed.

<sup>168</sup>Radical freedom is radical for a reason, it requires us to take responsibility for every action we ever committed and must accept that we are the cause of actions even when they might seem out of our control. The value which Sartre places on freedom seems to be valuable because it gives us autonomy over our actions, and we can create meaning from our actions and the values we create are dependent on the actions we commit throughout our lifetime. Therefore, in this sense, Sartre could be quite harsh on the individual, if one fails to be authentic, they have no one to blame but themselves.

So, the question which must be answered now, is if we are to combat the threat of nihilism, which philosophical system should we choose, Existentialism or absurdism? From our analysis, all three philosophies have allowed the field of existential analysis to flourish. The work of Nietzsche has allowed us to complete this dissertation, the death of God is, and continues to be one of the most prominent philosophical statements for an analysis of human existence and the value of meaning in our lives. However, Sartre and Camus truly try to solve the problem of nihilism in various ways, by taking the Nietzschean assertion that God is

---

<sup>167</sup> Ronald E Santoni, 'Camus on Sartre's "Freedom": Another "Misunderstanding"', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 61.4 (2008), p.798.  
<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/20131027>>

<sup>168</sup> Bruce Baugh 'Authenticity Revisited', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46.4 (1988), pp.478-80.



dead, they allow us to overcome the fall to nihilism. Sartre gives us optimism at the cost of crushing responsibility, and Camus gives us a call to revolt, to accept the absurdity and the limitations of the human condition and to enjoy and appreciate one's existence in the face of absurdity. But what both share is the existential message that, there is no meaning to be found in an essence or a metaphysical entity.<sup>169</sup> They both suggest that meaning can be found in our existence, while Camus would not accept that this meaning is so far that it provides a basis for our existence. But he does suggest that we can find value in our current situation and our revolt in the face of absurdity. In this way, the ability to live despite the inherent meaninglessness provides value to our lives.

In the face of this question, I believe that existentialism should not be defined simply as individuals who participate in existential thoughts. Instead, we should look at the plethora of varieties of existentialism and use this to inform us about how best to negate the effects of nihilism. Both Camus and Sartre provide ways in which we can live an existentialist life and are useful tools against the threat of nihilism. Is there one which is better than the other? No, not necessarily, Sartre does outline a clearer path to how to live than the implied methods of Camus. However, existentialists should always put their subjective experience at the centre of what they do. The works of Sartre and Camus can be used as an existentialist's utility belt, which can advise and set an example of how one can live an existentialist life.

---

<sup>169</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (2013). p.29.

## CONCLUSION

There are questions which now remain, what do we do now? Should we all become existentialists? Do existentialist understandings of the meaning of life provide a convincing solution to the problem of nihilism? These three questions have plagued us throughout this dissertation. We began our research by discussing the origins of nihilism, especially its emergence in the nineteenth century. We defined nihilism as the process in which our lives become devoid of value and meaning. We then discussed Jon Stewart's suggested five main areas in which nihilism arises. I proposed that we should instead split these into two areas, fears relating to human mortality and the advancements in science and human understanding. In this section we discussed the fascination and culture of death throughout recorded human history, we then discussed the scientific advancements such as the popularisation of evolution and other scientific advancements. This first chapter gave us an understanding of the underlying tradition of nihilism and a basis to help us in the later chapters. In the second chapter, we focused our attention on the key defining movement in studies of nihilism and existentialism, that is, the death of God announced by Friedrich Nietzsche in 1882. I discussed Nietzsche's central argument for the rise of nihilism and the death of God, citing the parable of the madman to closely analyse Nietzsche's position. This chapter focuses on Nietzsche's attempt to diagnose the problem of nihilism, and the significance of this announcement for future studies on nihilism such as existentialism.

In the next chapter, we focused on how Nietzsche suggested how we can solve the problem of nihilism, suggesting that we can overcome despair by disregarding the concept of God and creating values and meaning in our lives. In doing so we also addressed some criticisms of Nietzsche such as how Nietzsche cannot fully dispose of God as he hoped to do so. In the fourth chapter, we gave an overview of the debate of what constitutes an existentialist, and whether it is possible to consider Nietzsche as an existentialist. I conclude that it is important to differentiate between existential theories and the existentialist philosophy proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre. Albert Camus, like Nietzsche, presents very existential ideas, however, would not consider himself an existentialist. This differentiation was important to note so that we can discuss Sartre and Camus without confusion. The next chapter focused on Jean-Paul Sartre's contributions to the problem of nihilism and the creation of existentialism as we know it today. In this chapter, we defined Sartre's existentialism as a philosophy of action, a philosophy which places freedom and personal responsibility at the epicentre. We discuss the

differences between Sartre's and Nietzsche's responses to the problem of nihilism, especially their disagreement on freedom vs determinism. In the following chapter, I turned to how Sartre suggests that we can use existentialism as an ethical system. We specifically address Sartre's concepts of authenticity and bad faith to suggest how one can live an existential life. I argue that Sartre's existentialism provides a valuable way to live one's life, however, like Nietzsche, there is some question on how realistic it is to live an authentic life with the extreme personal responsibility necessary to live under Sartre's existentialism. Chapter 7 introduces an alternative to Sartre's existentialism with Albert Camus' absurdism. In this chapter, we focus on what the absurd is and focus on the two examples of absurdist heroes for Camus which allow us to exist and prevent what he calls philosophical and metaphysical suicide. In our final Chapter, I argue that that the philosophies of Nietzsche and Sartre, and Camus are all valuable for an existential understanding of our existence, and how to live a meaningful life. I conclude that all three existential solutions to the problem of nihilism provide valuable solutions to the problem of nihilism, and an understanding of any or all of these philosophies will allow one to combat the threat of nihilism.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arinze, Ambrose Tochukwu and Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuegwu, 'The Notion of Absurdity and Meaning of Life in Albert Camus Existentialism', *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 10 (2020), 528–38 <<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2020.104037>>
- Aspers, Patrik, 'Nietzsche's Sociology', *Sociological Forum*, 22 (2007), pp.474–99. <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/20110229>> [accessed 22 September 2024]
- Barrett, William, *Irrational Man* (Anchor Books, 1990)
- Baugh, Bruce, 'Authenticity Revisited', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46 (1988), pp. 477–87 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/431285>>
- Brombert, Victor, 'Camus and the Novel of the "Absurd"', *Yale French Studies*, 1948, pp.119–23. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2928869>>
- Brown, Stuart M, 'The Atheistic Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre', *The Philosophical Review*, 57 (1948), pp.158–66 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2181764>>
- Camus, Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Penguin Books, 2013)
- Camus, Albert, *The Outsider*, trans. by Sandra Smith (Penguin Classics, 2013)
- Caraway, James E., *Albert Camus and the Ethics of Rebellion*, (2018) <<http://www.jstor.org/Stable/41166823>>
- Cooper, David E, 'Existentialism as a Philosophical Movement', in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. by Stephen Crowell (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 27–49
- Cox, Gary, *The Sartre Dictionary* (Continuum International Publishing Group, Bloomsbury, 2008)
- Crowell, Stephen, 'Sartre's Existentialism and the Nature of Consciousness', in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. by Stephen Crowell (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 199–276.
- Durfee, Harold A, 'Albert Camus and the Ethics of Rebellion', *The Journal of Religion*, 38 (1958), 29–45 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/1200377>> [accessed 14 September 2024]

Duvall, William E, 'The Nietzsche Temptation in the Thought of Albert Camus', *Special Issue First International Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas*, 11 (1989), pp. 955–62 <[https://doi.org/10.1016/01916599\(89\)902817](https://doi.org/10.1016/01916599(89)902817)>

Ezung, Avothung, 'The Idea of "Moral Relativism" in the Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche', *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, 38 (2021), pp. 213–27 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s4096102100233x>>

Flynn, Thomas R, 'Bad Faith in Human Life: Being and Nothingness', in *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 262–83

———, 'Existentialism: The Fruit of Liberation', in *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 230–62

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, R J Hollingdale, *A Nietzsche Reader* (Penguin, 2003)

Gaston, Hall H, 'Aspects of the Absurd', *Yale French Studies*, 1960, pp. 26–32 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2928897>>

Gemes, Ken, 'Nietzsche's Critique of Truth', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52 (1992), pp.47–65. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2107743>>

Greenstreet, Stewart, 'On Being an Existentialist', *Philosophy Now*, (2016) <[https://philosophynow.org/issues/115/On\\_Being\\_An\\_Existentialist](https://philosophynow.org/issues/115/On_Being_An_Existentialist)> [accessed 20 September 2024]

Hamilton, Christopher, 'Nietzsche and the Murder of God', *Religious Studies*, 43 (2007), pp. 165–82 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/20006361>> [accessed 4 March 2024]

Hatab, Lawrence J, 'Nietzsche, Nihilism and Meaning', *The Personalist Forum*, 3 (1987), pp. 91–111 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20708503>>

Heath, Bawden H, 'What Is Pragmatism?', *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 1 (1904), pp. 421–27 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2011902>>

Hochberg, Herbert, 'Albert Camus and the Ethic of Absurdity', *Ethics*, 75 (1965), pp.87–102 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/2379406>> [accessed 4 October 2023]

Khapaeva, Dina, 'The Social and Historical Perspectives', in *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), pp.47–80

<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/10.3998/mpub.9296915.5>> [accessed 13 May 2024]

Luis, Juan, 'Nietzsche's Shadow: On the Origin and Development of the Term Nihilism', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 47 (2020), pp.1199–1212

<<https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453720975454>>

Makari, George J, 'The Last Four Shots: Problems of Intention and Camus' "the Stranger"', *American Imago*, 45 (1988), 359–74

<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/26303878>> [accessed 4 August 2024]

Mikics, David and Robert Zaretsky, 'From Solitude to Solidarity: How Camus Left Nihilism Behind', *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 89 (2013), pp.201–4.

<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/26446761>> [accessed 4 October 2023]

Miles, Murray, 'Criticisms of Existentialism', in *Inroads* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 576–80 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/10.3138/j.ctt1287vjt.49>>

[accessed 29 September 2024]

Nietzsche, Friedrich, Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, 'Book II', in *Nietzsche: Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 57-94 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812040.008>>

O'Callaghan, Paul, 'The Purification of the Elect', in *Christ Our Hope* (Catholic University of America Press, 2011), pp. 286–308 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt3fgq3j.15>>

Petrov, Kristian, "'Strike Out, Right and Left!": A Conceptual-Historical Analysis of 1860s Russian Nihilism and Its Notion of Negation', *Studies in East European Thought*, 71 (2019), pp.73–97 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-019-09319-4>>

Phillips D.Z, 'Bad Faith and Sartre's Waiter', *Philosophy*, 56 (1981), 23–31

<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/3750714>> [accessed 2 September 2024]

Plant, Bob, 'Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter', *Philosophy*, 84 (2009), 111–34

<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20533173>> [accessed 5 November 2020]

Pratt, Alan, 'Nihilism', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://iep.utm.edu/nihilism/>> [accessed 2024]

Rabin, Sheila, 'Nicolaus Copernicus', ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023)

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/copernicus/> [accessed 4 March 2024]

René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings* (Penguin UK, 2003)

Rockmore, Tom, 'Enlightenment and Reason', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 84 (1987), 699–701 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/2026777>> [accessed 4 March 2024]

Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (Routledge, 1998)

Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (Methuen, 2013)

Schacht, Richard, 'Nietzsche: After the Death of God', in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. by Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 111–35 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521513340.007>>

Sefler, George F, 'The Existential vs. the Absurd: The Aesthetics of Nietzsche and Camus', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 32 (1974), <<https://doi.org/10.2307/428426>>

Shaffern, Robert W, 'Learned Discussions of Indulgences for the Dead in the Middle Ages', *Church History*, 61 (1992), pp.367–81 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3167791>>

Sinhababu, Neil, 'Nietzschean Pragmatism', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 48 (2017), pp.56–70. <<https://doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.48.1.0056>>

Solomon, Robert C, 'Nietzsche on Fatalism and "Free Will"', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 2002, pp. 63–87 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/20717781>> [accessed 26 September 2024]

Stewart, Jon, 'Jean Paul's Vision of Nihilism and Plea for the Doctrine of Immortality', in *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 35–64

Stewart, Jon, 'Nietzsche's Vision of the Past and the Future of Nihilism', in *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 259–80.

Thorsen, Don, 'Heaven and Hell', in *What's True about Christianity?* (Claremont Press, 2020), pp. 197–202 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv138wrs6.29>>

Tubert, Ariela, 'Nietzsche's Existentialist Freedom', *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 46 (2015), pp. 409–24 <<https://doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.46.3.0409>>

Ure, Michael, 'Shadows of God: Book 3', in *Nietzsche's the Gay Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp.112-153

<<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139019354.005>>

Wild, John, 'Existentialism as a Philosophy', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 57 (1960), p.45–62.

<<https://doi.org/10.2307/2022807>>

Williams, Robert R, 'Nietzsche on the Death of God and Eternal Recurrence', in *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God*, 2012, pp. 263–89

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199656059.003.0010>>

Young, Julian, 'The Gay Science', in *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.88-104 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511584411.006>>