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The Absurd Nature of Existence Reading Camus's *The Outsider* through Sartrean Ontology

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Abstract
This paper examines Camus's 1942 novel The Outsider through Sartre's theory of existence. Although Camus resisted the existentialist label and took care to separate his philosophy of the Absurd from Sartre's thought, The Outsider works as a compelling illustration of Sartrean ideas in practice. Meursault embodies the Sartrean principle that existence precedes essence: he rejects prescribed social scripts and, in doing so, exposes the bad faith of bourgeois society. The trial functions as a case study in Sartre's concept of the Look of the Other, in which the court strips the individual of his subjectivity and reduces him to an object. Meursault's final awakening in prison comes when he accepts his finitude, rejects religious transcendence and arrives at a radical existential freedom. The paper ends by contrasting Sartrean self-creation with Camusian revolt, and by noting the colonial silence at the centre of the novel, so as to show both the shared foundations and the key divergences within mid-twentieth-century French existential thought.

I. Introduction

Albert Camus's *The Outsider* is widely regarded as a landmark of twentieth-century European literature. Set in colonial French Algeria, the novel follows Meursault, an emotionally detached shipping clerk who experiences life in a raw and immediate way. After his mother's death, an uneventful weekend and his entanglement in his neighbour Raymond's quarrel, Meursault shoots an Arab man on a sun-drenched beach. The second half of the novel centres on his arrest, his trial and his death sentence, which is brought about as much by his apparent indifference at his mother's funeral as by the killing itself.

Camus always kept his distance from Sartre's more formal existentialism. He described his own philosophical project as an inquiry into the Absurd, that is, the confrontation between the human need for meaning and a silent, unconcerned universe. Sartre, on the other hand, developed a systematic ontology in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and popularised it in a 1945 lecture, published the following year as *Existentialism is a Humanism*, in which he famously declared that "existence precedes essence." Despite their different theoretical paths, and despite the very public quarrel between the two men in 1952, *The Outsider* remains a rich text for Sartrean analysis. Sartre himself, in his long essay *Explication de L'Étranger* (1943), treated the novel as a classic and saw in it a sharp evocation of the absurd and of the alienation that his own philosophy was trying to describe.

This study reads *The Outsider* through the central concepts of Sartre's philosophical anthropology. It examines Meursault's behaviour, his dealings with social institutions and his state of mind as he awaits execution, in order to show how the novel reflects, questions and illuminates core Sartrean ideas: existence preceding essence, bad faith, alienation under the Look of the Other, and the radical freedom of the individual in an indifferent world.

1. "Existence Precedes Essence" and the Primitive Existential Subject

The Rejection of Pre-Determined Essence

Existential ontology is the foundation of Sartre's philosophy and entails a new principle: "existence comes before essence." In the Western metaphysical view, stretching from Plato to the Christian theology, both things and people were believed to have an essence or nature that existed even before they came into being. For Sartre the example is a paper knife: before the person who makes the paper knife can make it, he has thought about the idea of the paper knife and its purpose (its essence). But for Sartre, it is the opposite with humans. We do not have a definite purpose designed by a divine designer, nor is we pre-formed by a fixed human nature. The human being is first and exists, then sees himself in the world and acts in the world and only in acting does he come to be anything definite. Man is created nothing, and made what he is in the process of doing.

Meursault is cold and strange to others. But from a Sartrean point of view, he does not attribute anything more to human relationships than the experience of them in the here and now. He is not trying to be someone he isn't and can't be in his heart, and he allows his life to be just as it is. When Marie asks him if he loves her, he says that it doesn't matter and that he probably does not love her; when his boss offers him a job in Paris, he says, "One life is as good as another. Both are not poses. In each instance he refuses to accept a pre-made identity (the good-natured lover, the ambitious young clerk) provided by society to him.

Facticity, Transcendence, and the Sensory Realm

Sartre describes two aspects of human reality in Being and Nothingness: the facticity and the transcendence. Facticity covers the given facts of one's situation, such as one's body, birthplace, historical period, past and physical limitations. Transcendence is the human capacity to go beyond that facticity through choice, through projecting oneself into the future and through giving meaning to one's surroundings. Authentic existence requires holding these two aspects in tension. One must stay fully aware of the facts of one's situation while keeping hold of the capacity to transcend them. Denying either one leads to self-deception and, in Sartre's terms, to bad faith.

Of all the characters in the novel, Meursault is the one most completely in tune with his facticity, and yet at first he shows almost no desire for transcendence. He is absorbed in his own physical, sensory world: the soothing feel of seawater on his skin; the heat of the afternoon sun on his face; the smell of dried leather and oil on a streetcar; the physical discomfort of tight clothing or bright light. This absorption in sensory facticity reaches its most destructive point in the beach killing in Chapter 6 of Part One. As Meursault walks along the shore, the heat is described in physical, almost aggressive terms: the sun burns his cheeks, sweat gathers in his eyebrows, and the light flashing off the Arab's knife strikes his forehead like a long, gleaming blade. The first shot is not the result of ideological or racial hatred, nor of any calculated plan. It comes out of a physical confrontation with the environment so overwhelming that it leaves no room for conscious thought.

What follows the first shot complicates this picture. Meursault fires four more times into the motionless body, and he himself compares those shots to four short knocks on the door of unhappiness. Here the excuse of the sun begins to fall away. Sartre would insist that the heat, the glare and the fatigue are only Meursault's facticity: they explain his situation, but they do not make the choice for him. In Sartrean ethics there are no excuses, and the four extra shots show a man who is, however dimly, responsible for what he does. By tying the protagonist's act directly to physical reality rather than to an intellectual motive, Camus shows how fragile human rationality is. From a Sartrean standpoint, the crime is committed by a man who has lived entirely within his facticity until its consequences force him to step back, reflect and, eventually, transcend it.

2. Bad Faith and the Critique of Bourgeois Society

The Dynamics of Bad Faith

One of Sartre's key contributions to philosophy and psychology is the notion of bad faith. Bad faith is a form of self-deception in which people lie to themselves in order to escape the anguish that comes with radical freedom and total responsibility. Because freedom means choosing who we are with no safety net, people often hide behind social roles, dogma or theories of determinism to avoid facing it. Sartre illustrates bad faith with his well-known example of the café waiter. The waiter moves with exaggerated precision, carries his tray with practised eagerness and treats his customers with a slightly theatrical attentiveness. He is playing a role, trying to reduce his free existence to that of a thing (a waiter-in-itself). By convincing himself that he *is* simply a waiter, he escapes the frightening fact that he is the author of his own life. Bad faith typically manifests in two main ways: 1. denying one's freedom by treating oneself as a passive object, completely shaped by circumstances and by obligations one feels forced to accept. 2. denying one's facticity, that is, one's real physical limits and past actions, by pretending to be a purely abstract, disembodied freedom.

Society as an Architecture of Self-Deception

In *The Outsider*, the social institutions of Algiers (the legal system, the Church, the old people's home and the respectable middle class) are presented as resting on bad faith. People lean on social roles and moral dogma so that they never have to face the contingency and shapelessness of existence.

Consider the characters surrounding Meursault:

The Warden and Caretaker of the Home: they handle death according to a fixed routine. They expect visitors to show the proper amount of grief and to follow the home's customs of mourning. The whole ritual serves to shield them from the plain reality of death.

The Examining Magistrate: he is horrified less by the crime than by Meursault's admission that he does not believe in God. He waves a crucifix and asks Meursault to accept God's mercy. The only way that the magistrate can think is that the universe is Godless – then morality would have to be created by people instead of God. The

magistrate calls Meursault 'Monsieur Antichrist' when he continues to refuse. His power is based solely on religious dogma which he uses to escape his own freedom of choice.

The Prosecutor: he constructs a believable, but mostly imagined, narrative to account for Meursault's conduct. That's because he claims that Meursault shows no emotion at his mother's funeral, which makes him a moral monster, and that the same lack of emotion made him kill the Arab. The prosecutor isn't on board with the killing being as a result of a random mix of heat, chance and discomfort. There must be a clear villain and clear motives – if there are no neat motives then the system makes them up.

The Prison Chaplain: visits Meursault's cell at the end of the novel to try to convince him to repent before being executed. To the chaplain, life in this world is only a preparation for the life hereafter, and his role is to make death seem non-final with the promise of religion.

Meursault as the Counter-Example of Authenticity

Meursault is an existential figure rather than these institutional figures. In his preface to the American edition of this book written in 1955, Camus states that the hero of his book is "condemned because he does not play the game. When his mother dies, Meursault doesn't cry and only feels physically tired. When he views marriage as a social contract, he doesn't claim to love Marie. He is not pretending to be religiously guilty when he awaits the scaffold.

The point of Sartre is that Meursault's tenacity of honesty is the reverse of bad faith. He embraces his emotions and does not try to deny or rationalize them. Society finds it threatening because they don't want people to refuse to conform. Not only is he guilty of murder (the prosecutor's case is much more about the funeral), but he is a man who lives life as it is. That's enough of a danger to a society of bad faith.

To make Meursault a completely original Sartrean character, however, is too easy. For Sartre, authenticity is not merely the lack of pretense, but the embracing of one's freedom in a clear and direct way, and the acceptance of one's decisions. For most of Part One, Meursault does not lie, but he does not really choose either. He drifts. His honesty is real, but it is closer to a natural indifference than to a conscious project. This is why the prison chapters matter so much, since they show his honesty turning into a clear and deliberate stance.

3. The Look and Alienation in the Social Sphere

Sartrean Intersubjectivity and the Power of the Other

In Part Three of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre turns to the problem of intersubjectivity, that is, how we relate to one another. He argues that we do not become aware of ourselves as objects in the world through solitary self-reflection. That awareness comes through the Look of the Other. Before anyone looks at them, an individual is simply a pure subject, the centre of their own world of perception. The moment someone else looks at them, however, everything changes: The person realises that there is an outside consciousness observing, judging and classifying them. The individual's subjective freedom is suspended for a moment; they become an object (a being-for-others) in the Other's world. This objectification often produces a feeling of vulnerability, shame or alienation, since the individual loses control over how the observer defines them.

Sartre's own illustration is the man caught looking through a keyhole. While he is absorbed in what he sees, he is pure subject and barely aware of himself at all. Then he hears footsteps in the corridor behind him, realises he is being watched, and is suddenly flooded with shame. In that instant he becomes, for himself, what he is for the Other: a voyeur. Sartre gave this competitive and objectifying side of human relations its most famous expression in his play *No Exit* (1944): "Hell is other people." This does not mean that human company is evil in itself. It means that the gaze of the Other is always there, with the power to reduce one's open, subjective freedom to a fixed and static identity.

The Courtroom as the Institutionalisation of "The Look"

Part Two of *The Outsider* offers a powerful literary picture of Sartrean objectification at the level of a whole system. The courtroom is a physical and legal structure designed to impose the Look of the Other on the accused. From the opening of the trial, Meursault is watched constantly by the public, the jury, the press and the lawyers. Facing the jurors, he feels like a newcomer being sized up by passengers on a tram, and he senses that he is somehow an intruder at his own trial. The journalists, for their part, want to reduce his complex, sensory existence to a few paragraphs in the morning papers.

As the trial goes on, Meursault feels more and more estranged from his own life story. He watches the witnesses and lawyers go over his past and reshape it into a narrative he barely recognises. Drinking coffee at his mother's vigil becomes evidence of a heartless nature. Going to a comic film with Marie the day after the funeral becomes proof of moral decay. His friendship with Raymond Sintès is presented as complicity in a world of pimps and petty crime. Meursault himself notes that the case seemed to be conducted without him, as though he had no part in it, and that his fate was being settled without anyone asking his opinion. Through this process the court strips Meursault of his subjectivity. He is no longer a living man with sensations and experiences; he becomes a

fixed thing, a 'monster' created by the prosecutor's words and the jury's gaze. This is a textbook case of the alienating power of *The Look* and it shows how a society can freeze a man's open-ended existence into a fixed identity.

4. Freedom, Finitude, and Radical Self-Awareness

Radical Freedom in the Shadow of the Guillotine

A basic tenet of Sartre's philosophy is that freedom is absolute, total and permanent. Freedom is not something we exercise only now and then; we are, in his phrase, "condemned to be free." Even in the most extreme physical circumstances, such as a prison cell, the individual remains free to choose an attitude towards the situation and to give it their own meaning. In the first half of the novel, Meursault's freedom is largely passive. He goes along with things, rarely reflecting on his actions and following his natural inclinations and the rhythm of daily life. Only when he is imprisoned and facing execution is he forced into full awareness. He can no longer move about or live as he did before, and for the first time he has to face his freedom in its most radical form. In his cell he calculates the odds of a successful appeal, pictures the guillotine in all its mechanical efficiency and remembers his mother's story about his father going to watch an execution. All of this is bound by the narrow physical reality of his sentence. What lies outside it is his own consciousness, which no court can take from him. How he faces his death remains entirely his own choice.

The Climax with the Chaplain: Rejection of Transcendence and Acceptance of Finitude

The philosophical high point of *The Outsider* is Meursault's final encounter with the prison chaplain. The chaplain arrives unannounced and spends a long time trying to persuade Meursault to seek God's forgiveness, to give up his unbelief and to prepare for the afterlife. This is when Meursault finally explodes. He grabs the chaplain by the collar and shouts at him. He rejects the chaplain's spiritual answers as useless evasions and tells him that he lives like a dead man, trading the reality of this life for the illusions of another. Nothing in the chaplain's dogma, he insists, carries any weight against the plain facts of living and dying. His own life (simple, sensory and momentary as it has been) holds a certainty that the chaplain's theology cannot come near. From a Sartrean point of view, this is the moment when Meursault moves from passive existence to active, conscious authenticity. He refuses the chaplain's attempt to give his death a ready-made religious meaning. He will not slip into bad faith in his last hours. Instead, he takes full ownership of his past and faces his death with complete clarity.

The "Tender Indifference of the World" and Ontological Abandonment

After the chaplain leaves, a deep calm settles over the cell. Meursault is exhausted, all his anger spent, and he feels a great sense of peace. Looking up at the night sky full of stars, he opens himself for the first time to what he calls 'the tender indifference of the world.' This moment fits closely with what Sartre calls abandonment: the realisation that there is no God, that the world has no built-in moral order and that we are entirely on our own. Far from crushing Meursault, this realisation sets him free. He understands that the universe does not care whether he lives or dies, so he is released from the burden of serving some higher purpose. Without a divine plan, his choices and his experiences belong to him alone. And he concludes that he has been happy, and that he is happy still. In the novel's final lines, Meursault hopes for a large crowd at his execution, all of them greeting him with cries of hatred. This is the ultimate expression of his status as an outsider. In his own way, he accepts the Look of the Other. There is a strange logic to the wish: the crowd's hatred would confirm that he has stayed true to himself to the very end. He wants to die as the honest anti-hero of a society so deep in its own self-deception that it could never see his existence as anything but an aberration. He does not want to be the man who repents; he would rather be the man who is hated.

5. Divergences: Camusian Absurdism versus Sartrean Existentialism

Reading *The Outsider* through Sartrean concepts is valuable, but any serious philosophical analysis of Camus must also consider where his thinking departs from Sartre's formal existentialist system.

The Structure of Meaning-Creation

The basic difference between Sartrean existentialism and Camusian absurdism lies in whether we can create values in a world that has none. For Sartre, the universe has no given purpose, and it falls to each individual to create one. This happens through commitment, through choice and through the projects we pursue. Sartre's existentialism is therefore an optimistic view of the human capacity for self-creation, one that demands that we take responsibility for ourselves and for the values we live by.

Camus is much more sceptical about the possibility of building a coherent personal meaning. For him, the Absurd is not simply the lack of meaning; it is the conflict between the human demand for meaning and the silence of the universe. To build a neat system of meaning on top of that conflict is, for Camus, another form of evasion, which he calls 'philosophical suicide.' Rather than construct a new metaphysical system, Camus argues that one

must learn to live within the tension of the Absurd itself. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), published in the same year as *The Outsider*, he draws three consequences from the Absurd:
Revolt: a refusal to take refuge in any religious, moral or philosophical illusion, and a constant, clear-eyed confrontation with the absurdity of existence.
Freedom: giving up long-term hopes and plans, which frees thought and action in the here and now.
Passion: the desire to live as fully and intensely as possible, valuing the quantity of experience over any moral ranking of its quality.

Meursault as an Absurd Hero versus an Existential Subject

Seen strictly through Sartre's lens, Meursault at first appears to lack any transcendence or long-term project. He has no interest in politics or a career, and none in self-realisation through creative work. Within the Sartrean framework, that is the impression he gives. Through Camus's eyes, however, Meursault's lack of long-term desire is exactly what makes him the model of the absurd man. He does not try to build a legacy or a philosophy. He simply lives out Camus's three principles: he revolts against the moral hypocrisy of his society by refusing to lie about his feelings; he exercises his freedom by living in the present, with no future goals and no regrets about the past; and he lives with passion through his direct, bodily contact with the natural world, the sea, the sun and the night sky. The link with Sisyphus is hard to miss. Camus closes his essay by telling us that we must imagine Sisyphus happy, because the struggle itself is enough to fill a human heart. Meursault arrives at the same point in his cell. Condemned, with little hope of appeal and no belief in an afterlife, he can still say that he was happy and is happy now. In this sense he is less a Sartrean subject who has finally discovered his project than a Sisyphus who has finally become conscious of his rock. Where Sartre emphasises the project and the committed self, Camus emphasises lucidity and the immediacy of the present. The two thinkers do not disagree about the diagnosis of the human condition (both hold that the universe is indifferent and that the old dogmas no longer hold); they disagree about the prescription for how one should live once that diagnosis has been made.

A Limit of Both Readings: The Unnamed Arab

Both the Sartrean and the Camusian readings share a blind spot that later critics have pointed out. The man Meursault kills is never given a name. He is simply 'the Arab', and neither the court nor Meursault treats his death as the real issue; the trial turns on the funeral, not on the life that was taken. Critics such as Conor Cruise O'Brien and Edward Said read this silence as a sign of the colonial order that the novel takes for granted. Kamel Daoud's novel *The Meursault Investigation* (2013) answers Camus directly by retelling the story from the point of view of the dead man's brother, who gives him the name Musa. From a Sartrean angle the criticism carries extra weight, since Sartre himself later wrote forcefully against colonialism. The Look that the court turns on Meursault is never turned on the Arab at all; he is not even granted the status of an object of judgement. Any reading of the novel as a study of freedom has to admit that this freedom is shown from one side of the colonial divide only.

II. Conclusion

Albert Camus's *The Outsider* remains one of the essential texts for understanding mid-twentieth-century French philosophy. Read through Sartre's existential ontology, it shows with great force how difficult it is to live an authentic life in a world with no God to guarantee its meaning. Meursault is the archetype of existence preceding essence. His refusal to perform grief or other expected emotions exposes the *mauvaise foi* (bad faith) of the institutions around him. The trial demonstrates the alienating power of *le Regard*, which reduces an individual's open-ended subjectivity to a closed narrative. His confrontation with the prison chaplain marks the moment when he becomes fully conscious of his existence and reaches existential clarity, accepting both the indifference of the world and his own complete autonomy.

At the same time, Camus's narrative stands apart from Sartre's systematic philosophy, which shows how fine the theoretical line between them really is. Sartre stressed the deliberate creation of meaning through commitment and action, while Camus stressed the lucid revolt of an individual who chooses to live in the face of the Absurd. The novel's silence about its Arab victim also reminds us that this drama of freedom is played out inside a colonial world that the book never fully questions. In the end, *The Outsider* goes beyond its historical and literary setting to become a lasting meditation on freedom, on the judgement passed by institutions and on honesty with oneself. It can be read as a Sartrean work about the ontology of freedom or as a Camusian work about the Absurd. Either way, the novel challenges its readers to look at their own lives, to give up the self-deceptions they have built up and to take responsibility for defining who they are.

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