

Albert Camus and Absurd Communication:
From Undecidability to Übercommunication

by

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Communication conceived as understanding is a normative *telos* among scholars in the field. Absurdity, in the work of Albert Camus, can provide us with a framework to go beyond communication understood as a binary (understanding and misunderstanding) and propose a new conception of communication as absurd. That is, it is an impossible task, however necessary thus we need to embrace its absurdity and value the effort itself as much as the result. Before getting into Camus' arguments I explain the work of Friedrich Nietzsche to understand the French philosopher in more detail. I describe eternal recurrence and Übermensch as two concepts that can be related to communication as absurd. Then I explain Camus' notion of absurdity using a Nietzschean lens. Later I present an absurdist framework to understand communication. The framework is an aim to deconstruct communication conceptualized as understanding but at the same time go beyond and propose a new way of engaging in communication: Übercommunication. Finally I illustrate my arguments examining two novels of Albert Camus: *The Stranger* and *The Plague*.

DEDICATION

To my family who in front of the absurd has decided to keep rolling their boulder and now are able to read this. To my mother: Sisyphus herself.

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Chapter 1

Communication and The Absurd: An examination through the work of Albert Camus

Absurdity in the world is ubiquitous and along the same lines absurdity within communication is also omnipresent. Commonplace communicative transactions are most of the time based on faith: faith in rationality, systems, language, agency, etc. Take this paper for example: nothing guarantees that my argument will be understood as I want to convey it. Textual iterability and citationality, as Derrida (2001) thought, jeopardizes meaning and understanding. The hazard is at hand even when academic encounters are almost artificial communicative events. They occur in a sort of laboratory where the participants roughly have equal access to information, the relations of power are less pervasive than in other daily transactions, and under other conditions that make academia a sterile communicative environment, almost resembling Habermas (2007)' Ideal Speech Situation.

Let me present a more mundane example to illustrate communication's undecidability which is consequence of absurdity itself: Imagine that you are walking through a crowded street and suddenly a person stops you and with a calm voice says: "Life makes no sense. Aren't you bored of it?" and keeps walking. How do you assign meaning to such unusual exchange? There is no possible way of understanding what this person was trying to express because the possibilities are various and they are equally valid. The utterance could be a desperate cry for help, a way of venting after a bad day, irony, comedy, a philosophical inquiry, and the least could go on and on. Now, it is clear that such kinds of interactions are not common in daily life. People tend to follow linguistic rules to make meaning as clear as possible or perform arrival to clarity at least.

Let us look at a different situation then, a student is in class listening to a professor lecturing

on X subject. The following week there is a quiz in class about this particular lecture and the student performs poorly. It could be argued that being a participant in class does not necessarily require satisfactory performance in terms of grades. The communicative aspect of a class could also be seen from a ritual perspective and not merely as transmission (Carey, 2009).

On the other hand, it is obvious that although we attend class for several reasons besides learning, from obligation and necessity to narratives about success, learning still is an important factor in the process. The academic system relies on students acquiring information from professors and evaluates these transactions assigning numerical markers. In other words a grade is conferred to validate that a student understood his professor and by understanding I do not mean repeated information. It means that the student comprehended the professors' grading policy, attitude, inclinations, philosophy, whether it is repeating or challenging information. Ultimately, how do we make sense of these kinds of communicative exchanges? Is it realistic to trust methods based on faith on systems developed following rational methods? Could an absurdist account of communication provide a more realistic explanation of interactions that occur on daily basis like the student who is forced to fit in the educational system's definition of understanding or even extraordinary situations like a stranger uttering an enigmatic phrase?

Theoretical frameworks to understand human communication cover a wide range of traditions and streams of thought. Craig (1999) proposed a theoretical matrix with seven of these traditions as an umbrella under which a vast amount of attempts to theorize communication are conceived. Some of these theories deal with communication as experience. Specifically the phenomenological tradition, as identified by Craig, treats communication as "the experience of otherness" (p.74). Nonetheless, among the theoretical frameworks included under this tradition, or any other for the case, none of them touches on a concept that seems to be implicit in human

existence: absurdity. Conceived by the existentialist philosophers, (Kierkegaard (1938) coined the term) absurdity deals with humans, their confrontation with a nonsensical world and the absurd feeling that emerges out of this encounter.

My thesis will be an attempt to advance a framework to understand communication from an absurdist perspective. Distinctively, I will draw upon absurdity as conceived by Albert Camus, to understand communication as an impossible nonetheless imperative task. I will construct this framework extrapolating the ideas of Camus to understand how communication could be conceived following his thought. In order to do so, I shall incorporate other authors to complement Camus' thought. I will dedicate the first chapter to Nietzsche as an introduction to the work of Camus. Later I will incorporate Poststructuralism to deconstruct communication and explain its absurdity. This will provide the theoretical ground to develop an absurdist perspective to understand communication as undecidable. Finally, I will use two of Camus' novels, *The Stranger* (1988) and *The Plague* (2004a) to illustrate my claims about communication from a Camusean/absurdist perspective.

Absurdity within communication has been widely overlooked. It is problematic to construct a literature review of the problem that I am trying to address in my thesis. The work of Albert Camus has been ignored in the humanities since the mid 90's. He was a "master intellectual", as the French critics called him in the 40's and 50's, then his work was ignored by leftist intellectuals who considered him a conservative author although he was clearly non aligned politically. Then during the 80's with the emergence of Neoliberalism Camus' work was rediscovered although widely misread, according to David Sherman (2009b), and after the "fall" of the governments of Reagan and Thatcher, Camus' work was forgotten again.

In communication only few works (Sleasman 2011, 2009) deal with Camus' and

communication. Nonetheless both articles are concerned with Camusean ethics in a postmodern world. Existentialism, in general, has been somehow explored within communication, especially Kierkegaard. Nonetheless there is nothing written about communication from an absurdist perspective. Theorists have not dealt with the absurd as a concept and its implications within communication.

The lack of an absurd theory of communication, or any kind of project based on the absurd as conceived by Camus, seems like an omission and my thesis could be a contribution to the literature in communication and at the same time bring back the work of Albert Camus to the intellectual conversation within academia.

It is interesting to notice that no one has worried to write about absurdity considering that our postmodern world is one of disbelief in grand narratives, irony and political cynicism, fragmentation and unstable meaning; in other words absurdity itself. Thus the relevance of my project will be in the bridging of two important schools of thought: Poststructuralism and Absurdity. The former more used and widely commented, for and against, in communication and the latter unexamined within the field. An absurdist framework about communication is also relevant as it will start a conversation within the existentialist/phenomenological tradition about a subject that has been overlooked therefore bridging a gap in the literature.

Methodology

Considering that my thesis is a theoretical project, my research methods will not be empirical. First, I will examine Camus' entire work to extrapolate his ideas and apply them to communication. I will also use articles and books about Camus' ideas and any kind of secondary source that could be beneficial to elaborate my argument. Then, I shall contrast and compare Camus' ideas with the work of the most influential author in his work: Friedrich Nietzsche.

Later in the thesis, I will incorporate Poststructuralism, specifically Derrida's work to explore how language operates as a source of instability within communication. Thus I will argue that any idea of stable communication needs to be deconstructed. Once again this will be supported by secondary sources about Derrida's work. With the theoretical background explained, I will proceed to develop the absurdist communicative framework translating the abstract theory into concrete communicative language. I shall define precisely communication, its problems, and recommendations, examined under an absurdist framework. Finally, I will illustrate my framework through the novels of Albert Camus, mainly *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. In the following paragraphs I will offer a brief forecast of the chapters that I plan to write for the thesis.

Camus and Absurdity: The Myth of Sisyphus

Sisyphus, according to Homer's account, was a crafty man who seduced his niece, overtook his brother's throne, betrayed Zeus and reduced Thanatos to chains. Ares, bored because his opponents could not die in battle, freed Thanatos and captured Sisyphus. The Gods, offended by Sisyphus trickery, condemned him to an eternal punishment. He would roll a big rock to the top of a mountain, where, close to the summit the rock would inevitably fall back, forcing Sisyphus to repeat his task ceaselessly and being aware of its futility. Although this endless punishment seems like a torture, Camus proposes that we should consider Sisyphus being happy and looking at the gods with scorn. His happiness comes from being aware of his absurd task. Nevertheless he keeps rolling his boulder thus it becomes a meaningful act in its conscious absurdity.

Absurdity, understood as "lucid reason noting its limits" (Camus, 1955, p.49), is unavoidable in human experience. The absurd emerges out of the confrontation between humans and the world. It is not in the world, neither in humans, but arises out of the clash between a

mind full of questions and a world that remains in silence. At the same time even when it is not innate in humans, the absurd cannot exist outside of the human mind.

I propose a framework to understand communication that acknowledges the absurdity of this task. In other words: to understand accepting that we cannot fully understand. Or paraphrasing Gorgias' conception of existence if we can understand it, we cannot explain it; this resembles the absurd notion of theory: Whether the world is rational or not is a question that cannot be answered with a yes or no but instead with a maybe.

In his quest to escape from metaphysics, Camus dangerously flirts with radical agnosticism or what Nietzsche (1990) characterized as turning the question mark into a God. On the other hand the Camusean project is more concerned with the experience of absurd and its consequences than with any kind of Cartesian radical skepticism. Camus, as discussed by Sagi (2002), is a philosopher of existence itself instead of a theoretical existentialism. Considering this as a departing point to understand Camus' project, in the following paragraphs I shall briefly summarize absurdity and revolt in the work of Camus.

In order to do so, I will start with the *Myth of Sisyphus* (1955) to describe the absurd and move to *The Rebel* (1956) to illustrate revolt. From the individual absurd hero, Camus' work will develop into several heroes realizing that the absurd is a collective feeling. I will argue later that this move from absurdity to rebellion, if observed from a communicative perspective could translate into a move from undecidability to action based on solidarity. First, I shall describe Camus' thought on absurdity and its development through time.

Absurdity itself cannot be defined as it is not in the world nor in humans, but emerges out of the confrontation between the two. This is not to say that humans or the world can be defined. Nonetheless we must consider that at the same time the absurd cannot exist outside of the human

mind. Moving forward from the terrain of absurd paradoxes, Camus' most precise definition is "The absurd is lucid reason noting its limits" (1955, p. 49). This definition contrasts with the colloquial use of "absurd" as a synonym of unreasonable or illogical. The absurd as conceived by Camus does not reject rationality and its power but accepts that it has limits.

Camus claims that rationality has confines and the absurd is noting those boundaries while at the same time accepting that trying to understand where rationality begins or ends is absurd. This is by no means claiming that the world is neither irrational nor rational; it is unreasonable (Camus, 1955). This quotation carries an interesting connotation if closely read.

The line in its original language reads, "*Le monde pour lui n'est ni aussi rationnel, ni à ce point irrationnel. Il est déraisonnable et il n'est que cela*" (Camus, 1942,p.70). The word "*déraisonnable*", translated as unreasonable in the English edition (1955) has a more profound meaning that the translation does not capture in its totality. The Trésor Dictionnaire definition is "*Qui s'écarte de la raison*" [that deviates from reason].

At the same time one of the suggested synonyms is inconsequent which gives a new sense to the phrase the world is unreasonable. It goes beyond the idea that we cannot make sense of the world, at least not in a coherent form that progressively sheds light on its mysteries. Besides that, the world is inconsequent about our efforts. It does not care about us and there lies the absurd in itself: the confrontation with a world that remains in silence. Following this line of thought, the absurd leads to the question: Can we know anything at all? If there is nothing stable in our lives, is it worth navigating through undecidability?

This question is precisely what Camus tries to answer in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955). His conclusion: yes. The absurd does not lead to suicide but to revolt, to a personal awakening. In his early work Camus appeals to the individual as a site of rebellion and individual action as

meaningful in itself. Although we cannot make sense of our world we are here and the effort to navigate through a nonsensical existence is meaningful in itself. Considering that “*das Ding an sich*” cannot be understood, Camus is concerned with an existentialism of action.

Let us go back to Sisyphus and consider his absurd existence meaningful as Camus want us to think about him. Why is his existence meaningful and why is he happy? According to Camus everything starts with consciousness and because he is aware of his futile task, Sisyphus is in charge of his fate. The gods that had him as a prisoner disappear and although his world is nonsensical, the boulder he rolls becomes a new world in this awakening. The effort is meaningful in itself even when it will not accomplish anything. “The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus, 1955, p.123).

The Rebel: From Sisyphus to Prometheus

Sisyphus and Prometheus were condemned to an eternal punishment. The latter was chained to a rock where an eagle eats his liver daily, as in the night it is regenerated and his suffering can continue forever. Prometheus is also the absurd hero. Like Sisyphus he embraced metaphysical rebellion and stole the fire that Zeus, in anger, had hid from humans. To understand better Camus’ transition to *The Rebel* (1956) let us draw a comparison between Prometheus and Cain, another absurd character that decided to go against metaphysics (God). “With Cain the first act of rebellion coincides with the first crime” (Camus, 1956, p.32). The absurd lead him to justify murder as there is no set of pre-existent assumptions that we can trust to make any kind of ethical decisions.

Prometheus, on the other hand, exerts his absurd freedom to help mankind, rejecting murder and turning to solidarity. Prometheus is for Camus the absurd hero par excellence. We

see a movement from an individualistic Sisyphus to a *solidaire* Prometheus and at the same time a rejection of Cain's nihilism.

Sagi (2002) offers a comment on Camus' transition: "The Rebel represents a new stage in Camus' oeuvre. In the Myth of Sisyphus, the hero is the individual striving toward an understanding of the human condition, together with the realization of concrete existence" (p.107). Later he adds, "By contrast, the hero of The Rebel attains self realization in the revolt against injustice and suffering, through solidarity with the other" (p.107). This turn in Camus' position is directly related to the destruction, both physical and moral, that World War II spread around the world. According to Foley (2008), he was deeply concerned with how he had dealt with ethical choices in *The Myth of Sisyphus* because although it was clear that the absurd does not lead to suicide, it was not stated whether murder was permitted or not.

Camus mentions several times in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that "there are no stable rules" does not mean there are no rules at all, or everything is permitted, paraphrasing Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov. This problematic relation between the absurd and ethics lead Camus to deal with it thoroughly in *The Rebel*. "License to destroy supposes that you yourself can be destroyed" (Camus, 1956, p.41) he states, deeply concerned with ethical decisions and its consequences emerging from the absurd. Camus clearly addresses this problem in *The Rebel* where he rejects any tie between absurdity and violence.

In his second philosophical treatise, Camus is even more concerned with action in face of absurdity instead of any kind of clarity emerging out of it. *The Rebel* moves from Sisyphus and his meaningfulness based on consciousness to moral action and solidarity based on the other. Nonetheless it avoids any sort of categorization of "otherness" thus departing from traditional ethics.

“We can act only in terms of our own time, among the people who surround us” (1956, p.4). Camus says and rejects any possibility of a categorical imperative. When Caligula (1984), in the play of the same name, argues: “I believe all actions are equivalent”, Cherea responds “I believe that some actions are more admirable [plus belles] than others” which summarizes Camus’ ethical stance based on local, temporal, and situated moral action instead of nihilistic permissiveness.

The *Myth of Sisyphus* settles the bases to understand the absurd as an attitude, as the first step towards conscious action. The next step is summarized in the following quotation from *The Rebel*:

In absurdist experience, suffering is individual. But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as collective experience. Therefore the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe. The malady experienced by a single man becomes a mass plague. In our daily trials rebellion plays the same role as does the “cogito” in the realm of thought: it is the first piece of evidence. But this evidence lures the individual from his solitude. It finds its first value on the whole human race. I rebel-therefore we exist. (Camus, 1956, p.22)

The uncertainty that a “maybe” as a conclusion represents might be problematic for some academics. After all the universal project of academia is to advance and accumulate knowledge and uncertainty does not necessarily suits that unfinished puzzle. I have considered this issue and although somewhat challenging to traditional scholastic methods I argue through my thesis that uncertainty is a realistic condition that should be considered to come up with more realistic

explanations of communication.

Following the ideas of Nietzsche, Camus, and Poststructuralism about knowledge, I argue that any attempt to build a coherent unit named knowledge, conceived as an attempt to make sense and understand the world, is an illusion. An illusion based on necessity. Humans, since the beginning of times, have needed or been used to metaphysical explanations (e.g. God, Science) that have engendered, genealogically speaking, what we consider meaningfulness. Nietzsche's ideas on truth and knowledge will shed light on the previous claims.

Nietzsche and Camus

Friedrich Nietzsche was an influential figure to a whole generation of philosophers aligned with postmodernism and poststructuralism, and was particularly significant in the work of Albert Camus. His critique of 'truth' is often seen as a nihilistic approach although Anderson (2005) argues that Nietzsche's position on these subjects should not be read as radically opposed to the value of truth. He claims "We must explain how Nietzsche thought it possible both to affirm and to deny the existence of truths, and moreover, why he risked misunderstanding by praising the value of both truth and illusion in ways that appear to conflict" (Anderson, 2005, p 211).

Absurdity, as formulated by Camus, owes a considerable part of its argument to Nietzsche's critique of traditional philosophy and its platonic/Judeo-Christian origins. The German author was anti-foundational and well ahead of his time. His critique of epistemology, rationality, morality, and metaphysics can be seen in Camus' work and in the following paragraphs I will try to point out common positions that both philosophers share.

Absurdity is noting the limits of rationality and accepting that we cannot understand the world itself or that maybe there is no "thing itself" in the Kantian sense. All that we have is the

illusion of understanding it or systems that work to give us confidence in the fact that this world makes sense. Nietzsche's project is precisely a critique of these scientific "tartufferies", to use one of his terms. In *The Will to Power* (1967) he claimed:

One should not understand this compulsion to construct concepts, species, forms, purposes, laws ("a world of identical cases") as if they enabled us to fix the real world; but as a compulsion to arrange a world for ourselves in which our existence is made possible: - we thereby create a world which is calculable, simplified, comprehensible, etc, for us. (p.282)

This quotation ties directly to what Camus (1955) calls translating the world into anthropomorphic. In other words understanding, making sense in our terms to feel that we live in a safe, well known environment. The necessity of common stories, of a familiar world, is the cause and at the same time, the ultimate goal of systems of belief. "Truth" emerges from this need to understand, to have a purpose in our life or as Nietzsche (1967) argued "Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live... We can comprehend only a world that we ourselves have made" (p.272).

Nietzsche thought that this compulsion to understand, to systematize, or as Camus (1955) names it "the need for a life vest", has its origins in morality, in the idea that humans need to make sense of their existence. In the *Genealogy of Morals* (1990), he states "man had saved himself, he had achieved a meaning, he was no longer a leaf in the wind, a plaything of circumstance, of "crass casualty": he was now able to will something – no matter the object or the instrument of his willing; the will itself had been saved" (p. 298). This is what Nietzsche called the will to power: the will to preserve mankind through time, a psychological mechanism, which based on desire, is behind everything that humans create. The will to power then is not a

desire to control or dominate but should be seen as desire behind an artistic spirit.

Both Camus and Nietzsche share a common critique of knowledge as metaphysical explanations that are heavily influenced by relations of power (Foucault's project). In "On *Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*" Nietzsche (2010) describes science as a man who hides an object behind a bush and after some time goes back to the same place, follows a method and "discovers" the object behind the bush. This statement seems to misunderstand empirical science but at the same time poses an interesting critique of knowledge that Foucault (1984) will expand a century later. Temporary truths as science claims to discover are falsehoods masked as true through discursive regimes. It is tautological to "discover" temporary truths that were never true. Take for example the earth and the universe: from geocentrism, to heliocentrism, to Hubble, to string theory. Knowledge seems to be constructed on a chain of mistakes where truth is a discursive construction.

Why do we need knowledge or the illusion of having it? Nietzsche (2010) claimed that what humans call truth is nothing but:

A moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished and which after long usage seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions. (p.29-30)

For both Nietzsche and Camus, these explanatory attempts can be reduced to metaphysics or faith and as the German author noted "faith casts suspicion" (2010).

Finally, Camus and Nietzsche are concerned with why humans need knowledge to explain this nonsensical world or to make it a more comfortable, familiar, place. The two

answer that because it is easier to live in an understandable world than to be conscious of its absurdity (for Camus) or to be pessimistic, following Nietzsche's thought.

Francois La Rochefoucauld (2007) wrote in his famous *Moral Reflection or Maxims*, "We do not have enough strength to follow our reason fully" (p. 15). Along the same lines Camus (1955) claimed "It is always easy to be logical. It is almost impossible to be logical to the bitter end" (p. 9). If thoroughly examined our assumptions about knowledge could lead us to the despair that knowing that we do not know could cause. Without stable structures it is hard to pursue a goal or have a purpose. Nietzsche (1956) noticed "man would sooner have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose" (p.231).

According to Peter Sedgwick's (2009) interpretation of Nietzsche, "Wishing to know means affirming beforehand the value of knowing and the truths that such knowing will yield" (p.16). In other words, we need an explanation because we have been accustomed to a world that makes sense. From religious explanations to the Enlightenment's project it has been easier to believe that we can understand human existence and its relation to the world. Otherwise existence without a *telos* could lead to despair thus modernity has embraced scientific progress, to explain the world, as its teleology. After all, "A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world" (Camus, 1955, p.6).

On the other hand, absurdity does not reject rationality but neither embraces it blindly. In this sense, absurdity is not anti-rationalist but on the contrary it is rational acceptance of the limits of rationality. Departing from this idea I argue for the necessity of explanations that are less permeated by rationality and more open to disperse and unstable meanings, nonetheless inscribed in an ethical frame.

Camus and Poststructuralism

The absurd as a philosophical concept has a close relation to what Jean Francois Lyotard (1984) defined as the postmodern condition. "...incredulity towards metanarratives" (p. xxiv) could be seen as a parallel to the absurd; the end of metaphysics, of a knowable coherent world that can be explained as a whole. Following this unstable domain of meaning and knowledge, absurdity, as coined by Camus, bears a resemblance to poststructuralism, the Derridean stream specifically. Sherman (2009a) recognizes this resemblance when he analyzes the problematic nature of politico-ethical decision-making. He states:

According to Derrida, such decisions are "impossible", for there is no factual situation or set of reasons that can determine the decision in advance, lest the decision itself lose its ethical bona fides. Thus self-consciously mimicking Kierkegaard, he contends that a "leap of decision" is needed in which all prior reasoning is bracketed, for all truly responsible decisions are "radically incommensurable" – or, in other words, they are absurd. (p. 278)

Derridean poststructuralism and Camusean absurdity are both after metaphysics, seeking for unstable meanings, dispersed practices, and inherent contradictions masked by hegemonic rationalistic forces. I am not claiming that Derrida and Camus had the same intellectual project but that deconstruction and absurdity overlap in some sense.

Derrida critiqued the problematic tendency of representing the world in binaries and imbue one of the terms with presence. We make decisions under pre-existent conditions that we cannot control. Therefore, he thought that any possibility of knowledge, or informed decision, is limited to the origins. James Williams states "The origin is always infected by what follows it.

Origins are therefore also themselves originated: the origin has an origin” (2005, p.32).

Consequently any kind of rationalistic logic or system is always “contaminated” with a preset, pre-assumed goal which negates freedom of choice. On the contrary it institutes a performance of choice or what Lyotard (1984) identified as legitimation through narratives and language games. The absurd as a feeling operates among the same lines. In front of a word that is unreasonable, any kind of systematic explanation, named gods or History, appears as a false explanation that serves to discipline subjects. We are disciplined to have faith in our systems but when thoroughly examined we realize that they operate as a blindfold that covers the absurdity of our existence. They provide us with a goal but at the same time they provide the illusion of teleological freedom. Williams’ (2005) comments on Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* and his critique of metaphysics serve to illustrate my position here. He argues:

“...the world is thought of in terms of fixed beings and essences defined in terms of identifiable differences. These differences are put into a value system resembling theological distinctions in their, in principle, inviolable assumptions and their categories of good and evil, against and with nature, saved and fallen, of-this-world and of God. These values and differences then guide relations to the future. Acts are thought of as driven towards specific ends defined in terms of the metaphysics”.

(p.28) Camus would argue that it is easier to trust in methods than confronting the absurd thus being in danger of falling in despair. Then, both Camus and Derrida would agree that decisions based on systems, whether based on rationality or faith can be deconstructed and reduced to the same: metaphysics. Here I locate the correspondence between Derridean poststructuralism and absurdity as conceived by Camus.

Following the same line of thought, Sherman (2009a) argues that poststructuralism owes

more than it acknowledges, to the original French existentialists, including Camus. He traces similarities between Camus and Derrida when he states:

Moreover, in various respects, Camus also anticipates another *pied-noir*, Jacques Derrida. In a practical sense, Sartre might be right to say that Camus' humanism is "narrow and pure", but it must not be forgotten that Camus was also the "philosopher of the Absurd," and that the concept of the Absurd opens the door to the anti-humanism that is implicit in Derrida's deconstruction, and poststructuralism, more generally. (p. 209)

Nonetheless the Camusean absurd is also a post-structuralist attitude. Absurdity accepts that we cannot pin it down but tries to go beyond and act in face of this uncertainty or undecidability. As Camus claimed, "The important thing, therefore, is not, as yet, to go to the root of things, but the world being what it is, to know how to live in it" (1956, p.4). This attitude clearly separates him from the Derridean "endless death of metaphysics" (Sherman, 2009a, p.209), a rather contemplative approach towards the human condition. Sagi's (2002) description of Camus illustrates what he means by "know how to live" or absurd action:

He is not an academic philosopher, whose theoretical concern is the concept of "existence"; he deals with existence itself. He is interested in the "how" instead of the "what" that explains the "how"; his existentialism is an existentialism of action. (p.29)

Camus and Communication

The question that I want to answer in the following pages is: How do we understand communication from an absurdist perspective and what can we learn about it from the work of Albert Camus? I realize that I am trying to explain an absurd task, communication; through

absurdity itself thus contradictions could emerge from this effort. I acknowledge this issue and cannot offer a better explanation than the fact that although I have an impossible task, I am happy rolling my boulder uphill and for that I apologize if during this early stage I do not adhere to the academic rigor that a theoretical construction demands. As I mentioned before my intention is not to theorize but to contribute with an absurdist framework.

In the following pages I will try to establish a theoretical ground for an absurdist framework. I am tempted to call this effort a theory but it would be against the basic concept of absurdity itself. What I offer is a descriptive framework and a contribution on how we theorize communication. The turn in this framework is that it is more concerned with what Camus (1955) distinguished as “savoir-vivre which transcends savoir-faire” (p.98). It is a philosophy of action instead of systems.

A scientific approach is obviously problematic for absurdity, as systems require faith. The absurd, as conceived by Camus, does not lead to Kierkegaard’s leap of faith but to a rational rebellion. This ubiquitous Camusean distrust in systems is rooted in Nietzsche (1990) who claimed “We whose business it is to inquire have gradually grown suspicious of all believers.” (p.286). “Believers” here is used to describe people following scientific or religious methods as sense-making devices and Camus thought that “methods imply metaphysics (1955, p.11) which is precisely what absurdity is trying to overcome.

From an absurdist perspective communication is theorized as Sisyphean: impossible to accomplish, absurd, but meaningful and necessary in itself. Through communication we constitute our social worlds but we also constitute ourselves as human beings, as sites of value. Ubuntu philosophy, as described by the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, depicts the construction of subjects as “I am what I am because of who we all are; or I am me because of you and you are

you because of me”. Following this ethical premise, absurdity theorizes communication as the activity that translates a nonsensical world into anthropomorphic thought.

I propose a twist to the Cartesian “Cogito ergo sum” to a more humanist “Communicatio ergo sum (sumus)” and at the same time escaping the Sartrean “I am. I am. I exist, I think, therefore I am: I am because I think that I don’t want to be. I think that I... because...ugh! I flee” (Sartre, 2007, p.101).

After all we need to make sense of this world, but seeing communication as an absurd task also restrains us from systems that claim to understand, explain, predict, and control human communication. We communicate for the sake of being.

Communication theorized as absurd encounters a fundamental problem in the fact that communication itself is not possible but necessary. This impossibility intrinsically leads to its necessity just like absurdity leads to revolt. The theoretical problems that absurdity sees in other models are unrealistic systems that heavily rely on rationality. It is important to remember that absurdity is not rejecting rationality but the lucid notion of its limits. Relying on rational models of communication is contrary to absurdity even when those systems are based on experience like phenomenology or pragmatism.

The idea that we can understand human communication is problematic; absurdity proposes instead that we can understand specific communicative events and learn from these events. Nonetheless, a systematic mechanism to predict outcomes in similar communicative situations is absurd. In other words, it might be possible but it escapes the confines of the human mind.

Brianke Chang (1996) in his book “*Deconstructing communication: Representation, subject, and economies of exchange*” deals with communication as undecidable. Based on a Derridean approach he deconstructs the idea that we can somehow arrive to stable interaction

through communication. This idea is parallel to the examples that I offered about a stranger in the street and a student; nothing guarantees communication whether there is a pure form of communication or not. Chang also critiques the academic tendency to define communication as a homogenizing practice or faithful to its Latin roots, the practice of making common, disregarding misunderstanding as an aberration. "...a blindness that is by no means uncritical, causes communication theorists to reify understanding as the ideal, the telos, and the norm of communicative activities" (1996, p.174).

Absurdity within communication valorizes misunderstanding and embraces confusion because only in front of it can communication occur. "If the world were clear, art would not exist" writes Camus (1955) in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. If the world were clear, communication, an art, would not be necessary can be extrapolated from that thought. Nonetheless absurdity is not concerned with the quest of clarity but with action in the middle of darkness.

Chang (1996) concludes that we must communicate even if it is impossible to do so. His argument is clearly informed by Derrida and can be related to Camus as they both see contradictions in the discourses shaping knowledge and action. Chang explains the Derridean argument about the undecidability of communication in the following terms:

Derrida redescribes communication as an unbridled play of differences, substitutions, and displacements taking place at the limit of signification. If we are often unsure whether we are the beneficiaries or victims of communication – because it means simultaneously both happy intersubjectivity (mutual sharing) and the possibility of alienation or domination (one way transmission) – Derrida would assure us that our sense of uncertainty comes naturally and inevitably from the very nature of our linguistic being, that we are always and already at the mercy of peripatetic signs. (1996, p.187)

Nevertheless, “Il faut Parler. Parler sans pouvoir” (Chang, 1996, p.228) said Blanchot, and Chang concludes his book with this line.

It seems that Chang’s deconstruction of communication at the end invites to action but I argue that this is a rather contemplative position. It invites to act for the sake of acting because following Derrida’s line of thought it is impossible to escape from the confines of language. Derrida rejects any stable meaning based on the premise that nothing can guarantee such stability. At the same time he assures that communication will fall in the traps of language, in other words and it sounds contradictory but according to Derrida the only guarantee that we have is that meaning is unstable. Under this tragic, not to be confused with pessimistic as in Camus, circumstances what kind of action can we take?

Chang does not offer any tentative suggestions and Derrida would argue that only temporary, local, accomplishments can be made nonetheless both fail to provide an account on how do we act instead of only pointing at what destabilizes communication. Absurdity, on the other hand, is a struggle for meaningful action. We must communicate, even with it is not possible without a doubt but we have to go beyond it and act for the sake of being.

Absurd action is meaningful action. Like Sisyphus rolling his boulder, we keep communicating knowing that it is an impossible task but meaningful in itself. Nonetheless we have to move from personal consciousness to collective recognition. We recognize the struggle in the other, his/her boulder and communication becomes our revolt against absurdity. In the following section I will illustrate how communication relates to this transition from the individual to the collective, from the absurd to revolt, from undecidable action, as in Derrida, to action in front of undecidability, as in Camus.

From *The Stranger* to *The Plague*: Mersault and Rieux

As an applied case to test the theoretical body of the thesis, I will examine Camus' fiction and illustrate through his characters how communication can be conceived as an absurd task. Usually, critics of Camus undermine his work arguing that he was not a philosopher, claiming that he did not have a method or adhered to the rigorous standards that philosophy demands. Sartre himself referred to Camus as a poet in a somehow dismissive way which is interesting considering that in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus rejects Sartrean existentialism reducing it to poetry.

Forsdick (2007) argues that "In Sartre's view, therefore, Camus is successful as a novelist but not as a philosopher: the triumph of style over intellectual content is an accusation that would surface in the exchanges leading to a rupture a decade later" (p.120). Forsdick's point is strengthened if we turn to Sartre's own words: "Camus is not an existentialist. His real masters are not Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Heidegger but the French moralists of the 17th century" (Foley, 2008, p.2).

With this comment Sartre was clearly trying to differentiate himself from Camus. In fact, both authors coincided to declare that it was somehow amusing to see their names under the same label. At the same time Sartre's statement dismisses Camus' ethos by setting him apart from the "philosophers." His accusation supports Camus' validity as a philosopher of action instead of systems. A philosopher concerned with the "how" and not the "what" behind the "how", following the point raised by Sagi (2002).

Jean Sarocchi (2005) dedicates an entire chapter of his book *Variations Camus* to the quarrel between Sartre, the philosopher, and Camus, the novelist. He argues that Sartre can be seen as the traditional philosopher, possessor of a method (See Sartre, 1963), and a prose that

demonstrates rigorous philosophical training common within academic circles. On the other hand, Camus is a philosopher of literature. His thought is embodied in his novels and short stories. Unlike Sartre he does not write sophisticated philosophical arguments as those conveyed in *“Being and Nothingness”* or *“Critique of Dialectical Reason”*. Camus’ argument is found in Mersault, Rieux, Clamence, etc. Therefore Sarocchi concludes: “Camus philosophe sans que Sartre le sache” (2005, p.232). [Camus is a philosopher without Sartre knowing it].

Considering this, I would like to propose a study of communication and absurdity based on Camus’ fictional work. The study case to illustrate my thesis will be two of the most representative novels of Camus: *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. A literary piece can be philosophical at the same time, take for example Dostoyevsky, Valéry, Borges, Kundera, to name a few. I shall read these two novels as philosophical works and through the lens of an absurdist communicative framework.

The Stranger

Monsieur Mersault is the main character in *The Stranger*, one of the three “absurds”, as Camus named them, along with *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *Caligula*. Mersault goes through life making meaningless decisions that are all equivalent showing nothing but detachment from the world. He shows no emotions, not even at his mother funeral.

Nonetheless, as Bronner (1999) argues, “... it doesn’t intentionally celebrate cynicism, nihilism, or the loss of values – quite contrary. Its close is a celebration of the lived life, and the novel deals with the transformation of an indifferent yet self-absorbed individual, a man committed to remaking his life in the shadow of death”(p.32). Mersault resembles Sisyphus and deals with the absurd alone. Through Mersault Camus celebrates the individual awakening to consciousness.

From a communicative perspective Mersault somehow supports Chang's and the poststructuralist's argument. He seems to go through life even without the ability to do so and therefore represents the meaningless action proposed by poststructuralism. Action confined within unstable meaning that cannot escape the traps of language thus condemned to fail. Bronner again comments about this apparent apathy of Mersault and its implications. "The Stranger is concerned with the creation of meaning in a meaningless world" (1999, p.34). Later he adds "Memory awakens Mersault's sense of responsibility and enables him to reappropriate his life. The Stranger becomes less a testament to the absurdity of life than a reaction against it..." (1999, p. 34).

To dream, in *The Stranger*, equals to create. "If the world were clear, art would not exist" Camus (1955) says. Mersault seen as an artist goes through his absurd existence creating a meaningless world that eventually he will love and miss. Communication is an art in the sense that Camus is trying to convey. We must communicate not only because it is necessary but because the effort assigns meaning to our lives, we become creators. Subjects are constructed through the recognition of the other. There cannot be a Me without a Them. Through Rieux, the hero in *The Plague*, the concern will shift to from Me and Them to We.

The Plague

Having completed the absurds and after the Nazi occupation, Camus's view shifted to a more collective account of human existence. During this period he writes *The Plague* in 1947 and *The Rebel* in 1951. Gray (2007) comments on this period and the novel that concerns this section:

In keeping with this cycle's exploration of tragedy and revolt, *La Peste* [The Plague] chronicles the imprisonment, exile, oppression and suffering experienced by the citizens of Oran when a plague strikes. Yet the novel also dramatizes the victory of human spirit and

solidarity over that which would threaten and dismember it: a plague, an enemy occupation, existence itself. (p.165)

Based on the Nazi invasion of Europe, *The Plague* is a story about persons that act in front of a terrible pest that spreads through the city of Oran killing people at a dramatic hasty rate. The characters, all for different reasons, decide to turn to solidarity instead of individualistic despair. Rieux, the main character, is a doctor that helps people just because he feels like he should try to save people. There is no grand narrative or moral absolute behind his actions, but a strong sense of human solidarity. At the end the plague finally disappears but the reasons are not clear.

Camus is trying to convey that although absurdity calls for action, action in itself will not solve our problems. Nonetheless it will help us navigating through them, assigning meaning to our existence, making sense of our world, even when these accomplishments are all temporal.

Roland Barthes critiqued the novel for being an inaccurate transposition of the French resistance movement to a fictional work. Thody (1970) summarizes Barthes' argument, "Camus had replaced a struggle against men by a struggle against the impersonal microbes of a plague" (p.338). Camus (1970) responded in a letter arguing that the plague does not have a human face to make it applicable to any kind of tyranny that triggers resistance.

The transition from *The Stranger* to *The Plague* is a shift towards solidarity. Communication could be conceived as rebellion against the absurdity of existence itself, noting that our experience of life is constructed and mediated through communication. Nevertheless rebellion does not guarantee success. Similarly, recognizing absurdity within communication does not assure any discovery of meaning. Rebellion, in communicative terms is acknowledging that "We" are struggling to communicate, to assign meaning to an unreasonable world.

Rebellion thus guarantees engagement. Bronner describes the novel as "... a work of great humanism and even greater moral simplicity. There are no grand words and no grand gestures. There is "no question of heroism in all of this. It's a matter of common decency" (1999, p.65).

Conclusion

No grand word or gestures, as Bronner (1999) states, could be read as there are no models, theories, or systems that guarantee communication or solidarity within the practice. The purpose of my thesis is not to develop a normative theory but instead a description of the communicative condition (roughly the human condition), and a suggestion to navigate through it. Solidarity emerges out of the recognition of the other. Therefore communication is first an ethical activity instead of an instrument to overcome misunderstanding.

The sanctity of the other, according to Camus, is recognized in front of injustice. We are always moved when injustice is perpetrated against the other. Although history is full of examples that disprove Camusean ethics it is because solidarity is a consequence of the absurd and subsequent revolt. Communication that tries to overcome misunderstanding in other words shatter differences is no different from Totalitarianism. Political theory is vastly concerned with consensus, most of the time rational consensus; instead a turn to disensus could cultivate healthier communicative practices.

Communication should celebrate misunderstanding. It is in front of it that we confirm our humanity. In face of the absurdity we recognize that the other shares our struggle. The struggles occur under different circumstances and I am not trying to overemphasize freedom but argue that we all share this absurd condition of human communication. We must communicate, not because we must but because it is a meaningful act. "I'm always doing what I cannot do yet in order to learn how to do it", said Vincent Van Gogh. To communicate is trying to assign

meaning to a meaningless existence. Trying to do what we cannot do. It is rebellion in itself.

In the following paragraphs I offer a preview of the chapters as I plan to develop them through my thesis. This is a brief and tentative sketch of how the thesis will unfold. In chapter two I will introduce Nietzsche and his relation to Camus. The German author was, along with Dostoyevsky, Camus' biggest influence to develop his intellectual project. I will show that in Camus' work Nietzschean arguments are clearly recognizable. Particularly I will focus on three ideas: The will to power, The Overman, and eternal recurrence. By shedding light on Camus' work situated against Nietzsche's thought, I pretend to show Camus personal project in a more clear manner and at the same time, find ideas that could help me in my own work. Then I will situate Camus' thought in comparison with his philosophical hero.

Chapter three will be an introduction to the work of Albert Camus. First I will present a brief biography of Camus because I consider that knowing about his life is really important to fully understand his thought. Then I will comment of Camus' lack of philosophical training and how that serves to be dismissed as philosopher by more serious academic circles, nonetheless I will argue that Camus' is a philosopher of action and not of systems or methods. Noting that Camus is not an academic philosopher per se, I will examine his work from a philosophical perspective which eventually will be translated to a communicative vocabulary. I will start with the *Myth of Sisyphus* (1955), where he describes the absurd, and move to *The Rebel* (1956), where he deals with action in front of absurdity. I will support my research with several of Camus' work but will focus on these two books because they illustrate his turn from individual rebellion to collective action. This turn will be an important part of the framework that I propose to understand communication. Before I move to the framework itself I will try to situate and complement Camus' ideas with other authors.

Chapter four will be an attempt to construct an absurdist framework. To do so, I will start describing communication as absurd and its implications. Then I will incorporate Derrida's work on deconstruction to explore the nature of communication's absurdity. Finally I will go back to Camus to explain how absurdist ethics can help us in this undecidable world and particularly to communicate in front of absurdity. This will present absurdity as a post-structuralist attitude.

After I have explained and compared the three authors that I have mentioned, in chapter five I will illustrate my claims through Camus' fictional work. I plan to do a situated study of several of his novels but I will focus mainly on two: *The Stranger* (1988) and *The Plague* (2004a). I argue that literature is situated within the "real" world that many scholars in communication claim to study hence my applied case is an example of how communication works. At the same time considering that Camus was not an academic philosopher the best way of illustrating his claims is through his fictional work. Finally I will offer a conclusion summarizing my claims and pointing at the novels that I mentioned to display how I see absurd communication working in the world.

Chapter 2

Nietzsche: Camus' spiritual ancestor. Zarathustra meets Sisyphus

“Some men are born posthumously” wrote Nietzsche (1920, p.37) in *The Antichrist* and this pronouncement, sadly, describes his own philosophical work. Few authors have been so influential as Friedrich Nietzsche and at the same time so misread and misapplied. His ideas influenced schools such as existentialism, and poststructuralism and authors like Heidegger, Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, and Camus himself. Nietzsche's thought was radical and original, perhaps one of the first critiques of Kantian and Platonic rationality that inaugurated a new approach towards knowledge, science, and existence. If the critical tradition has its foundations in Kant and Hegel, then to Nietzsche, even when it might sound redundant, we owe a critique of this tradition. Nietzsche, alone, could easily become a doctoral dissertation thus I must acknowledge my limitations. Although I understand that a chapter dedicated to him runs the risk of being simplistic I will justify the necessity of this chapter in the following lines. I depart from the idea that to understand a thinker it is always helpful to go back to his/her influences. In the case of Camus, considering that he was not an academic philosopher trained under a rigorous tradition, finding philosophical influences is harder than one would imagine. Nonetheless Nietzsche is one of the few philosophical heroes that Camus recognized as essential in his work.

“Je dois à Nietzsche une partie de ce que je suis¹” [I owe to Nietzsche a part of what I am] wrote Camus in 1954. (as cited in Weyembergh, 2009 ,p.604) As Maurice Weyembergh (2009) argues, Nietzsche is present in the entire Camusean production and it is not possible to understand his work without understanding the German philosopher first. Both authors shared

¹ Throughout the thesis where the original text is in French I translated it to English

particular things in common like their love for ancient Greece and particularly its Dionysiac legacy, critical stand against religion, and unfortunately they both suffered health issues during their lives and they both found death in a tragic way. Although Nietzsche is a “philosophe écrivain²” and Camus is an “écrivain philosophe” (Weyembergh, 2009, p.607) both share a particular aesthetic orientation towards aphorisms and the essay instead of systematic treatises. Hence both authors are highly criticized and dismissed, Nietzsche to a lesser extent, within the analytical tradition for their lack of “rigor” and philosophical clarity. Walter Kaufman (2000) finds this rather bedazzling, stating, “One may actually be led to wonder whether in philosophy there is an inverse proportion between profundity and importance on the one hand, and clarity and excellence of style on the other” (p.xix).

Finally, and perhaps the most important dimension of their work’s intersections, is the radical skepticism against rational paradigms that claim to explain the world. A fundamental question that Nietzsche and Camus try to answer through their work is: How do we live a good life in a world without God³(s)? How do we live in an absurd world? Hubert Dreyfus (2009) locates the roots of existentialism, and consequently absurdity, in Nietzsche among other authors such as Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Pascal, etc. It is no surprise then that Camus’ “irrationality” was deeply influenced by Nietzsche’s critique of Kantian and Platonic philosophy; and concepts like Truth, science, morality, etc.

Although Camus, like almost every existential philosopher with the exception of Sartre, rejected the label “existentialist” his work definitely falls along the lines of Tanzer’s (2008)

² The word *écrivain* translated from French literally means writer. However it refers to writers of books, (commonly Literature). Thus when Weyembergh says a *philosophe écrivain*, he is trying to imply that Nietzsche wrote Philosophy with literary style while Camus (*écrivain philosophe*) wrote Literature with a philosophical style.

³ The Nietzschean God goes beyond its religious form and includes Science among others.

definition of it:

In opposition to the Platonist claim that things in the world are what they are in accordance with rational unambiguous principles, that the world is rational, and thus that ambiguities in the world are merely apparent; the existentialist claims that things really are ambiguous, that there are no unambiguous principles constituting that world—the world, for the existentialist, is irrational. (p.7)

However as I mentioned in the first chapter Camus did not accept that the world was completely irrational but unreasonable. This claim will be clearer in the next chapter.

Since Camus' thought is deeply connected to Nietzsche's work, understanding some central tenets of Nietzsche's thought is a way of shedding light on Camus's work. In this chapter I shall focus on three points that I want to address within Nietzsche's work. In the first section I will deal with the kind of Nietzscheanism that concerns Camus and this particular project. Second, I will turn to the influence of Nietzsche on Camus explicitly and implicitly stated through Camus's oeuvre. Third, and finally, I will offer an explanation of three Nietzschean concepts that are fundamental to understand absurdity in the work of Camus: the will to power, the Overman, and eternal recurrence. By the end of this chapter I hope to have established the basis for the rest of the arguments elucidated in this thesis based on Camusean absurdity.

What does it mean to be Nietzschean?

Michel Foucault is probably one of the most problematic philosophers to pin down as he was always rejecting and slipping between categories and labels. Nonetheless and against this sneaky attitude, in his last interview he did not vacillate to say, "I am simply Nietzschean, and I try as far as possible, on a certain number of issues, to see with the help of Nietzsche's text—but

also with anti-Nietzschean theses (which are nevertheless Nietzschean!)-what can be done in this or that domain” (1996,p.471). A surprising remark from Foucault that opens interesting questions, among others the one that concerns this section: What is Nietzscheanism?

Pertinent to this issue, in a different interview Foucault again stated, “I do not believe there is a single Nietzscheanism. There are no grounds for believing there is a true Nietzscheanism, or that ours is any truer than others” (1988,p.31). Nietzsche’s style was by no means traditional and academic, even when he held a position at the University of Basel in the Department of Classical Philology⁴. His provocative statements are usually written in the form of aphorisms and as some critics propose we should approach his work conscious of his rhetorical use of sarcasm and humor. Therefore Foucault is right when he claims that there is no true Nietzscheanism considering the polysemy of his work, and although it might be problematic for some, for others it opens the possibility of constant reinterpretation and reinvention of Nietzsche’s work which is by no means a form of intellectual hijacking.

At the same time his work seems to be populated by contradictions that under an analytical lens might seem like philosophical fallacies. Nietzsche tends to reject his own claims, playing with the reader through humorous and flowery language. These characteristics make him hard to read and impossible to find a “correct” interpretation. Therefore my intention is not finding a definition of Nietzscheanism but looking for intersections between his work and Camus’.

Although Nietzsche was one of the biggest influences on Camus, especially his early work, eventually his position turned more critical. Nevertheless Camus’ esteem and appreciation for him never decreased. “What is admirable, in Nietzsche, is that you always find in him

⁴ He was 24 years old when he was appointed chair of the department.

something to correct what is dangerous elsewhere in his ideas” (1968, p.354), said Camus about his “spiritual ancestor” in an interview. Before delving into details about the obvious intellectual connections between the two, I want to make clear that Camus, as Foucault, is a Nietzschean who also works with anti-Nietzschean ideas. For example in his period of rebellion Camus believed in collective revolt while Nietzsche was always concerned with personal transcendence.

With that in mind, I would like to make a turn to Nietzsche’s influence on the development of existentialism, specifically, its French stream. Camus (1968) rejected the label existentialist several times, finding it amusing to see his name associated with Jean Paul Sartre’s (who felt the same way), as if they were part of the same school of thought. Nonetheless, the existentialist movement has several themes in common with his thought. Later, in the chapter dedicated to Camus I will offer a more elaborated argument on Camus’ rejection of the label. For the purpose of this section I will describe existentialism first and eventually move towards absurdity, as conceived by Camus, to understand his particular reading of Nietzsche.

Defining existentialism is a thorny endeavor because we are trying to define something that rejects stable definitions. Besides, there are several currents, and especially authors associated with existentialism, that approach subjects in different manners: from Kierkegaard and Marcel’s theism to Camus and Sartre’s atheism. Another characteristic of existentialism that complicates its definition is the fact that existentialism, perhaps as no other philosophical school, explored literature as a way of expressing its thought. Exponents like Dostoevsky, Unamuno, Melville, Kafka, Beckett, never wrote a philosophical treatise, nonetheless the particular issues that concerned them are in clear relation to those of the more “rigorous” philosophers that I mentioned before. Camus is a particular case, as he seems to flirt between the two sides but always closer to literature. After all he never considered himself a philosopher.

Existentialism in its most basic and rudimentary definition is a radical rejection of Platonic and Kantian rationalism, a departure from the tradition that has dominated Philosophy since the Greeks. This rejection of Platonic rationalism does not imply that the movement is necessarily irrational. Tanzer (2008) maybe goes too far arguing that existentialism is irrational. It does not necessarily reject rationality but understands its limits. Existentialism also takes into account the relation between subjects and the world and rejects any kind of mechanistic or teleological explanation of it. In other words it is an attitude and an attempt to understand the relation between humans and the world and how to live in it.

Robert Solomon (1974) provides a great description of this attitude and at the same time illustrates how different authors provided different definitions but with overlapping issues concerning the human condition.

Existentialist philosophy is the explicit conceptual manifestation of an existential attitude—a spirit of the “present age.” It is a realization of a self-consciousness living in a “broken world” (Marcel), an “ambiguous world” (de Beauvoir), a “dislocated world” (Merleau-Ponty), a world into which we are “thrown” and “condemned” yet “abandoned” and “free” (Heidegger and Sartre), a world which appears to be indifferent or even “absurd” (Camus). (p.ix)

The question is where did these existentialist authors get their claims of a “broken, dislocated, absurd” world?

The answer, partial of course, comes from Nietzsche’s critique, among others, of rationality, subjects, and morality. Dreyfus (2009) affirms, “All the existential thinkers share the view that what Nietzsche called “the Socratic will to truth” has not fulfilled its promise but rather, has undermined the possibility of a good life” (p.156). The question then becomes what

is a good life and how do we live it? The answers vary among the existentialists. Kierkegaard for example, thought that Christianity (free from Augustinian Platonism) was the answer, unlike Nietzsche who saw Christianity as part of the problem. Camus would eventually reject Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" and take a more Nietzschean approach, not to forget, incorporating anti-Nietzschean ideas.

"God is dead", proclaimed Nietzsche (2008) in *The Gay Science*. This is perhaps his most famous sentence and, at the same time, the most misinterpreted. The death of God does not mean the death of humans, instead, God's death has created this "dislocated," "broken" world but it has also opened the possibility of a world where humans live without the necessity of any sort of metaphysical self-deception. We have the chance to, and must, become gods ourselves, Nietzsche would say. Life is a constant overcoming, even when we do not know what it is that we are becoming and there is no need to know it.

"God is dead and we have killed him" announces the madman in the *Gay Science* (Nietzsche, 2008) and therefore declares his disbelief in all the metaphysical certainties that have aided the construction and maintenance of the European civilization. Peter Sedgwick (2009) explains this line, "In simpler terms, modern science, according to Nietzsche, has begun to explain the world in a manner that no longer requires the notion of a living divinity to animate its innermost workings. God has become redundant, but the consequences of such redundancy, are for the present at least, obscure" (p.34). It might seem paradoxical that a person, who critiqued science as much as Nietzsche did, proclaims that science has killed God. Following his sarcastic and ludicrous style, he thinks that scientists have killed God just to replace him with reason or science itself. God is dead. Long live God disguised as reason, science, history, or structure.

With his announcement Nietzsche inaugurates a tradition that would become popular in

the 20th century, a tradition concerned with the death of metaphysics. For him, metaphysics equals error. "...one may designate it the science that treats of the fundamental errors of mankind – but does so as though they were fundamental truths" (Nietzsche, 1996,p.22). This critique of metaphysics as a tradition became popular with movements like structuralism, poststructuralism, and existentialism. Nonetheless it could be argued that none of them escaped transcendental metaphysics to explain the human condition.

Moving forward with the premise that God is dead, existentialism finds in Nietzsche arguments to construct their irrationalism contra Platonic and Kantian rationality. Dreyfus (2009) highlights some common places between Nietzsche and the existentialists:

1. There is no human nature...
2. Therefore human nature and the world can radically change – be transformed...
3. Commitment is more important than ethical principles. The individual is higher than the universal.
4. The involved point of view reveals a reality more basic than the revealed by detached reason and theory. Truth is subjectivity.
5. Belief in God as a super – being is no longer possible or necessary for us, but that opens up the possibility of other ways of understanding and relating to the divine. (p.159)

Even though Nietzsche is considered a founder, or precursor, of the existentialist movement, at the same time he is also regarded an anti existentialist. The death of God and our subsequent ascension to his level does not pose a problem for Nietzsche who, unlike Dostoyevsky, thinks that this creates new humans, "free spirits" like there were never before in the history of any culture. "In exulting the free spirits who thrive on overcoming. Nietzsche is, in an important way, an anti-existentialist. All the existential thinkers we have been considering

[Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky], as well as more recent existentialists like Sartre, inherit from the confluence of the Greek and the Judeo-Christian traditions a need for something absolute and unchanging in human life” (Dreyfus, 2009, p.159).

Dreyfus refers to Nietzsche’s thoughts about absolutes as anti-existentialist and at the same time somehow strengthens Camus’ argument against his forced association with Sartre and the so-called existential thinkers. After all Camus (1955) is critiquing precisely this existentialist “nostalgia” for the absolute. Thus Camus is more a Nietzschean than an existentialist. He argues with Nietzschean thesis and challenges those ideas whenever they need to be challenged, and even more interesting, as Camus (1968) mentioned, most of the time you can correct Nietzsche with more Nietzsche.

Camus’ Nietzscheanism

Nietzsche wrote:

The philosopher supposes that the value of his philosophy lies in the whole, in the structure; but posterity finds its value in the stone which he used for building, and which is used many more times after that for building—better. (2000a, p.156)

This aphorism, prophetically, describes Nietzsche’s own destiny. Although several times misinterpreted and misapplied (e.g. Nazism), his legacy goes beyond systems (if any) that he might have built but in the materials that he left for others to use. Existentialism and poststructuralism are perhaps the most widely recognized descendants of his thought and postmodernism in some sense, even when Lyotard turned to Kant instead⁵.

Camus indeed used the stones that Nietzsche left. The critique of Platonic rationality,

⁵ See Schrift (1995)

Judeo-Christian morality, and the transcendence of the individual beyond any metaphysical absolutes or universal truths are all part of what Camus' inherited from his German "mentor". At the same time, one cannot avoid wondering if Camus is the "philosopher of the future" that Nietzsche (2000b) describes in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

Are these coming philosophers new friends of "truth"? That is probable enough, for all philosophers so far have loved their truths. But they will certainly not be dogmatists... "My judgment is my judgment": no one else is entitled to it—that is what such a philosopher of the future may perhaps say of himself. (p.243).

He champions a free spirit, a philosopher of deception rather than an advocate of the Enlightenment, "a figure that radiates as much darkness as it does light" (Sedgwick, 2009, p. 54).

"Knowing whether or not man is free doesn't interest me. I can experience only my own freedom," says Camus (1955, p.56) in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and resembles one of these philosophers that incarnate Nietzsche's prophecy in the *Antichrist* (1920) about men who will understand his Zarathustra and that probably are not born yet.

The Greeks divided Philosophy into three areas: Theory of knowledge, Ethics, and Metaphysics (Dreyfus, 2009). Ethics dealt with the question: How should we act? Socrates, and Plato through him, thought that there must be universal rules that all humans should follow once they really know what they want in order to get it. Nietzsche tries to answer the same question adding how should we act after the death of God?

And Camus (2000) understands Nietzsche's ethics in terms of the question "Can one live, believing in nothing?" His reply is in the affirmative. Yes, if one creates a system out of absence of faith..." (p.856). Kierkegaard, according to Camus (1955), thought that "despair is not a fact but a state: the very state of sin. For sin is what alienates from God", to which the

latter responds, “the absurd is sin without God” (p.40).

In other words Camus, the Nietzschean, expands his own project based on the stone that the German philosopher left. The absurd as understood by Camus, is the attitude of the “free spirits” that Nietzsche dreamt of. It is a struggle that implies “total absence of hope (...not despair), continual rejection (...not renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (...not immature unrest)” (Camus, 1955, p.31).

In Camus’ project the spirit of the Nietzschean “will to power” is alive. Absurdity can be equated to a mature Dionysian attitude. Sedgwick (2009) suggests: To be Dionysian is to affirm life not least through the teaching of eternal recurrence. It is to overcome the inherent suffering of existence identified by pessimism, not however by negating pain but by transfiguring it through celebration of the rich and dangerous possibilities of our animal nature...”. (p.38)

The absurd is Dionysian as it rejects suicide and despair. It affirms that life is worth living and asserts the necessity of creation in the midst of the desert.

The Will to Power, the Overman, and Eternal Recurrence

Before I elaborate more on the relation between Camus and Nietzsche, there are three ideas that I would like to expand: the will to power, the Overman, and eternal recurrence. These are key concepts that along with the Overman, deserve special attention, not only because they are implicit in Camus’ work but also because they are at the core of Nietzsche’s philosophy. At the same time these are concepts that defy precision thus I cannot venture to offer any completely satisfying definition, if such thing exists, of them.

Before getting into detail about these concepts before, I would like to introduce them with a critique of Nietzsche's readers formulated by Deleuze (2000) that sheds light on how we should approach his work. Of course this is only a suggestion considering that there is no true Nietzscheanism, however a suggestion that I would like to follow throughout this work. He stated:

As long as the reader persists in: 1) seeing the Nietzschean "slave" as someone who finds himself dominated by a master, and deserves to be; 2) understanding the will to power as a will which wants and seeks power; 3) conceiving the eternal return as the tedious return of the same; 4) imagining the Overman as a given master race—no positive relationship between Nietzsche and his reader will be possible. (p.858)

As Deleuze argues, when misinterpreted, which tends to happen when Nietzsche's prose is taken literally, he can be a dark prophet and the appropriation of his work by the Nazis⁶ clearly proves Deleuze's point. It is necessary then to avoid any attempts to interpret the will to power, the Overman, and eternal recurrence based merely on factual translations as they hide the profound concepts within the three key terms.

The will to power in its simplest interpretation can be seen as desire. Nietzsche's critique of transcendental truths inherited from the Platonic/Judeo-Christian tradition finds its drive in the will to power. It is the will to power what allows humans to live after the death of God. Not only live but also become Gods themselves. Solomon (1974) explains this survival mechanism in the following terms: "...Nietzsche takes a naturalistic approach to moral reasoning. There are no a priori moral principles; there are only desires, all of them reducible to a single psychological drive, "the will to power"" (p.43). Power, as Solomon adds a few lines later in the same page, is

⁶ Nietzsche's work is rich in comments against Anti-Semitism. He also condemned his sister Elizabeth for her engagement to a well-known anti-Semite.

not political power but “the “spiritual” power of the artist or saint”. For Nietzsche the Dionysian act of creation is the will to life, to overcome, and to become.

Desire is the psychological drive behind everything we do according to Nietzsche. The Overman and the “slave” of morality are driven equally by the will to power, but the latter is the will of the weak. At this point it is just to wonder, if our lives revolve around the will to power, does that mean that once we have gained that power our lives are complete?

The will to power is not a thing that you can obtain but a desire. It is desire to preserve life, to preserve humans, to go beyond what we are. It is an attempt of self-transcendence that can never be fulfilled. Its unachievable status is indeed what guarantees the existence of the will. “The feeling of pleasure lies precisely in the dissatisfaction of the will, in the fact that the will is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance” (Nietzsche, 1967, p.370). Thus when we think about the Overman, who seeks power, we shall not fall in the mistakes that Deleuze (2000) recommends avoiding.

The Overman is not a superior race, nor a master who controls slaves, or wants to impose his force and dominate the creation. It is an artistic spirit, forgiving Nietzsche’s romanticism, trying to go beyond himself, to overcome himself, to become indefinitely or as Arthur Danto (2005) thinks “We are more than we were, but less than we might become, and the higher fulfillment of ourselves as humans is that which we should seek” (p.180).

Additionally, Sedgwick (2009) articulately presents a notion of the Overman, “It is not something that is to be imposed in humanity by some superior power but an idea that, in the text of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we are invited to consider imposing upon ourselves” (p.110). The final words of this quotation exemplify Nietzsche’s rejection of any kind of universal morality as the Overman is not to be universally imposed but accepted individually. Even more, there is no

archetypal Overman that compared to others reduces their efforts to vane mimicry. Danto (2005) supports this argument stating. “Even in Zarathustra itself, no specific characterization is really furnished. As the ideal we are to pursue in our capacity as humans, it is goal of singular indefiniteness and unspecificity” (p.179).

The absence of a prototypical Overman can be explained through Nietzsche’s rejection of any kind mechanistic or teleological explanation of human existence. We must overcome what we are and become but becoming happens under different circumstances in Nietzsche’s ontology. Becoming is the core of the third concept that I want to expand in the following paragraphs: eternal recurrence.

Following once again Deleuze’s (2000) advice, we shall not fall in the temptation of simplifying the eternal recurrence as a tedious cycle where alpha and omega are transparent and immutable. Following this line of argument would be falling in a mechanistic interpretation, which is far from Nietzsche’s intentions.

Assuming the cyclical hypothesis would account to accept that there is a final state towards which we have to move. If we are moving towards a certain state there must be an initial state that is exactly the same as the final to fulfill the cycle. Doing this will be assuming some sort of *telos* in Nietzsche’s philosophy.

He writes, “This conception is not simply a mechanistic conception; for if it were that, it would not condition an infinite recurrence of identical cases, but a final state” (1967, p.549). In a different page from the same book he adds:

Becoming must be explained without recourse to final intentions; becoming must appear justified at every moment (or incapable of being evaluated; which amounts to the same thing); the present must absolutely not be justified by reference to a future, nor the past

by reference to the present. (1967, p.377)

The eternal return can be a thorny theme in Nietzsche's philosophy, especially if we consider the fact that he did not amplify the idea in any of his books. He briefly and explicitly mentions it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006), *Ecce Homo* (2000c), and *The Gay Science* (2008).

As I have mentioned several times, it is not correct to identify one true Nietzscheanism but there are several readings and all of them can contribute with something important about his thought. In order to construct my argument I will follow a line of thought defended by Deleuze (2006) in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* about the eternal recurrence. Coincidentally, I will return to the eternal recurrence to explain how it works in Camus' philosophy and to elaborate an argument about communication as eternal recurrence. However, now I would like to explain eternal recurrence, first from a widely accepted perspective and second from Deleuze's point of view. Although not opposed to the first account, Deleuze contributes with a particular ontological argument that I will expand in the following lines.

To illustrate the first interpretation of the eternal recurrence I will use the work of Sedgwick (2009), and Kaufmann (1974). In *The Gay Science* (2008), we find probably one of Nietzsche's most famous aphorisms. I will quote it entirely for the sake of clarity and although it is a lengthy passage, its importance is crucial to understand the eternal recurrence from the first perspective. Nietzsche writes:

The Heaviest Burden. What if a demon crept after thee into the loneliest night

loneliness some day or night, and said to thee:

This life, as thou livest it at present, and hast lived it, thou must live it

once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every

pain and every joy and every thought and every sight, and all the unspeakably small and

great in thy life must come to thee again, and all in the same series and sequence—and similarly this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and similarly this moment, and I myself. The eternal sand–glass of existence will ever be turned once more, and thou with it, thou speak of dust! Wouldst thou not throw thyself down and gnash thy teeth, and curse the demon that so spake? Or hast thou once experienced a tremendous moment in which thou wouldst answer him: “Thou art a God, and never did I hear anything so divine!”. (pp.171-172)

Would you gnash your teeth and curse the demon or would you be delighted and welcome such announcement as a blessing? Here rests the core of the explanation that scholars widely accept as correct. The ascetic ideal that Nietzsche critiques in *The Genealogy of Morals* (1956) presents existence as the preparation towards a better state. The promise of heaven, according to Nietzsche, also serves as a rejection of the importance of our own existence. If we will reach a perfect state in the afterlife, this world is not as important as the promised one. Thus, our own existence is nothing but a preparation for the following life.

The ascetic ideal therefore detaches our lives of any kind of perfection (in a Nietzschean sense) achievable in the present and makes it only a threshold where we wait for a reward. Even when people work towards that ideal, the action is not meaningful in itself but meaning to our existence will be assigned only if we achieve this perfect state. Nietzsche critiques this ideal as he thinks that it renders humans as imperfect creatures whose lives cannot transcend in the present but only in an ultimate ideal stage. Well then, what if a person encounters him/herself involved in the situation that Nietzsche’s describes? Who would think that this is the most horrible punishment and who would be delighted with such announcement? Nietzsche thought that this kind of eternal recurrence would be a punishment for regular people but a pleasurable

experience for the Overman. Hence the question itself is a test to separate the Overman from the rest. The “slave” finds the eternal repetition of life unbearable because he, or she, thinks that his, or her, reward is in the afterlife. The Overman, on the other hand, happily accepts the opportunity, as it means eternal becoming.

Nietzsche thought that everything that happens in the universe has happened before. He argues that if we were moving to a final state it would have occurred long time ago. Therefore events must repeat eternally over and over, rendering life meaningless, which obviously is closely related to absurdity, as, conceived by Camus. Curiously, Nietzsche thought that this was his most important idea, and in fact thought that it could be scientifically tested and proved⁷. Unfortunately, soon after he came up with the idea, he suffered a mental breakdown that paralyzed him and eventually led to his death.

If things happen over and over, eternally, if everything that happens now already happened before, it seems as if the cyclical interpretation of the eternal recurrence would be accurate. Nietzsche’s story about the devil announcing life’s perpetual repetition definitely falls in that category. Nonetheless, if we go back to the quotation from the *Will to Power* (1967) that I presented above, it is clear that Nietzsche rejected the mechanistic interpretation. Deleuze (2006) offers an analysis of eternal recurrence that goes beyond the problem posed. The problem according to Deleuze is in the manner that we treat being and becoming.

The eternal recurrence is not an original contribution of Nietzsche as the ancient Greeks (Pre-Socratics) already mentioned it. In fact, Nietzsche read, and admired, Heraclitus who thought that things in the universe were ceaselessly repeating themselves. However, Deleuze (2006) thinks that:

⁷ In fact Nietzsche was considering going back to college to specialize in the hard sciences to combine it with his philosophical work and prove his theory.

We must understand that Nietzsche does not recognize his idea of eternal return in his predecessors of antiquity. They did not see in the eternal return the being of becoming as such... They even saw it as the opposite, a subjugation of becoming, an avowal of its injustice and the expiation of this injustice. (p.29)

In other words, Deleuze claims that Nietzsche's eternal recurrence does not identify a final state, because there is no need in doing so. If others do, it is because they assign being only to departure and ending. Becoming, as commonly conceived, represents moving from point A to point B. Thus, it is inferred that being is only possible at the points A and B, but not at becoming. This is why I opened this section mentioning that becoming is fundamental to understand the eternal recurrence.

“All we need to do to think this thought is to stop believing in being as distinct from and opposed to becoming or to believe in the being of becoming itself” (2006, p. 48), answers Deleuze, to the question of becoming as eternal recurrence. Then we can deduct that becoming is being in itself. A and B do not happen over and over, but on the contrary it is becoming what is constantly returning or as Deleuze (2006) puts it, “It is not being that returns but rather the returning itself that constitutes being insofar as it is affirmed of becoming and of that which passes” (p.48).

The eternal recurrence then, is the absurd in itself. Danto (2005), without noticing, or explicitly stating it, describes the eternal recurrence in a manner that resembles absurdity as Camus thought about it. He states, “It does not matter that we pass away and return and pass away again. What counts is that we eternally do, the joy in overcoming, whatever our task may be, and the meaning we give to our lives. And all of this for the sake of the thing itself, not for any consequences: for it leads to what it has led to and always will” (p.194).

Nietzsche (2000c) writes: “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*⁸, that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity” (p.714). Camus would compare this attitude to the great Titan Sisyphus. *Amor fati* is not conformism but rational acceptance of the limitations of our life, and our knowledge. Wishing that things were not different does not mean tedious uniformity but the opportunity to repeat our chances over and over. Choosing things again, making mistakes, change decisions, keep them as they are, and more. Living over and over is not necessarily a movie that repeats endlessly but the chance to become forever.

In a posthumous note, Nietzsche asserts, “My doctrine states, so live that you must desire to live again. This is your duty”, later he adds, “Let us stamp the form of eternity upon our lives, what effect has the doctrine of eternal damnation has had! This life is your eternal life” (as cited in Danto, 2005, p. 194-195).

In this chapter I have explained how Nietzscheanism cannot be considered as a single unified school of thought but as several interpretations of the work of one of the most influential philosophers in history. With that in mind, I have tried to offer an explanation to some key concepts from his work that will help us understand Camus’ position. Particularly, I have chosen to focus on the will to power, the Overman, and eternal recurrence as ways of drawing parallels between Nietzsche and Camus. In the following chapter I shall offer an account of the work of Albert Camus and absurdity. It will be easier to understand Camus’ existentialism from the Nietzschean perspective and then maybe understand his rejection of the label.

I would like to conclude this chapter mentioning how frustrating it can be to dedicate only a chapter to Nietzsche. His work is so vast and rich that I feel that these few pages do not

⁸ Love of fate.

do justice to his thought. Nonetheless, this project is about Camus and communication, therefore I hope that the reader will forgive my brevity and have in mind that Nietzsche's thought will be present in the majority of the arguments elucidated here.

Chapter 3

Albert Camus: his life and thought

There are people like Nietzsche who only get the recognition they deserve posthumously. Even worse, sometimes they are recognized by causes that they did not endorse, for example Nietzsche and Nazism. As Camus mentioned, “In the history of the intelligence, with the exception of Marx, Nietzsche’s adventure has no equivalent; we shall never finish making reparation for the injustice done to him” (1956, p.75).

Unlike his “spiritual ancestor,” Camus’ life is fantastic in a literary sense. It resembles a traditional “feel good” story that seems written by the best of the novelists. Born in a situation of extreme poverty, Camus became the center of the intellectual elite in France. His novels were read worldwide, he became the second youngest winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, after Rudyard Kipling and the first African author to receive the award, and he attained international celebrity as a more handsome version of Humphrey Bogart, well known for his stylish clothes, numerous romances, good sense of humor, and love for football (soccer) Sherman (2009b).

This chapter is dedicated exclusively to the life and thought of Albert Camus. Nietzsche provided us with a framework to better understand his thought. In the following pages I will present Camus’ original philosophical work. This chapter will be divided into four sections. First, I will offer a brief account of the life of Camus. His particular struggles through life will give us a better sense of how the shadow of absurdity was always present in his life. Second, I will advance the notion of the absurd, presented in the first chapter. In this section I shall elaborate in more detail the arguments from *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In the third section, I will follow Camus’ development of the absurd as stated in *The Rebel*. Although he never rejected absurdity as conceived in his first treatise, he was concerned with the ethical implications of

Sisyphus and decided to address them and take an ethical stance in *The Rebel*. Finally, the section entitled “Metaphysics of the Absurd”, will present a summary of Camus’ work, analyze its development, and examine his arguments in search of issues that may be problematic.

A pied-noir in the center of France’s intellectual elite

It is 1951 and Gabriel d’Aubarède interviews Camus and comments on how young people look at him as a leading figure.

...the new generation looks on you today as one of its masters... (This time the author of *The Plague* laughs out loud). A master, already! But I don’t claim to teach anybody!

Whoever thinks this is mistaken. The problems confronting young people today are the same ones confronting me, that is all. And I am far from having solved them. I therefore do not think that I have any right to play the role you mention. (1968, p.352)

This answer is most representative of Camus, who never stopped being a humble Algerian who happened to arise from extreme poverty to become one of the greatest intellectuals of his time. Curiously those thinkers who had a privileged life critiqued Camus for not being “engaged” enough. Camus was a philosopher of life and practice and not a theorist of it. In the following pages I will briefly go over Camus’ life and the road that took him from poverty and anonymity to being a world renowned author.

Albert Camus was born in Mondovi Algeria on November 7, 1913. His parents were of French descent but born in Algeria what back in those days was called a *pied-noir*⁹ in Algerian and French society. The Camus family was very poor. Lucien Camus was a cellarman in a wine company until the French army drafted him. He died in the Battle of the Marne, in World War I,

⁹ Black-foot

only one year after his son Albert was born.

Catherine Sintès, Albert's mother who was of Spanish descent, was a cleaning lady who never learned to read¹⁰ and was partially deaf. After Lucien's death, Albert and his mother moved to Belcourt, where Camus grew up in a small room that he shared with his mother, older brother, a mute uncle, and his grandmother.

Camus was a brilliant student and under the tutelage of Louis Germain¹¹ he earned a scholarship that allowed him to attend a private and prestigious high school, which otherwise his family could not have afforded. At the age of 17, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, a disease that would haunt him for the rest of his life. He was forced to move out of his house due to the risk of contagion, and lived with his aunt and uncle. The couple owned a butcher shop and therefore had a more comfortable economic situation. With them, Camus realized that there was more to life than the harsh situations that he had experienced growing up in poverty.

Back in high school, Camus met Jean Grenier, his Philosophy professor, who would become one of his most important influences. In fact the two exchanged correspondence until Camus' death. Under Grenier's guidance, his interest in philosophy increased. At the same time he came in contact with the work of André Malraux, who Camus (1968) recognizes, along with Grenier, as pivotal in his own work. David Sherman (2009b) recognizes a particular stance in Camus' early influences:

Unlike many French thinkers... Camus' interest tended not toward German philosophy but rather toward the ancient Greeks. The one notable exception to Camus' general indifference toward German philosophy was Nietzsche, who initially trained as a

¹⁰ Camus dedicated his last and incomplete novel *The first man* (1995) "To you who will never be able to read this book".

¹¹ A professor in high school who influenced Camus in his early years

philologist, had himself been enamored of the ancient Greeks, and, in particular, their aesthetics, to which Camus himself was also powerfully attracted. (pp.11-12).

Camus would continue his studies in philosophy and eventually earned a *diplôme d'études supérieures* (equivalent to an M.A) writing a dissertation titled “Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism: Plotinus and St Augustine”.

At the same time, Camus held several jobs to support himself and his first wife Simone Hié. Eventually he served as editor and journalist at *Alger Républicain*, a newspaper aligned with the working classes, and combatant of fascism, which was rapidly expanding around Europe at the time. At the newspaper he met Pascal Pia, also an editor, who would become a good friend. In 1939, at the dawn of World War II, the situation in Algeria was no longer tolerable. After the military authorities banned the *Alger Républicain*, Camus had to emigrate from his beloved Algeria. Fortunately for him, Pascal Pia was able to secure a position for himself and Camus as editors at *Paris-Soir*, an independent newspaper in France.

In Paris, the journey that would eventually lead Camus to his association with the Parisian intellectual elite begins. During the German invasion, he joined the French Resistance through the clandestine and subversive newspaper *Combat*. In 1944, after the liberation, he continued to work in *Combat*, where Pascal Pia, had become an editor. Now a legal publication, *Combat* served as the place where Camus would meet and become friends with Jean Paul Sartre, who often collaborated with the paper.

But let us step back and go to 1940, the year when Camus finished what is called his first cycle of works or “the absurds”: *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Stranger*, and *Caligula*: a philosophical essay, a novel, and a play respectively. The same year, he married again, and moved to Oran, Algeria, which would be the site of his future novel *The Plague*. While in

Algeria, in 1942, he suffered a severe relapse of tuberculosis and had to move back to France. The same year the house Gallimard published *The Stranger*.

Sick and virtually trapped in his house in France because of the disease and the Nazi invasion, he worked on what would become his second major cycle, which was concerned with rebellion in the face of absurdity. Again a philosophical essay, a novel, and a play were part of the cycle. He worked on *The Plague*, and *The Misunderstanding* (novel and play) and at the same time took a position as a manuscript reader at Gallimard. His essay, *The Rebel* would come up later in his career. In 1947 *The Plague* was published, and Camus' already established authorial grew. The book turned out to be more popular than *The Stranger*.

During the following years Camus became increasingly involved in the political scene. From his unaligned perspective, he equally critiqued the United States and the Soviet Union for the conditions of the working class, which would eventually led to him being ostracized by the French intellectual left. However Camus was sympathetic of the leftist cause and believed in some sort of democratic socialism, but with the advent of the Cold War, the political environment was so polarized that intellectuals saw Camus' position as contrary to the interests of the working class.

However he was not always criticized by intellectuals. In fact he was strongly involved in political causes, always writing, participating in demonstrations (several times with Sartre), and doing whatever was necessary to support the leftist cause. On the other hand, as time passed Camus became more and more critical of communism, the Soviet position, and especially Stalinism. The left saw this as supporting capitalism and the United States, which he never did, and in fact vehemently rejected.

In the fall of 1951, *The Rebel* was published and his quarrel with Sartre reached its lowest

point, receiving wide coverage from media. Although Camus' book does not endorse capitalism, he is very critical of Soviet communism. Thus some right wing critics, who did not like Camus particularly, wrote some positive reviews about the book. Sartre, at the time editor of *Les Temps Modernes* (leftist), knew that a critique from his paper was necessary. The only problem was deciding who would do it. After all he still considered Camus, a friend.

The issue was problematic for Sartre and everyone in the editorial staff. After six months of discussion, he decided that Francis Jeanson would be in charge of writing the review. Sartre explained to Jeanson the reason for his selection with the words "at least you will do it politely¹²".

The review, of course, was negative and Camus took it as a personal attack from Sartre. In fact Camus' response was directed to Sartre, excluding Jeanson from the quarrel. After an unfriendly exchange of correspondence, the two ended their friendship forever. In one of his letters directed to Sartre, Camus wrote,

I am beginning to get a little tired of seeing myself—and even more, of seeing former militants who have never refused the struggles of their times—endlessly receive lessons in efficacy from critics who have never done anything more than turn their theater seat in the direction of history. (as cited in Aronson, 2004, p.145)

After his falling out with Sartre, Camus found himself politically isolated. He did not align with the Gaullinist¹³ right nor with the French communist party, supported by the left intellectuals at the time. For example, after a trip around the United States where he gave conferences about French thought, he critiqued the over commercialized American society, and

¹² From the documentary Camus vs. Sartre, retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iW74PnBIGo

¹³ Supporters of Charles de Gaulle

thus the capitalistic system. At the same time he denounced the Soviet concentration camps, to which Sartre responded with indifference, as he thought that the working class should not be disappointed finding out about the excesses of the Soviet regime and its communist government. By the end of 1952, he decided to retreat from the political arena, partly forced by this inflicted alienation and partly because his wife Francine was suffering a severe depression episode that required hospitalization.

In 1954, the Algerian revolution started, and Camus, a *pied-noir*, was torn between two sides. Although he supported Algerian independence, he did not support the FLN (Front for National Liberation) and their violent tactics, neither did he reinforce the colonialist injustices perpetrated by the French. The French left promptly expressed their support of the socialist FLN. Camus remained neutral. Although he denounced the atrocities of war over and over, as an intellectual pariah he no longer had influence. The conflict ended up with the Algerian independence, and almost a million military casualties. More than 800 thousand civilians were killed or tortured, and more than 900 thousand *pied-noirs* had to escape to France, as the hostility towards French descendants dangerously increased during and after the conflict.

Camus, the moralist, thought that rebellion in the 20th century meant rebellion against war, and being an Algerian he knew well the consequences of the independence he supported. “*Neither victims nor executioners*” is the title of a series of essays by Camus (1991) where he explores revolution in the 20th century, or the “century of fear” (p.117) as he calls it. He always rejected any form of revolution that involved death. After the horror of World War II, it was necessary, he thought, to fight against war, instead of thinking that revolution required one.

In 1957 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and unlike Sartre years later, he accepted the honor, mentioning during his speech how unworthy of the award he considered

himself. During the celebratory banquet, a nationalist Arab confronted Camus and reproached him for not supporting the FLN. He responded, “Between defending justice and defending my mother, I will always defend my mother” (as cited in Sherman, 2009b, p.19). His answer was readily critiqued by leftist intellectuals who, overlooking the true nature of Camus’s response, saw it as a colonialist attitude. He was rejecting any kind of “just cause” that required terrorism, torture, or some sort of violent tactic that would lead to human losses, to kill someone’s mother.

Sadly, those who eagerly ostracized Camus were silent about the Soviet Union¹⁴, and the atrocities that they were committing in the name of revolution. Camus mentions his mother before justice while in the Stalinist Russia children were invited to denounce their parents if they spoke against the regime, which lead to their execution under the charges of being reactionaries. Camus thought that murder could never be justified.

In 1958, he suffered another bout of tuberculosis and moved from Paris to Lourmarin, a small town in the south of France, where he kept working mostly on plays. During 1959 he started working on an autobiographical novel, *The First Man*, which he never concluded and was published posthumously.

On December 30 of 1959, he wrote a letter to Maria Casarès, his long time lover, regarding his return to Paris, with the words “Let’s say Tuesday in principle, taking into account any surprises on the road... (as cited in, Bloom, 2008, p.262). Five days later, January 4 of 1960, Camus died in a car accident while driving to Paris with his friend and publisher Michelle Gallimard, and his driver. In the pocket of his coat a train ticket was found as he originally had planned getting to Paris by train. Camus was killed instantly in the accident. He was 46.

Close to the wrecked car, lay a muddy valise that belonged to Camus and that was

¹⁴ Sartre only denounced it in 1956 after the Red army crushed the Hungarian revolution, even when he had visited The Soviet Union in 1954.

immediately sent to his wife. In it she found a copy Shakespeare's *Othello* and of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. Also in the briefcase, Francine Camus found the unfinished manuscript of *The First Man*.

“In this century, and running counter to history, he was the current heir to that long line of moralists whose works perhaps constitute what is most original in French literature. His stubborn humanism, narrow and pure, austere and sensual, fought an uncertain battle against the massive, misshapen events of our times”, wrote Sartre (2009, p.174) in a moving obituary that he wrote for Camus, four days after his death, putting an end to a quarrel that perhaps was exacerbated by the media, and by the political polarization of a poisonous historical period.

Camus' life seems taken from a romantic novel. From his days of poverty, to his rise to stardom, going through his Don Juanism¹⁵, his permanent health issues, and his early death, Camus embodied the absurdity of the world and the consequent rebellion that he argued for. Against the backdrop of his life is work makes more sense, and becomes clearer. Nietzsche recommended living your life so that you must desire living again and Camus in the midst of absurdity followed his advice.

Camus reminds us that the death of God and the absurdity inherent to our life does not lead to despair. In fact suicide, and logically despair, is precisely what he tries to reject in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his first philosophical treatise. The following section deals with this work where he sets the notions of absurdity as an emotion, and the consequences of it.

¹⁵ Don Juan was one of Camus' absurd heroes.

The Myth of Sisyphus

O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible. —

Pindar, Pythian iii

Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* with this epigraph. In a Nietzschean turn, it is not a coincidence that he goes back to an ancient Greek, his introduction reminds us that this is not an effort to understand or to decipher any transcendental truth behind human life. On the contrary, Camus is trying to exhaust the limits of logical understanding, which can only happen when the well-known finitude of our life is analyzed. *The Myth of Sisyphus* is not a philosophical treatise as it is by no means an attempt to impose rationality and find explanations of the world. On the contrary, Camus' project deliberately rejects any metaphysical assumption of a transcendental truth, and like Nietzsche with nihilism, his work is a description of the absurd.

The absurd is not a concept but a feeling, an emotion. “The feeling of the absurd is not, for all that, the notion of the absurd. It lays the foundations for it, and that is all”, writes Camus (1955, p. 28). Without a doubt, this is a sentence that enlightens as much as it obscures, but as I have mentioned before, Camus' style is not that of a scholastic philosopher thus it is not a surprise to find this kind of argument. Besides, the absurd rejects any stable definitions hence it would be tautological to demand a stable definition of it.

The feeling of the absurd is described in *Caligula*, a play about the Roman emperor and his confrontation with a meaningless existence that leads him to nihilism, which degenerates into Caligula considering himself a God, who humiliates, tortures, and kills whoever he chooses. For him an absurd existence does not necessarily require an absurd morality, there is no moral distinct between acts, to the point that Caligula considers every action in the world to be equivalent to each other. His confrontation with the absurd, and a good description of the

feeling, can be summarized in Caligula's haunting pronouncement, "Men die; and they are not happy" (Camus, 1958, p.8). However, Camus does conceive an absurd morality and an ethical position to deal with the absurd.

Caligula exposed the basic conflict of the absurd. Camus thought that, "The absurd is born of this confrontation between that human need [happiness and reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world" (1955, p.28). Nietzsche had inaugurated the absurd with the "death of God". The absurd is that empty infinite space that the absence of God has created. The eternal silence of that void that frightened Pascal (1970) is exactly what creates the feeling of the absurd. But Camus lived in an entirely different world from Nietzsche and Pascal. The Great Depression, two wars that annihilated millions of people, Hiroshima, The Iron Curtain, are all events that contributed to a (post) modern world where life seems to be void of meaning. Even further, Marx's prediction of a world where the working class becomes more and more alienated was truer than ever before. Consequently, the feelings of the absurd, the nausea that Sartre noticed, are stronger than ever when Camus writes. Thus his concern with the absurd moved him to write a philosophical essay to elaborate on the ideas exposed in *Caligula*.

This is how *The Myth of Sisyphus* was born. Published under Nazi censorship, in the occupied France, the book begins with the following inquiry,

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. (Camus, 1955, p.1)

In other words, Camus is not concerned with accurate descriptions of the absurd, as a concept and as a feeling, but with the consequences that emerge from it. For him the question is

not how can we understand the world through reason. He is concerned with ethics as the ancient Greeks dealt with it: how to live a good life? Particularly, for Camus, Is an absurd life worth living? That is the main issue that the absurd obliges us to answer and Camus' answer is affirmative.

Just like Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, life deserves the effort and the reason is not beyond our human condition but in our own mortal fugacity. Our existence occurs in set stage where we go to college, go to work, follow a schedule, eat healthy, have coffee with friends, enjoy our weekends, and multifarious patterns that we endlessly repeat. And the meaningfulness of our acts comes from different teleological arguments that religion and science readily provide. Camus initially critiques this repetitive life that the modern worker is used to living, and sadly the word 'live' in this case is a euphemism for 'suffer'. As Foucault (1983) thought, science creates subjects and we are disciplined to live in a discursively constructed world or in the words of Camus (1955), "We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking" (p.8).

Well then, since we are not only the consequence of X (e.g. God, structure, history, economy) but we also construct our world with a certain degree of freedom, we come to question our own existence and, "It happens that the stage sets collapse" (Camus, 1955, p.12), and one day we stop and ask: Why? That "why" is the first step to the awakening that succeeds the confrontation with the absurd. With consciousness begins the journey of the absurd person¹⁶, or in Camusean terms, "Everything begins with lucid indifference" (Camus, 1955, p.94).

Caligula's lover, his own sister, dies in the play written by Camus, and the main character recognizes his own ephemeral and fragile mortality. He recognizes the absurdity of his existence in an ordinary and inevitable event: death. Camus uses a hyperbolic image of the absurd (death)

¹⁶ Camus uses the term "absurd man" but I will try to avoid the gendered vocabulary

for stylistic and dramatic purposes; however he thinks that people also confront the absurd in their daily mundane activities. In our self-interrogations when we ask “why am I doing this?” and in our striving for something that we never achieve, we confront absurdity. Even if we, through repeated effort, achieve what we have been fighting for, happiness remains out of reach.

Nietzsche writes, “Man will sooner have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose” (1990, p.299). Purpose masks the inherent absurdity of our existence, thus we are accustomed to believe that a meaningful existence lies in the rewards we collect, whether it is here or in a transcendental state. Absurdity appears when the reward is not enough, when the promise does not fill a void, and inevitably the mask falls and reveals the eternal silence of the universe. The absurd is universal although the feelings are particular and subjective.

But if the absurd is universal, then it must work systematically and thus it could be theorized. Camus avoids any sort of systems for various reasons. One of them is based on the idea that, “There can be no absurd outside of the human mind” (1955, p.30), which is why there can be no theory of the absurd, because as soon as we step back, to objectively theorize, the absurd no longer exists. Just like a world that is intersubjectively constructed cannot be objectively explained, the absurd cannot be explicated for that would imply an ontology of the absurd, which Camus rejected.

Although, it is complicated to argue that Camus did escape from metaphysical explanations of the world, his project has a primordial difference with the work of “other existentialists”. The biggest difference is that Camus’ argument in the *Myth of Sisyphus* is not based on traditional existentialists authors such as Heidegger, Sartre, or Kierkegaard. His argument in the book is mostly Nietzschean, and as Dreyfus (2009) claims, Nietzsche is in many senses anti-existentialist. He is an anti-existentialist because he rejects “a need for something

absolute and unchanging in human life” (Dreyfus, 2009, p.159), something that all existentialists have in common, but that Camus’ avoids. He is not concerned with “existential structures”, which are invariable according to Heidegger, or a phenomenological ontology as conceived by Sartre. “In other words, Camus, is not ontologizing the Absurd: having described an experience, he is merely seeking to determine what follows from it” (2009b, p.42), as Sherman explains.

Therefore Camus’ rejection of systems is informed by Nietzsche who wrote in *Twilight of the Idols* “the will to a system is a lack of integrity” (1998, xiii). Seemingly, Camus (1955) thought, “For methods imply metaphysics; unconsciously they disclose conclusions that they often claim not to know yet” (p.11). The *Myth of Sisyphus* thus is not a systematic treatise about the absurd but the consequences of it and how to navigate through it. Robert Solomon thinks that, “Camus’ book is better understood as giving us a phenomenology, not a way of reasoning,” and what is being made is a “powerful appeal to our pre-philosophical feelings” (as cited in Sherman, 2009b, p.37).

In other words, Camus does not pretend to arrive at conclusions by following a philosophical method, first because of his rejection of systematic approaches. “A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world” (1995, p.6), wrote Camus. The absurd person realizes that the world is not familiar, it does not make sense, nonetheless we are here and we have to learn how to live in it. Second, because he thinks that there is nothing that could be explained, there is no essence of the absurd in the world, the absurd changes through time, and so does humanity, thus any attempt of unification is just a form of suicide.

In the first part of the book, Camus deals with suicide as a possible consequence of the absurd. He recognizes two kinds of suicide: the common attempt to end one’s life, and philosophical suicide. The former does not require further elucidation as Camus is writing about

killing oneself, literally. The latter, philosophical suicide is what Camus thinks critiques in modern science, religion, and philosophy. It is sacrificing the intellect for the sake of a “peaceful existence”. That is, systematic explanations of the world that assign meaning to our lives thus provide us with the “familiar world” that Camus mentions.

Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith renounces to rationality for the sake of God as the ultimate meaning of our existence. Kant thought that the limitations of reason make room for faith, and Descartes’ radical skepticism serves to prove the existence of God. The aforementioned thinkers philosophize in the shadow of God, as Nietzsche would say. However, Camus sees atheist existentialists like Sartre and Heidegger falling in the same trap. Both authors are concerned with an ontology of Being (structures of existence for Heidegger), in doing so they think that in fact there is something immutable, absolute, in human existence and the shadow of God, is not gone. In addition, following Nietzsche’s steps, Camus critiques science for killing God just to replace it with science.

Summarizing, he accuses of philosophical suicide any kind of system that claims to explain the world, assign meaning to our life, or sacrifice reason for the sake of an easier life. Just like Nietzsche rejected teleological or mechanistic explanations of the world, Camus rebuffed explanations of the human condition. Partly, this is why he did not accept the label existentialism, as he thought that any “isms” necessarily lead to systems, hence philosophical suicide.

On the other hand, it is easily arguable that this is Camus’ weakest point in the book. Not being a trained philosopher, his conclusions sometimes are not as rigorous as one would expect. Even more, it could be contended that he also commits philosophical suicide. At the same time, it is clear that his intention is not to construct a sound explanation of anything but a

phenomenological description of existence.

On the question of suicide, in its two variations, Camus firmly rejects both. As I have noted, the absurd does not lead to despair. This does not claim that people do not commit suicide, or suspend ethical action, in the face of the absurd. Camus thinks that it is the absurd person (or hero in a rather romantic jargon) who rejects it, somehow resembling the Overman who wants to transcend him/herself. Going back to Sisyphus is a good way to illustrate this rejection. Condemned by the gods, Sisyphus finds meaning in his absurd task. His rock becomes his world.

Sisyphus demonstrates his passion, embracing his task with love, after all it is *his* rock, *his* world. He rejects death with the same passion, and the gods, at the same time. His revolt begins when he takes control of his task, when the gods are no longer in charge, a rebellious Sisyphus looks at them with scorn. In a way, Sisyphus embraces Nietzsche's *amor fati*. If the demon showed up and told him that his life will be repeated endlessly, Sisyphus would be one of the few to receive the news with delight. Finally, his freedom exists insofar he is in control of his world. His struggle belongs to him, thus he is "master of his days" (Camus, 1955, 123). And as Camus points out later in the same passage, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (p.123).

Being a phenomenologist of existentialism (Sherman, 2009b), Camus' thought is centered in experience itself. Although, influenced by Husserl, like Sartre and Heidegger, he does not believe in any kind of "extra-temporal" essences. Since what concerns Camus is experience and life itself, not the explanation of the absurd but the consequences of it, his approach to the subject is stylistically different from other philosophers. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, the Homeric legend in itself constitutes a rhetorical aid to extend his arguments. Analyzing the last line of the

previous paragraph, and of Camus' book, Lise Revol-Marzouk (2009) explains that,

Imaginer, voir, contempler, regarder, les termes se répètent sans cesse, redoublant par la vision de l'auteur et du lecteur, le regard même du héros sur sa destine. C'est qu'il ne s'agit pas ici de philosophie abstraite, mais de philosophie pratique et sensible. (p.839)

[Imagine, see, contemplate, look, the terms are repeated ceaselessly, repeated for the vision of the author and the reader, the observation itself of the hero over his destiny. He is not concerned here with abstract philosophy but with practical and sensitive philosophy]

Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus* his basic assumptions about the absurd and rejects suicide in front of the absurd, which was the question that the essay aimed to respond. Nonetheless, when he concluded "the absurds" and particularly *Sisyphus*, he was not particularly happy with the ethical ambiguity present in them. Specifically he thought, that although he rejected suicide, the question of murder and its validity was yet to be answered.

His second cycle, "revolt" is concerned with this facet. He decides to elaborate an ethical treatise parting from the notion of the absurd. In this sense, Camus resembles more the French moralists (Pascal, La Bruyère, La Rochefoucauld) than the existentialists and at the same time supports Sartre's (2009) association of Camus with these authors. The following section will deal with *The Rebel*, Camus's philosophical essay on murder and the absurd. A sort of work on absurdist morality, this book was the cause of his quarrel with Sartre, and Camus' eventual retirement from the political arena.

The Rebel

"Having lived for a long time without morality, like many men of my generation, and having actually advocated nihilism, although not always knowingly, I then

understood that ideas were not only emotionally moving or pleasant-sounding games, and that on certain occasions, to accept certain thoughts amounted to accepting murder without limits”. (Camus, 2004b, p.207)

With these words Camus justifies his second major philosophical work, *The Rebel*. After the success of *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* he was deeply concerned with the ambiguity of his ethical positions. Although in *The Myth* he had rejected suicide, he felt that the ethics of the absurd were not entirely clear and that murder was not openly rejected in his “absurd” cycle. Mersault, confronted with the absurdity of his existence, kills a man in *The Stranger*, and Caligula kills more than one under the pretext that “all actions are equivalent” (1958).

Camus’ time is a time where the absurdity of human existence seemed to have found its summit. World War II, concentrations camps, an occupied France and the Vichy collaborationist regime, the Cold War, the rise of the Soviet Union and its repressive tactics, the United States and McCarthyism, etc. In addition to this, in the post war France, it was a common practice to execute those who collaborated with the Nazis during the war. Camus felt that politics, in this new age of absurdity, not the first and not the only one, had taken control over ethics and in fact it seemed that the latter was subjected to the former. *The Rebel* is a book written with all these atrocities perpetrated against humanity in mind, and an ethical response to these crimes. The purpose of the book, once again, was to reject murder and to come up with a sort of absurdist morality. Although he did not reject his original ideas from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the new book goes beyond absurdity to rebellion and solidarity while at the same time touches on the ethical implications of the absurd.

The original title of *The Rebel* is L’Homme révolté, which literally translated means “man

in rebellion”, or “a rebelled man”. Once again the translation does not capture the essence of the title or of the book. A rebel is a man who protests against something, a rebel cannot exist without X validating his protest by means of oppression. On the other hand, a person in rebellion is rebelling against existence and its inherent absurdity. Like the Overman, a person in rebellion, is trying to transcend him/herself thus he/she has to rebel against his or her human condition first. Camus describes a rebel as, “A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation” (1956, p.13). As the absurd conducts to indifference but not despair, rebellion is negation but not renunciation of the human condition. Revolution, at the time that Camus is writing, seemed to be the panacea for all intellectuals around the world. The left intellectuals in France, supported Marxist revolutions, and particularly The Soviet Union, and Camus is particularly harsh and critical of the Stalinist regime, which is precisely why this book will signify his ostracization from the French political life and his particular rupture with Sartre.

The Rebel deals with revolution, and what does it mean in an absurdist sense. Before elucidating for the reader what absurdist revolution looks like, Camus critiques the modern sense of revolution, and its imminent violence. He rejects what he calls “logical murder” and proposes that any ethical principles can only be local and temporal. “We can act only in terms of our own time, among the people who surround us “ (Camus, 1956, p.4). Through these lines Camus critiques political systems that had implanted systematic murder as a matter of state, and all justified for the sake of revolution or the ultimate state of it. Here, he is not only concerned with Marxist revolutions but also with The United States and its aggressive defense of Capitalism (e.g. witch hunting of Communists). Ultimately Camus is rejecting any kind of system of thought that presumes that a *telos* can temporarily suspend ethics or that morality has to be developed under certain political commitments.

The absurd sets a phenomenology of existence, and at the same time it is rebellion in itself; rebellion against an absurd existence, against death, and to an extent metaphysical rebellion. However Sisyphus is a solitaire rebel, his rock is his world, and his life has sense in the confines of his own subjectivity. Although Camus was trying to extol the characteristics of a rebel through Sisyphus, he thought that he felt short to describe a realistic rebel. Thus he makes a move from Sisyphus to Prometheus, and even when he does not reject Sisyphus as an absurd hero, he does think that Prometheus's actions can be judged as "*plus belles*,¹⁷" as Cherea replies to Caligula's ethical relativism.

The Titan Prometheus, according to Greek mythology, stole the fire from Zeus and gave it to the mortals. As punishment, Zeus sentenced Prometheus to be chained to rock, where an eagle eats his liver every day, only to have it regenerated in the night so his horrendous torture would go on forever. Pierre Grouix (2009) claims, "Là où Sisyphe manifestait la constance de l'effort absurde, Prométhée, s'il est par essence un homme du <<oui>>, est d'abord celui qui refuse le sort qu'on lui a assigné et qui proteste contre les rigueurs d'un droit injuste..." (p.727). [Where Sisyphus showed the constancy of the absurd effort, Prometheus, though he is essentially a "yes" man, is first he who refuses the fate assigned to him and who protests against the rigors of unjust law]

Although both mythical figures are "yes" men as Grouix puts it, that is they say yes to life, and embrace its absurdity represented in their condemnations, there is a difference that illustrates Camus' move from individual to social philosophy. Sisyphus also protests against his fate but his rebellion apparently has no communal implications, on the other hand Prometheus' deeds have a social end.

¹⁷ More beautiful or admirable

Against this figure who promotes rebellion based on solidarity, Camus presents another case of metaphysical rebellion: Cain. He contrasts the two, to separate modern revolution from absurd revolution or humans in rebellion. “With Cain the first kind of rebellion coincides with the first crime. The history of rebellion, as we are experiencing it today, has far more to do with the children of Cain than with the disciples of Prometheus” (Camus, 1956, p.32). The “Cainistic” revolution, and Camus has The French Revolution in mind, leads inevitably to violence, murder, and tyranny, thus revolution should be grounded in subjective experience that moves to collective solidarity not based on any system of thought, which is what the former proposes. Camus here makes a turn to social philosophy.

The Rebel then becomes Camus’ post-existentialist work. Sartre’s (1968) *Search for a Method* is an attempt of marriage between existentialism and Marxism. Camus’ attempt to go beyond the absurd takes the form of collective rebellion instead of solitary resistance. Steve Earnshaw (2006) describes Camus’ movement from Sisyphus,

What is different in *The Rebel*, however, is that now Camus argues that this rebellion is a communal response to a universal condition rather than an individual one. It is no longer the solitary outsider figure, clinging to the truth of his or her subjective world, which provides the rock from which to build, but the shared rebellion of all those who suffer... (p.105).

“I rebel therefore we exist” adds Camus (1956, p.22).

At this point, it seems that Camus has fallen in a metaphysical explanation of the human condition. He assumes that solidarity and rebellion are necessarily innate in people, which looks like philosophy in the shadow of God, and weakens his rejection of existentialism. Two arguments can be made about this, the first, simplistic in nature, is that *The Rebel* is Camus’

worst work. Solomon (2006) and Sherman (2009b) agree with this claim. Both authors are fond of Camus' work and assessed on a sympathetic reading nonetheless as philosophers they see Camus' argument poorly constructed and defended throughout the book. Nevertheless, they find the book interesting and valuable as a treatise about ethics. Once again, Camus' philosophy is grounded in experience and as so *The Rebel* can be a great phenomenology of ethics.

The second argument, if I may, is a personal argument on how to read Camus' project in *The Rebel*. I do agree with Sherman (2009b) and Solomon (2006) to a certain extent, as the book is far from being one of Camus' most elegantly constructed or aesthetic oeuvres. In fact, it can be rather tedious in some passages, which might be condonable if we consider that he only took one year to write the 306 pages. This compulsion to finish it is directly tied to the poisonous situation of the world at the time he was writing. Camus, the moralist, did not want the absurd associated with an ambiguous ethical position. His efforts to correct, explain, and sometimes reject his previous work lead to a book that could be deemed as poorly argued. Nonetheless, Solomon (2006), in a move that I endorse, states, "...I want to read most of Camus' bad "arguments" as appeals to ordinary experiences of absurdity, in other words, as everyday phenomenology" (p.46).

Following Solomon, I argue that to understand the ideas that Camus advances in his cycle of "rebellion," a Nietzschean lens is more suitable as a mechanism of interpretation, even when it sounds like an aberration to have Nietzsche and mechanism in the same sentence. By Nietzschean I mean understanding general claims not as generalizations of the human condition but as individual experiences bracketed under one name. The Overman, for example, is a concept that does not have an absolute goal but on the contrary is subjective self-transcendence. With this in mind I shall proceed to explain what Camus attempts to do with his turn from the

individual to the collective.

In a Cartesian move, Camus (1956) writes, “I proclaim that I believe in nothing and that everything is absurd, but I cannot doubt the validity of my proclamation and I must at least believe in my protest” (p.10). Thus the protest is meaningful in itself as it a proof of our existence. Nonetheless the protest against a *dérisonnable* world is a cry for unity, for “order in the midst of chaos” (Camus, p.10). It seems like Camus is dangerously flirting with metaphysics once again, but later he adds, “...it is absolutely necessary that rebellion finds its reasons within itself, since it cannot find them elsewhere. It must consent to examine itself in order to learn how to act”. And, as aforementioned, action is locally and historically bounded.

Thus true rebellion, for Camus, does not come from political, philosophical, or ethical systems but from our protest against absurdity. It derives from our attempt to transcend ourselves, for as he thought, “Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is” (1956, p.11). Rebellion then is not metaphysical but a consequence of an absurd world that does not care about our cry.

Here, a brief parenthesis to comment on metaphysics seems necessary. If it is true that rebellion is a consequence of an absurd world that does not care about our cry, then the absurd is Camus’ metaphysics. However, if we go back to Sherman’s (2009b) claim that Camus is not ontologizing the absurd, then I would argue that Camus is not ontologizing rebellion; the argument about Camusean metaphysics can be avoided, though not rejected. This maneuver is not a refusal to engage in deeper analysis but a faithful, which is different from correct, interpretation of his project. As Solomon (2006) claims, “... few philosophers [...] have been less interested with metaphysics and the epistemological problems that normally go along with it than Camus” (p.55). Hence, I shall leave the deconstructive step for whoever might be

concerned with it. It is Camus' existential phenomenology what concerns me, and experience can be contradictory, as we all know. Under this light, Camus' philosophical contradictions can be overlooked, in good nature and as he wrote, "The absurd is, in itself, contradiction" (1956, p.8).

So far, rebellion has not been entirely defined, thus I shall proceed to do so in the following lines. Rebellion is our attempt to go beyond ourselves, and at the same time our response to the absurdity and fragility of our existence. To commit suicide is to say that life is not worthy, thought Camus. Rebellion, on the other hand, is the affirmation of life. Sisyphus rebels against his fate and in doing so his effort becomes meaningful in the midst of a meaningless¹⁸ existence. In rebelling against his fate he proclaims his love for that fate, a Nietzschean claim.

Rebellion then, is not a violent reaction against an oppressive power, but indifference, and at the same time, acceptance of our condition. It is proclaiming that my life is in my hands, and although fragile and absurd, it belongs to me, thus happily I remain rolling my rock. But as I have mentioned before, Camus moves beyond this individualistic approach to a more social claim. If the absurd dictates rebellion, rebellion's consequence is solidarity, which is how absurd rebellion becomes a collective condition.

Solidarity is one of the main themes of the rebel. Having rejected suicide, Camus goes on and claims that to be rebel in the contemporary world is to reject violence. At the same time, he is not advocating passiveness in front of injustice, the title of one of his essays eloquently summarizes his position, "Neither victims nor Executioners", he wrote. For Camus, the world

¹⁸ For now on, I would like to present a rather slim definition of meaning in Camus, as I will elaborate on it in the following chapter. Meaning, for Camus, is "reference beyond itself" or "external appeal" (Solomon, 2006, p.43)

that we live in calls for action but action can never equate to murder, if fatalistic murder is inevitable, “logical” murder should not be.

Camus thinks that a rebel rejects violence, although there is no pure form of rebellion. He does not think that there is a model person in revolt. Revolt in this sense is self-transcendence, which is why I argue that Nietzsche is helpful to make sense of this cycle of rebellion. Revolt is individually achieved but collectively experienced, Camus claims.

This is where his argument becomes weak. He deduces that rebellion follows the absurd, rebellion and absurdity do not necessarily lead to suicide or murder, and rebellion is self-transcendence. On the other hand, his attempt to explain collective experience falls in a metaphysical argument that is poorly defended.

“There’s only identification of one’s destiny with that of others and a choice of sides. Therefore the individual is not in himself alone, the embodiment of the values he wishes to defend. It needs all humanity, at least, to comprise them” (Camus, 1956, p.17). Camus argues that the only proof that we have of our humanity is what we recognize of it in others. Our confrontation with the absurd creates a rebel, and from the moment that we rebel, we realize that we are not alone in this. We are all together in this absurd, unreasonable world, thus we identify with others in their struggle.

“When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical” (Camus, 1956, p.17). Here the argument becomes problematic, what started as a Nietzschean claim turns into a phenomenological idea. It seems as if Camus proposes that out of subjective rebellion, a transcendental essence could emerge in the form of solidarity. He provides a couple of examples to support his claim but none of them are really convincing. One of them is that people tend to

feel solidarity not only for those that suffer under their same conditions but sometimes from the mere spectacle of injustice. For example, although people tend to be more empathetic towards others that undergo the same injustices, they also tend to feel solidarity when an injustice is committed even if they are not affected by it or even when it is committed against an enemy. Even more, solidarity is not necessarily a good thing. Nazi partisans had solidarity to each other. Of course Nazi supporters were the opposite of a person in revolt. They thought that ethics could be adjourned by politics and a “higher goal”.

These examples lead Camus to conclude that solidarity must be in human nature, a thought highly informed by the ancient Greeks. “Why rebel if there is nothing permanent in oneself worth preserving? (1956, p.16), Camus asks. For him then rebellion is communal and solidarity is the proof of this. From the individual noticing the absurdity of his or her existence and rebelling against it, he/she moves on to recognize his or her struggle in others, thus the fact that we all roll our own boulder becomes the foundation for Camus’ collective solidarity. “I rebel therefore we exist” (1956, p.22), makes more sense from this perspective.

Even when I acknowledge how problematic Camus’ argument might be at this point, I want to follow Solomon’s advice and read *The Rebel* as everyday phenomenology, or quotidian experience. If solidarity cannot be rationally proved as metaphysical, at least it can be experienced as personal and subjective. I do not know if it is possible to bracket human solidarity to find its true essence, all that I can experience is my own form of solidarity. But going beyond the kind solidarity that is born in chains, the feeling can arise in the most mundane situations.

From the moment that I recognize the struggle of the other and the fragility of his/her existence, the “*Unbearable lightness of being*” as Milan Kundera brilliantly titled his novel,

solidarity occurs. As I write this, I read the newspapers and learn about people who died on the other side of the world, anonymous people that in theory do not affect my existence.

Nonetheless, I cannot help feeling a commonality, something that identifies me with these strangers. Their mortality reminds me of my own. Even a terrible person's death reminds me of the vainness of my existence. The most powerful person one can imagine and I will have the same end and one feels the urge to stop and ask, then what is the point of anything? Who has not felt solidarity towards someone else's death because we see our own condition there? And what is the biggest proof of the absurdity of our existence but death?

Embracing the absurd will necessarily require solidarity, otherwise we end in a world of Caligulas, children of Cain, and revolutions of systems and not of people. Any other sort of outcome is simply not an absurd reasoning but unethical action.

Metaphysics of The Absurd

Camus philosophical journey from the absurd to rebellion and solidarity, as found in the progression from *The Myth of Sisyphus* to *The Rebel* can be thorny, when thoroughly examined. It is not clear if the latter rejects the former or in fact advances the original argument stated in *The Myth*. Camus thought of the two works as a continuum where the notion of the absurd as examined in the first book, is not rejected in the second but revised in search of errors or overlooked issues. James Woelfel thinks that in *The Rebel*, Camus "returns to the absurd starting point and sees some implications he had not seen before. (1975, p.92). In other words, he tries to correct the individualistic Sisyphus with a more social Prometheus.

Sherman (2009b) offers a good explanation of Camus' turning point based on a Kantian argument. He explains that Kant thought that, "theoretical and practical philosophy are different perspectives that while irreconcilable, are still both valid" (p.107). In Kant's work *The Critique*

of Pure Reason belongs to the former category and *The Critique of Practical Reason* to the latter. Thus Sherman concludes, “Something similar is taking place in Camus’ change of perspective. Theoretically, he does not deny the Absurd, which has its own inherent “logic” but practically, as Cherea¹⁹ points out, the Absurd cannot be “soundly” lived, if, in fact, it can be lived at all” (p.107).

Sagi (2002) also contributes to the thesis of the continuum stating, “The progress marking the transition from one work to the other is the progress of absurd consciousness gradually discovering that human existence is constituted through concrete human relationships instead of through transcendent dimensions” (p.108). Nonetheless Sagi overlooks the fact that Camus actually ends up describing a transcendental dimension that emerges out of human relationships and that is solidarity. “... human solidarity is metaphysical” (1956, p.17), for people in revolt, writes Camus. Then it becomes necessary to question Camus’ rejection of metaphysics.

The first important issue to respond is: What is metaphysics? For Camus, metaphysics refers to unchanging and transcendental things, first causes, and other methods that try to explain the human condition. He does not deny metaphysics, which would be a metaphysical assertion, but defies and distrusts metaphysical explanations. Metaphysical systems cannot account for humans and their condition. Existence escapes systematical elucidation, thus our confrontation with the absurd. There is nothing to fill the gap between the silent world and us.

On the other hand, he is still philosophizing under the shadow of God when he claims that solidarity is metaphysical. Therefore, Camus keeps a residue of what he denies in his own philosophy. At the same time he conceives the absurd as feeling and not as an unchanging concept, and describes rebellion as personal awakening, or absurd consciousness. Finally,

¹⁹ The antagonist of Caligula, in the play of the same name.

solidarity is the metaphysical consequence of absurd rebellion. Nonetheless, Camus does not think of solidarity as a final state, thus his project is not teleologically constructed. There is no final state in his absurd reasoning neither a final explanation, solidarity is only a feeling but does not conduct to any rule of action.

We find ourselves in this absurd world and rebel against its absurdity, later we identify with others and recognize our own struggle in them and out of this recognition solidarity emerges. But there is nothing beyond that in Camus' work that attempts to explain the world in metaphysical terms. Solidarity arises but after that, it is in everyday experience that we negotiate our actions upon the world and others. Ergo, there is no right way of dealing with the absurd, but being in solidarity is the beginning of ethical action. The results of ethical action are to be tested through experience and there will never be a fixed result (with the exception of murder's rejection), because, as Camus (1956) wrote, "We can act only in terms of our own time, among the people who surround us" (p.4).

On the subject of metaphysics in Camus' work, Sagi (2002) thinks that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is rebellion against all metaphysics that cloud human consciousness. "By contrast in *The Rebel*, revolt is the beginning of a new metaphysics, a metaphysical revolt instead of a revolt against metaphysics, since revolt is a definite act whereby an individual rejects the conditions of life that were exposed in the absurd... Through revolt, individuals discover their ability to act and the basic values motivating their action" (p.112). Sagi, then accepts as a fact Camus' "fall" into the realm of metaphysics.

Thus, I argue that Derrida's endeavor and his quest for the "endless death of metaphysics" (Sherman, 2009a, p.209), is not important within Camus' project. In *The Rebel*, he introduces the book stating, "The important thing, therefore, is not, as yet, to go to the root of

things, but, the world being what it is, to know how to live in it” (1956, p.4). Camus’ phenomenology can be contradictory and that is why it is based on situated experience. As Sherman, informed by Kant, mentions, what is logical is not necessarily practical. The absurd is a logical argument but its soundness in life seems to be problematic. This idea will be clearly illustrated in the final chapter where I shall analyze *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, which in the best style of Camus, exemplifies his movement from the absurd to rebellion.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have covered the life and work of Albert Camus, his elucidation of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and his turn to solidarity and social philosophy in *The Rebel*. I have argued that Camus’ work is better understood as a phenomenology of existentialism or practical philosophy based on everyday experience. Therefore, I have also advanced the idea that Camus’ philosophy should not be read in an analytical manner, specifically *The Rebel*, has to be seen as an ethical phenomenology to take the best out of it.

Although seemingly contradictory, Camus’ practicality compensates for his spontaneous lack of theoretical soundness. Thus a deconstructive approach towards his work is not suitable to read his work, which is why I claim that Camus ideas are better understood through a Nietzschean lens, which helps us avoiding falling into teleological or mechanistic interpretations of his thought. Existence goes beyond our understanding, therefore Camus’ work, like Nietzsche’s, is descriptive instead of explanatory. His concepts should not be understood as final states but just as with Nietzsche, his notions are not universal rules but subjective recommendations to strive for self-transcendence and collective awareness, or absurd consciousness.

The absurd embraces life and rejects suicide. This attitude equates to rebellion but

individual rebellion is not enough, accordingly rebellion lead to collective solidarity. Under this umbrella, ethical responsibility is necessary and we must act. Action is only local, temporal, and situated, nonetheless absurd action shall reject murder, in other words attempt to construct a better world. All this based on the fact that we all share the load of an absurd existence, thus we have to navigate through it collectively or run the risk of falling in nihilism.

In the following chapter I will use these ideas that Camus presents, which supported by Nietzschean thesis, will help me to construct a framework to understand communication from a Camusean absurdist perspective. As Camus' work was not oriented towards communication, I shall incorporate some ideas from poststructuralism to correct, when necessary, or address issues that are unnoticed in Camus' philosophy. The purpose of the following chapter, then, is to contribute with an original perspective to describe communication from a perspective that has been shelved by scholars in the field.

Chapter 4

Undecidability, Absurdity and Übercommunication

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

George Bernard Shaw

“Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: Your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep sympathy. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday” (Camus, 1988, p.3). This is perhaps one of the most famous beginnings in world literature. Mersault, the main character in *The Stranger*, opens the book with this rather daunting thought. Going beyond its aesthetic quality, let us examine it from a communicative perspective. If a person said this to us, could we really understand what they are trying to convey? In the case of the fictional character, can we really understand what Camus was trying to express? How does the fact that we are reading a translation obscure the process even more? To express my concern in one question: Is communication happening in all these instances that I have mentioned?

That communication is possible seems to be normative among scholars in the field (Chang, 2002). Understanding is implicitly treated as a *telos* within communication, deeming misunderstanding as an aberration. There is nothing wrong with striving towards consensus and seeing communication as an instrument of harmony is without a doubt an ethical approach. On the other hand expecting understanding from every event regarded as communicative reduces communication to a linear model where accuracy accounts for success.

The transmission model has become less and less popular in the field and communication is held as much more than the exchange of information and meaning. However, even within these models understanding is always the ultimate goal. For example James Carey (2009)

thought that seeing communication, as pure transmission, although he argues that this is the dominant view in society, is shortsighted and proposes that communication can also be seen as a ritual where shared beliefs are represented, confirmed, and maintained. In other words, although he thinks linearity is not fully representative of communication, he also assumes that understanding is implicitly expected in order to have a successful ritual. We can only share beliefs if we all agree on them, even if sometimes we do not understand them, thus understanding and consensus is the goal if a rite is to be performed.

However, before getting into discussions about understanding as a goal of communication we should try to answer: What is communication? This is a problematic task considering that scholars in the field do not agree on a definition and a large number of them circulate in the literature. Dance and Larson (1976) counted 126 definitions, a figure that proves the diversity of approaches within the field. The situation is not different in terms of theoretical approaches.

James Anderson (1996) found 127 communication theories. Craig (1999), although concerned with the range of theories more than definitions, argues that we should not seek coherence in the field based on a universal model but in acknowledging that, “we all have something very important to argue about” (p.124).

I agree with the idea that a universal concept is not necessary, the best that we can say about communication is that we keep learning about it. It is precisely because of its protean nature that we should question why we implicitly expect understanding to occur as a consequence of communication. Although scholars acknowledge misunderstanding it is only as an error that we are supposed to overcome, after all we study communication and not miscommunication. Nonetheless, seeing communication as understanding or misunderstanding assumes that there is a final state of communication. In these terms communication happens or it

does not. In this chapter I will try to go beyond and reflect on the idea of communication as eternal becoming and not only as something that happens.

As the previous chapters, this will be divided in several sections. First I shall explain the purpose of my project, its characteristics, and utility. Second, based on the work of Camus and absurdity I will construct my framework extrapolating Camus' ideas to answer fundamental questions about communication. This section will be briefly interrupted by my third section where I will introduce poststructuralist thought in my research to address some issues that Camus does not deal with, specifically meaning and language. After doing so, I will retake my second section and offer a final description of my project. The framework then will be a hybrid of absurdity and poststructuralism (segments two and three) and an attempt to defend a post-poststructuralist attitude towards communication, which is a recognition of uncertainty and dispersion in communication but at the same time a sort of pragmatic attitude recognizing that we are in the world and we need to act and learn how to live in it.

Communication as absurdity

As there is no definition universally accepted across the discipline, following Craig's (1999) advice, I propose to offer my own take about communication. It is not a finished concept but a contribution to the field and of course a preamble to the absurd framework. Before defining the framework I would like to describe what absurd communication is.

In a volume edited by Shepherd, St. John and Striphas (2006), several scholars offer their perspective on communication. Among the twenty-seven responses, we find communication seen as: Relationality (Condit), Transcendence (Shepherd), Practice (Craig), Techne (Sterne), Dialogue (Baxter), Diffusion (Dearing), Rational Argument (Rowland), Dissemination (Peters). None of them deals with an existentialist approach. The closest to it is Chang's "Communication

as Communicability, a Derridean argument, and as I mentioned before the poststructuralists do not willingly recognize their debt to the existentialists.

Considering this hole in the literature I would like to propose that communication is also, though not only, absurdity. The original contribution in seeing communication's inherent absurdity is that we recognize its impossibility but at the same time its inevitability. In some sense absurdity is, and this is an argument that scholars have overlooked, a marriage between pragmatism and poststructuralism. We must find "solutions" through experience but at the same time deconstruct the solutions and notice the instability of any attempt of systematization.

As I try to conceive absurdity, and this is an ongoing process, I find myself thinking about the necessity of accomplishing tasks in the world through communication but also critique solutions apparently successful. In other words, "it works" should not be an ultimate answer as there are many issues to analyze within a successful solution. The absurd operates in the realm of impossibility navigated through experience. Solutions are temporal, and cannot be systematized; however we cannot fall in ethical ambiguity and endless deconstruction. Given that the world is what it is, we have no other option but to choose. An existentialist precept is that to live is to choose, and options, exercised through communication, are absurd.

A second way of seeing communication and closely related to the absurd is communication as eternal recurrence (Nietzsche). It is eternal becoming, thus no *telos* should be our orientation but the attempt itself is meaningful and productive. My approach is practical, a romantic definition of communication is not useful, and thus I argue for solutions, but temporal and unstable where no final state can be achieved. If communication could find a final state it would also find its death in that final state. In this sense, it is eternal becoming, where the process of becoming is the essential process and not necessarily the results. In other words from

an absurdist perspective, communication's importance lays in the attempt itself and not in the result. In this attempt we constitute our humanity and recognize those human traits in discovering the "other".

In this chapter I plan to construct a framework based on the two conceptions of communication: absurdity and eternal recurrence. Originally this idea started as a theoretical project, then it moved to a non-theory, though with theoretical implications, and at this point I can claim that my intention is not to develop a theory but a phenomenology of communication based on absurd ethics. Craig (1999) argues that theory is communication about communication, and my descriptive framework falls under this definition. Infante, Rancer and Womack (2003), explain that theory should fulfill at least one of the following purposes: description, explanation, prediction, and control. Nonetheless description requires a somewhat stable phenomenon to describe and I argue that communication is not something that can be described but instead the feeling of absurdity that emerges from our communicative interactions and the consequences from them are the subject of my description, which cannot be objective.

Thus my purpose is not to adhere to rigorous models to develop a theory or meet the criteria that Infante, Rancer, and Womack (2003) suggest for effective theory, which are: "logically consistent, consistent with accepted facts, testable, simple, parsimonious, consisted with related theories, interpretable, useful, pleasing to the mind" (p.40). The authors aforementioned deal with communication mostly from the transmission view and as an instrumental discipline, that is they are more concerned with sender, receivers, and mainly efficacy and accuracy, which is an approach that poses numerous problems as it reduces communication to a mere tool overlooking its infinite dimensions. A communicative theory, whose sole purpose is prediction and control, is not only unrealistic but also dangerous.

Communication constitutes worlds, realities, and even humans, thus “controlling” it as an instrument operates as what Foucault described as an episteme. That is: an apparatus where science is discursively constructed and it serves the causes of those who are in power. Foucault (1983) thought that through science, among other modes, human beings objectively become subjects²⁰ through science. For example, economics create the subject as a productive being. Biology focuses on being alive as a mechanism of objectivization, and disciplines like linguistics create the subject as a speaking being. If communication is theorized as an instrument we run the risk of becoming another device within this apparatus.

My point is that we should not attempt to construct any kind of predictive or controlling mechanism to constrain communication. As Foucault claims, humans are fictions constructed through knowledge. Communication, among others disciplines, constitutes our humanity. A systematic treatise of communication could systematically construct subjects; something perilous considering that human history is full of examples of what happens when systems guide, and cloud, our consciousness.

Consequently I propose a framework that does not label communication as good or bad. In “*Beyond Good and Evil*” Nietzsche (2000b) critiques this binary good/evil that is the base of morality. He advises us to go beyond it because the world has no transcendental, perfect state, thus passing judgment on it cannot be grounded on anything. In a similar sense, to claim that there is good or bad communication equals to say that there is a transcendental state that should be our *telos*. In that sense, I am not trying to theorize in a traditional way.

This framework should be seen as a heuristic device or a humble contribution to the discipline. Parallel to Camus’ attempt to describe the human condition and its consequences, I

²⁰ That can be read not only as a noun but as an adjective to describe subjection to X

will try to explain how this human condition is constructed, experienced, and navigated through communication. In the same way that he suggests temporal “solutions” to navigate our absurd existence, I shall propose “solutions” to navigate absurdity within communication, through communication. My framework is, a la Camus, a phenomenology of existence, where existence is created, mediated, and navigated through communication.

The communicative condition of existence and its absurdity

Communication as a constitutive force is widely regarded as a working paradigm in the field. In fact this is not a modern idea. Sophists like Isocrates and Protagoras already believed that the world was a human creation. The socially constructed nature of reality is more or less accepted by diverse schools of thought or traditions (Craig, 1999) and scholars deem communication as the creative force of the worlds we live in. Communication seen as absurd is not necessarily innovative as it works under the same social constructionist assumption.

Communication is understood as “experience of otherness” (Craig, 1999, p.74) under the phenomenological tradition, which is closely related to existentialism. For Camus, experience of the other can never happen, as we are condemned to be eternal strangers to ourselves. A claim that would inaugurate a tradition of anti-humanism embraced by poststructuralist authors, such as Foucault, and Derrida, based on the idea that subjects are fictional constructions, and the modern concept of a stable ego is an illusion. For Camus, although not the existentialists, as for poststructuralism, the ego is fragmented. Therefore, any possibility of experiencing otherness is limited to the experience of a fiction. Thus an absurdist perspective even though departs from a phenomenological claim, critiques its notions.

In absurd terms communication is a Sisyphean task, which is impossible but meaningful in itself. It is our boulder as true communication cannot occur, but we all have to keep rolling it

uphill, just to see our efforts vanish and start over. Along the same lines, communication is eternal recurrence. It is a state of becoming that never comes to be. On the other hand, this definition brings more problems than solutions. If communication never happens, how do we explain the fact that there is a world out there and that it works through communication, a pragmatic reader might ask? After all we do accomplish things and the world keeps going on.

My argument is that communication is eternal recurrence, or an absurd task, because communication has no ontology. Communication has no being, in fact if communication constitutes the world, then communication itself is a construction. I would elaborate more on this idea in the following section where I introduce poststructuralism into my framework because communication as a concept needs to be deconstructed to understand how I propose to use it. Going back to my first sentence, communication is a process of eternal becoming because we are not moving towards any perfect final state. I propose that we understand communication not as a “thing” that comes into being when understanding occurs but as an attempt of self-transcendence.

Communication creates the world through communication, thus it seems that we as communication scholars are falling in the realm of metaphysics. Seemingly communication operates as a God, creating everything but as an autarchic and inscrutable unit. Once again we should remember that communication itself is a social construction, thus its products are also constructions, and fictional constructions, although functional are nothing but fictions.

Communication works in different situations, which is different from communication happens or exists. Consensus, for example, is not necessarily an instance of communication but an illusion that understanding as a *telos* creates. We are disciplined, through communication, to negotiate, rationally if possible, with others to maintain a civil community. Therefore, consensus

can be the imposed result of communication. The fact that people come to agreement does not mean that they agree, nonetheless communication can operate as the life vest, in Camusean terms, that gives us the peace of mind that we require to go through the world. It is easier to assume that we have communicated than to realize the impossibility of this task.

My argument here is that communication could be considered as philosophy in the shadow of God. It seems that communication is always good as long as it creates consensus or understanding; nonetheless we tend to forget that communication also creates the subjects that intervene in a particular negotiation, the issues that they argue about, and the particular worldviews that inform the negotiation. Hence we have a result that comes out of cooperation between socially constructed subjects mediated by communication, also socially constructed. Nonetheless, even when we operate with such unstable components we still believe that there is a perfectible state where we should arrive. Understanding, the proof that communication has happened, works as a transcendental state. From an absurdist perspective we should value the fact that we try to communicate, the attempt in itself, the becoming, not instead, but as much as the occurrence of it.

It is necessary then to step back and examine our faith in communication and the absurd provides a suitable lens for such examination. However Camus overlooks many aspects that I consider essential in this inquisitive process and thus I must turn to poststructuralism to deconstruct communication. Nonetheless I will come back to Camus, as he will be helpful in the process of reconstruction and attempt to go beyond communication's impossibility through absurd ethics.

The poststructuralist move

So far I have been trying to critique the traditional notion of communication as something or at least as something that produces stable results, even when they are only temporary. Camus and the existentialists in general, do criticize rational approaches to understand the world and make a turn to experience as a way of navigating it. This turn highly informed by Husserl's development of phenomenology, is also critical of its essentialism. Thus my critique of the idea of stable communication is based on the existentialist project; nonetheless Camus' work has limitations to support my critique of the inherent instability of communication. His work is helpful to understand absurdity and communication but the source of this absurdity (also read as instability) cannot be explained through his work thus the need of poststructuralist thought.

It is a complicated task to define what rejects and critiques definitions hence it might be contradictory to define poststructuralism. In a broad sense, poststructuralism is a movement concerned with meaning, knowledge, language, its limitations, origins, and hidden instabilities. Williams (2005) describes the movement as "... a set of experiments on texts, ideas and concepts that show how the limits of knowledge can be crossed and turned into disruptive relations" (p.22). Thus, more than a coherent school of thought, it can be seen as a collection of authors, the most popular perhaps Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, and Kristeva²¹, which through different methods examine and critique traditions, institutions, etc. in search of masked contradictions that work as stabilizers and create illusions of security. In other words the goal of poststructuralism is to make the set collapse, in Camus' terms, but not for the sake of making it collapse, on the contrary to advance and go beyond what it is, to think about what will come (*à venir*).

However it is hard, not to say problematic, to write about poststructuralism as if there was

²¹ Some authors also include Lyotard, and Butler.

one kind. As aforementioned, the authors and their methods are diverse. From deconstruction, to difference, to archeology, the representatives have a wide range of approaches to the issues that concerned them. Even more, they rejected the label poststructuralist and in fact were the protagonists of heated debates among each other. One of the most prominent being Derrida's lecture "Cogito and history of madness", which was a critique of Foucault's work and the latter's response to it, which became *The order of Things*.

Although all the varieties of stances within poststructuralism are helpful and could be used within my work, for example it is not a coincidence that I have mentioned Foucault several times throughout the chapters, nonetheless I will limit to one of the authors and his particular method: Jacques Derrida and deconstruction. I have picked Derrida's work as a complement to Camus for two reasons that I will elaborate later on. First, because it can be argued, as Solomon (2006) and Sherman (2009a, 2009b) do, that the existentialists, including Camus, opened the door to the poststructuralists, hence I can work upon the coincidences between the two.

Second, as I have already mentioned, Camus' description of the world is a phenomenology of existence, nonetheless he overlooks the fact that existence and experience of it are structured by language. Derrida's approach, on the other hand, and completes my own personal attempt to explain communication as absurd by deconstructing it. Communication is absurd, nonetheless we navigate our world with it. At the same time there is no communication (or thought) outside of language and the instability of communication, thus its absurdity, is linked to language's instability, which Derrida explores.

I would like to develop my point about absurdity and deconstruction being related, a little bit more. Solomon (2006) mentions that the poststructuralists never acknowledged, even more never mentioned, the existentialists although they owe considerably to their work. The

similarities between the two movements go beyond the shared roots that they have: Nietzsche and Heidegger were immensely influential for the two.

The existentialists elaborated a critique of rationality as inherited from the Enlightenment. Even more poststructuralism's anti-humanism is highly indebted to existentialism and its rejection of the Cartesian ego. Going beyond this, to a more particular analysis, Camus and Derrida, absurdity and deconstruction, also have common ground if put in conversation. Absurdity has been explicated several times throughout the chapters hence I will not get into it again, just as a reminder the absurd is rationality extenuated to its limits. Then to elaborate on my argument, in the following paragraphs I will answer: What is deconstruction?

This question, like many that I have posed up to this point, would require a more exhaustive study to answer it in its totality. Unfortunately, this work will have to do with the condensed response that I can offer. John D. Caputo's (1997) commentary on a roundtable held at Villanova University, where Derrida participated, is an attempt to explain deconstruction in the most simple and pedagogical terms. Deconstruction in a nutshell is precisely cracking nutshells. Even when it seems contradictory to confine deconstruction to a "nutshell", and Caputo is aware of this, his definition is a wonderful first step towards a more elaborated understanding of Derrida's method.

Derrida tries to unmask apparent stable systems (nutshells) and reveal the inherent contradiction within them. Caputo (1997) writes:

The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things—texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices, of whatever size and sort you need—do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always

more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy. (p.31)

Derrida would say that when we try to put things in nutshells, in a system that attempts to fix “meanings”, or “missions”, then the thing itself, if any, escapes, slips away. In other words as Caputo (1997) thinks, “What is really going on in things, what is really happening, is always to come” (p.31).

Deconstruction is an opposition to totalitarian discourses. It is not destruction of structures, after all poststructuralism is also structuralism, but an attempt to inhibit these structures from inside, to disrupt apparently steady equations. It is active vigilance of discourses that on the surface operate as systems of articulation only because external and invisible centripetal forces hide the dispersive nature of these systems. Deconstruction introduces *différance*, a disruptive mechanism that at the same time works as a surveillance device. *Différance* preserves the openness of systems otherwise taken as set, defined, and imbued with “presence”, “a point where a text finds its most pure truth” (Williams, 2005, p.32).

Deconstructing communication equals to “crack the nutshell” that we call communication, showing that it cannot be understood because when we trace boundaries around it, or assign a purpose to it, then the “thing itself” slips away. Totalitarian discourses of communication lead to erroneous models to understand it. And even when some theorists might argue that their models are nothing but that, models, and that in practice communication can be seen as a constant negotiation, we must remember that a model, although a representation, claims to be a representation of the real or as Chang (1996) puts it “By organizing the real, the model projects itself as realistic” (p.178). The problem with models, or theories, that appear realistic is

that in doing so they can substitute reality itself.

Jorge Luis Borges's short story about cartographers that created a map of an empire that was so detailed that eventually the map covered the empire is useful to illustrate my point here. If theories or models work to understand communication it might be because reality is constructed in such a way that it perfectly fits with certain theoretical postures. For example, when a process of negotiation is explained through deliberative theory, it does not necessarily mean that the theory was right about the phenomenon observed. Just because we achieved understanding that does not assure that communication has happened or even more that the theory had anything to do with the apparent success of the communicative event.

The explanation can be as trivial as one of the parts was tired and decided to end the discussion, the parts did not understand what they were doing, one of them was tricked into agreeing, etc. Models that explain reality that fits its own reality can hide all these scenarios. In other words, when communication is defined as understanding, it overlooks other stances that produced it. By defining it has escaped from our sight and it is replaced with the illusion of its occurrence.

Then, theories, at least those who do not acknowledge communication's inherent undecidability cannot offer realistic explanations of communication, even when the models that what we have now seem as the best we can do to explain it. To illustrate how deconstruction operates, Caputo (1997) uses democracy as an example. He states, "For even if the existing democracies are the best we can do at present, the least bad way to organize ourselves, still the present democratic structures are deeply undemocratic" (p.43). His point is that corporations, media, demagoguery, and other forms of undemocratic practices have corrupted democracy. Thus, "Democracy does not exist, and the corruption of existing democracy must become the subject of

endless analysis, critique, and deconstruction, for these democracies are hardly democratic” (p.43), he concludes. Following this line of argument, how do we deconstruct communication and what is the purpose of it?

Geoffrey Bennington argues that, “Communication takes place, if at all, in a fundamental and irreducible uncertainty as to the very fact and possibility of communication” (as cited in Chang, 1996, p.225). His deconstructive approach sees communication as a possibility, not as a real condition. Communication is not something to achieve, but a constant transformation or attempt. Communication is always something to come, using Derridean terms. Deconstructing does not account for destroying it but on the contrary finding better communicative practices by critiquing those that are normative right now. In this sense, following Caputo, it can be inferred that communication does not exist, at least not as a stable practice that can be explained.

This deconstructive approach to communication is not new in the field. Chang’s (1996) work is the best example of a detailed deconstructive attitude towards communication. From a Derridean perspective, communication cannot be defined because it cannot happen in its pure form (presence). In the field, understanding as a normative *telos* would be this pure form of communication. Derrida explains why this pure form is never achieved through his study of language and how it operates as a play of differences. That is words have meaning only in relation to other words and in terms of these words. Caputo (1997) uses a dictionary as an example to illustrate what Derrida means for play of differences: words are defined in relation or reference to other words and by other words. In the same sense, communication is part of this play of differences where no stability can be guaranteed.

Chang (1996) explains this undecidability in the following terms:

Derrida redescribes communication as an unbridled play of differences, substitutions, and

displacements taking place at the limit of signification. If we are often unsure whether we are the beneficiaries or victims of communication—because it means simultaneously both happy intersubjectivity (mutual sharing) and the possibility of alienation or domination (one-way transmission)—Derrida would assure us that our sense of uncertainty comes naturally and inevitably from the very nature of our linguistic being, that we are always and already at the mercy of peripatetic signs. (p.187)

Along the same lines Derrida writes, “There is nothing outside of the text [*il n’y a pas hors le texte*]” (1976, p.158). He is pointing at the fact that our inner experiences, just like our external experiences, are mediated through language. The fact that there is nothing outside the text does not mean that “everything goes” because it is all representation.

Derrida’s point is that due to the nature of language, the world itself has textuality and our interpretation of the text happens within constrained systems and frames. For example when we read authors such as Plato, Derrida argues, or any of the Greek classics, the Western tradition tends to see presence in these texts, as if what they wrote objectively exists out there and its reality could be transmitted in a formula that we can repeat over and over. On the contrary, we read the text through our own particular and collective text, and in that sense we cannot escape the text or as Nietzsche (1967) thought, we think in language and there is no escape from it.

In *Signature Event Context*, Derrida (2001) poses the question: Is the word communication communicable? His concern in this lecture is not the deconstruction of communication but to show how signs, writing, and utterances operate in a sort of metaphysical conceptual net and how context cannot guarantee meaning because it is also undecidable or cannot exist outside of the text. Nonetheless his inquiry about whether the word communication communicates or not opens an interesting debate for communication scholars. Following his

argument “There is nothing outside of the text”, Derrida reflects on his own question,

However, even to articulate and to propose this question I have had to anticipate the meaning of the word *communication*: I have been constrained to predetermine communication as a vehicle, a means of transport or transitional medium of a meaning, and moreover of a unified meaning. (p.1475)

The problem then becomes how can we trust in a teleological view of communication as understanding when communication itself is inscribed within this play of differences.

Communication is defined in relation to and differentially from other words therefore its significance does not exist independently but it is subject to systems of signification. Therefore the idea that communication has happened does not exist independently from the actors involved but within a text of preset assumptions about what is communication and when it has occurred. In other words, communication does not happen outside of the text, as Derrida would say.

Ontologizing communication, seeing it as something that is out there, that exists, is problematic if we do not analyze what constitutes this apparent reality. From a deconstructive perspective, to say that reality is constituted through a play of differences and textual (Discursive) intersections is not a rejection of reality but an examination of how what exists comes to be. Whether we agree with Chang’s (1996) assumption that the normative idea in the field is that communication has understanding as a *telos* or with Bennington’s (as cited in Chang, 1996) notion that communication happens in misunderstanding, in any given case there is a binary distinction that needs to be addressed to properly move beyond in the examination of communication as real and at the same time as constitutive of realities.

Derrida’s quest for the death of metaphysics focuses on binaries and how they operate in the history of western philosophy, and other institutions. The most famous binary distinction

that he deals with is speech and writing, the latter being secondary or a supplement of the former. Derrida's point is that systems are based on binary oppositions where one of the terms involved has "presence" or is implicitly seen as the right term.

With communication the binary understanding/misunderstanding plays the role of the boundaries of what constitutes it. Derrida would argue that these boundaries are arbitrary and unreal. Communication does not exist at the limits of understanding or fails when it reaches the confine of misunderstanding. Whatever "happens" to it, whatever it achieves depends on the context and following deconstruction, the context is always undecidable. Through this analysis we can conclude that communication does not exist out there as an independent entity but it operates as a fiction created within its own text.

Roland Champagne (1995) illustrates this claim in a better way when he writes, "The opposite of fiction is a realm where the text does not invent its own reality. The real exists as the other of fiction, distinct from its "context"" (p.45). This is not to say that there is not a "real", my point is that the boundaries between real and fiction are linguistically arbitrary. Communication creates its reality through communication thus there is no true communication but instances of it. Champagne adds, "The text describes its own reality rather than alluding or referring to reality beyond its language" (p.46). Thus communication, from a theoretical perspective that deems it as understanding, describes its own reality constituted within the text but at the same time this close system excludes other alternative realities and this is not an accusation against theories for not taking into account every single possibility.

My critique comes from a broader perspective and is concerned with frames of reality more than with the real itself. By this I mean that communication theories with understanding as an inherent *telos* do not share a universal idea of communication, nor that they should, but that

such approaches create a frame where realities emerge and others are constrained.

Chang's critique is a good example of this when he claims that misunderstanding should not be dismissed as an aberration but as an instance of communication, communication is also misunderstanding and thus this alternative "reality" should not be repressed by a totalitarian discourse centered on understanding. However, Chang is not claiming that communication is understanding or misunderstanding, neither that communication is possible or impossible. Through a Derridean read of communication he argues that communication is undecidable at its best.

Although Chang deconstructs, in his own way, communication, my argument has some differences with his project. His read of Derrida starts by contrasting him with Heidegger; a valid move considering that deconstruction comes from Derrida's reading of Heidegger's *destruktion* of metaphysics. Chang operates under a Heideggerian paradigm and before deconstructing communication he proposes an ontology of communication. He writes, "Ontologically, communication has always and already occurred. Communication precedes existence—to be is to communicate" (1996, p.110). His argument being that communication constitutes subjects, grounds the presence of man in the world, and activates the Being of being through mediation of man and the world (Chang, 1996).

Following this ontologization of communication he proceeds to deconstruct it. Nonetheless, it seems like his previous claims need to be deconstructed before he concludes that communication is undecidable. Nonetheless the purpose of this work is not a critique of his work, on the contrary I have used what resonates with my own project but at the same time I will deconstruct what seems problematic, to expand my argument.

His claim, rather a strong one, is that communication operates as the force that brings

beings to be. With that assumption he later deconstructs the normative idea of communication as understanding, nonetheless his own ontological assumptions fall categorically under metaphysical assumptions. First, that communication has always and already occurred goes against the basic principle of deconstruction, which is something that is always to come, that opens the possibility of something better to come.

Second, in a sort of Sartrean (Existence precedes Essence) approach he writes that communication precedes existence, which not only flirts but fails directly under what Nietzsche called philosophizing under the shadow of God, and paradoxically instills presence in the term communication, precisely what Derrida critiques.

Finally, Chang concludes: “If communication is anything at all, it is an undecidable... “Il faut Parler, Parler sans pouvoir.” One must communicate, communicate without the ability to do so” (1996, p.228). At this point, and although I do not agree entirely with his argument, his conclusion leaves us at the common ground that I have pointed before between Camus’s absurdity and Derrida’s deconstruction.

Communication is undecidable nonetheless we need to communicate. Derrida has shown us through language and its instability why communication can be seen as an undecidable and Camus through metaphorical assertions rather than philosophical arguments opened the door for this idea. Nonetheless, deconstruction arrives to a certain tricky terrain where action seems infinitely bounded to texts and a quest for metaphysics. The world, being what it is, requires action and we need to live in it, after all here we are. In the following section, I will go back to Camus’s work to offer a postdeconstructionist attitude towards the undecidability within communication.

Bringing it all together: Camus, Derrida, and Communication

So far we can conclude that from a Camusean view communication is absurd, which tying to Derrida's work roughly accounts to say that communication is undecidable. It should be clear by now my argument about absurdity and deconstruction being closely tied and in some sense the former as a precursor of the latter.

Absurdity, contrary to daily use, even in academic circles I would say, is rationality noting its limits, which is not falling into despair because the world makes no sense. The fact that the world makes no sense is exactly what opens the door to a life that has to be navigated through experience instead of transcendent principles. In the same way, undecidability does not mean that all actions are equivalent as Camus' Caligula would say.

Caputo (1997) makes an excellent point about undecidability. He states:

Undecidability is taken, or mistaken, to mean a pathetic state of apathy, the inability to act, paralyzed by the play of signifiers that dance before of our eyes, like a deer caught in a headlight. But rather than an inability to act, undecidability is the condition of possibility of acting and deciding. For whenever a decision is really a decision, whenever it is more than a programmable, deducible, calculable, computable result of a logarithm, that is because it has passed through "the ordeal of undecidability". (p.137)

Decision making, according to Caputo, is possible because of its impossibility or undecidability, which is what gives us something to decide. For example, judgments cannot be based on universals because otherwise instead of judges we would use computers. There are no "just" acts that adhere to universal rules (or Abraham is lost as Caputo and Derrida point out) but only singular occasions where we must decide and that decision is possible because of justice's undecidability.

When Sisyphus keeps rolling his boulder, he is not doing it based on any logical calculations although he rationally acknowledges the absurdity of its task. Sisyphus' situation is undecidable and his decision, which avoids the pathetic state of apathy that Caputo mentions, is sustained by its undecidability. The absurd state of this world is precisely what demands action, otherwise in a calculable world there are no decisions but illusions of it, illusions provided by external hegemonic forces as Derrida names it or by life vests as Camus puts it.

To understand this better let us use agency and structure as an example. When an agent makes a decision within a structure, in theory she or he is exercising his/her freedom of choice. What if the options that the person in question is choosing between were provided by the structure? Is the person still making a decision or is he/she living under the illusion of making one?

On the other hand, even when Sisyphus realizes that he is a prisoner of his fate, he is still a prisoner. However in some sense, we can trace a parallel between Sisyphus' story and a person who is under the influence of a more or less deterministic structure to explain how absurdity and deconstruction operate. Camus tells us that we should imagine Sisyphus happy because in being conscious of his punishment he has regained his freedom and looks with scorn at the gods that keep him captive. For Camus, in knowing that he is a prisoner, Sisyphus has liberated himself and found meaning in his burden. His rock is his world and his absurd task becomes significant.

Seemingly, deconstruction appeals to disrupt these apparently steady structures. By doing so it opens the possibility of a better future, an unknowing future nonetheless. It calls for a new way of seeing and doing but with no planned goal, instead of that it invites to embrace an uncertain future, a future that is not a final state. Here we have another common point between Derrida and Camus, which is not a coincidence as this "love" for the future comes from

Nietzsche's *amor fati*.

Although Sisyphus rolls his boulder knowing that it will never make it to the top of the hill, the person in rebellion advances from this state and realizes that there is something beyond the absurdity of his/her days and strives for self-transcendence. Along the same lines Derrida coined the term messianic to refer to this state of waiting for the future. Caputo (1997) explains what kind of future Derrida is referring to. He states, "Not the relative and foreseeable, programmable and plannable future—"the future of strategic planning"—but the absolute future, the welcome extended to another whom I cannot, in principle, anticipate, the *tout autre* whose alterity disturbs the complacent circles of the same" (p.156). Just a reminder here, *amor fati* and eternal recurrence are not tedious repetition of the same, thus the messianic is Nietzschean in its core.

Going back to communication as absurd I would argue that a definition of communication is not as important as its experience. I am not arguing that definitions are useless, on the contrary the more we talk about communication, the bigger the field will become.

As the absurd cannot be defined but only experienced, communication, I argue, "happens" under the same circumstances. Camus sets notions of the absurd but not a universal definition because the absurd does not exist out there but emerges out of the confrontation between the world and the human mind. Communication, just like the absurd, cannot happen outside of the human mind. As it is inner thought, it occurs within the confines of language. Language, as Derrida claimed, is arbitrary. Thus, it is not possible to have a definition of communication, from an absurdist perspective, but a description of it because communication does not happen out there, it has no ontology. Although the traditional understanding of it, in and outside of academia, assumes that it has a presence, communication seen as absurd does not

happen but is always to come.

Some might argue that all this uncertainty leads nowhere and that in practice we have to negotiate or navigate our existence through communication. The point of having an open definition of communication, of seeing it as absurd, is that it disrupts apparently stable systems. In doing so it opens to debate, practices otherwise closed under the excuse of their functionality. For example, as Caputo (1997) critiques democracy for being a corrupt system that apparently works because it is the “best” that we have right now, communication as absurd questions practices where communication apparently has happened in the best possible way. Just because people agree about something that does not mean that it was the “best” possible solution. As Derrida points out practices can appear stable because hidden hegemonic forces operate to create the illusion of stability (Spinoza, 2001).

This is not to say that communication is always an illusion but that within an absurd framework communication cannot happen systematically. By this I mean, we should not have faith in a particular theory or method and believe that because something was accomplished, it was the “best” possible solution. For example, consensus in society is a good example of how systems can force something to operate under their exigencies and instead of explaining what they claim to study end up obliging a particular practice to fit under their justification.

Although diverse in nature, almost every theory about consensus explains it as rational encounters where people reach understanding for the sake of a goal. Habermas’ theory of communicative action is an example of this. According to Bohman and Rehg (2011), “Communicative action is thus an inherently consensual form of social coordination in which actors “mobilize the potential for rationality” given with ordinary language and its telos of rationally motivated agreement”. From an absurd/poststructuralist stance, the *telos* needs to be

critiqued thus communication cannot be understood as an instrument to pursue a goal. This takes me to my next question.

Can we rationally understand communication? Extrapolating from Camus' ideas the answer is: No. Rationality has its limits and eventually we found ourselves in the midst of a nonsensical world. Communication being a thought process, it does not exist outside of the human mind, cannot be understood, at least not in a stable universal way. To understand communication would amount to understanding ourselves whereas, as Camus thought, we are condemned to be strangers to ourselves (Camus, 1955).

So far it seems as if I am arguing for communication that is nothing but undecidable, impossible, unstable. The purpose of seeing communication as absurd is going beyond that impossibility. Chang (1996) realizes that it is the impossibility of communication precisely what makes it possible and Derrida, as commented by Caputo (1997), tells us that deconstruction is always waiting for the uncertain future. Camus would agree with these takes but at the same time argue that the world being what it is we need to live in it. With communication being what it is, we need to communicate.

The Sisyphean view of communication is somehow pessimistic in a philosophical sense. Communication is our boulder and we roll it uphill but at the end we always fail. We never fully understand and are not fully understood, nonetheless we keep trying and in doing so our task becomes meaningful. If communication was as simple as achieving understanding then it would not be worthy. The fact that we always fall short is precisely what makes it valuable.

Communication thus is an ethical practice because it attempts to bridge the gap between us and the other. Miscommunication is what creates the other, or makes us care about the other, not always for ethical reasons, however we have faith in the other. Even more, communication

bridges the gap between us and the world, the other, and ourselves. I will return to the other and communication as an ethical negotiation momentarily, but first I wish to elaborate on communication's impossibility.

I have maintained that, like Sisyphus with his boulder, we are doomed to fail at communicating however we continue with our task. However, before accepting that we are not successful at it, we should examine what constitutes failure at communicating. Throughout history, and today maybe more than ever, communication has been highly regarded as an important practice. In our contemporary world we have widespread narratives about its function in modern society. Terms like "problem of communication", "need more communication", "miscommunication", and others, are part of daily talk to refer to a wide range of societal issues. This shows that we care about communication and consider it a solution for many of our problems. It also reveals that the inherent *telos* within communication also works as a barrier for agents. Clearly this description is closely related to the transmission model, which is dominant in society, nevertheless it can also be seen working in more academic models.

The only reason why we fail at communication is because we think that we did. One cannot fail at something that does not exist and by this I mean that communication as a defined concept does not exist. If we look at communication from a teleological perspective then of course we fail at communicating over and over. Instead of seeing it as a process that takes us, or should take us, from point A to B, we should embrace and love its absurdity.

My point is that there is no need for systematic communication, for teleology or ontology of it. Communication is undecidable because when we engage in it we fail when we think we have succeeded and other times we succeed when we think that we have failed. Nietzsche, Camus, and Derrida would argue that systems that claim to understand communication do

nothing but fit phenomena to their descriptions, which is different from saying that science is always wrong. Their point is that we should not have faith in systems but rationally understand their limits. Let those systems help us understand instead of forcing our practices to fit under their explanations, and regulations.

Discourses about understanding should not work in this way. Instead of being systematically totalitarian, communication should be, and is, the instance of human life that disrupts hegemonic systems, and introduces possibilities that might lead to emancipation but first, and in absurdism more importantly, invites us to personal awareness. Consciousness is the first step for Camus, in acknowledging that communication is always to come then we start to understand it as an ethical obligation.

Sisyphus rolls his boulder uphill knowing that he is going to fail but at the same time he is aware of it and in doing so he realizes that there is nothing to fail at because there is no final perfect state. To communicate under Sisyphus' spirit we must be aware that there is no perfect communication and that do not we fail at it. We try and that is the best we can do. Communication is meaningful as an attempt. A conversation that goes nowhere is meaningful just because the participants tried. Communication is an attempt to understand the other, the world, ourselves. Absurd communication is an attempt to understand but also question the other, ourselves, the world, and communication itself. Absurd communication is the absurd par excellence. It is doing for the sake of being not doing for the sake of doing. Likewise, it is communicating for the sake of being not for the sake of a goal.

On the other hand, this romanticism (Camus, therefore this work, is prone to fall into it) leaves the door open for an interpretation of communication as anything goes. The absurd moves from personal awareness to collective solidarity, absurd communication then must follow

the same progression to be a viable project. In the following paragraphs, I will expand my argument on communication as ethical negotiation. Although this part is important within the framework that I propose, I will not have a fully detailed explanation of it. I will set the bases and explain what ethical absurdist communication is. Later in the following chapter, I will illustrate communication as an ethical commitment through Camus' novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. Finally in the conclusion of the thesis, I will summarize my position, having explained it here and through the novel.

Absurd communication, just as Camus' absurdity, must necessarily move to solidarity as its starting point for ethical action. As the world is absurd, it is easy to take that as a license to do as one pleases. The same applies to communication if we believe that it is absurd. We should remember that Camus was concerned with the ethical ambiguity of his work. Thus *The Rebel* corrects any weak or vague points that the *Myth of Sisyphus* might have had. As we saw, he moves from an individual rebel (or person in rebellion) to collective awareness of our absurd condition and solidarity emerging from this new state of consciousness.

Translating that to absurd communication means that we necessarily need a collective response to this condition. Individually we must acknowledge that we live under what I call an absurd communicative condition. By this I am trying to describe a particular phenomenon, the fact that we engage in communication to navigate and make sense of our absurd existence but at the same time communication is also absurd. Nonetheless we still communicate and in doing so it becomes meaningful; somehow this issue solves itself in a kind of lucid paradox.

Critiquing communication as a teleological practice leads us to understand its inherent absurdity. There is no system that assures "successful" communication and even when some claim to do it is an instance of what Camus would call philosophical suicide. Nonetheless this

absurdity is not obvious and there are several hegemonic forces that covert communication's instability, (e.g. the illusion of rational consent). However there is always a moment when absurdity confronts us and the same happens with communication. We all have been in situations where communication has proven to be unstable, where collaboration, deliberation, or any kind of practice proves to be ineffective and the only result of the event is frustration. Sometimes we even have to hide our frustration to adhere to the norms of propriety, to follow the rules of "good" communication.

Once the absurdity of our communicative condition strikes us, we must make a decision about it. We can continue having faith in our systems, as although they are not always accurate, and they do not claim so, at least it is the best that we have and we have come so far trusting in these ways of communicating. On the other hand we can realize that the stage has collapsed and that communication is indeed absurd, which creates another conundrum: whether we accept that communication's absurdity gives us the license to do as we please or we try to go beyond this absurdity.

People in rebellion try to reinvent themselves to live, a good life a must say, in a world where all universals cease to exist. Understanding that communication is absurd requires not only personal reinvention but deconstruction of communication. In a way this deconstruction as a constructive step to move beyond absurdity appeals to a new way of communication: Übercommunication, to borrow from Nietzsche, or communication that goes beyond communication. It goes beyond itself because it has no stable limits, neither origin, nor ending.

Going back to the Greeks, communication should be our Proteus, a mythological figure who could tell the future but mutated into different forms not to. Protean communication then would always be open to a new possible result instead of foreseeing it. When two persons argue

using traditional methods of communication, it happens that the result has been decided even before the first word is uttered. Instead of finding more creative solutions we tend to communicate in a mechanistic way, as the dominant logic tells us that this is what good communication is. Compromise is an example of this dominant logic.

All this absurdity puts us in a position where communication can finally happen (not ontologizing it). We realize that communication is absurd for me as much as it is for the other, that just as I cannot make sense of myself or the world and our relation, the other is also struggling with this condition. Our solidarity emerges from this state of consciousness, which is universal but not transcendental. We are in this together and we have to roll our boulder.

Collective awareness that becomes solidarity leads to action. Individual action but informed by this feeling of solidarity, in other words, ethical action. This kind of action requires faith. Traditional communication is also based on faith but faith in methods, systems, theories, rationality, and language. Absurd communication requires faith in the other. It opens the possibility of difference, which is the main condition to understand the other. I recognize and respect the other by accepting our discrepancies as sacred instead of fusing them into “understanding.” I mean that communication should not be a tool to avoid misunderstanding as a way of living in a society. In fact communication should value it as it is the most important feature of the other. I am who I am because I am not you thus the other constructs my own humanity. The Cartesian, rational, ego is also a communicative ego constituted in language.

Absurd ethics, or ethical absurd communication, cannot be defined but must be negotiated in experience. This is why I will not go into detail about it here but instead will use *The Plague* to illustrate how this works. I will conclude this chapter with a few sentences about these ethics that I am talking about. Absurd communication is grounded in absurd ethics, which

is not a system in the traditional sense of the word.

Absurd ethics is the recognition that there are no fixed set of pre-existent texts, discourses, or laws, to universally decide good or bad²². Instead we can only find local and temporal solutions that are always singular cases and always open to examination; the best is always to come. Seemingly, communication is not good or bad but must be negotiated in grounded action and under the same circumstances that I described in the previous sentence. Communication, we must remember, is always to come.

However in the attempt of engaging in it, in my recognition of the other, it becomes a meaningful instance of our existence. Instead of treating communication teleologically as a bridge to understanding, the ethical absurd position would be to treat it is a site to recognize the other as different. To realize that understanding sometimes operates as a suppressor of otherness and is not “the best” that we can do but on the contrary annuls the possibility of multiple “best(s)” to come. In the next chapter I will explore absurd ethics in a more detailed manner through the novels *The Stranger and The Plague*.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to develop a framework to understand communication as absurd. I have extrapolated Camus’ ideas to apply them to communication, exploring traditional ways of understanding it and trying to discover new ways of seeing communication that the absurd might reveal. To do so, I have incorporated the work of Jacques Derrida on deconstruction. I tried to show how Camus and Derrida have common points, and through the work of the latter I have attempted to deconstruct communication as a concept and explain why it is absurd or undecidable.

²² Along the same lines of Nietzschean morality

In addition, by deconstructing the stable idea of it, I have proposed seeing communication as eternal recurrence, where the becoming is privileged over the Being. Thus I have argued that we should not ontologize communication but instead look at it as an attempt to engage in something that is always to come, never complete. Communication represents our boulder, one that we should happily roll uphill even when we know that we will not complete our task.

At the same time, in my attempt of redefining communication, I argue that one cannot fail at it, if we do not see it as having a final state or *telos*. By opening the limits of communication to negotiation we can move beyond good or bad communication and value the attempt as an important ethical practice, an attempt that I call Übercommunication.

Finally, I have tried to bring Camus and Derrida together in an explanation of how absurd communication works, the feelings that emerge from it, and the consequences of the confrontation with its absurdity. Imitating Camus progression from *The Myth of Sisyphus* to *The Rebel*, I elaborate a communicative progression from individual confrontation to collective awareness. In this state of consciousness we have to act and navigate through this absurd communicative condition and I argue that we should do this through absurd communicative ethics.

I did not get into much detail about this last idea because I prefer to do it in the following chapter where I will examine thoroughly *The Stranger* and *The Plague* to illustrate how we can understand communication as absurd and how do we act in front of it. This final chapter will serve as a sort of situated study of the existential novels of Camus to discover communicative practices through his characters and the way they deal with an absurd world through these practices.

Chapter 5

Mersault contra Rieux: An Absurd Existence and Absurd Ethics

“As always, whenever I want to get rid of someone I’m not really listening to, I made it appear as if I agreed.” Mersault - *The Stranger*.

Throughout the previous chapters I have been dealing with abstract concepts about communication. In fact I have argued for a different way of understanding communication as something that exceeds the limits of any possible conceptualization. In this chapter I will move beyond the theoretical realm and explain how communication operates in specific instances of daily life. My situated study will be a close reading of Camus’s novels, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, to illustrate communication’s absurdity and what kind of ethical response it requires from us.

It might sound contradictory that my sample of daily communicative situations comes from Camus’ fictional characters. However I have some arguments to go beyond this contradiction. First, literature is an instance of communication that represents humanity in so many senses that it becomes a rich site for the study of human behavior. Fiction tends to shed light on subjects that reality takes for granted. As Raymond Williams thought, literature is one of the best ways of understanding a culture in a particular moment in time.

Second, Camus’ novels were (are) so popular because they tend to be detailed examinations of the human condition. Although scholars in the field do extensive research collecting data about multiple issues, I am concerned with a more general phenomenological description of communication. Therefore fictional works fit perfectly with my purpose as they are condensed worlds that offer elaborated examples of different cases, paradoxes, problems, etc. that people face in their lives. Literature is a description of the human condition. In the case of

this work, the situations that the characters of *The Stranger* and *The Plague* face shed light on how communication can be absurd and how a turn towards ethics is valuable to navigate in the midst of this absurdity.

This chapter will be divided in two sections, named after the two novels that I am analyzing. I will examine each in detail how the characters of each book construct their worlds through communication and how it operates in this fictional realm of Camus' existentialist literature. In each section, I will offer a brief summary of the novel and proceed to a close textual analysis to illustrate my claims about communication.

In *The Stranger* we will find Mersault, the main character, as an example of a person trapped in an absurd existence that leads him to feel nothing but apathy and tedious. Rieux, the absurd hero in *The Plague*, also confronted with an absurd world, tries to go beyond it and do whatever it takes to save people when a virus threatens to kill the entire population of a town. In both cases I will explain how the character's reactions to absurdity are mediated through communication and what can we learn from about it.

Before I get into the first section, I must make a brief statement about the nature of Camus' characters. So far I have used only male writers who, particularly Nietzsche and Camus, tend to use gendered language. In Camus' case, his main characters are mostly men; women usually have secondary roles and stereotypical attitudes. When analyzing these novels, someone might object that any examination of communicative behavior should take into account traits such as race, gender, sexuality, etc. And I would agree with that comment.

Nevertheless I am developing a framework to describe communication, and so I am not trying to offer a detailed account of a particular case but a more general approach to existence and communication. My purpose is to offer suggestions that might be helpful when studying

particular sites, groups, or events, where it is possible to focus on social identities, economic forces, and other issues that shape communication. I am not being blind to all these, I am suggesting that absurdity is also an important part of that equation that researchers should consider as well as the others.

The Stranger

In almost every college course about existentialism, *The Stranger* is an obligatory reading. This demonstrates the importance of Camus' most popular novel. In France, it is a required reading in high school, and to this day has sold more than 6 million copies there, and many more around the world. It was the book that made Camus a worldwide known author, receiving rave reviews from authors such as Sartre, among others. Unlike *The Plague*, *The Stranger* was well received by critics who praised the novel for its philosophical argument, as well as its aesthetical value. The literary style of the book is not traditional within French literature as Camus used short and concise sentences in the style of American authors such as Melville, and Hemingway. The book has a shocking beginning that has become a classic in world literature. Mersault finds out through a telegram that his mother died; for him it is not clear when it happened, which immediately introduces us to the apathy that rules his life. He is not devastated by the news, in fact does not show any feelings about it, except annoyance because he will have to skip work and travel for a few hours to attend his mother's funeral at the retirement home where she was living. It is obvious that he loved *Maman*²³ and he mentions it several times, nonetheless his apathy does not change at all, not even during her funeral.

On the way back to his hometown his thoughts continue to be a demonstration of the tediousness of his existence. For Mersault, it is all the same. His actions are momentarily

²³ An affectionate way of referring to a mother in French, close to mommy

entertaining but at the end of the day there is no difference between eating, spending time with friends, making love, or being at work. For him everything is equivalent, and his only motivation in life is the satisfaction of physical desires.

The following day, after he returns from attending his mother's funeral, he decides to go swimming to the beach where he runs into Marie, an ex colleague. The two set up a date later that evening and after going to the cinema they spend the night together. In the morning when Mersault wakes up, Marie is gone, so he decides to have lunch at Céleste's. Céleste owns a restaurant where Mersault eats frequently thus their relationship is more than mere business but to certain degree, it is a friendship.

Going upstairs, after his meal, he runs into two neighbors. The first is Salamano, an old man who lives only with his dog since his wife died. The dog is also very old and sick, and Salamano treats him with cruelty until one day the dog gets lost and Salamano realizes how much he represents for him. Then he runs into Raymond, an important character in the novel and somehow responsible for the upcoming events in the life of Mersault.

Raymond is a man who lives by himself and has a bad reputation for living off women. He invites Mersault to have dinner with him that night. While they are eating, Raymond tells his guest a story about his mistress, an Arab woman, and how they got into a fight because he suspects that she is cheating on him. He beat her and consequently got into a fight with her brother. Raymond wants to get "even" with her so he asks Mersault to write a letter for her. His plan is that she will come back if she gets a nice letter and then he will have his revenge. Mersault agrees and after writing the letter, he goes back to his apartment.

Mersault's days go by and he follows the same routine; working, swimming, eating at Céleste's, etc. On Saturday Marie visits Mersault and while they are talking they hear shouting

coming from the hallway. They go out to see what is happening and find out that people have called the police because Raymond is beating his mistress again. The police officers slap Raymond, take the woman away, and warn Raymond that he will have to go to the police station to set everything straight.

The next day Mersault goes with Raymond to the police station, where the latter gets a reprimand but they let him go. This situation brings Raymond closer to Mersault, although Mersault does not care about it. Still, it is all the same for him.

Around those days, Marie asks him if he loves her and if he would like to marry her, to which Mersault replies with indifference but accepts to get married anyway. The following Sunday Raymond invites Mersault and Marie to a friend's beach house outside of their hometown and they accept. When they are leaving Mersault's building, Raymond notices that there is a group of Arabs directly across the street, among them the brother of his mistress, with whom he got into a fist fight some time ago. However they decide to avoid any confrontation and enjoy their day at the beach.

When they get to the house of Masson, Raymond's friend, the four plus Masson's wife decide to go swimming. Later they have lunch and after they eat, the three men decide to go for a walk. While walking on the beach they notice that the same group of men that they saw when they left their hometown is following them, getting closer and closer. Now only steps away from each other, a fight starts and Raymond is stabbed by the brother of his mistress. After taking care of his wounds, Raymond goes back to the beach with the purpose of killing the man who stabbed him but Mersault who had followed him, convinces Raymond not to. He takes the gun away from Raymond's hand and the two walk back to Masson's place.

After they arrive to Masson's place, Mersault feels that it is too hot to get into the house

plus he does not want to explain what happened or answer any questions so he decides to go for a walk. He thinks that after all the fight is not with him and that situation should be over. He turns around and starts walking down the beach when suddenly he runs into the guy who stabbed Raymond. He was alone and lying on his stomach but as soon as he saw Mersault, he sat down and put his hand in his pocket to grip the knife he was carrying. Mersault does the same to hold Raymond's revolver, which is in his pocket.

Still sitting, the Arab draws his knife, and Mersault decides to shoot. He shoots him once and the Arab fell dead. Then he walked closer to the motionless body and shot it four more times. Mersault is taken to jail where he awaits trial. Originally his lawyer and the judge are keen of Mersault and think that he acted in self defense.

Nonetheless the two men grow weary of Mersault's indifference and eventually consider him a monster with no respect for institutions, religion, or human life. His trial becomes a show heightened by media coverage. The prosecutor calls one by one a list of witnesses that were at Mersault's mother funeral and they all agree that he did not show any signs of sadness during the ceremony. After days of trial the jury finds him guilty and the judge condemns him to death in the guillotine.

In jail and waiting for his execution, Mersault reflects on his life trying to make sense of his situation. He cannot come to agreement with the fact that he is going to die, that he will not see Marie again, or swim in the ocean, and his life becomes a life of dreams. He dreams about being free, a successful appeal to his case, Marie wearing her Sunday dress, etc. At the same time he follows the same tedious routine in jail, a routine that does not seem like a punishment anymore to him.

One day the chaplain, who had tried to convince Mersault of accepting God, visits him

against his will. After rejecting the chaplain's arguments one more time, Mersault has a rage attack and starts yelling at the priest that he rejects any kind of religion. He says that he is right, that he has been right all the time. He is happy with the way he had lived his life and at least he can be sure of one thing: that he is going to die, just like everyone else. After this moment of anger, Mersault realizes for the first time that he is in peace with the absurdity of human existence. He recognizes that he is right accepting the fact that there is nothing but this physical world, that existence is meaningless. For the first time, Mersault accepts his fate and recognizes the world as absurd. By embracing this absurdity he abandons any hope for the future.

The book concludes with Mersault happy and waiting in jail for his execution. He recognizes that by loving the physical world, he has loved life. In fact he mentions that he would happily live his life again and again, becoming an example of what Nietzsche meant by *amor fati*. Through this brief summary we can conclude that Mersault illustrates Camus' ideas on absurdity as exposed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. For example, Mersault is a modern bureaucrat²⁴, which is one of the images that Camus had in mind when he picked Sisyphus as an example of the absurd hero. Philip Thody (1957) writes:

He is the 'everyday man' described in *The Myth of Sisyphus* who, before his consciousness of the absurd, had projects, hopes, ambitions, the belief that he was free to order his life, but who has realized that 'all that is disproved in one breathtaking sweep by the absurdity of a possible death'". (p.6)

Sisyphus scorns the gods when he is fully conscious of his punishment. Mersault wishes that during his execution there will be a big crowd waiting to see him die and greet him with "cries of hate" (Camus, 1988, p.123), which is his way of scorning society. Not because he hates

²⁴ "Desk job", not necessarily governmental

people, but because he rejects those superior or transcendental values that society lives by, instead he reaffirms *amor fati* and his love for the physical world. There are many other common places between the novel and the essay but that would be subject of another work. Now I would like to turn no analyze Mersault's communicative practices and by communication here I mean the way he constructs his world through language by the way he interacts with others and his inner thoughts.

Understanding Mersault

I have argued that communication is absurd because we cannot thoroughly make sense of it. I am not claiming that it is fully irrational but absurd, or undecidable if one wants. However the absurd is only a stage and we have to act in front of it. Through *The Stranger* I will illustrate the first step in this transition: the confrontation with the absurd. The original title of the book *L'étranger* can be translated as the stranger or the outsider. Both translations reveal something about Mersault. He is an outsider to society and a stranger to himself (Thody, 1957). When he receives a telegram informing him about his mother's death, his reaction is cold and calculated. He is concerned with the trip he will have to make, the days he will be absent from the work, and other things that one might judge as trivial considering the nature of the news he had received.

In the previous chapter I asked whether we could make sense of Mersault's reaction to the news. "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday" (Camus, 1988, p.3). This is an instance of Mersault's thinking but let us pretend for a second that a person pronounces those words.

Chang's (1996) example to illustrate communication's undecidability is a person who runs into another, says something, but the other one does not understand a word and does not

know how to respond. With Mersault's words we have a different instance of undecidability. Assuming that we speak the same language, we can understand this utterance. On second thought, at the same time we cannot understand it.

From a rhetorical perspective, Mersault's words lack of propriety. It is not acceptable to express yourself in such a manner on this kind of topic. Seeing it as transmission of information, apparently it happened but how accurate can we deem the transmission of this kind of message if the decoding cannot be done, or to put it differently, there are several ways of interpreting it and it all depends on the text that the receiver is using to read Mersault's text and as Derrida (1976) would readily mention, "There is nothing outside of the text" (p.158). Mersault's reaction to his mother's death proves itself to be an absurd utterance, absurd communication.

In response to his boss' discontent for the two days of permission that he asks to attend his mother's funeral Mersault replies "It's not my fault" (1988, p.3) and then he thinks that that was something he should not have said. What could be better for communication than honesty? In this case it is shown that in fact honesty is not the best for understanding. How could a person understand someone saying "It's not my fault" referring to the loss of his mother? Through this example I am trying to explain how communication can actually operate as a divider instead of being faithful to its roots, unite or make common.

If Mersault performs as he is supposed to, and picks the right words, that exchange would be recognized as "good" communication. Curiously Mersault's honesty is what makes this an example of bad communication, something that needs to be corrected. If Mersault followed the script of what we consider civil behavior then communication has happened. This leads me to one of my claims throughout this thesis: understanding as the *telos* of communication can work as a totalitarian discourse that masks contradictions and problems.

Anonymous posts on the internet are an example from daily life that reveals how “performing” understanding is sometimes an illusion. Reading through the comments of any clip posted on YouTube, one can see a variety of outrageous intolerant comments. I cannot help but wonder how many of those users would employ the same language if they were not communicating anonymously. I am not saying that we should offend people for the sake of honesty but that communication understood teleologically can actually mask problems under the illusion of solving them.

Going back to the novel, on his way to Maman’s funeral Mersault falls asleep on the bus and he wakes up next to a soldier who is his seat companion. The soldier asks him if he had been traveling long. “I said yes”, says Mersault, “just so I wouldn’t have to say anything else” (1988, p.4). Here we have an example of performing communication where Mersault actually followed the script. They actually understood each other although nothing was communicated. On the other hand it is not that communication happened but that we forced an event to fit within communication as a concept.

Instead of explaining how communication works, our theories and models sometimes force reality to conform to their rules. For example, a scholar using the work of Erving Goffman (1982) would say that Mersault was saving or maintaining face. Mersault does not care, for him it is all the same. He did not care about saving face with his boss. He does not care about it at his mother’s funeral. Why would he care about it with a stranger?

Throughout the novel we see examples of Mersault’s communication shifting from performing propriety to not doing it at all. However a common trait is his indifference every time he engages in conversation. For him it is all equivalent nonetheless he still acts as a regular member of society. However, he is not a bad person. I mean he is not Caligula who inflicts

suffering on people in the name of absurdity. Sometimes he is even capable of showing affection, sadness, or worry about people but even then the worlds that he constructs through communication are absurd worlds. Worlds that exist only in language therefore are unstable and undecidable.

He is a friend for Raymond and Céleste, a partner for Marie, an employee for his boss, and eventually a criminal for society. All instances of life mediated and constructed by communication. Intriguingly, he reacts with the same indifference in all of them and thus communicates with the same apathy.

One could say that Mersault treats people as nonexistent entities hence he performs communication instead of truly engaging in it. However under a strict definition of communication as understanding, Mersault is a functional communicator. From a pragmatic point of view, he gets things done. From an absurdist point, communication should not be an end but instead should be seen as an ethically valuable attempt and the attempt itself has as much value as the result. Communication is always happening, always to come.

In Mersault's view rituals and communication mean nothing and although he abides to the performance, at the end, it is meaningless and empty. For example, he spent a night at the retirement home keeping a vigil of his mother's body and a group of residents also attend the traditional ritual. On their way out they all shake his hand, to which Mersault reacts with surprise. "... they all shook my hand—as if that night during which we hadn't exchanged as much as a single word had somehow brought us closer together" (1988, p.12). For the residents, a ritual, in Carey's sense of the word, was performed but nonetheless and although some may argue that ritual was important for them, we should not forget that Mersault is an active actor in this performance. He is the reason why people gather, to give him their condolences. Has

communication happened in this one sided event or the illusion of it is enough to explain it?

Throughout the story Mersault vacillates between propriety and brutal honesty when he communicates with others. The first time that Raymond approaches him, he talks to him because there is no reason for not doing it. When Marie asks him if he loves her replies, "I told her it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so" (1988, p.34), then he agrees to marry her. It does not mean anything anyway.

Perhaps the most interesting feature about Mersault's use of communication is that this is precisely what is going to cause his death. Beyond the fact that he shoots a man, and in the afterward, during the legal process, feels no remorse about it, what condemns him is the image that others had of him. During the trial he is constructed as a monster by all the witnesses based solely on the way he speaks. For Mersault an absurd world demands absurd communication. His world makes no sense, and has no purpose, and the way he communicates operates along the same lines.

For example, while preparing his defense, Mersault's appointed attorney asks him if he felt sad the day that his mother died. Mersault says, "...I answered that I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself and that it was for me to tell him what he wanted to know. I probably did love Maman, but that didn't mean anything" (1988, p.65). This answer makes the attorney uncomfortable and Mersault recognizes it when he says, "He didn't understand me, and he was sort of holding it against me. I felt the urge to reassure him that I was like everybody else, just like everybody else" (1988, p.66). It is interesting to notice that what makes Mersault different, and what is going to cost him his life, is how he communicates and what others make out of it.

His cry to reassure to the lawyer that he is like everybody else reveals how

communication sometimes can operate as a prison. Here we see an instance of communication constructing and constraining subjects, even more good and bad subjects. This is why I argue that structured communication, under the pretext of making common, can sometimes operate as a prison. By structured communication, I mean engaging in it mechanistically or teleologically. That is performing what is socially accepted as “good” communication, following a procedure, etc. However I am not attacking the procedure. I argue that it (process) cannot be applied to every situation and a systematic approach to it works under this assumption and is justified in its functionality. That a system gets things done or reaches a goal does not mean that the goal was the best or that the participants are happy. Communication as a system can actually corrupt the original intent of it, making common.

We see this in the exchange between the attorney and Mersault. Mersault’s honesty makes him uncomfortable. We have become so used to perform when we communicate that people breaking the script make us uneasy. Instead of appreciating what communication represents as an attempt, we focus on the mechanic aspect of it and see instances of misunderstanding, like the exchange between Mersault and the lawyer, as failed communication, as an aberration. We are not accustomed to see situations like this as an opportunity to engage in communication, to realize that this is a true instance of it. Instead we try to remedy the situation. On the other hand, Übercommunication goes beyond good or bad, in fact the only thing to overcome is communication itself, when communication is suppression of otherness in the sake of understanding.

Based on the way he acts and engages with others, we should ask: Is Mersault a monster? And I use the word monster because that is the word used by the jury, and the judge, when they sentence him to death. It is interesting to notice how a monster can be constructed through

language and communication. Mersault's reactions have turned him into a monster to public perception. Because he has not adhered to what we call proper communication, Mersault is socially constructed as a deviant. If as Foucault (1983) thought subjects are fictions constructed through science then in this instance we see Mersault as a product of communication. After all discourses about proper communication come from theoretical contributions that deem it as understanding, to which Mersault reacts with indifference.

I would like to stop my account of *The Stranger* here. Mersault illustrates absurdity but does not go beyond it. Only at the end he realizes that he has lived his life the way he wanted and accepts his absurd existence. Nonetheless his journey to emancipation is lonely. Mersault, like Sisyphus, is an individualistic absurd hero and we can tell that by the way he communicates. He does not make the minimum effort to engage with others. As I mentioned before, for him and absurd world requires nothing but absurd communication.

On the other hand in *The Plague*, we will see a different approach to the absurd. The characters, also aware of their nonsensical existence, try to move beyond it and their rebellion turns into a collective attempt to survive the plague. In the following section, I shall explain how communication works in the story and highlighting the differences between Mersault and the characters from *The Plague*, I will illustrate how absurd communication (Übercommunication) functions as an ethical activity and how understanding does not have to necessarily be the goal of communication.

The Plague

The story takes place in the Algerian city of Oran. Probably Camus picked Oran to situate his novel because the city had suffered plague several times in the 20th century after French colonization. Although the reader only finds out at the end, Dr. Bernard Rieux, in charge

of the medical teams that fight the disease, is the narrator of the story. Rieux keeps a journal where he records in detail all the events as they develop.

In Oran thousands of rats are dying in the streets. At the beginning the habitants are not concerned with this rare occurrence but eventually the number of dead rats is so large that the authorities have to address it. They take some sanitary measures but do not deal with it as if it were a dangerous treat. Against Dr. Rieux's advice, the authorities do not declare a state of emergency and try to avoid any actions that could alarm the population. Later the first human victims die, all with similar symptoms. Eventually the situation gets out of control and the government tries to take stronger measures but it is too late. The outbreak of plague spreads through the city and the death rate skyrockets. Officially the authorities declare an emergency and the national government isolates the town from the rest of the country with armed guards controlling the access points.

In the middle of this horrible situation, and as people keep dying at dramatic rates, the city has to take measures such as installing quarantine camps, forbidding funerals, having massive burning of corpses, and other shocking procedures. Dr. Rieux, along with others, creates sanitation teams to fight the plague and in the process their own stories develop. They all fight against a common enemy but for different reasons. In fact they never agree on why they should resist the plague, they just do it.

Rieux is the main character and the narrator. He is a middle aged doctor and when the plague starts his wife is in a sanatorium outside of Oran, thus they are separated during the whole story. Rieux represents the absurd hero in the novel. Unlike Mersault, his rebellion is not individual but collective. He realizes that people are suffering and that action is needed and in that sense he resembles Prometheus, and not Sisyphus. At the same time, he does not see

himself as a hero. He does not have any system that informs his acting. He is not trying to be a religious man or following any philosophical or moral precepts and although his actions are grounded on ethics, he does not have any system of preexistent ethical ideas.

Rieux is aware that the plague cannot be defeated, which is an analogy of how absurdity is permanent in the world. We cannot make sense of the world but we can resist its absurdity and that is what Rieux is doing, resisting the plague. Rieux has problems understanding Paneloux and his blind acceptance of his faith.

Father Paneloux is an educated religious man who sees the plague as a punishment from God, and well deserved according to him. He also invites the town to accept the plague as a rite of purification. However his view of the plague changes when he witnesses the death of a young boy, who after suffering terribly succumbs to the disease. His views are shaken by this experience and eventually he joins Rieux's sanitary teams. Paneloux will die of a disease whose symptoms do not resemble those of plague but greatly resembles it. He rejects any kind of medical attention trusting that God alone can save him.

Grand and Cottard are neighbors and part of the teams. They are both highly involved with the plans to fight the plague. At the beginning, Cottard tries to kill himself but after the outbreak of the plague his personality changes and he becomes more and more concerned with saving people. At the same time, he takes advantage of the situation and makes money selling contraband liquor and cigarettes. At the end of the story he loses his mental balance and shoots a crowd from his apartment, finally the police arrest him.

Grand is a clerk for the city government. Thody (1957) compares him with Rieux, "Yet is not Rieux who is described as the true hero of the novel but Joseph Grand, who is engaged in activity as modest and unassuming as that which Camus had admired as expressing the true

nature of rebellion” (p.32). Grand, quietly keeps the statistics of the plague, volunteers for any jobs that are needed, and is particularly fond of talking to people when they are in need. He is always smiling and trying to write a novel that he has been working on for a while but he keeps rewriting the first sentence and never goes beyond it.

Raymond Rambert is a Parisian journalist. He was in town to cover the death of the rats and finds himself trapped in the town after the government issues the quarantine order. His solely purpose is to escape Oran to be reunited with his girlfriend. He tries several things to escape but nothing works. Eventually he makes an arrangement with two of the guards in charge of the gates but when he is about to leave he turns back and decides to join Rieux and the others in their fight against the plague. He says that he could not live with himself or look at his girlfriend if he left the town. At the end he gets reunited with his lover.

Jean Tarrou is a man who arrives at Oran a couple of weeks before the outbreak of plague for unknown reasons. He comes up with the idea of organizing teams to fight the disease. His purpose is to become a saint although he does not believe in God. His quest for sanctity comes from his life as a teenager. His father was a prosecutor who wanted him to follow his steps. One day he takes young Tarrou to court to see him at work where he convinces the jury to condemn a man to death. Tarrou describes the defendant as an owl caught in a headlight. Since that day he realized that his duty was to help people like that “owl” and that is all he knows. Tarrou recognizes in the plague an opportunity to get involved in the salvation of people and at the same time argues that the plague is a collective responsibility. When the plague is almost over, Tarrou is one of the last victims of it. Rieux is affected by Tarrou’s death more than any of the other victims. His death shows Rieux one last time how absurd the world can be.

Briefly summarizing, all the characters find themselves in a town infested with a plague

that is killing people at alarming rates. Panic is taking over the city, so these men decide to join forces and fight their common enemy. Although they all have different ideologies and ethics, and fight it for different reasons, their common struggle unites them with a bond of solidarity. Through *The Plague* Camus tried to correct whatever was ethically ambiguous in *The Stranger*.

Although the men try as hard as they can to resist the annihilation of the town, the plague does not recede. Nonetheless they never stop trying. For example, Castel, a colleague of Rieux, creates a serum to fight the virus. After several attempts, he thinks that he finally has found a cure for the plague so they decide to try it on Othon's little son. Othon is a magistrate in Oran and his little child suffers plague. Rieux and Castel give him the serum thinking that it will help him but the kid dies after suffering horribly the symptoms of the plague.

Eventually the death rate starts to decelerate and it is not clear if the serum has anything to do with it. It is obvious that the plague is starting to disappear but the reasons behind are unknown. A few days later the authorities declare the end of plague and therefore of the quarantine. The town has a celebration where lovers and family reunite, others for the first time can pay their respects to those who died, and a crowd rejoices dancing and drinking. In the middle of the celebrations, Rieux knows that the plague is gone but not forever, because the menace of a new plague is always present. He is happy to know that madness is over at least for a while, but at the same time recognizes that he should be ready to fight whenever the plague decides to strike again.

The Plague was written by Camus during the Nazi occupation. In many ways, the plague is a euphemism for National Socialism. Nonetheless because it was published after the defeat of the German troops, right wing intellectuals used it to attack Soviet communism as well. Although Camus is definitely critiquing the systematic use of violence by the collaborationist

regime, the themes in the novel go beyond collective resistance against violence. Among others, Camus tries to explore themes like love, exile, religion, and perhaps more importantly resistance, and solidarity in an age of absurdity.

If there is something to learn from the plague is that our existence occurs in the most absurd circumstances. Plague is not a synonym for absurdity; plague is what reminds us of the fragility of our existence. Mersault recognizes the absurd through his own consciousness. In the case of *The Plague*, the absurd is imposed by the hostility of a cruel world.

The plague cannot be stopped by any rational or religious resources. All that people can do is navigate through it. Resisting it then becomes a way of living with it. Thody (1957) writes, “In simply doing his job well, Rieux is being faithful to the injunction always to serve man in a relative and limited way without aspiring to the eternal or the absolute” (p.31). The same goes for the other characters. Grand for example, has the most humble job in the plot. He is in charge of keeping the statistics about the disease however Camus thinks that any task that helps people in his fight against injustice is rebellion. Rambert once moved by his love for a woman, realizes that he is fighting the same thing that all the other habitants are fighting. He recognizes that he is not the only one missing a partner and in doing so he feels solidarity with his other companions of captivity. This solidarity forces him to return and join Rieux and the others in their quarrel.

There are many layers of meaning in *The Plague* but unfortunately I cannot cover them all. This is a thesis about communication thus it is time to move to the communicative aspects of the novel that I want to describe. First, it is obvious that the world of *The Plague* is not the same of *The Stranger*. The former is a hostile environment where people strive to survive while the latter is staged in a way that the characters live in a regular environment that could be seen as the

lives of any citizens of any modern city in the world.

Curiously, in this “regular” environment we found a man like Mersault, who is not concerned with any kind of collective life. Mersault is first and above all an individual that gains happiness through consciousness. On the other hand, Camus thought that the worst time brings the best in people and that is why in the midst of the dreadful reality that the plague has brought to Oran, we find characters like Rieux, Grand, etc. that act for the sake of others and that realize that the collective is as valuable as the individual. It is worthy to notice that I am not writing collective above the individual because that would not be faithful to Camus’ purpose. He never rejected Mersault. He thought that he was the first step towards rebellion. Our confrontation with the absurd is not an end but a call for rebellion and solidarity.

For example and to start with the analysis of the novel we can read one of the paragraphs of Rieux’s chronicle where he writes:

Thus the first thing that plague brought to our town was exile. And the narrator is convinced that he can set down here, as holding good for all, the feeling he personally had and to which many of his friends confessed. It was undoubtedly the feeling of exile – that sensation of a void within which never left us, that irrational longing to hark back to the past or else to speed up the march of time, and those keen shafts of memory that stung like fire. (Camus, 2004a, p.64)

It is interesting to notice how different Rieux and Mersault communicate. I am not saying that one is better than the other but in this paragraph there are some themes that highlight the differences.

Rieux writes about exile but the subject of exile goes beyond pure physical separation. Exile in the work of Camus is a consequence of the absurd. We become alienated from the

world, as nothing else matters. At least this is Mersault's vision of the world. He lives in exile, separated from a society that he scorns, and it is obvious by the way he communicates that he does not want to put an end to that exile. This happens because putting an end to it would amount to commit philosophical suicide and pretend that he fits in a society with values that reject the absurd.

On the other hand, Rieux mentions his permanent sensation of void, a feeling that emerges from his confrontation with the absurd. However he moves on and connects this sensation with that of his friends, realizing that he is not alone in this madness that the plague has brought. This clearly represents Camus' move from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*.

Mersault connects with people for minutes, and sometimes he is capable of showing emotional attachment to some of them. Nonetheless he does not see himself as part of anything. For him the absurd gives him the right to navigate his existence by himself, to alienate himself from world. He cannot recognize his struggle in others. Rieux goes beyond Mersault. Rieux attempts Übercommunication and goes beyond understanding. For him there is nothing to understand but the fact that he is not alone; for him the absurd is not a reason to perform communication but the condition of its existence. The same goes for Rambert who originally is concerned with a solution for his conundrum but eventually realizes that he is not the only one suffering on his/her forced exile away from a lover. In his awareness, he decides to stay and fight with the others.

The world that Rieux constructs is a world of solidarity in the midst of absurdity and his words prove it. Nonetheless Rieux is not trying to construct a world of understanding. Once again, for him there is nothing to understand, except the struggle in others. And a struggle cannot be rationally understood unless it is experimented. In the same sense understanding

communication as absurd is something that creates solidarity only as long as we can experience its impossibility.

Let me illustrate this through an example, reading about the past we come across with hundreds of wars, genocides, and other injustices committed throughout human history. However and as cynical as this sounds, the death of millions of innocents does not change our existence but at the same time we do feel solidarity for them. What happens when that injustice is committed upon us? It is natural to think that solidarity is stronger than ever when we have felt the same way that those with whom we identify.

Rieux says, "I'm fumbling in the dark, struggling to make something out. But I've long ceased finding that original..." (Camus, 2004a, p.113). We can trace a parallel between his words and how communication operates and recognize that the other is doing the same. Communication's undecidability is what precedes the existence of otherness but at the same time is what creates commonality.

Thus privileging understanding over its opposite or even conceiving communication in terms of this binary should be avoided. Communication is not one or the other but both and none. Communication goes beyond any limits that we might impose. Like Rieux, we should cease looking for the original and appreciate our struggle in the dark. Communication is undecidable but that it is only the first step. We cannot see it as an end. Nor stay in the endless critique of its undecidability. Here absurdity becomes a post-poststructuralist attitude. We need to go beyond communication and overcome it. It is not misunderstanding that we need to overcome but any kind of systematic approach to communication that indeed might suppress the possibility of it. Rieux says, "What's true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves" (Camus, 2004a, p.113). If communication works as

totalitarianism, we should try to rise above ourselves to overcome it (Übercommunication).

Rieux is saving people and that is all he is concerned with. He is a pragmatic and he does not have any systems to guide his conduct and does not believe that what works today will do tomorrow. In other words, although pragmatic he does not believe in solutions that can be systematized. “A man can’t cure and know at the same time”. So let’s cure as quickly as we can. That’s the more urgent job” (Camus, 2004a, p.185).

This attitude can be deemed as irresponsible but Rieux acts in a moment of madness where time is scarce. It is hard to apply the same kind of recommendation in everyday life situations, however if there is something that one can rescue from Rieux is his ethical behavior. Ethics in this case is not a system but an answer to the question: How do you live a good life?

Camus’ answer is simple, and it is clearly expressed through many of the characters in the book, by serving others. In Oran, everyone serves the cause for different reasons. From Tarrou’s quest for sanctity to Rambert’s individual reasons, the characters act under different circumstances but all for the sake of others. The narrator describes the condition saying, “No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all” (Camus, 2004a, p.149). The question is how do we equate the situation in a time of plague with communication or how do we have ethical communication?

One of the themes of *The Plague* is social life or how do we come to live together. Camus thinks that we have to learn to live—or perish—together. Working under a constitutive paradigm, we could claim that we construct our social life through communication. Thus when Rieux and others fight the plague, they also do it through communication. Nevertheless, unlike Mersault, they engage in ethical communication. They make an effort to understand but at the same time take on matters through action. In other words, they appreciate the effort as much as

the results.

Rieux's concern is the health of people instead of ultimate salvation. He says it in an argument with Paneloux about the plague and its consequences for Oran. Along the same lines while talking to Tarrou, he says: "Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me, I imagine. What interests me is—being a man" (Camus, 2004a, p.226). Here, Rieux is expressing a recurrent theme in Camus: rejection of any kind of ulterior purpose in human life. Instead the physical world, according to Camus, is the world that concerns us and seemingly the present and not any kind of rationally, or irrationally, calculated future. Communication as absurdity should work under the same assumptions.

We should not communicate for the sake of an ulterior purpose but on the contrary with focus on the other and the particular situation where we find ourselves involved. A pragmatist might argue that things still need to be done but communication as absurd still would have accomplishments. The difference is that based on absurdity and undecidability the outcome is nothing but a temporal solution. In other words when I say that communication is always to come, I am not saying that it never happens, as in accomplishes anything, but that the result should always be opened to critique. We should realize that considering the impossibility of communication, there should always be something to come that is better than what we have.

Second, in appreciating the effort that we make when we try to understand others, it should be expected that the outcome would be better. What is better of course is opened to deconstruction but if instead of seeing communication as a tool to achieve X we see it as an ethical activity where the other should be a priority over the goal, the goal itself would improve drastically. We have trusted rational systems to argue, agree, and decide but the world being what it is maybe it is time for a change.

Of course these recommendations can be dismissed as romantic. After all Camus and the existentialists have been forgotten accused of promoting ethics that do not work in a modern/postmodern world. In a conversation with Rambert, Rieux says: “There’s no question of heroism in all this. It’s a matter of common decency. That’s an idea which may make some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is – common decency” (Camus, 2004a, p.147). Along the same lines communicating for the sake of the other should be a matter of common decency and it is paradoxical that communication (making common) could be dismissed for being based on ‘common’ decency.

Overall the implications of acting in times of plague cannot be translated to times of peace and thus equating this novel with communication is complicated. That is why I have tried not to fall in the mistake of taking the plague for misunderstanding as an evil to fight. On the contrary I argue that misunderstanding is something to appreciate as it is the condition that opens the possibility of communication. Under the same assumption, Rieux mentions the following about Cottard:

...fear seems to him more bearable under these conditions than it was when he had to bear its burden alone. In this respect he’s wrong, and this makes him harder to understand than other people. Still, after all, that’s why he’s worth a harder effort to understand. (Camus, 2004a, p.175)

Once again the effort is what makes a difference within communication from an absurdist perspective. This simple act of “common decency”, the attempt to understand the other, is what constitutes absurd ethics. Rieux considers Grand “the hero” because he keeps doing his job, probably the simplest, but in doing so he is serving others. We should not think that communication has happened because we arrived to some sort of agreement or understanding, as

that result is always opened for deconstruction. On the other hand instead of trying to suppress difference we should happily embrace it as it is the site of constitution of otherness and of the self. Heterogeneity is the condition where communication occurs thus seeing it as an evil that we need to overcome simply reduces communication to a maker of fictions. In other words it is easy to believe in communication as understanding; it makes our life less complicated but we should question ourselves at what cost.

Absurd communication invites us to respect the sanctity of the other and make a true effort and try to understand him or her. We can overcome communication as suppression of otherness if we go beyond it (Übercommunication) and try to make use of the opportunity that it brings to us. In trying to understand we honestly engage in an ethical activity and by honestly I mean we truly accept that we cannot understand the other. At the same time the other cannot understand me and what we call “understanding” is nothing but systematic simplification of our desires or language games as Lyotard (1984) named the process of legalization of ideas in a postmodern world.

In recognizing our struggle in the other, solidarity becomes part of communication and although the task might be impossible or as Rieux calls it, “A never-ending defeat” (Camus, 2004a, p.115) it is meaningful in itself. There is no external meaning, no mechanistic or teleological explanations to assign meaning to it but the sole attempt that we make takes us beyond ourselves and the same happens to communication.

In this final chapter I have analyzed the novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague* looking for communicative practices in Camus’ characters and how they construct their worlds through them. In the first book, Mersault lives the absurd under the premise that it is all the same thus the way he communicates just reproduces his meaningful life. His engagement in

communication is always void and deprived from any kind of attempt to understand others.

However we should not see Mersault as a monster but ask ourselves why is it that his peculiar way of communicating is so strange? Mersault then becomes a critique of society and its structures and at the same time of communication as a structure. Mersault's honesty will cause his death and it is all because he cannot engage in any kind of proper communication. Nonetheless Mersault is only a stage in the quest for rebellion. His conception of the absurd is individual and although happy at the end, his world is not a social world. Thus Camus proposes that we should see him as the first step towards true rebellion. If Mersault could notice that others share his struggle, that they feel the same void going through a meaningful existence then he could move up to the next stage: rebellion.

In the second section, through the characters of *The Plague* we can clearly see this movement. In a hostile world where people are dying, a group of men decide to go beyond what is expected from them and join forces to fight a common enemy. Although they all do it for different reasons and with different things in mind, they recognize that they share the same struggle. Likely, when we communicate we realize that we are struggling to understand each other and in doing so solidarity should emerge. Rieux has no system or superior morality to inform his actions. He is just trying to serve others and in doing so he exemplifies absurd ethics at its best.

Seemingly, absurd communication is an ethical task. It values the effort as much as the result when engaging in communication. It sees it as the possibility of otherness thus it welcomes misunderstanding not as any evil to overcome but as the condition for communication to arise. Übercommunication, then, is a critique of systematic communication when it operates as a suppressor of otherness. It works under the assumption that a more ethical engagement and

to appreciate the effort as much as the result would deliver better outcomes, which of course are always open to critique as communication is always to come.

In the following pages I will briefly summarize the thesis, chapter by chapter. Then I shall explain the project as whole and offer my final thoughts about the issue that I have tried to cover. Finally, I will make a closing statement with the main arguments I have developed throughout the chapters and offer some conclusions about this project, and its implications, limitations, and future development.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Albert Camus tried to conceive a philosophical attitude through the absurd. As he was trying to separate himself from the existentialists, his work can be seen as a phenomenology of ethics. It is debatable whether he succeeded or not separating himself from the existentialist movement, however his oeuvre are rich in ideas and his thought essentially original. However, his work has long been forgotten and overlooked by scholars, particularly in communication. This project is an attempt to bring Camus back, or introduce him, into the conversation taking place in our field.

Although Camus is not or ever claimed to be a rigorous philosopher, his arguments are still relevant and provide us with valuable ways of seeing and understanding the world. Nietzsche wanted his legacy to be simple ideas that others could use to advance knowledge instead of ideal systems. I chose to read Camus in the exact same way, as a philosopher whose work's importance lays in the extensive observation and description of the human condition that he performed.

Camus the moralist, as Sartre called him, elaborated an interesting critique of diverse themes such as violence, rebellion, absurdity, and exile, among others. However communication is not among them. I have tried to extrapolate his ideas and apply them to communication. Not to explain how it operates but to describe our communicative condition from an absurdist perspective.

Originally my purpose was to construct a theory of the absurd and communication but as the thesis unfolded my focus changed to a more descriptive approach. Just as Camus' work can be seen as a phenomenology of existentialism, I would like to see this framework as a

phenomenology of communication. In other words a description and an attempt to contribute to our understanding of it but realizing that this can only be partially done.

I do not claim any kind of comprehensive analysis of communication but an examination of the concept looking for problematic or unstable issues. Because I am not offering any sort of closed system, the best that I can hope for this project is that it becomes a heuristic device for people who might want to do further research. As I see it, absurdity is another variable that communication scholars should acknowledge in their work.

At the same time, I have also tried to go beyond mere description and critique, offering an ethical approach to the problem of communication. Camus was concerned with people and not only with ideas. In fact he was deeply critical of systems because he saw them as dangerous artifacts that clouded human consciousness; in some cases accepting violence as a rational solution to our problems. Camus was an advocate of human freedom and through his work proposed a more ethical attitude towards others. Along the same lines, I have proposed a change in the way we engage in communication to see it first of all as an ethical task.

Communication should be seen as a practice where subjectivity and otherness are constructed thus as a site to appreciate heterogeneity. Communication's inherent impossibility is precisely what opens the door to its necessity and consequently to its possibility. Nonetheless, in the field understanding is a normative *telos* and misunderstanding, or difference, is deemed as an aberration. Even in daily talk, miscommunication is treated as an evil that we need to eradicate while understanding is always accepted as positive state.

Through the framework that I have tried to develop, I argue that we should not judge communication as good or bad, solely based on results. By doing so we are implicitly accepting that there is a perfectible state of communication, a goal that we are supposed to achieve thus we

disregard the present, the outgoing process that communication is. In accepting communication as understanding and ontologizing it, we fall at risk of privileging what Chang (1996) calls totalitarian discourses. In other words forcing understanding for the sake of a goal.

Before discussing my conclusions in more detail, I shall offer a brief summary of this thesis to put all the ideas it expressed in conversation. The first chapter was an introduction to the problem that I examine here. I explained the purpose of this project, its scope, and methodology. There I quickly introduced the ideas that I wished to explore and the direction in which I wished to move.

The second chapter was entirely dedicated to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. Camus' spiritual ancestor, as he referred to him, was tremendously influential for existentialism and poststructuralism. Camus' ideas on absurdity more closely resemble Nietzsche's thinking than Kierkegaard's. Specifically, I pointed to three concepts that are important to understand Camus: Eternal recurrence, Overman, and *amor fati*. I explained how the three can be used to explain Sisyphus's attitude toward his absurd existence. Embracing the absurdity of existence represents an affirmation of life or the Nietzschean love of fate and of course an effort to go beyond oneself. Camus' position is clearly informed by these ideas found in Nietzsche and that is why I have dedicated an entire chapter to the German philosopher. Understanding his work has provided me with a lens that allows me a deeper understanding of Camus.

In the third chapter I covered the work and life of Albert Camus. A short biography served to illustrate how his background and personal experience molded his philosophy. From his days of extreme poverty to his tragic death, Camus' days seemed to be haunted by absurdity. Later in the chapter I explained his two major philosophical works: *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. In the former we see the foundations of the absurd as he conceived it. In this work,

Sisyphus represents the absurd hero: a person condemned to an absurd task who in his personal awakening gains control of his life. His consciousness sets him free from the punishment and his rock becomes his world. We must imagine Sisyphus happy, concludes Camus.

In *The Rebel*, Camus tries to move beyond the problem presented by the absurd. How do we live a meaningful life in a world deprived of meaning? More importantly for Camus, does the absence of meaning equal to anything goes? He rejects any kind of moral permissiveness based on the absurd and proposes an ethical, situated attitude towards others. *The Rebel* was written during a time of political polarization, right at the beginning of the cold war, thus Camus is critiquing systems that pretend to justify violence for the sake of an ulterior goal.

Instead of a systematic revolution Camus proposes personal rebellion. *The Rebel* is a treatise on this kind of rebellion and how it does not need any kind of universal principles or any goal to achieve. Instead of being like Cain, Camus encourages us to be a rebel like Prometheus, a rebel of solidarity. Solidarity is precisely the next step in our rebellion against an absurd existence and we find it when we realize that we share our struggle with others. Then we can understand Camus' attitude towards absurdity as a first step in our quest for rebellion that finishes in collective solidarity. We move from the individualistic Sisyphus to a more social rebel like Prometheus.

In chapter four I attempted to extrapolate Camus and Nietzsche's ideas to construct a framework to describe communication. Absurdity is present in communication as it is in the world and I argued that one of the sources of instability is language. In one of the sections of the third chapter I brought in Derrida to elaborate on how communication is undecidable based on language instability. After explaining why communication can be seen as absurd through Derrida, I proposed avoiding ontologization it. When we draw boundaries around

communication it escapes those limits. At the same time seeing communication teleologically reduces it to a tool based on functionality. Instead of being productive actually this can operate as a maker of illusions. Understanding as the proof that communication has happened disguises issues that need to be deconstructed. Instead of seeing communication as something that occurred, we should see it as an open text, as something that is always to come.

Derrida's deconstruction was a useful lens to examine how communication is inherently unstable and always tending to dispersion. Our idea of how it happens is based on what Heidegger called articulation, where people come together in practices and find together a *telos* that they try to achieve. Understanding would be such *telos* in communicative practices.

On the other hand, Derrida would say that practices tend to dispersion and if there is a *telos*, it is because hegemonic exterior forces impose it even when the participants have the illusion of the choice. I have argued that communication as understanding operates in the same sense and that sometimes when people "agree" it is for the sake of normative discourse that suggests this is how it "ought to be" and, therefore, the necessity for a new form of communication. In other words because we agree on something it does not mean that communication works but maybe it is that we performed what we know as communication.

After deconstructing communication as a concept, my purpose was to go beyond it instead of falling into an endless spiral of critique. Thus I went back to Camus and Nietzsche to propose a new way of seeing communication: Übercommunication. Drawing upon Nietzsche's Übermensch and Camus' Sisyphus, I have proposed a concept where communication is something that we need to overcome and by that I mean overcome as a concept. Instead of seeing it mechanistically as teleological, communication should be valued as an attempt. Sisyphus' boulder becomes his world when he decides to stop worrying about the result and start

valuing his effort, thus his task becomes meaningful. Communication as an attempt means that we should go beyond good or bad because there is no perfectible state to compare it against. Instead engaging in it is what we should appreciate as it represents an ethical attempt to embrace otherness.

In this sense communication is eternal recurrence. It is an activity where we appreciate the act of becoming (attempting) instead of judging its success based on final results. Camus would say such appreciation is meaningful because in realizing that success is impossible we regained our consciousness. Thus instead of following any systematic idea of communication we do it based on our personal experience, situated, local, and temporal. This opens communication as an opportunity to appreciate difference instead of trying to suppress it for the sake of understanding.

Even more it takes us beyond its absurdity. Instead of conforming to its impossibility we engage in it precisely because it is impossible. Whether communication is impossible or not is not the question to answer but, in a Camusean turn, we must ask ourselves how do we act in an absurd world? Or how do we engage in communication if it is absurd?

To answer this question I have proposed that we need to follow Camus' existentialist ethics and to illustrate this in chapter five I have proposed a close study of two of his novels: *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, which demonstrate Camus' movement from *The Myth of Sisyphus* to *The Rebel*. Camus argues that individual rebellion produces solidarity and this creates collective rebellion. We should engage in communication in the same way. If we realize that the other is also struggling with his/her boulder, this would bring a sense of solidarity among participants thus a collective awareness of what communication represents as an attempt would emerge from this consciousness.

Mersault, in *The Stranger*, represents the first step, individual consciousness while Rieux, in *The Plague*, demonstrates how the absurd rebel should behave. Although the character clearly present Camus' attitude, I wanted to show how they do that through communication, not only to argue for absurd communication but to point out how communication conceived as understanding can sometimes work against its purpose.

Justified by his absurd existence Mersault communicates as an alien, as in alienated from a society that demands from him adherence to a number of norms that he despises. For him it is all the same and communication is one of these instances where he cannot perform as society demands. However Mersault's attitude is not an example as he does not attempt to go beyond the absurd, his discovery only makes him indifferent to everything and everyone. His consciousness separates him from the world and he does not try to bridge the gap as his happiness is in his own individual world.

On the other hand, Rieux, and the other characters in *The Plague*, try to survive in a hostile world where absurdity is constantly being imposed upon people through a plague that threatens to kill the entire town. The characters decide to join and fight a common enemy, in doing so they rebel against the plague and instead of using absurdity as an excuse, as Mersault does, they use it as a reason to engage in ethical action. In other words, they go beyond it when they realize that they are all together in that world of absurdity.

The Plague offers several notions of what Camus meant by ethics but mainly he argues that it is to serve others. Rieux, Grand, Rambert, etc. serve others, do their job, try to save as many people as possible because that is the ethical thing to do in time of plague and not because there is a universal morality to follow, nor a philosophical system. They do what the moment requires from them. Rieux goes beyond and says that to serve others like he does is just a matter

of common decency.

Contrasting Mersault, Rieux, and the others, truly attempt to engage in communication. Not because they have to perform but because they need to act in this time of plague. At the same time the plague has exposed them to the absurdity of their existences. They have realized how fragile human life is, and in this “terrifying” finding they have found solidarity with each other. The absurd has given them a reason to collectively rebel instead of an excuse to close to the world.

In these final pages I would like to develop an overall conclusion and summarize important ideas that I have argued through my thesis. First, throughout this project, I have tried to mention how Camus’ ideas can sometimes be problematic to defend, problematic from an academic standpoint of course because he does not use any methods that satisfy academic rigor. However I have not get into great detail about these issues. Here I would like to write a few lines about Camus’ weak points.

When one admires a thinker it is easy to be blind to many of the issues in his/her writing or sometimes “hijack” their ideas to make them fit to our own arguments and in my case I have to recognize that now and then I felt tempted to do so with Camus. Nonetheless, one of the major conclusions that I draw from this thesis is that the best way of showing admiration and respect of an intellectual’s work is by doing an honest critique of their work. After conducting research about Camus, my admiration for his thought has not decreased, but now I realize that there are several points where his arguments are poorly constructed. However the fact that arguments are not strong does not mean that they are wrong and I have learned this with Camus. For example, in my attempt of an absurd framework I had to incorporate Derrida to back my claims about undecidability.

Camus' weak points can be reinforced with other ideas, which curiously, as in the case of Derrida are closely related to absurdity even when he does not acknowledge any kind of debt to Camus. Even more interesting just as Nietzsche can be solved with more Nietzsche, according to Camus, I would argue that Camus can be solved with more Camus. This is not a coincidence but it comes from the fact that the two were not philosophers of systems thus they can easily contradict themselves in a book and correct it in another. Perhaps this is part of the rich experience that it is to read the two and their work cannot be understood as a closed system but as an open body of ideas.

Although Camus was not concerned with metaphysics, his works are clearly a critique of metaphysical systems that claim to explain existence and the world. Solomon (2006) argues that we should overlook the fact that Camus' critique of metaphysics also falls in a metaphysical explanation. Although I agree with Solomon's take, I also think that it is important to give Camus a more elaborated defense of his arguments.

Perhaps the most important questions that one could raise about the absurd are: How is the absurd not a metaphysical idea? Second, if it is unrealistic to have any sort of mechanistic or teleological systems to explain existence, ethics, etc. how is 'the rebel' that Camus proposes, not a *telos*?

I would argue that the answer to these questions are not strongly stated throughout Camus' work, however I would not claim that they point at mistakes that he made. They show issues that Camus does not explicitly state but that are implicitly clear in his literature and in his Nietzschean roots.

To answer the first question, I would go back to the second chapter and mention how Solomon (2006) and Sherman (2009b) remind us that Camus is not trying to ontologize the

absurd. The absurd is not a thing that exists out there but a feeling that emerges out of our confrontation with a nonsensical world. Thus, there is no universal absurd but different interpretations of it and in fact Camus would say that some people could go through life without noticing its existence.

More importantly and something that perhaps strengthens Solomon's argument is that Camus's work is a phenomenology of existence. That is he is not concerned with a rigorous philosophical argument but with descriptions of experience and recommendations about it. When Rieux says "We cannot know and cure at the same time", he summarizes Camus' attitude about philosophy. To cure is to live and that is the most important thing to do right now, to know becomes secondary (which is not to say unimportant) in an absurd world. In other words, to know how to live is privileged over know how to do²⁵.

The second question is an interesting one that is not explicitly addressed by Camus: Is the rebel a goal? Well, yes and no. Although Camus argues that rebellion is the outcome of our confrontation with the absurd (it is rebellion or suicide) his idea of a rebel is not universal. There is no perfect state of rebellion to achieve or a perfect rebel to imitate. Nietzsche is useful here, as his Overman is closely related to the rebel. In both cases, although it is clearer in Nietzsche, they do not argue for one model to achieve but for individual overcoming. Going beyond oneself does not happen universally but as Pindar wrote, and Nietzsche rephrased, at the end it is about becoming what you are. However if Camus falls into metaphysics it happens with solidarity as this is the instance, and he accepts it that he sees universally emerging from absurd rebellion.

Camus' romanticism is probably one of the reasons why his work is highly dismissed in academic circle nowadays. It is curious that ethics based on "common decency" can be

²⁵ *Savoir vivre* vs. *Savoir faire*

dismissed as romantic. Nonetheless there are instances of his work that clearly show blind faith in humans. For example, he was convinced that there is more to praise than to condemn in people, which is a noble thing to believe, and live by, but hard to prove empirically. There are multiple examples of how Camus puts maybe too much faith in people (e.g. solidarity, justice) and it is understandable why academics could dismiss this arguments.

On the other hand, and following Solomon's (2006) recommendation, I am one of those who prefer to follow Camus' great ideas even when they are expressed through weak arguments. If "common decency" cannot be argued for sure it can be experienced and between acting in the name of it and Derridean "always to come" ethics I prefer the former. Camus the moralist did not call himself a philosopher. Why should we judge him for not being one? He preferred to see himself as an artist, and life is art in the Dionysian/Nietzschean spirit thus he is a philosopher of existence not of methods.

Communication is also an art and that is how I see Camus's ideas working in this thesis, as suggestions on how to improve our art and more importantly how to recover its original tragic spirit. The tragic for Nietzsche is joyful (Deleuze, 2006) thus even when communication's tragedy lays in its impossibility, it is joy because misunderstanding guarantees that communication will revive, that it is never dead, always recurring eternally, always to come.

Finally, in the following pages I would like to summarize my ideas on communication and absurdity, identify challenges on it, and present a few personal reflections on this project. First, I must recognize that at moments I felt overwhelmed by the authors that I chose to write about and sometimes it was like wandering into the land of the giants. However, if I had to do it again I would not change any of it. Nietzsche provided me with a different lens to understand Camus and poststructuralism, and notice Nietzschean common themes between the two.

Derrida, an author that I would have liked to dedicate more time to, also gave me a stronger understanding of the absurd and his more methodological approach to philosophy helped me to write about communication, a theme that Camus does not mention explicitly while Derrida does.

To reconstruct my thesis I will explain it in three steps: First, our encounter with communication as absurd. Second, why is communication absurd? Third, what do we do in front of absurd communication?

The first question can be empirically tested and there are multiple examples available about it. Chang (1996) for example writes about an encounter between two persons where one of them says something, the other does not understand and the interaction is over after that. According to him this illustrates how communication is undecidable. Camus would say that this is an instance but there are other more common in daily life that also illustrate its absurdity.

Absurd communication holds that communication is not completely rational or irrational but that we cannot make complete sense out of it. We cannot fully understand it because reason has limits and beyond it there is only silence that can only be “surpassed” with faith. Communication thus works as faith, which is not what I critique. I invite us to think what is it that we have faith in and propose that instead of trusting rational methods we should advance towards a more ethical attitude. If one wants to keep the term faith, I would argue for faith in the other and not in totalitarian rationality disguised as commonality. For example, when people agree on something, do they really agree or the illusion of it is enough for a society to keep going on?

This question takes me to the second part of my reconstruction: Why is communication absurd? We all have been in some sort of situation where we cannot make sense out of someone’s words, and not necessarily as dramatic as Chang’s story. Camus tends to assume that

the world is absurd and his arguments are more focused on critiquing systems that do not acknowledge it than on elaborating a consistent treatise on the absurd and as I mentioned before communication is completely out of his scope. This posed a particular problem in my work as I did not find the correct tools to explain why communication is absurd. This is where I brought in the work of Derrida on language and communication to support Camus' ideas.

The question can the word communication communicate, is a good example of Derrida's work on language. If the word communication communicates it is only because it has a pre-assigned meaning, which has been defined in relation and reference to other words. Thus words are systems of texts that we use to construct other texts, which at the same time we interpret through mental texts. Consequently, Derrida's most popular maxim: "There is nothing outside of the text" (1976, p.158).

Thus I argue that communication is absurd because like everything that is part of human experience it happens within the confines of an arbitrary structure like language. Hence expecting any kind of regularity from such an unstable system is unrealistic and communication explained as a mechanism that we use to achieve a goal together would be so too. Can we really expect any kind of consistency from a text (communication) used to make sense of others, ourselves, and the world (all of them texts as well)?

Finally the third part of the reconstruction and the most Camusean is our attitude in front of absurdity in communication. I have proposed a framework, although the word sounds too structure-related to fully describe my attempt, to describe and experience communication. What follows is what I see as my humble contribution to the field and it is a suggestion on how to act in front of absurd communication.

First, I propose that any ontologization of communication is not necessary and in fact we

should try to go beyond it. Seeing communication as being in the world reduces it to the confines of a concept that cannot contain it. To deconstruct is to show how limits are arbitrarily assigned, how they are mobile, and how when we try to draw boundaries around something the thing itself (if any) always slips. Communications defined as something that “happened” reduces it to understanding therefore instances of it escape the assigned limits. For example under the idea of communication as understanding, misunderstanding is an aberration and we have seen through this project, and with Chang, Derrida, and Camus, that sometimes communication happens in its “opposite” and sometimes we pretend that it happened when in fact it did not.

Relying on these arbitrary boundaries to study communication can privilege totalitarian discourses or hegemonic forces that deem difference as something to eradicate or overcome. What we should overcome is communication as heterogeneity and at least make the attempt to appraise difference. After all where if not in difference can communication exist?

However I am not arguing for a world of misunderstanding, whatever that is or looks like, nor preaching about the evils of understanding or claiming that communication is dead. I argue that we should try to change the way we engage in communication and by doing so go beyond it. When Nietzsche says that humans are something that we need to overcome, he is not saying that humans are dead but that a new concept of humanity is necessary. The *Übermensch* is not a universal goal but an attitude based on the idea that we need to overcome “human” as we see it now. That is based on societal discourses that constrain our potential.

Übercommunication, seemingly, is not a claim to destroy communication or understanding but a plea to open the possibility of a better communication to come. A new attitude towards it that puts emphasis in the respect of difference as it is the only reason why communication is necessary. Even when it is absurd, life is still meaningful. Along the same

lines, although absurd, communication is still meaningful and not just because we achieve things or reach understanding, that is only an aspect of it. It is meaningful because we try to engage in it.

Camus and his rebellion are a good way to conclude this thesis as he shows us the absurd and at the same time he proposes an attitude to go beyond it. Translating this rebellious spirit into a communicative attitude would mean to engage in Übercommunication. Prometheus, the rebel for the others, taught us that are ways to navigate the absurd, which are strongly based on ethics. Can we act as Prometheus when we communicate? Maybe, however expecting this from the world would be mere romanticism thus I look forward for something less heroic.

Can we communicate like Rieux lives? That is with no set of ulterior goals that rule our actions but with the strong belief that we have to do it to serve others. Instead of privileging the result, we should embrace the opportunity and the attempt as the part that makes communication a valuable meaningful task. It is the site where we have the opportunity to discover and serve the other and by doing so, indirectly, we discover and serve ourselves.

Let us communicate for the sake of communicating, which is not to say that everything goes but asking for a reinvention and rediscovering of communication as an attitude. Let us attempt to claim communication as our boulder, which is meaningful because we keep trying to roll it uphill not because we get to the top. Let us reclaim communication from the functionality and easiness that seeing it as understanding provides and instead of that let us appreciate its difficulty, impossibility, and particularly its role as generator of otherness. What makes communication valuable is not that it suppresses difference and otherness but on the contrary that it is the condition *sine qua non* of their existence. What could be more ethical than to appreciate the other so much that we actually try to understand him/her instead of ascribing to normative

discourses of how understanding should look like, even more when we know that we cannot understand them.

Maybe I am asking too much from people. Maybe I am demanding too much from myself. I know that I could not entirely adhere to these recommendations because the world does not function like that. However just by trying I will be doing my part. Even when I know that this would be an endless defeat, I also know that sometimes I could win and after all life is the sum of the small battles that we win instead of one big war that we could lose. No one loses at life and no one should lose at communication. Just going beyond good and bad, understanding and misunderstanding we will realize this. Then again maybe I am asking too much from people, maybe too much from myself. Or maybe what I am arguing for, and this might make some people laugh, it is just a matter of common decency.

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