

The Black Side of the Sun: Camus, Theology, and the Problem of Evil

MATTHEW SHARPE

*Deakin University, Arts-Education School of Humanities and Social
Sciences, Victoria, Australia*

Albert Camus is typically categorized as an atheistic thinker, in the same breath as Sartre. Yet there is a sizable, often sympathetic, theological response to his works, which deal at great length with Christian themes, wrestle with the problem of evil, and are animated by his own avowed desire — in strong contrast with Sartre and other existentialists — to preserve a sense of the sacred without belief in human immortality. This essay reconstructs three components of Camus's rapport and disagreement with Christian theology, which he approached pre-eminently through the figure of Augustine, central to his early *Diplôme* thesis. First, we recount the young Camus's neopagan "religiosity" — a sense of the inhuman majesty and beauty of the natural world at the heart of what he termed (and later regretted terming) the "absurd," and rooted in Camus's own unitive experiences growing up amidst the sea, sand, and blazing sun of North Africa. Second, we look at Camus's engagement with the problem of evil, which for Camus — as for many early modern thinkers such as Bayle or Voltaire — represented the decisive immanent tension in later medieval theology, vindicating — in ethical terms — the modern rebellions against altar, pulpit, and throne. The essay closes by rebutting the charge, strongly argued recently by Ronald Srigley, that Camus was (both) anti-modern because anti-Christian. Camus's aim, we propose, was instead to bring together a neopagan sense of the wonder of the natural world and our participation in it, with the egalitarian components of Christian ethics, severed from secularized eschatological content.

KEYWORDS Augustine, Camus, philosophy, problem of evil, theology

Amidst the contemporary theological turn, and converging calls to rehabilitate one or other inhabitant of Jerusalem, the West's monotheistic

heritage, it becomes interesting to consider the few recent thinkers who, faced with similar anxieties about the legitimacy of modernity, responded by arguing the need for the moderns to also revisit Athens, the ancient classical heritage. In the lyrical closing peroration of *L'Homme Révolté* ("The Rebel") in 1951, Albert Camus calls for a second "renaissance, beyond the limits of nihilism"¹ and announces his credentials as one such thinker: alongside Karl Löwith for one instance, writing at nearly the same time.² The recent rush of publications on Camus's work, together with the extent (which we will demonstrate) of his engagement with Western theology, all speak to Camus's importance in contemporary debates.³ The issues he wrestled with are our own: the possibility of normative value in a post-traditional, multi-cultural world, the West's relation with the Moslem other, the importance of reconsidering our *rappport* with nature, and the possibility of a progressive critique of, and rebellion against, the injustices of liberal capitalism which avoids the Stalinist option. Drawing on Camus's long familiarity with classical philosophy and admiration of the *médan agan* (nothing too much) of Delphic religion and the tragic stage, Camus's language of a new "renaissance" is considered. Camus's distance from today's theological turn can be seen in several remarks he made in his *Notebooks* concerning calls, during the Nazi occupation of France, for some such return to the medievals:

The modern mind is in complete disarray. Knowledge has stretched itself to the point where neither the world nor our intelligence can find a foothold. It is a fact that we are suffering from nihilism. But what is most amazing are the "back to" sermons. Back to the Middle Ages, back to primitive mentality, back to the land, back to religion, to the arsenal of old solutions. To give these soothing potions the slightest efficacy we would have to behave as if we had forgotten all our knowledge [...] pretend, in fact, to wipe out what is indelible. With one stroke of the pen we should have to cross out the contribution of several centuries, together with the undeniable gains of a mind which [...] recreates progress for its own sake [...] In short, we were worth nothing during the Renaissance, the 18th century and the Revolution. We counted for something only from the 10th to 13th century [...] thus whole centuries of history, the hundred or so great names that have handed down to us a

¹ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1971), 305.

² Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

³ Mark Orme, *The Development of Albert Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice: "Justice pour un Juste"* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Aicha Kassoul and Mohamed Lakhdar Maougal, *The Algerian Destiny of Albert Camus* (Ann Arbor, MI: Academica Press, 2006); John Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt* (Stockfield: Acumen, 2008); Christine Margerrison, Mark Orme and Lissa Lincoln, eds, *Albert Camus in the 21st Century: A Reassessment of his Thinking at the Dawn of the New Millennium* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008); David A. Sprintzen and Adrian van der Hoven, eds and trans., *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2004); David Sherman, *Albert Camus* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Ronald Srigley, *Camus' Critique of Modernity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011).

tradition, a national life, love [...] all this has been in vain, it is all nothing.
And it is we who are nihilists!⁴

Camus is often popularly represented as a deeply anti-religious thinker, given reference to his early fictional works and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his first extended philosophical essay. Yet one remarkable feature of Camus's reception is that many of his most sympathetic, and best, readers have been theologians, or thinkers deeply sympathetic with the West's revealed religions.⁵ While *L'Homme Révolté's* critique of Stalinism as a secularized messianic eschatology precipitated Camus's break from Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the circles around *Les Temps Modernes*, he was receiving letters of praise from Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, and Martin Buber. Christian authors such as James W. Woelfel or Paul J. Archambault saw in Camus, if not a kindred thinker, then a worthy and respectful adversary, and an admirable man.⁶ Alfred Cordes' *Descent of the Doves*, arguably one of the most profound studies of Camus, shows how his fiction is replete with Christian symbols, culminating in the novella *The Fall* and the short stories in *Exile and the Kingdom*.⁷ Differently, in his provocative 2011 study *Camus' Critique of Modernity*, Ronald Srigley has argued that wrestling with the West's theological legacy represents the hidden key to unlocking Camus's trajectory from the 1930s, beginning with Camus's *Diplôme d'études supérieures* thesis on early Christianity, to his untimely death in 1960.⁸

For all these reasons, a reconsideration of Camus's critique of Augustinian Christianity, and his wider engagement with theology, is a very timely task. In what follows, we will thus revisit the complex issues of Camus's relationship with theology and religion, and contribute to the

⁴ Albert Camus, *Carnets 1942–1951*, trans. Philip Thody (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966), 9, 52.

⁵ James Woelfel, *Camus: A Theological Perspective* (New York: Abington, 1975); Albert Cordes, *The Descent of the Doves: Camus's Journey of the Spirit* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980).

⁶ Woelfel, *Camus: A Theological Perspective*; Paul Archambault, *Camus' Hellenic Sources* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972).

⁷ Alfred Cordes, *The Descent of the Doves: Camus's Journey of the Spirit* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980).

⁸ According to the Christian salvific conception of history, the first man lives in the Edenic kingdom until his rebellion against God. This leads to the fall, exile, and the need for transcendent, eschatological salvation. In the very titles of Camus's work after 1950, Srigley contends, this theological sequence is reordered, and its termini are reversed. After his longest philosophical work on human revolt, *The Rebel* (1952), Camus writes *The Fall* (1956) and the haunting stories of *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957). Only then do we arrive where the Bible begins, at *Le Premier Homme* (1959–60). According to Srigley, this sequence reflects not imminent conversion to Christianity, as per Howard Mumma, *Camus and the Minister* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2000), but an attempt to rethink the Western legacy in service of a second, neoclassical renaissance: "Camus' reversal of the traditional symbolism is a way of giving a Greek meaning to a Christian image. People rebel, but there is no fall, no change in human nature such that an apocalyptic redemption is required in order to restore it. With the fall gone every human being is *le premier homme* [...] these human beings are not Christians, but Greeks and Mesopotamians and Jews. The sequence of titles and the images they entail suggest a movement back towards a beginning that Camus discovers to be ubiquitous in human experience [...] In this respect, *The First Man* would have offered an image of human nature healed of our apocalyptic madness." Srigley, *Camus' Critique of Modernity*, 10; cf. Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1951–1959*, trans. Ryan Bloom (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), 125.

present renaissance of interest in Camus's work.⁹ I will argue, first, that there are at least two key reasons why Camus's thought has provoked such a respectful response from informed theologians, and should provoke the same from us; although I am closer to agreeing with Srigley than with Cordes *et al.* in assessing the wider, neopagan tendency of Camus's thought.

The first reason for the respectful response is that Camus's philosophical thought and literary output is uniquely shaped by his own, early, powerful experiences of contemplative, near-mystical wonder and sensuous participation in the natural world, growing up "poor but happy" in North Africa. No simple atheist, as we will see, Camus could write, on nearly the same page of his notebooks as the first citation above from 1942: "secret of my universe: imagine the sacred without a belief in immortality."¹⁰ Far from religiously unmusical, Camus was deeply attuned to the longing for what he would term, evoking Plotinus, a redeemed *patrida* or homeland. Moreover, if his worldview remained explicitly tragic, it was rooted in a deep sense of life affirmation, not world rejection, as he underscored in his early review criticizing the *pathos* of Sartre's *Nausea*: "it is the failing of a certain literature to believe that life is tragic because it is wretched. [But] life can be magnificent and overwhelming — *that* is its whole tragedy."¹¹ To clarify what I will term Camus's religiosity,¹² and its complex relationship with Camus's famous philosophical scepticism, will be the work of Part I below.

The second claim, the subject of Part II, is that Camus's thought is preoccupied, like the thought of "the other African" before him, Saint Augustine, with the problem of evil.¹³ Famously, in the first "cycle" of his works including *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *Caligula*, and *L'Étranger* ("The Outsider"), Camus is preoccupied with the troubling reality of human finitude, the inevitability of death, and its seeming consequences for the attempt to live fulfilling human lives. After 1942, as Camus became involved in the French resistance and political life, his work becomes shaped by the need to respond to the reality of political evil and rationalized murder, demonstrated most spectacularly in the genocidal Hitlerian and Stalinist regimes. Like Camus's neopagan sense of the sacred, I will argue, the ethical gravity of his mature thought — wrestling in particular with theodicy — gives a weight to Camus's engagements with theology far exceeding more facile atheisms, old or new.

⁹ See, for instance, by way of comparison, Mark Orme, *The Development of Albert Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice: "Justice pour un Juste"* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); John Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008); Christine Margerrison, Mark Orme and Lissa Lincoln, eds, *Albert Camus in the 21st Century: A Reassessment of his Thinking at the Dawn of the New Millennium* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008); v Sprintzen and van der Hoven, *Sartre and Camus*; David Sherman, *Albert Camus* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Ronald Srigley, *Camus' Critique of Modernity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Albert Camus, *Carnets 1942–1951*, trans. Philip Thody (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966), 7.

¹¹ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1968), 201; Camus, *Carnets 1942–1951*, 113.

¹² We use this term, first, since the term "religion" is now deeply contested, at best multivalent and at worst without an agreed transcultural referent; second, since we will see how Camus was highly critical of Augustinian Christianity, the hegemonic "religion" of his adoptive France, if not his native Algeria; and third, since the adjectival form "religiosity" shows that Camus's sense of what he sometimes calls the sacred is rooted in ecstatic or contemplative experiences, rather than sacred texts, hieratic institutions, or collective ritual practices.

¹³ Archambault, *Camus' Hellenic Sources*.

The third task we will then undertake in the context of Part II is to unpack the mature Camus's criticisms of Christian theology, placing him in dialogue along the way with Hans Blumenberg's better-known claims concerning modern self-assertion as emerging in the wake of internal divisions within Christian theology. Camus's defence of the legitimacy of modern metaphysical rebellion, I will show, turns around the claim that the Augustinian doctrine of a universally inherited original sin, and predestination, at the foundations of Latin Christendom represent deeply problematic responses to the realities of evil and meaningless suffering. As Camus puts it, with typical directness: "what I reproach Christianity with is being a doctrine of injustice."¹⁴ I will argue that recalling Camus's critique of Christian theology, on behalf of an ethical claim for justice, is an important counter to polemical, often deeply under-determined and inaccurate, depictions of modern thought as "nihilistic," amoral, or reducible to forms of psychological and political egoism.

In the concluding remarks, we want to qualify the picture of Camus's critical relationship with the Christian heritage that emerges from Part II. Following Archambault, we will note that Camus's democratic and charitable concern with social justice itself reflects his own deep debt to Christian egalitarianism.¹⁵ The Greeks were never such egalitarians as was Camus. So his second renaissance — like the first — embraces deep ethical impulses from Jerusalem or Galilee, alongside a greatly renewed appreciation for the tragic, "aneschatological" wisdom of the classical Greeks.

I. A Hymn to Demeter? Camus's Religiosity

The sense that Camus is an atheist thinker, I believe, is largely shaped by the success of his first novel, *L'Étranger*. We recall the famous culminating passage of the novel's action, when the hero Meursault is visited by a Catholic priest. The latter tries to confront Meursault with his sin, and call upon his remorse. Meursault breaks out in a cathartic, "great burst of rage," for the first time certain of himself and resolved to *écraser* any hint of theological consolation:

Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why. He, too, knew why. From the dark horizon of my future a sort of slow, persistent breeze had been blowing toward me, all my life long, from the years that were to come. And on its way that breeze had levelled out all the ideas that people tried to foist on me in the equally unreal years I was then living through. What difference could they make to me, the deaths of others, or a mother's love, or his God; or the way a man decides to live, the fate he thinks he chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to "choose" not only me but thousands of millions of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers.¹⁶

While the persistence of readers' identification of Camus with his first hero is testimony to *L'Étranger's* extraordinary art, it remains an obvious error to conflate a *littérateur* with any one of his characters. Camus, for his part, would repeat in interviews his distance from this atheistic and nihilistic Meursault, "the only Christ

¹⁴ Camus, *Carnets 1942–51*, 56; cf. 63, 92.

¹⁵ Archambault, *Camus' Hellenic Sources*, 101–102.

¹⁶ Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage, 1954), 151–52.

we deserve,” as he ironically put it.¹⁷ It is closer to the truth to describe Camus as an agnostic. “I hear people speak of my atheism,” he would comment in the 1950s: “Yet the words say nothing to me: for me they have no meaning. I do not believe in God *and* I am not an atheist.”¹⁸ In classically sceptical fashion, Camus argues that we can as little know that a God does *not* exist as we can claim to know that He does. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the philosophical essay he published soon after *L'Étranger*, Camus instead describes his position — in language he will always hold onto — as one which only affirms *limits* to what we can legitimately claim to know. These “absurd walls” speak equally against the availability of total, secular or Rational accounts of the world, as they do against theological accounts claiming to disclose the “final words,” or meaning of the Whole. Nor does Camus suppose that such agnosticism leads in any meaningful way to “nihilism.” One need only conclude that the world “has no meaning” on the basis of the premise that we cannot know whether a creator God exists, *if* one accepts the framing supposition that meaning is possible *if and only if* such a Deity exists. Yet *The Myth of Sisyphus* denies, or rather holds in *epokhē*, any such framing suppositions: “no metaphysic, no belief is involved,” Camus pleads in his “Preface,” anticipating and trying to forestall atheistic misreadings of his work.¹⁹

The Myth of Sisyphus only claims that, *even if* the world and human experience has some absolute Meaning, we can never legitimately claim to know or command it. Rather, “we must first posit negation and absurdity because they are what our generation has encountered,” as he replied to Christian critics.²⁰ Yet this sceptical or agnostic outcome is only one side of a picture which Camus will insist is always at least double. The other side is what Camus calls throughout his career the human desire for unity and meaning, which, so far from being discredited by admitting our ignorance concerning things in the heavens and beneath the earth, *animates* the very inquiries which can lead to such Socratic self-awareness. “Whatever may be the plays on words and the acrobatics of logic, to understand is above all to unify,” Camus comments. “The mind’s deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man’s unconscious feelings in the face of the universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity.”²¹

For Camus, this desire for unity is universal and inalienable to all humans — “common to both believers and rebels”²² — albeit capable of different

¹⁷ Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 337.

¹⁸ Camus, *Notebooks 1951–1959*, 112.

¹⁹ Albert Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (London: Penguin, 1978), 2. Differently, Camus observes at various points in his *oeuvre* that the very idea of “nihilism” is strictly chimerical: since even to assert that “nothing is true” is to claim that that sentence at least is true. As for the claim that “nothing has any meaning,” to do so much as continue living is to admit the relative value of life over death (Camus, “The Enigma,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 159–60). For Camus we are as it were immersed in meaning, whether we like it or not. This position holds even for destructive acts, like suicide and murder, in which Camus sees a distorted expression of the human desire for unity and communion: “There is no method of thought which is absolutely nihilistic [...] [even] the destruction of man once more affirms man. Terror and concentration camps are the drastic means used by man to escape solitude [...] If men kill one another, it is because they reject mortality and desire immortality for all men. But they prove at the same time that they cannot dispense with mankind; they satisfy a terrible hunger for fraternity [...] Terror is the homage the malignant recluse finally pays to the brotherhood of man.” Camus, *The Rebel*, 247–48.

²⁰ Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Random House, 1960), 45.

²¹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 22–23; cf. Camus, *The Rebel*, 260–62.

²² Camus, *The Rebel*, 233.

symbolizations. He locates it at the basis of the different pursuits of art, science, literature, philosophy, politics, love, labor, and religion.²³ The parallels here between Camus's thought and that of Immanuel Kant are thus notable. Camus, like Kant, underscores both the limits to human understanding, at the same time as he argues that the founding impulse of our minds, confronted with the conditioned phenomena of our experience, is always to seek — ultimately impossibly — to know the totality of the conditions. "There is not one human being who, above a certain elementary level of consciousness, does not exhaust himself in trying to find formulas or attitudes that will give his existence the unity it lacks."²⁴

Yet Camus's great distance from Kant — not to mention from the Parisian philosophical contemporaries into whose company the success of *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* would propel him after 1942 — is also important to understand.²⁵ Camus's earliest writings make it clear that his own shaping sense of this human desire for unity sees it not as purely cerebral, the product of a transcendental rationality, but as affective, desiderative, embodied, and responsive above all to our place in the natural world. Camus's notebooks are punctuated from their beginnings in 1935, like his earliest lyrical essays, by a series of descriptions of natural phenomena to which he responds with an almost erotic sensitivity: a thin, transparent band of blue sky beneath storm clouds in August 1935; light through branches out of an open window of the room where he was convalescing from tuberculosis in January 1936; the sun above him as he descends a hill, coming out of woods with friends into "the miraculous daylight";²⁶ the joy of sheer immersion in the North African sunlight at the ruins of Tipasa, which he describes in the resonant language of the pagan *hieros gamos* or contemplative initiation at Eleusis:

At Tipasa, "I see" equals "I touch", and I am not so stubborn as to deny what my hands can touch and my lips caress [...] Need I mention Dionysus to say that I love to crush mastic bulbs under my nose? Is the old hymn that will later come to me quite spontaneously even addressed to Demeter: "Happy is he alive who has seen these things on this earth"?²⁷

Camus throughout his life would underline that these first piercing experiences of natural beauty formed the basis for his abiding sense of the sacred, and, differently, of his sense that there is something tawdry about simplistically anti-religious positions, like today's new atheisms.²⁸ At times, as in the music of his essay "Nuptials at Tipasa," Camus is content to describe his sense of natural beauty in explicitly polytheistic or pantheistic terms: "In the spring, Tipasa is inhabited by gods and the gods speak in the sun and the scent of absinthe leaves, in the silver armour of the sea, in the raw blue sky, the flower-covered ruins, and the

²³ Camus, *The Rebel*, 101; Srigley, *Camus' Critique of Modernity*, 71.

²⁴ Camus, *The Rebel*, 262.

²⁵ "I am not an existentialist, although of course critics are obliged to make categories. I got my first philosophical impressions from the Greeks, not from nineteenth century Germany." Cited in Todd O. *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. B. Ivry (London: Chatto and Windus; 1997), 379.

²⁶ Camus, *Notebooks 1925-42*, 2, 4-5, 9.

²⁷ Camus, "Nuptials at Tipasa," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 68.

²⁸ Camus, "Return to Tipasa," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 165, 167.

great bubbles of light among the piles of stone”; or again, “ah, I would be converted to this, if it were not already my religion.”²⁹ Camus’s literature is dotted with extraordinary moments, like that which moves Janine in the short story “The Adulterous Woman,” when characters’ circles of mundane preoccupations fall away, they find themselves face-to-face with the permanence, and silent majesty, of nonhuman nature, and somehow “the knot tightened by the years, habit, and boredom” is loosened in experiences of “affliction and wonder.”³⁰

When Camus does come to theoretically describe the desire for unity at the heart of his philosophy, his sources are not modern philosophers like Kant. Just as there have been no landscapes in European novels since Fyodor Dostoevsky, Camus complains that modern philosophy has turned its back upon nature.³¹ Hegel, he notes, characteristically thought that self-consciousness could arise only in big cities.³² Camus’s proximal sources come from ancient Greek thought. Camus’s early academic research in 1935–36 was on the transition between the pagan and Christian eras, which he would always maintain was the most momentous shift in the history of Western culture.³³ The sense in the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus, who has a key role in Camus’s *Diplômes* thesis, that human Reason is a fundamentally contemplative capability; together with Plotinus’s Hellenic sensitivity to the beauty of the cosmos — “if things are explained, it is because things are beautiful,” as Camus glosses it³⁴ — all spoke powerfully to the young Camus’s aesthetic sensibility, and his own powerful experiences of natural beauty. In “Summer in Algiers” of 1937, Camus thus describes the desire for unity that *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* will continue to identify as “one essential element of the human drama” with express reference to Plotinus, who appears also in *Le Mythe*:

there are moments when everything [in us] aspires to this homeland (*patrie*) of the soul: “Yes, this is the place to which we must return”. [But] this union, which for Plotinus so ardently wished — what is so strange about finding it on this earth, where unity expresses itself in terms of sun and sea?³⁵

Camus is therefore very clear, despite his continuing misreception, that what he calls the absurd in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* is anything but the sterile promontory of a world bereft of meaning and a larger order. This absurd is not a fact, invented or discovered, about the world at all. Just as little is it merely subjective, the anomie of a mind lost to measure and reason: “the Absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have a meaning) nor in the world, [it is] in their presence together.”³⁶ The absurd for Camus describes what he variously calls the clash,

²⁹ Camus, “Nuptials at Tipasa,” 65; cf. Camus, *Notebooks 1924–42*, 40, 32.

³⁰ Camus, “The Adulterous Woman,” from *L’Exil et Le Royaume* of 1957, available online at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/2934167/THE-ADULTEROUS-WOMAN> (accessed May 14, 2013).

³¹ Camus, “Helen’s Exile,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 150–51.

³² Camus, “Helen’s Exile,” 150.

³³ Camus, *Notebooks 1942–1951*, 176.

³⁴ Camus, *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, trans. Ronald Grigley (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 90.

³⁵ Camus, “Summer in Algiers,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 90.

³⁶ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 34.

“confrontation,” or “breach” between the inalienable longing for order that animates us as humans, and a world which resists its final satisfaction. It is a “confrontation between the irrational and the wild longing for unity whose call echoes in the human heart.”³⁷ And the significance of its disclosure, for Camus, is immediately an ethical one. Camus sees the absurd as the basis for what we might call today a kind of sceptical, epistemically shaped, virtue ethics. Camus wants “to know if I can live with what I know and only with that,” as he says: remarking that this seems to him only a matter of “decency.”³⁸ It is just that even the most far-reaching metaphysical scepticism cannot reduce the “odd trinity” of “the irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter.”³⁹ So it is for Camus simply a question of intellectual honesty to acknowledge and honour this “first distinguishing feature” of the absurd: that “it cannot be divided. To destroy one term [humanity or the world] is to destroy the whole.”⁴⁰ This is why *The Myth of Sisyphus* opposes suicide, and argues that its rationality does *not* at all follow from rejecting metaphysical absolutism of any kind.⁴¹ Rather, its entire second half centers around an appeal for a new philosophical way of life. “Daily effort, self-mastery [...] an *askesis*” are required to “maintain awareness” of the divided condition of the absurd, Camus repeats in *The Myth* and his *Carnets*.⁴²

So the vast distance between Camus’s philosophy, even in its earliest incarnations, from any simple atheism is, I hope, by now becoming clear. In order to further bring out the specificity of Camus’s fundamental commitments, though, we need to conclude this first part by raising an important query or quandary that can and, indeed, does strike many readers. This query concerns Camus’s propensity to describe the ethics he recommends on the basis of his “absurd reasoning,” in a language of rebellion, revolt, protest, and defiance. For all the art of Camus’s evocations of natural beauty and sensitivity to the human “nostalgia for unity,” it can and has been charged — for instance, recently and well by Ronald Strigley — that this language gives the game away: Camus’s pagan nature-worship notwithstanding, he remained prey despite himself to the same kind of acosmic world-rejection as Meursault’s violent dismissal of the *padre* with which this section began.⁴³

A language of revolt, affirmed to describe the ethical stance Camus associates with fidelity to the absurd, is certainly present in the earliest *Carnets*, the essays of

³⁷ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 26; cf. 51–52.

³⁸ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 53.

³⁹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 32.

⁴⁰ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 34.

⁴¹ Closely attending this kind of probity or *rechtlichkeit* is what Camus names a kind of fidelity characterizing “the absurd man”: the desire to keep faith with, or remain mindful of, the first vintage of his “absurd reasoning.” Such fidelity, Camus will always insist, involves (thirdly, alongside honesty or “intelligence” and fidelity) the virtue of courage, set against the dispersing forces of habit, the human genius for forgetfulness, and the temptation to “leap” (as Camus puts it) out of the “tension” of the absurd, into upholding a position which hypostasizes either the human wish for unity, or the world’s resistance to it.

⁴² Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 54, 115; Camus, *Notebooks 1935–42*, 33; cf. Camus, *Notebooks 1942–1951*, 6, 134. One thing Camus sees which made Christianity so compelling was that it involved the pursuit of an exemplary “style of life.” His philosophy for its part also recommends “a school of patience and lucidity,” “a discipline for understanding and for living.” This way of life, moreover, aims at what Camus sometimes explicitly terms “a Sainthood of negation,” again in strongest contrast to any more simply anti-religious position. Camus, *Notebooks 1942–1951*, 12; Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 115, 96. I have dealt with this aspect of Camus’ work in “Camus’ *Askesis*: Reading Camus via the *Carnets*,” *Philosophical Practice*, March 2013, 8.1: 1149–1164.

⁴³ Strigley, *Camus’ Critique of Modernity*, 49–51, 77–78.

Nuptials, and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Yet it is important to see how for Camus this “permanent revolution” in the field of individual experience, as he calls it,⁴⁴ never bespeaks or recommends a futile rejection of our mortality, and thereby the limits of the human condition.⁴⁵ It names instead the strenuous effort of attention to “keep the absurd alive”: “a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity [...] simultaneously [an] awareness and rejection of death.”⁴⁶ Camus “protests” against death, particularly the senseless death of innocents (as we will see), because of “the consequences implied by death. If nothing lasts, then nothing is justified.”⁴⁷ Principally, death puts an end to our awareness of the world, and thereby to the absurd confrontation his philosophy wants at once to explore and valorize. But Camus always adds that, for this reason, “to fight against death amounts to claiming that life has a meaning, to fighting for order and for unity.”⁴⁸ Indeed, Camus is clear — in a difficult thought, recently ventured by Martha Nussbaum⁴⁹ that, for him, our mortality is in the last instance a constitutive precondition of what gives human life its meaning and dignity, not any kind of regrettable obstacle to be somehow overcome.⁵⁰ As Camus reflects in his notebooks: “what would the world be without death — a succession of forms evaporating and returning, an anguished flight, an unfinishable world. But fortunately there is death, the stable one.”⁵¹

The point is that, contra Srigley and many others, Camus’s concept of rebellion is no Miltonian-existentialist protest against the order of creation. A critic of romantic dandyism,⁵² Camus rather recommends a scepticism concerning all positions which, as he puts it, “relieve me of the weight of my own life”: either by preaching resignation in the face of death’s inevitability, or by holding up hopes of another life, thereby “evading the implacable grandeur of the [life] we have.”⁵³ For Camus this implacable grandeur — which is, to underscore, what his “revolt” *sets out to preserve* — is opened to us in peak experiences of love, admiration, joy, ethical solidarity (increasingly central in the later works), and aesthetic contemplation. What happens in these furtive experiences, Camus maintains, is that “the stage scenery of habit” falls away, which serves usually to *conceal* from us the uncanniness and wonder of our mortal condition, and the greater reality of which it is a part. What we are left with is the order of a world that we did not create, which transcends our domestication and control, and yet of which we are one transient and fragile part. *Le Mythe* puts it this way, concerning our experience of beauty:

at the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of the trees at this moment lose the illusory meaning with which we

⁴⁴ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 54.

⁴⁵ Cf. Camus, “Wind at Djemila,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 73–79.

⁴⁶ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 54.

⁴⁷ Camus, *The Rebel*, 73.

⁴⁸ Camus, *The Rebel*, 73.

⁴⁹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 227–29.

⁵⁰ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 55.

⁵¹ Camus, *Notebooks 1942–1951*, 45.

⁵² Camus, *The Rebel*, 32ff.

⁵³ Camus, “Summer in Algiers,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 91.

had clothed them. The primitive hostility of the world rises up across millennia [...] the world evades us *because it becomes itself again*.⁵⁴

To affirm life on this model is to assent that the world is much greater than we are, that the calculus of time shall soon enough reduce all our passions and projects to memory and silence, at the same time as we must rebel against everything within ourselves and others that would diminish “the unique opportunity of seizing awareness [...] that constant presence of man in his own eyes” which Camus sees as most admirable in the human drama.⁵⁵

For Camus, then, the “inhumanity” of the world, up to our own mortality and everything in nature which “denies” us, also “constitutes man’s majesty,” as Camus puts it in a remarkable phrase. It follows that anything which reduces, disavows, or denies this primordial otherness of things, and in ourselves, “is tantamount to impoverishing man.”⁵⁶ This is why Camus thinks we should never be too quick to take at their word philosophies which reassure us that their accounts, which presume to explain all things, are the necessary conditions of lasting value and ethical worth. Instead Camus contends that “the doctrines which explain everything to me debilitate me at the same time. [For] they relieve me of the weight of my own life” at the same time as they tend to drain the world of its suprarational, “inhuman” grandeur.⁵⁷ As enigmatic or paradoxical as these thoughts sound, then, Camus is again self-consciously taking his place in the classical Hellenic legacy in upholding them. Aristotle already noted that gods could have no need for many of the virtues we most deeply admire — justice, courage, moderation, practical wisdom — since immortal beings can experience none of the pressing needs, desires, dependencies, and fears that call forth these admirable traits in men and women.⁵⁸ Michel de Montaigne, closer to Camus, concurs in his essay “On Virtue” that the man who has need to overcome himself, his fears and ignoble desires, is more admirable than the scarcely human, god-like sages extolled in the ancient schools.⁵⁹ Just so, Camus affirms in *The Myth*’s main text: “It was previously a question of finding out whether life had to have an [absolute] meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear on the contrary that it will be lived all the better if it has no [such] meaning.”⁶⁰

This is a strange kind of “rebellion,” then. Our point here is only that it is an expression of what we’ve been terming Camus’s religiosity, rooted in an affirmation of this life (“the fixed and radiant point of the present”): not its nihilistic denial.⁶¹ Camus’s ultimate claim, indeed, is that all the virtues, far from being undermined by a post-metaphysical uncertainty about ultimate Meaning, are deeply *grounded* in the bracing spectacle “of the [human] intelligence at grips with

⁵⁴ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 54, italics added.

⁵⁵ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 54.

⁵⁶ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 55.

⁵⁷ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 55.

⁵⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book X, chapters 7–8; Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 225–29.

⁵⁹ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, book II, essay 29 (“Of Virtue”).

⁶⁰ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 53.

⁶¹ Camus, *The Rebel*, 269.

a reality that transcends it” — and which calls forth our courage, moderation, humility, charity, and justice.⁶² Or, as he put it wryly in a late interview:

The right explanation is always double, at least. Greece teaches us this, Greece to which we must always return. Greece is both shadow and light. We are well aware, aren't we, if we come from the South, that the sun has its black side?⁶³

II. *Nemo Bonus?* Camus, Theology, and the Problem of Evil

We have shown now why it is deeply problematic to read Camus as an atheistic, or simply anti-religious, thinker. Drawing principally on his earlier works, we have seen instead that Camus's thought brings together sceptical-agnostic and openly pantheistic-pagan elements, to give a lyrical voice to what Camus called a sense of the sacred without immortality, or a kind of Sainthood without God: what we have here called Camus's religiosity. The language of revolt, which only becomes more central to Camus's oeuvre as it develops, in no ways pulls against Camus's neoclassical or neopagan “worshipping of the world as divine,” in the direction of the kind of godless existentialism often attributed to him.⁶⁴ Far from a denial of the reality of limits and mortality, Camus's rebel sets himself against all positions — atheistic or theological — which would refute such limits and this reality, thereby diminishing what Camus always called the implacable grandeur of our mortal lives. “Rebellion proves in this way that it is the very movement of life,” Camus rejoins in *The Rebel*, “and that it cannot be denied with renouncing life. Its purest outburst, on each occasion, gives birth to existence. Thus it is love and fecundity, or it is nothing at all.”⁶⁵

So, turning now to Camus's mature work, we want to shift the grounds, and open our presentation of Camus's religiosity onto wider, newly contemporary questions about the nature and legitimacy of the post-theological, modern age. In doing this, we shall be reflecting Camus's own direction after 1942, as his involvement in the French resistance and postwar political Left engendered a widening of Camus's concerns into the field of political philosophy, with its central concerns for questions of justice. Camus's great mature philosophical essay, *L'Homme Révolté* (1951–52), in fact, is a lengthy consideration of the modern age, animated like Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) by the urgent need to understand how the National Socialist and Stalinist regimes, and their genocidal crimes, could have become possible in twentieth-century Europe.⁶⁶ Camus's argument in the book, we will contend, represents a qualified defence of the modern, secularist break with the West's premodern, Christianate culture; one which nevertheless traces the genealogies of Hitlerist and Stalinist regimes to the modern European philosophies of Rousseau, de Sade, Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. Modernity is the age of rebellion *par excellence*, Camus observes: “metaphysical

⁶² Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 55.

⁶³ Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 357.

⁶⁴ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 7.

⁶⁵ Camus, *The Rebel*, 304.

⁶⁶ Cf. Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

rebellion” in the realm of ideas, challenging theology’s hegemony over the European mind, and “historical rebellion” on the streets and the barricades, overthrowing first the *anciens régimes*, then challenging the bourgeois-capitalist societies that have largely taken their place. If we are to evaluate the legitimacy of the modern age, then, Camus argues, we need to philosophically weigh up the rationale behind these rebellions. We need to ask, in particular, whether regimes of concentration camps and *gulag* archipelagos followed of necessity, down a long but slippery slope, as soon as the early moderns challenged the thrones and altars of old Europe, “to the accompaniment of crashing ramparts.”⁶⁷ Our particular concern is how Camus evaluates the early moderns’ motives for the critique of Christian theology — what he calls “the great offensive against a hostile heaven” undertaken by de Sade, the Romantics, Stirner, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Marx.⁶⁸ So let us proceed.

The rebel is someone who says “No!” to some perceived violation of her or his life, concerns, fellows, or their dignity, Camus observes. But, typically, Camus observes that such a “No” always presupposes, logically and existentially, a prior “Yes”: the affirmation of a limit, on the hither side of which are all the things the rebel prizes as not under any circumstances to be violated, but defended and, if need be, through recourse to violence.⁶⁹ *The Rebel*’s phenomenology of revolt thus develops explicitly, *The Myth of Sisyphus*’s confrontation of the human desire for unity and order with “an unjust and incomprehensible condition.” Never merely negative, the rebel’s “blind impulse is to demand order in the midst of chaos,” Camus says: “he protests, he demands, he insists that the outrage be brought to an end, and that what has up to now been built on shifting sands henceforth be founded on rock.”⁷⁰ What was it, then, that the early modern thinkers who broke with the “sacred world” were protesting against, or saying their “No” to, on Camus’s assessment?⁷¹ When we turn to early modern philosophers who led the intellectual rebellion against “the world of grace” constituted by Europe’s theologically sanctioned monarchies, Camus suggests, as has Susan Neiman more recently, that we find again and again a preoccupation with the problem of evil.⁷² How, in particular, can what were called “natural evils” like the earthquake which devastated Lisbon in 1756, not to mention plagues like the ones central to the work of Camus and Lucretius, be explained in a world that Christian theology argued was created by an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God? The charge of everyone from Machiavelli to Bayle, Voltaire, and Sade on this question, Camus notes, was simply that, given the evident injustices and sufferings of the world, if an omnipotent God truly created such a world, He must not be omnibenevolent, but “a criminal divinity who oppresses and denies mankind.”⁷³ “All Sade’s atheists suppose, in principle, the nonexistence of God for the obvious reason that His

⁶⁷ Camus, *The Rebel*, 26.

⁶⁸ Camus, *The Rebel*, 26.

⁶⁹ Camus, *The Rebel*, 9–10.

⁷⁰ Camus, *The Rebel*, 10.

⁷¹ Camus, *The Rebel*, 21.

⁷² Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁷³ Camus, *The Rebel*, 37.

existence would imply that he was indifferent, wicked, or cruel,” Camus observes.⁷⁴ Milton’s Satan, so dear to the Romantics, likewise condemns the arbitrariness of this “aggressive and unworthy God” who employed force to subjugate him “whom reason hath equal’d.”⁷⁵ “‘Nothing’, Lucifer says, ‘will change this determined mind, this high disdain born of an offended conscience.’”⁷⁶

The key point here is that, for Camus, the early modern free thinkers and metaphysical rebels blasphemed against God, not at first to supplant Him, but only to challenge his works “in the name of a moral value.” If nihilistic, secularizing, claims to the divinity of the individual or the species were soon enough to follow, this does not license retrospectively “reading out” of modern history its opening, ethical cause. Camus’s most extended analysis of such early modern metaphysical rebellion concerns Dostoevsky’s troubled character of Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan’s metaphysical rebellion against his inherited faith is prompted by witnessing the needless death of a child, innocent of all but the most petty crime, at the hands of a provincial noble. Ivan simply cannot reconcile himself, morally, to a world order in which such a criminal action could be sanctioned as somehow providentially necessary. “If the suffering of children serves to complete the sum of suffering necessary for the acquisition of truth,” he protests, “I affirm from now on that truth is not worth such a price.”⁷⁷ *Even if God exists*, Camus notes that Ivan begins by arguing — agnostically, not atheistically — “I would persist in my indignation.” Again: “Ivan does not say there is no truth. He says that if truth does exist, it can only be unacceptable. Why? Because it is unjust. The struggle between truth and justice is begun here for the first time, and it will never end.”⁷⁸ We are as yet a long way from any hybristic aim to do more than challenge God’s justice in the name of a moral value, and close to the biblical book of Job.

Yet Ivan’s full trajectory, for Camus, condenses down to its philosophical essence the larger career of modern political ideologies, which will lead in the twentieth century to Ivan’s Fascist and Stalinist successors in metaphysical rebellion perpetrating crimes far more heinous than the Lisbon earthquake of 1756 to which the enlighteners pointed to argue that God must be either impotent or malign. “Long reflection on the condition of mankind as sentenced to death,” Camus tells us, leads Ivan to make an explicable, but disastrous, leap from the moral claim “even if He exists, I would not follow Him,” via “He does not deserve to exist,” to the “there is no God, and therefore everything is permitted” that we know justifies Ivan’s complicity in the senseless murder of his father. “As God and immortality do not exist,” as Ivan pretends to have established, so the “new man is willing to become God,” or if not God, then an overman, a nihilistic terrorist, or the vanguardist leader of a revolutionary cell.⁷⁹ In this way, metaphysical rebellion against God passes over into something very different: what Camus calls metaphysical revolution. In this process, men and women, then entire political

⁷⁴ Camus, *The Rebel*, 37.

⁷⁵ Camus, *The Rebel*, 48.

⁷⁶ Camus, *The Rebel*, 51.

⁷⁷ Camus, *The Rebel*, 56.

⁷⁸ Camus, *The Rebel*, 56.

⁷⁹ Camus, *The Rebel*, 58.

movements, come to feel licensed to take on the same violent prerogatives the early modern metaphysical rebels had protested against at the hands of the dethroned Deity and His earthly representatives. It is just that, whether Christian theodicy had vindicated the natural disasters visited upon human beings by recourse to God's providential plan, Rousseau's revolutionaries will justify their Terror by recourse to a transcendent principle of Justice and the General Will; the Fascists will vindicate their "resettlement programs" and pre-emptive campaigns by the chimerical vision of a purified, Aryan overman or race of masters; then Lenin and Stalin will justify the show trials and slave camps by way of an eschatological philosophy of History, in which the proletarian revolution features as a kind of last, cleansing judgment "redeeming collective suffering from alienation."⁸⁰

The key distinction Camus makes here, then — one which critics routinely miss — is between metaphysical rebellion, carried out in the name of justice against the theological, or any, rationalization of natural and moral evils: and species of metaphysical revolution, which license these same evils to be performed by human beings who have usurped to themselves the superhuman prerogatives of Deity. Modern metaphysical rebellion, or its aims — "the protest against evil at the very core of metaphysical revolt"⁸¹ — Camus argues to be "noble." It is for him the basis of the lasting legitimacy of modern attempts to build post-theological political regimes.⁸² But in metaphysical revolution, which in effect "reoccupies" the same suprahuman theological ground the early moderns had challenged, Camus comments that the victims have simply found in their own sufferings the justification for becoming criminals or tyrants in their turn:⁸³

Hatred of the creator can turn to hatred of creation [Camus aligns Sade, and differently Marxist-Leninism in this axis] or to exclusive and defiant love of what exists [as in Nietzsche]. But in both cases it ends in murder and loses the right to be called rebellion. One can be a nihilist in two ways, in both by having an intemperate recourse to absolutes [...] but they are identical, consumed with the desire for true life, frustrated by their desire for [this] existence and therefore preferring generalised injustice to mutilated justice. At this pitch of indignation, reason becomes madness [...] Progress, from the time of Sade up to the present day [1951], has consisted gradually in enlarging the stronghold where, according to his own rules, mankind without God brutally wields power.⁸⁴

The term "reoccupation" that we just used to describe Camus's position concerning modern revolutionaries' taking on the theological prerogative of being able to disclose the true meaning of human history and rationalize the suffering or persecution of enemies and innocents, is not taken from Camus. It hails from Hans Blumenberg's better-known *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (first published in 1966). Blumenberg, like Camus, distinguishes between the legitimacy of the "limited self-assertion" or "sufficient rationality" of early modern thought, set

⁸⁰ Camus, *The Rebel*, 173.

⁸¹ Camus, *The Rebel*, 101.

⁸² Camus, *The Rebel*, 101.

⁸³ Camus, *The Rebel*, 102.

⁸⁴ Camus, *The Rebel*, 101–102.

against later medieval Christendom's increasing elevation of God's inscrutable Will over his Intellect; and later modern thought which Blumenberg argued fell prey to a felt need to respond to questions — like that concerning the meaning of History, and the justification of evil — that the new modes of modern rationality, led by the sciences, had not been created to resolve.⁸⁵ Rather, the West's theological heritage, so long unchallenged, bequeathed to the early moderns a set of questions, unknown, for instance, to the Greeks, which modern philosophers and ideologues then felt obliged to answer. As a result of their attempt to answer these theological questions, Blumenberg claims, modern thought was transformed. Modern intellectual systems, and political ideologies, came deleteriously to “reoccupy” positions previously “occupied” by theologies in ways that have invited the charge that modern ideas exclusively secularize theological motifs, without novelty or legitimacy of their own.⁸⁶

Comparing Camus's position with Blumenberg's is then very helpful for bringing Camus's key claims into sharper relief, since Camus remarkably anticipated the later thinkers' positions. Centrally, in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* Blumenberg argues that later medieval scholasticism's hypostasization of God's inscrutable Will was motivated by the Christian heritage's continuing difficulty in warding off gnosticism's all-too-cogent answer to the “problem” of evil. Gnosticism's answer to this problem — to which Camus devoted the second chapter of his *Diplômes* thesis — is to argue that this material world is the creation of a wicked demiurge; so human salvation lies in a gnosis which will allow us to transcend this realm altogether, and be reunited with the wholly different, wholly transcendent God of salvation.⁸⁷ Augustine, like the Gnostics, was preoccupied with the problem of evil, both the younger Camus and Blumenberg observe.⁸⁸ For belief in a single creator God, who is at the same time the God of salvation, makes explaining how the world shaped by such a Creator can include so much natural and moral evil an acute problem. Ultimately, Camus argues, Augustine's theodical “justification of God” necessitates three kinds of moves.⁸⁹ First, Augustine assigns the advent of evil to Adam's sin, and so conceives of the evils that humans continue to suffer as so many, just punishments visited upon subsequent generations because of original Adamic sin. Secondly, moral evil is slated to human free will, at the same time as Augustine in his *querelles* with the Pelagians will also claim that Adamic sin means that humans are unable ever to choose the good.⁹⁰ Thirdly, Augustine refers us to the unplumbable mystery of God's unfathomable Will to explain the ongoing evils of the world, developing the doctrine hinted at in Paul of His unfathomable separation of the chosen elect from the rejected, and paving the way for what Blumenberg suggests is the later

⁸⁵ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 48–49, 59–61, 64–65.

⁸⁶ Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 64–65; cf. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (London: Blackwell, 2006).

⁸⁷ Camus, *Christian Metaphysics*, 67–86; Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 128–29.

⁸⁸ Camus, *Christian Metaphysics*, 117, 119–21; Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 131–35.

⁸⁹ Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 135.

⁹⁰ Camus, *Christian Metaphysics*, 121–22.

medieval period's "second attempt to overcome Gnosticism" in the theological doctrines of voluntarism and nominalism.⁹¹

The young Camus's account of what he calls Saint Augustine's "second revelation,"⁹² which domesticated the eschatological dynamism of early Christian thought by drawing on Neoplatonic categories, remarkably mirrors what Blumenberg ironically calls Augustine's own unstable "secularization" of early Christian other-worldliness.⁹³ What we want to stress here is only the way Camus's account of early modern rebellion, as in Blumenberg, finds its necessity or justification in the internal divisions within Christian thought, in turn animated by the troubling problem of evil. More than this, and more directly than in Blumenberg's more intellectualist account, Camus sees modern self-assertion as *above all* justified by the inconsistencies in the Christian responses to the problem of evil. Influenced deeply by Nietzsche, Camus also rails against what he calls two millennia of Christianity's devalorization of the body, sexuality, and the natural world: a devaluation which he thinks modern philosophy largely carries over.⁹⁴ However, as Christian critics such as Archambault have seen, and as we commented above, Camus's deepest criticism levelled at Christianity is that the Augustinian doctrine of a universally inherited original sin represents a deeply inadequate, if not inhumane or unjust, response to the problem of evil.⁹⁵ As *The Rebel* argues, Christianity's strongest response to the problem of injustice and suffering is, remarkably, to point to the even more terrible, more unjust, suffering of Christ "each time a solitary cry of revolt was uttered": "the man-god suffers, too — with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to Him since He suffers and dies."⁹⁶ Its more troubling response in the Latin West was the notion of *nemo bonus* (no one is good), and the Catholic Church's longstanding doctrine that unbaptized children remain damned. Camus finds this latter idea as morally abhorrent as Ivan found the notion that the suffering of innocents might be a necessary price for the divine grace. In a talk presented to a group of Dominicans at Latour-Marbourg in 1946, Camus thus protested against his depiction as a pessimistic thinker in these precise terms:

[W]hat right has a Christian or a Marxist to accuse me of pessimism? It is not I who invented the "misery of the creature," nor the terrifying formulas of divine malediction. It is not I who exclaimed "*nemo bonus*" [Mark 10:18], nor I who preached the damnation of unbaptised children. It is not I who said that man was incapable of saving himself, and that from the depths of his misery his only hope was in the grace of God.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Cf. Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 132–36.

⁹² Camus, *Christian Metaphysics*, 45, 87, 115.

⁹³ Cf. Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 37, 37–45; Camus, *Christian Metaphysics*, 62.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Camus, *Notebooks 1942–51*, 4, 84; Camus, *The Rebel*, 299; Camus, "Helen's Exile," 147–52.

⁹⁵ Camus's response in *The Rebel* exemplifies the neoclassical *mesure* he aims to defend in that text: "Finally, man was not entirely to blame, since he did not start history; nor is he entirely innocent, since he continues it. Those who go beyond this limit and affirm his total innocence end in the insanity of definitive culpability. Rebellion, on the contrary, sets us on the path of calculated culpability." Camus, *The Rebel*, 259–60.

⁹⁶ Camus, *The Rebel*, 34, 32; Archambault, *Camus' Hellenic Sources*, 78, 100.

⁹⁷ Camus, "Pessimism and Courage," in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, 31; cf. Archambault, *Camus' Hellenic Sources*, 152.

In a note in his *Carnets* in the weeks preceding this speech, Camus had reflected similarly:

The only great Christian mind to look at the problem of evil in the face was Saint Augustine. His conclusion was the terrifying “*nemo bonus*.” Since then, Christianity has spent its time giving the problem temporary solutions. The result is there for everyone to see. It took time, but men became intoxicated with a poison that dates back two thousand years. They have had enough of evil, or they are resigned to it, which amounts to pretty much the same thing. But at least they can no longer put up with lies on that subject.⁹⁸

In Camus’s literary output, *La Peste* (“The Plague”) is his clearest enunciation of this dikaisunic critique of Christianity. Probably the most affecting moment in Camus’s dispassionate chronicle comes when the secular doctor, Rieux, and the Jesuit father Paneloux — who happens to be an expert on Augustine and the early African church — are left to helplessly watch the drawn-out, agonized death of a small boy, Jacques Othon.⁹⁹ Paneloux’s first sermon after the plague had begun to ravage Oran, delivered amidst a storm raging outside the crowded church, was an extended, pitiless discourse on the “*nemo bonus*,” Augustine’s first response to the problem of evil: “Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you have deserved it [...] too long this world of ours has connived at evil, too long has it counted on the divine mercy.”¹⁰⁰ When the child Jacques finally expires despite Paneloux’s prayers, however, Rieux storms out, and in the extraordinary exchange that follows, challenges the Father directly on just this Augustinian point:

Rieux was already going out of the ward, walking so quickly and with such a look on his face that when he overtook Paneloux, the priest held out his arm to restrain him. “Come now, doctor,” he said. Without stopping as he swept along, Rieux turned round and spat out: “Ah, now that one, at least, was innocent, and you know it as well as I do!”¹⁰¹

Paneloux then follows Rieux out into the stifling heat of the schoolyard that the plague has turned into a hospital-quarantine:

“Why did you speak to me with such anger just now?” said a voice behind him. “I, too, found that unbearable to watch.” Rieux turned round to Paneloux. “That’s true,” he said. “Forgive me. But tiredness is a form of madness. And there are times in this town when I can only feel outrage and revolt.” “I understand,” said Paneloux. “It is outrageous because it is beyond us. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand.” Rieux sat up abruptly. He looked at Paneloux with all the strength and passion he could muster and shook his head. “No, Father,” he said. “I have a different notion of love; and to the day I die I shall refuse to love this creation in which children are tortured.”¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Camus, *Notebooks 1942–51*, 179.

⁹⁹ Camus, *Notebooks 1942–51*, 61; Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Penguin, 1971), 78.

¹⁰⁰ Camus, *The Plague*, 80, 81.

¹⁰¹ Camus, *The Plague*, 177.

¹⁰² Camus, *The Plague*, 178.

Camus makes clear that Paneloux is as profoundly confronted by the death of the child Jacques, as is Rieux. For the first time, he tells Rieux, he has fully understood what is meant by talk of grace. Soon after he delivers a second, halting sermon which retreats from his initial, strident Augustinian claims that the plague was punishment for Oran's especial sinfulness.¹⁰³ Moving instead from Augustinianism towards a later, voluntaristic scholasticism — or, thinking of Blumenberg, from the first to the second Christian attempt at “warding off Gnosticism” — Paneloux's commitments restrain him now to admit that, in the face of the suffering of a child like Jacques, there can be no divine justification that we can rationally understand.¹⁰⁴

“My brethren,” Father Paneloux said at last, announcing that he was coming to an end, “the love of God is a difficult love. It assumes a total abandonment of oneself and contempt for one's person. But it alone can wipe away the suffering and death of children, it alone makes them necessary because it is impossible to understand such things, so we have no alternative except to desire them. This is the hard lesson that I wanted to share with you. This is the faith — cruel in the eyes of man, decisive in the eyes of God — which we must try to reach. We must try to make ourselves equal to this awful image. On this peak, everything will be confounded and made equal, and the truth will break forth from apparent injustice.”¹⁰⁵

What then is Camus's “solution,” or response, to the reality of evil, in protest against this kind of rationalization of its inevitability, which can easily pass over into cynicism or resignation? For Camus, in one sense, there is no “solution”: the suffering or murder of innocents is an outrage that can never be justified, only struggled against. Indeed, Camus leads us to strongly suspect the attempt to rationalize such recalcitrant assaults on human order and meaning. At the same time, he underscores that we must see with open eyes that, even after we have rectified all that we can about ourselves and the surrounding environment, “children will still die unjustly even in the best society [...] Dmitri Karamazov's cry of ‘why?’ will continue to resound: art and rebellion will die only with the last man.”¹⁰⁶ Camus is no messianist. This is another mark of his great distance from much later Francophone theory, in which secularized messianic motifs of rupturous events or redemption have become widely accepted as legitimate or wise¹⁰⁷: “the idea of messianism is at the base of all fanaticism,” Camus claimed, a thought which is at the heart of his critique of the Stalinist *désastre*.¹⁰⁸ In Blumenberg's terms, Camus's second renaissance instead involves defending only a

¹⁰³ Camus, *The Plague*, 182–83.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Archambault, *Camus' Hellenic Sources*, 160.

¹⁰⁵ Camus, *The Plague*, 186.

¹⁰⁶ Camus, *The Rebel*, 303.

¹⁰⁷ It is obviously not possible to fully cash out this claim, so I draw on the widespread acknowledgement that there has been a theological turn in French and related theorists, beginning from Levinas's Judaism, which profoundly affected Jacques Derrida's later work, and also that of Jean-François Lyotard; the “Christian materialism” of Lacanian Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou's “ethics of Truth,” which turns upon the notion that there are wholly unanticipatable truth-events, fidelity to which calls forth a series of virtues which Badiou is famously able to articulate through a reading of Saint Paul.

¹⁰⁸ Camus, “Neither Victims nor Executioners,” 2. Online edition available at http://www.ppu.org.uk/e_publications/camus.html (accessed January 2, 2013).

limited form of human self-assertion: self-assertion, as Camus put it, “on the scale of average greatness that is our own,”¹⁰⁹ “free of messianism and disencumbered of nostalgia for an earthly paradise.”¹¹⁰

Signifying just this, at the end of *The Plague*, we discover that Rieux, the doctor, has been our narrator all along. In an age of commissars and executioners, Camus instead presents a third figure, that of the physician, as emblematic of the kind of ethical stance he admires, “to save from murder him who can be saved, without surrendering to the arrogance of blasphemy.”¹¹¹ Reading Camus, on this as on much else, we can be reminded of Montaigne’s wrestling with, and great hopes for, a new empirical “physic” in the final essay of the second book of his *Essais*, in contrast to the competing theological programs presently surrounding him, and murderously dividing France.¹¹² In any event, two important notes in Camus’s *Carnets* from 1944, as he was preparing *The Plague*, explain his position well:

Id. Medicine and religion: they are both professions and seem to go together. But today when everything is clear, we realise they cannot be reconciled — and that we have to choose between the relative and the absolute. “If I believed in God, I should not treat men. If I had the idea that men could be cured, I should not believe in God.”¹¹³

And:

Grace? We should serve justice because our condition is unjust, increase happiness and joy because this world is unhappy. Similarly, we should sentence no one to death, since we have been sentenced to death. The doctor, God’s enemy: he fights against death.¹¹⁴

Rieux himself, however, probably puts things best in his exchange with Paneloux which ensues in *The Plague* after Rieux’s *cri du coeur* cited above, that “that one at least was innocent”:

A shadow of profound distress passed across Paneloux’s face. “Ah, doctor,” he said sadly. “I have just understood what is meant by God’s grace.” But Rieux had slipped back onto his bench. From the depths of his returning exhaustion, he replied more gently: “Which I don’t have, I know. But I don’t want to discuss this with you. We are working together for something that unites us at a higher level than prayer or blasphemy, and that’s all that counts.” Paneloux sat down beside Rieux. He seemed moved. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, you too are working for the salvation of mankind.” Rieux

¹⁰⁹ Camus, *The Rebel*, 258.

¹¹⁰ Camus, “Neither Victims nor Executioners,” 2.

¹¹¹ Camus, *The Rebel*, 304. In the wake of their exchange in *The Plague*, Paneloux tells Rieux that he has been working on the strange idea of an exposition on the question: “can a Priest consult a doctor?” (Camus, *The Plague*, 180).

¹¹² Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, book III, chapter 37 (any edition: online at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/766/montaigne.pdf;jsessionid=E12BAE922F8CC6531784E2E37370A265?sequence=1> (accessed April 2013)). It is interesting that Camus, too, like Francis Bacon or Goethe, assigns a fundamental significance to the Prometheus myth as pointing to the limited legitimacy of the human attempt at “the relief of man’s estate” through the charitably or philanthropically directed development of technology.

¹¹³ Camus, *Notebooks 1942–51*, 61.

¹¹⁴ Camus, *Notebooks 1942–51*, 65.

tried to smile. “Salvation is too big a word for me. I don’t go that far. What interests me is man’s health, his health first of all.”¹¹⁵

Concluding Remarks: Camus’s Return to Tipasa

Doctor Rieux’s passionate yet limited rebellion against a creation in which children are tormented directly calls to mind, of course, Ivan Karamazov’s initial metaphysical rebellion, prior to his despondent atheism. It also returns us in a different way to the issue with which we closed Part I: the tension in Camus’s language between a principled, loving acceptance of this world as we find it, and his vindication of principled revolt against moral and natural evil. In the context of *The Plague* and *The Rebel*, this issue becomes that of the relation between Camus’s neopagan reverence of nature, and his later, passionate rebellion on behalf of political justice in the face of Hitler’s and the Stalinists’ crimes. Camus’s lyrical essay “Return to Tipasa” of 1952 recounts his return to the ruins of Tipasa in Algeria, so important to his youthful, sensuous paganism, “hoping, I think, to recover there a liberty I was unable to forget.” In doing so, it lyrically addresses these two sides to Camus’s developing biography and philosophy. For in the fifteen or so years between the mid-1930s and his return, in a way that for Camus allegorizes the sadness of his times, the ruins of Tipasa had been surrounded by barbed wire, and could now only be entered through official entrances.¹¹⁶ Likewise, Camus finds himself wrestling now with the two aspects of his philosophical persona, the impulses towards justice and natural beauty that had differently animated the different periods of his life. In memorable prose, Camus reflects:

Once you have had the chance to love intensely, your life is spent in search of the same light and ardour. To give up beauty and the sensual happiness that comes with it and devote one’s self exclusively to unhappiness requires a nobility I lack. But, after all, nothing is true which compels us to exclude. Isolated beauty ends in grimaces, solitary justice in oppression. Anyone who seeks to serve the one to the exclusion of the other serves no one, not even himself, and in the end is doubly the servant of injustice [...]. Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever difficulties the enterprise may represent, I would like never to be unfaithful either to the one or the other.¹¹⁷

Closing in this spirit, then, we want to underscore that Camus’s powerful criticism of Christian theodicy and eschatology finally did not commit him to such a wholly “anti-Christian” position as he is often taken to have propounded, for reasons that can now be properly understood.¹¹⁸ In line with Camus’s dictum — borrowed from the Christian Blaise Pascal, whom he deeply admired¹¹⁹ — that nothing is

¹¹⁵ Camus, *The Plague*, 178–79.

¹¹⁶ Camus, “Return to Tipasa,” 163.

¹¹⁷ Camus, “Return to Tipasa,” 169–70.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Srigley, *Camus’ Critique of Modernity*.

¹¹⁹ The best formulations of this later position are to be found in Camus, *The Rebel*, 295–97, 300–301, and 306; “Return to Tipasa,” 169–70. See also Camus, “In Defence of *The Rebel*,” in *Camus and Sartre*, ed. and trans. Sprintzen and van der Hoven, 212–17. Cf. Camus, *Carnets 1935–42*, 48; *Carnets 1942–51*, 27, 38; *Carnets 1952–1959*, 11, 15.

true that compels us to exclude, even amidst Camus's most strident statements against the Christian-modern turn away from nonhuman nature as object of contemplation, Camus would still caution:

Nature [must] once more take up the fight against history. Naturally, it is not a question of despising anything, or exalting one civilization [the Mediterranean and pagan] at the expense of another [the European and Christian], but of simply saying that [this] is a thought which the world cannot do without for much longer.¹²⁰

Just as the pages of Camus's *Carnets* of the late 1950s do not bespeak such a total break with all things modern as Srigley has recently suggested,¹²¹ neither do they vindicate the idea that the late Camus dreamt of totally overthrowing everything Christian. In the final *Carnets*, on the contrary, Camus is toying with the idea of a "Christ-Pan," alongside a "Don Faust," for a new cycle of works.¹²² In the same breath as advocating a "restoration" of pagan thought, Camus specifies that the "paganization of belief" which he wants to promote should involve not jettisoning, but "hellenizing the Christ."¹²³

Most tellingly, there can be little doubt that the "strange form of love," which Camus argued animates human revolt in the closing sections of *The Rebel*, is distant from the Greek *eros*, if not *philia*. Non-sexual, and extended, in principle, to all contemporary men and women ("our brothers [...] breathing under the same sky as we,"¹²⁴ it is unmistakably closer to the *agapē* at the heart of Christianity. When Camus reads the Greek historians in the early 1940s, his *Carnets* certainly do not simply idealize them, but note that such concern for the oppressed was markedly absent from the Greek *poleis*, where the leisure and art of citizens were sustained by slavery.¹²⁵ Paradigmatically, when he finally makes it to Greece in 1956, even atop the extravagant splendour of Cape Sounion, Camus chides himself not to forget the humiliated:¹²⁶

Perfect, except for the island across from Makronisos, empty today it's true, but it was once a deportation island of which I'm told terrible stories [...] Towards the middle of the afternoon, the colors darken, the islands solidify, the skies lighten. This is the perfect moment of light, of abandon, where *All is well* [...] But on the promontory again, before taking to the road, one sees Makronisos [...] Lecture. Dinner where I obtain information on the deportation. The figures seem to agree. The number of deportees was reduced to 8 or 9000. It is with this that I should be occupied.¹²⁷

One need not speculate on Camus's imminent conversion to see how his own celebration of "Greek" moderation, as he perceived this, did not exclude the heart

¹²⁰ Camus, *The Rebel*, 300.

¹²¹ Srigley, *Camus' Critique of Modernity*.

¹²² Camus, *Notebooks 1952-1959*, 101.

¹²³ Camus, *Notebooks 1952-1959*, 203; Srigley, *Camus' Critique of Modernity*, 35.

¹²⁴ Camus, *The Rebel*, 307.

¹²⁵ Indeed, "in certain Greek cities, in the fourth century, the following oath was taken by the oligarchs: 'I shall always be an enemy of the people and I shall advise it to do what I know will be most harmful to its interests.'" Camus, *Carnets 1942-1951*, 120.

¹²⁶ Camus, "Return to Tipasa," 169.

¹²⁷ Camus, *Notebooks 1952-1959*, 143.

of Christian ethics — in opposition to the forms of eschatology and theodicy he continued to deeply reject as rationalizing injustice. A note of 1942 captures all Camus's ambivalence, but also his deep ethical debt, to the Christian heritage: "our task is really get down to it and do what Christianity has never done," Camus writes: "[and] concern ourselves with the damned."¹²⁸ Camus's deepest philosophical legacy — still far too little appreciated, and such a long way from those of most of his contemporaries — is the remarkable attempt to carry forward such a post-Christian egalitarianism, while aligning its charitable concern for the oppressed of history with a larger, neopagan affirmation of the natural world as we find it, in "the fixed and radiant point of the present."¹²⁹ In a period of growing socioeconomic inequality and ecological depredation, this is a legacy that is worth remembering.

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¹²⁸ Camus, *Notebooks 1942–1951*, 65.

¹²⁹ Camus, *The Rebel*, 269.

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Notes on contributor

Matthew Sharpe teaches philosophy and psychoanalytic studies at Deakin University, Australia. He is interested in the intersections between politics, philosophy and psychoanalysis, and classical philosophy in particular. His research draws on the history of political ideas, the Frankfurt School tradition, Lacanian theory, and increasingly on the work of Pierre Hadot. He has published many articles in these areas, as well as, with Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (2010) Correspondence to: Matthew Sharpe, email msharpe@deakin.edu.au