



Authenticity Without Foundations: Existential Freedom and Absurd Revolt in Sartre's *Existentialism Is a Humanism* and Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*

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Abstract: *This paper explores a simple question: can authenticity survive without metaphysical foundations? It does so by reading Sartre's *Existentialism Is a Humanism* published 1946 and Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* published in 1942 closely against one another. Both thinkers start in the same place, really. God is gone. Human nature is not fixed. There are no objective moral values handed down from anywhere. But here is where things split apart. Sartre insists that authenticity lives in freedom: radical, vertiginous freedom. To live authentically means recognizing that your choices don't just shape you, they propose an image of humanity itself. This is where his doctrine of responsibility emerges: collective, crushing, inescapable. Camus takes a different path entirely. He argues for something he calls lucidity, and paired with it a kind of perpetual revolt. Not against society exactly, but against the temptation to escape the absurd through either suicide or false hope. His authentic agent doesn't create values; they sustain a refusal to accept comforting lies about meaning. These two models are coherent on their own terms, yet they diverge at every crucial point: in what they understand consciousness to be, in how an agent relates to freedom and value and perhaps most strikingly, in what authenticity actually feels like. Where Sartre's person is dignified and consistent, Camus imagines his absurd hero as happy, even content, rolling the boulder without illusion. This paper argues that authenticity without transcendence is possible, but its shape depends entirely on whether you begin from Sartre's ontology or Camus's lived experience of meaninglessness.*

Key Words: *Authenticity, Existentialism, Anti-foundationalism, Radical freedom, Absurd revolt, Phenomenology*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Both Sartre and Camus began with the shared conviction that God, fixed human nature, and objective moral order are gone. From this shared ground of negation, each asked what authenticity could possibly mean in a world stripped of radical uncertainty and foundational supports. Yet their answers diverged in ways that have shaped philosophical debate ever since.

Both texts treat the conditions under which a human life can be called genuine, honest or self-affirming in the total absence of transcendent foundations. Sartre, drawing on his broader ontological project, locates authenticity in the exercise of radical freedom and the acknowledgment of responsibility. Camus locates it in lucid confrontation with meaninglessness and continual revolt that refuses both suicide and metaphysical consolation. These differences reflect two fundamentally distinct models of what it means to be human in a godless universe. As Aronson notes, both thinkers grapple with the problem of how to live in a world where traditional sources of meaning have collapsed (Aronson), yet their responses pull in divergent philosophical directions.

While significant scholarship addresses each thinker separately, the specific question of how anti-foundationalism functions differently in their respective theories of authenticity warrants closer textual analysis. This study examines how their existential freedom and absurd revolt function as distinct models of authenticity in a world devoid of transcendent foundations. Sartre locates authenticity in radical freedom and its attendant responsibility; Camus locates it in lucid confrontation with the absurd and continual refusal of both despair and false consolation. The stakes of this divergence extend beyond academic philosophy, touching on fundamental questions about how one ought to live when certainty evaporates.



2. AUTHENTICITY AND ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM:

Before examining how Sartre and Camus diverge, let us consider what they share. Anti-foundationalism names the rejection of any grounding principle, entity, or structure external to human existence that could supply meaning, value or purpose from the outside. Both thinkers refuse God, fixed human nature and objective moral truth, and their refusal is existential in character, something which is felt rather than merely deduced. This shared rejection represents not just a theoretical position but an existential stance toward the world.

For Sartre, the foundational move is captured in the famous inversion: existence precedes essence. Human beings, unlike manufactured objects, do not come into the world with a predetermined purpose or nature. “Man first exists,” Sartre writes, “he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself” (Sartre 22). Because there is no God to conceive of a human nature in advance, there is no such nature to consult. The individual is, to begin with, nothing. What a person becomes is entirely the product of choices made across a lifetime. This inversion proves radically destabilizing because it removes the philosophical ground that Western thought had relied upon for centuries.

This rejection of essence profoundly reshapes human agency: every action contributes to defining what it means to be human. We invent ourselves as we go along. This is what Sartre means by saying “man is responsible for what he is” (Sartre 23). This responsibility is an inescapable feature of existence. Every choice is an affirmation of a way of being, a kind of vote cast for a certain image of humanity. Webber demonstrates that for Sartre, character emerges not from a fixed nature but from a unified project of the self that can always be radically revised through fundamental choices (Webber). Responsibility extends further than one might expect: in choosing for oneself, one inevitably chooses for all of humanity because every choice implicitly proposes an image of what human beings should be. “In creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be” (Sartre 24). This gives human life its “dignity”—we are the ones who decide what it means to be human.

Camus’s starting point is phenomenologically different but reaches a similar place. He begins not with ontology but with a mood: the absurd. It arises from the confrontation between the human need for meaning and clarity and the world’s utter silence in response to that need. “What is absurd,” he writes, “is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (Camus 26). For Camus, the absurd is relational, emerging in the gap between our demand for order and the world’s refusal to supply it. God’s absence matters not because it has been philosophically demonstrated, but because it is existentially felt: the heavens are silent, values do not descend from a transcendent realm and any attempt to bring them from outside human experience is dishonest.

This feeling of the absurd is a sudden rupture in the ordinary flow of life, when the “why” arises and everything begins in weariness infused with amazement. Camus describes this experience in terms of the “strangeness” of the world and the “denseness” of things. When the stage sets collapse, we are left with the bare fact of our existence in a world that does not care about us. This is a shared diagnosis: the old foundations have crumbled and what remains is the bare human being confronting a world that neither supports nor condemns it. Sagi argues that this shared recognition of groundlessness constitutes the philosophical awakening that defines the modern condition (Sagi), though the two philosophers’ responses to this awakening are strikingly different.

3. SARTRE’S MODEL OF AUTHENTICITY:

Existentialism Is a Humanism is a public lecture delivered in October 1945. Sartre responds to charges that existentialism is pessimistic, quietist and morally bankrupt. His argument proceeds from abandonment: because God does not exist, there are no values inscribed in any heaven and there is no predetermined human nature to serve as a guide. “If, however, God does not exist, we will encounter no values or orders that can legitimize our conduct. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse” (Sartre 29). Man is thrown into existence without any instruction. “Man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (Sartre 29).

Freedom, in Sartre’s hands is not a gift but a condition. It cannot be refused or escaped. Every moment involves a choice, including the choice not to choose which is itself a choice with consequences. The radical claim is that this extends to what we typically think of as fixed: one’s character, past, and social role. “The coward makes himself cowardly and the hero makes himself heroic” (Sartre 39). No temperament, physiology or circumstance can explain or excuse one’s actions, because to accept such explanations is to flee from the recognition that one is always the author



of what one does. Heter argues that recognizing this freedom necessarily involves an intersubjective dimension, since authentic freedom requires acknowledging the freedom of others as the condition for one's own freedom (Heter).

Anguish that follows from this realization is the recognition that one legislates for humanity without guarantee. This anguish is not pathological but the appropriate emotional register of freedom taken seriously. Bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) is the evasion of this recognition, that treats one's role, passion or position as fixed and determining rather than chosen. The waiter who performs his role with excessive precision as though waiting were essential to his being rather than chosen, exemplifies bad faith. "Any man who takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, is operating in bad faith" (Sartre 47).

Authenticity, for Sartre, is the opposite of bad faith. It consists in the full acknowledgment of one's freedom and its responsibilities without flinching. To live authentically is to recognize that one is "nothing other than what he makes of himself" (Sartre 22) and to act from that recognition rather than from the comfortable fiction of a fixed self or determining circumstance. This model offers no comfort, no transcendent purpose and no community of meaning to fall back on. What it offers instead is dignity: the dignity of a being who does not deceive itself about its condition. Flynn emphasizes that "Sartrean authenticity demands a kind of courage that the individual must continuously exercise, a refusal to hide behind external justifications or predetermined essences" (Flynn 76), making it a perpetual and exhausting ethical demand.

4. CAMUS'S MODEL OF AUTHENTICITY:

Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* with a provocation: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide" (Camus 11). This is not melodrama but a kind of diagnostic claim. If life has no inherent meaning, the first and most urgent question is whether it is still worth living. For Camus, the answer is vigorously yes, but the path runs through rigorous confrontation with the absurd by refusing every shortcut.

The absurd is a relationship, a divorce between the human demand for clarity and the world's silence. Faced with the absurd, Camus argues that there are essentially three possible responses. One can commit physical suicide. One can commit what Camus calls philosophical suicide by embracing transcendence, a leap of faith, or a system that resolves the contradiction by positing meaning beyond empirical evidence. Or one can live with the absurd, holding it open and refusing both forms of evasion. For Camus, only the third option is honest. Foley observes that Camus's refusal of philosophical suicide represents a commitment to lucidity that, paradoxically, becomes the foundation for a new kind of authenticity (Foley).

Camus criticizes existential thinkers, particularly Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Chestov, who use the experience of the absurd as a springboard toward transcendence. "Having started from an anguished awareness of the inhuman," (Camus 62) these thinkers "deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them" (Camus 35). For Camus, these are acts of philosophical bad faith, oriented toward the metaphysical rather than the social. The absurd is preserved only so long as it is not consented to.

What does it mean to not consent to the absurd while continuing to live with it? This is where revolt becomes central. Revolt, for Camus, is not rebellion in any political sense, at least not primarily. It is an attitude, a stance of consciousness toward one's condition: a confrontation of "the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (Golomb 124), a refusal to be resolved or comforted. Revolt is the continual refusal to accept any answer that would dissolve the tension the absurd presents. It is sustained by lucidity, by a clear-eyed awareness of one's situation. "I draw from the absurd three consequences," Camus writes, "which are my revolt, my freedom and my passion" (Camus 62). Bowker argues that this "mature and creative resolution of contradiction" distinguishes Camusian authenticity from mere nihilism or despair (Bowker 2).

This revolt is not a one-time event but a daily, hourly effort. It is the refusal to give in to the "comforting" lies that would make life seem more meaningful than it is. It is the choice to stay with the silence of the world, to look it in the face without blinking. This is what Camus calls "lucidity." Lucidity is the opposite of hope. For Camus, hope is a form of avoidance because it projects meaning into a future that does not exist. To live authentically is to live without hope, which is not the same as living in despair. It is to live in the present, with all its limitations and all its possibilities. Sherman notes that this quality of sincerity in the face of limitations distinguishes the absurd hero as one who knows the truth about their condition and acts from that knowledge rather than against it (Sherman).

The freedom Camus speaks of is not Sartrean radical freedom; it is freedom from hope, from the need to project life's value onto some future state or transcendent meaning. One is free because one no longer needs to be saved. The figure of Sisyphus crystallizes this model with something close to poetic economy. Condemned to roll his rock endlessly,



Sisyphus represents the human condition stripped of all illusion. There is no purpose to his labor, no redemption and no reward. What Camus asks us to imagine is that Sisyphus is happy. The happiness is not of satisfaction or accomplishment but of lucidity, of a consciousness that knows the truth of its condition and does not flinch: "All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him" (Camus 110). To own one's fate, even a futile one, is the only form of authenticity the absurd permits.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS:

After placing side by side, the two models reveal structural similarities often overlooked. Both situate authenticity in the relationship between consciousness and its condition, rather than in the attainment of some substantive goal or conformity to some external standard. Both reject the comforts of transcendence. Both insist on some form of honesty about one's situation as the minimal condition of living well. Both are fundamentally secular: there is no appeal beyond the human, no outside authority to which one can shift responsibility.

The differences, however run deep. The most fundamental is ontological. Sartre's account is grounded in a specific claim about consciousness: it is characterized by nothingness, by the perpetual gap between what it is and what it makes of itself. Freedom is not a value Sartre dictates; it is what the structure of consciousness is. Camus does not make this kind of ontological claim. He begins phenomenologically, from the experience of the absurd without grounding that experience in any theory of consciousness or being.

The practical implication is visible in how each thinker understands the agent's relationship to value. For Sartre, since freedom is constitutive of human existence, the question is always what one does with it: one either exercises it authentically, taking responsibility for one's choices or flees from it in bad faith. Camus's revolt, by contrast, does not derive from any feature of consciousness; it is a posture adopted in the face of the absurd. Where Sartre's authentic agent is primarily a chooser, actively creating values through deliberate decisions, Camus's absurd hero is primarily a sustainer, a being who maintains clarity in the face of conditions that invite either despair or false comfort.

The treatment of freedom reveals this difference sharply. Sartre insists that freedom is absolute in principle, even if constrained in practice: no external condition can determine a person's choices. Camus's freedom is quieter and more circumscribed. When he writes that the absurd gives him freedom, what he means is something like: freed from the obligation to hope, freed from the tyranny of future-orientation, and liberated into the present. As Camus describes the work of creation, it gives voice to "a soul for ever freed from hope" (Camus 105), this allows the individual to turn full attention to the only life he has. This is freedom as liberation from illusion rather than freedom as radical self-creation.

Responsibility and lucidity mark another axis of divergence. Sartre's concept of responsibility is collective: because one's choices imply an image of human life as it ought to be, one bears responsibility for all mankind. The weight of this is deliberately crushing, designed to make the individual feel the full gravity of their existential condition. Camus's lucidity is more solitary. The absurd hero attends to their own condition with unflinching honesty. There is something contemplative about Camusian authenticity, a quality of patient, clear-eyed witnessing. The social dimension that Sartre foregrounds is relatively subdued in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, though it becomes more prominent in Camus's later work *The Rebel*.

Sartrean authenticity is demanding in a way that risks abstraction: the insistence on radical freedom can underestimate the degree to which human beings are shaped by their histories, relationships, and circumstances. Camus's approach keeps the lived particularity of human experience closer to the surface. On the other hand, Camus's revolt, as a pure attitude of consciousness can seem politically thin: if everything is absurd, including the desire for justice, on what basis does one act in the world? This was broadly the charge Sartre's circle leveled against Camus during their falling out in 1952, even if it was a reductive one.

There is a final and perhaps most consequential difference: the relationship between authenticity and happiness. Sartre's authentic agent is not necessarily happy; they are dignified, consistent, and self-aware. Camus's absurd hero is imagined as happy, not in spite of their situation but through it. The happiness of Sisyphus is not the happiness of a person who has solved his problems; it is the happiness of one who has made peace with the impossibility of solving them. This remains, even now, a striking and in its way generous conclusion.

6. CONCLUSION:

The question this paper examined was how Sartre's existential freedom and Camus's absurd revolt function as distinct models of authenticity in a world devoid of transcendent foundations. Both models are internally coherent on



their own terms, both respond with genuine seriousness to the philosophical situation they inherit and both encounter at their respective limits, a version of the same difficulty: generating normative authority from a position that has dismantled the traditional sources of such authority.

Sartre's response is to locate authority in the structure of freedom itself. If bad faith is logical self-contradiction, then authenticity is required not by any external norm but by the nature of consciousness itself. This is elegant, yet it depends on an ontological claim that not everyone will accept and it remains unclear whether the demand for self-consistency can do all the ethical work Sartre asks of it. Camus's response differs fundamentally: he accepts that the value of revolt cannot be externally justified and treats this acceptance as itself a form of integrity. The absurd hero does not ask for permission to live; he simply lives, lucidly and with passion, in full knowledge of what that entails.

What both thinkers demonstrate is that authenticity does not require foundations. It does not require God, a fixed human nature or an objective moral order. What it requires, in Sartre's version, is the courage to acknowledge one's freedom and bear its weight; in Camus's version, it requires the clarity to see one's condition without flinching and the spirit to affirm it without illusion. These are not trivial requirements. They are, in their different ways, demanding enough to constitute a genuine ethics, one suited to the situation both thinkers diagnosed as the situation of modern human beings. The rock keeps rolling. The struggle toward the heights is enough. Whether that is consoling or simply true is, perhaps, a question each reader must answer for themselves.

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