Ethics, Meaning, and the Absurd in Elie Wiesel’s *The Trial of God* and Albert Camus’s *The Plague*

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**Abstract**

Although rarely examined together, Elie Wiesel’s *The Trial of God* and Albert Camus’s *The Plague* are distinct, but philosophically related projects. Both respond to the moral crisis that culminated in widespread fascism and genocide in Europe prior to and during World War II by claiming that humanity must struggle against absurdity to make its own meaning, even in the face of profound and meaningless suffering. This essay argues that without such meaning, there can be no truly shared, universal ethics. Wiesel and Camus successfully make a similar claim not by asserting the world has *become* absurd, but by claiming that it has *always* been absurd. Both assert that we can ease human suffering by adopting an ethics that operates *in spite* of the constant uncertainty caused by absurdity.

*I want to blaspheme, and I can’t quite manage it. I go up against Him, I shake my fist, I froth with rage, but it’s still a way of telling Him that He’s there, that He exists . . . that denial itself is an offering to His grandeur.*

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**Elie Wiesel**

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**Albert Camus**

*The final conclusion of the absurd is, in fact, the rejection of suicide and the maintenance of that desperate confrontation of human interrogation and the silence of the world.*

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2 Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower, (New York: Vintage, 1956) 16. When I refer to the absurd in this essay, I am utilizing Camus’s definition of the absurd as articulated in this quote. Simply put, the absurd is that which reminds us that, despite our need for meaning, human experience often defies categories that provide us with meaning, especially when the actions of our fellow man refute our sense of the ethical without compunction. The image of humanity struggling against the weight of the unexplained, the unethical, and the meaningless in spite of the “silence of the world” is, I believe, crucial to understanding both Camus and Wiesel as absurdists.
For Elie Wiesel and Albert Camus, the absurdity of the world and the intrinsic meaninglessness it might indicate point to man's unbreachable loneliness, but not necessarily to his fundamental inability to communicate. The patent absurdity of human experience indicates to them that, to confront the moral abyss revealed by totalitarianism, fascism, and unspeakable human suffering, humanity must create its own meaning in the face of the absurd. What I wish to argue is that, without that meaning, there can be no shared ethics. When the “silence of the world,” as Camus would say, or “the silence of God,” from Wiesel's perspective, is met with mankind's sincere interrogation and protest, hope is possible, even if concrete answers are not forthcoming. This essay explores the ways Wiesel's *The Trial of God* and Camus's *The Plague* contribute to distinct, though philosophically related, projects. They are related in that both aim to rescue ethics from traditional metaphysics as well as from the ideological malaise and loss of innocence that define life after Auschwitz. They do this most successfully not by denying that the world is absurd, but rather by asserting wholeheartedly that it has always been absurd.3

In 1949, Theodor Adorno famously proclaimed that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”4 By 1966, though, Adorno's feelings began to change. “Ceaseless suffering,” he explained then, “has as much right to express itself as does the victim of torture to screaming. Therefore it may have been false [on my part] to say that after Auschwitz one cannot write poetry. But it is not false to ask...whether after Auschwitz it is possible to live at all; whether...[one] who escaped by accident and who by every logic should have been murdered” can

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3 Camus eventually vehemently objected to being labeled an existentialist, or even an absurdist. Documenting the development of these objections, or even engaging in the well-worn debate (i.e., Is Camus an absurdist or an existentialist, even if he says he is not?) is not the purpose of this essay. I will honor Camus's objections, however, by defining the absurd (a concept he is credited with having created, after all) as Camus himself has defined it in various writings without attempting to place him in or define him by any larger philosophical movements from which he may have felt disconnected. For Camus, absurdity is a confrontation between the human need for inherent meaning and clarity and a universe that defies the entire prospect of inherent, metaphysical meaning. Camus never claimed that inherent meaning did not exist; rather, he felt humanity was incapable of discerning that meaning. According to Camus, we are better off making our own meaning. Camus's understanding of the absurd had a significant influence on Wiesel, especially in his early work. It is my hope he would not object to the way in which I have utilized his ideas here. I have no interest in classifying either Camus or Wiesel; I only want to compare their strikingly similar ideas about the role of the absurd in the creation of ethics.