Honors Thesis Proposal

For

Love at the Edge of Despair: Kierkegaard, Camus, and the Philosophy of Love

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INTRODUCTION

The present age is an age of cynicism, mistrust, and inevitable arrogance. The pessimistic attitude with which people used to criticize their society, one grounded in the fear that the object of their critique could no longer change, has largely disappeared, for the present age finds it too optimistic. The critique of the present age replaces fear with certainty, relegating any hope for change to an accidental matter, an unfortunate natural tendency that reason cannot fully extinguish.

The critics of the present age naturally finds solace in the company of their supposed past counterparts, often reducing them, as we often do when looking at the past, to simple philosophies and sentiments that conveniently align with theirs. When we look at major criticisms of society in the past two centuries, however, we see a clear difference between these attitudes. This can be seen in the works of two of the greatest social critics of 19th and 20th centuries—whose positions as such are often overlooked—Soren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus, respectively.

This is the point of departure for my thesis, which will take the form of a comparison between the two thinkers. I intend to accomplish several things through this comparison, though two explicit purposes stand out. Primarily, I intend to establish that the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Camus can be found to have a concrete relationship based on love, a core concept that separates them from other so-called existentialists. Beyond this, I wish to analyze and compare the role of aesthetics in these love-based philosophies and, additionally, the role of the individual artist in society. More implicitly, I aim to help dispel the notions that the metaphysical foundations of each thinker should prevent any kind of developed and fruitful
comparison and, finally, that either thinker advocated purposeful wallowing in despair, pure individualism, or, even worse, anything resembling a nihilistic attitude.

The thesis is tentatively divided into three main chapters: the absurd, love, and aesthetics. These chapters correspond to the concepts through which the analysis will look at the works of Kierkegaard and Camus. These concepts are not wholly independent, they are consecutive and cumulative. Because these concepts appear in different manners and degrees in each of the thinkers' texts, the analysis will focus more on one thinker at times, while the other's philosophy is then used as grounding for the analysis. Thus, the chapter focused on love will place heavy focus on Camus' philosophy, where this aspect remains more overlooked than ever before, given his appropriation by postcolonial thought in the past few decades. Alternatively, the chapter on aesthetics will be likely be more attentive and rigorous towards Kierkegaard's philosophy, for this will likely allow for some problematizations of the widely-accepted view that it relegates aesthetics to a mere initial rung on a ladder towards his real goal, religiosity.

THE ABSURD

The first chapter will deal with the concept of "the absurd." While Kierkegaard, along with others, uses the term "absurd" numerous times in his philosophy, it is most closely associated with Camus as a concrete philosophical concept. Thus, we must explain Camus' definition of the absurd and then ascertain whether it corresponds to Kierkegaard's ideas or the manner in which they operate, rather than simply comparing their respective usages of the word.

Camus formally defines the concept of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the essay that will serve as the primary source for his thought in the first chapter. In this essay, Camus describes the absurd as the tension arising between man's natural longing for meaning and the indifferent world that provides none. Rather than resigning ourselves to this absurd condition
(through suicide, the validity of which prompts Camus' study) or attempting to ameliorate it through any kind of comforting ideology (which he regards as philosophical suicide), we must always remain aware of the tension and, through it, find a sense of absurd freedom and passion that will henceforth fuel our desire to live.

Camus is not interested in proving God's nonexistence or the world's meaninglessness. His view is instead that both reason and experience have a clear limit, one which would have to be transgressed in order to reach God or any kind of objective or universal meaning. The absurd hero formulated by Camus is one who is aware of the limit and lives at its verge but never jumps or retreats.

In Kierkegaard's case, The Sickness Unto Death will be used as the second primary source for the first chapter. The Sickness Unto Death is Kierkegaard's exploration of despair and largely deals with the constitution of the self. For despair is conceived as a sickness of the self and as sin. In order to best describe the various forms and levels of despair, Kierkegaard personifies them and writes about the mode of being of each of the despairing selves. One of these forms of despair, that of the person who despairs at not willing to be him/herself, has a significant similarity to the condition of the absurd man described by Camus. This form of despair produces in the despairer a realization of himself qua self and his consequent separation from the rest of the world. Realizations which lead to fear and further despair. It is particularly relevant that this is the last level of despair to be reached before a transcendence of despair (or at least this form of it) is reached and the individual can truly become a self before God, Whom we must believe in by "virtue of the absurd."

Because Kierkegaard preceded Camus by a century, his characterization and critique correspond to the general viewpoint/lifestyle that the latter encourages in his work. Camus, on
the other hand, clearly read and considered Kierkegaard’s thought, for he provides an analysis and critique of the Danish thinker in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This then forms a certain dialogue—one which will be found throughout the thesis—between the two thinkers that will force us to test each other’s claims about the other. In this case, it is necessary to evaluate Camus’ claims about Kierkegaard as an unknowing proponent of philosophical suicide and to see whether Kierkegaard’s conclusions about the man who despairs at being himself match or could be derived from Camus’, not to mention the relationship between despair and the absurd for both.

We can see from these general descriptions that there are two movements made by each philosopher, one representing a convergence and the other a divergence in their thoughts. Both thinkers describe similar experiences of a kind of realization of selfhood and individuality before the world. Their absurd characters find themselves driven to the limits of reason by their yearning for some form of meaning. It is at this point that the divergence takes place, for Camus will prescribe a kind of passionate settlement at that limit, while Kierkegaard asks us to leap beyond it, for only through the leap can we become selves before God.

What follows from here is an analysis of their respective thoughts as inverses of one another, for they both follow the same basic structure and purpose. That is, despite the opposite movements made by each at the verge of the absurd, both thinkers prescribe an active and passionate life that depends on some constant maintenance of tension (irrational faith for Kierkegaard, the absurd existence for Camus) rather than the comfort of stagnant modes of being and ideologies. Thus, what is truly different here is simply what is represented in these relationships rather than the relationships themselves.

Finally, “the absurd” will be explained as a concept related to emergence in both thinkers. The “person” described before the absurd is hardly a person, he/she is conceived as an
unreflective member of "the crowd." It is the realization of one's selfhood and the weight thereof that uproots us from our common and unreflective existence and drives us to the despair of the absurd. Thus, it is only in our response to the meaningless gap in front of us — as long as that response is not a retreat into the crowd — that we emerge as true selves. While the structure of The Sickness Unto Death, which moves from one form of despair to another in ascending order until the final level is reached, gives credence to the view of emergence of the self in Kierkegaard, we may find the same for Camus, not only within The Myth of Sisyphus, which similarly describes the moment of realization of the self, but also in The Stranger, Camus' first novel which, as I will argue, dramatizes this process.

**LOVE**

The following chapter corresponds to love in the formal sense of the word: namely general love for people — or in this case, the neighbor — and preferential or romantic love. Though this central chapter addresses love in this sense, it will be argued that even the first chapter on the absurd and the emergence of the individual might in fact represent a movement already grounded in love, which is after all the core concept upon which the comparison is based.

In a way, Camus will take the forefront in the second chapter, with Kierkegaard remaining as much more of a background figure. Such is the case because Kierkegaard makes clear his views on love in Works of Love, which will obviously serve as the main source for the chapter, along with M. Jaime Ferreira’s commentary on it, Love’s Grateful Striving. Camus, on the other hand, had no major texts dealing philosophically with love, and thus the chapter will develop his views on love through the analysis of numerous major texts, including: The Rebel, The Misunderstanding, The First Man, and The Plague (the order in which the texts will be analyzed is conceptual rather than chronological).
The Rebel. Camus’ second major philosophical essay, deals with his concept of rebellion and delves into a history thereof that largely shows the manners in which rebellion can and has become warped and destructive. Camus starts by describing a slave who one day decides to stand up to his master upon being whipped. The slave’s rebellion represents the realization of the existence of values, of right and wrong, one which derives from experience and intuition rather than from external forces and institutions. The rebellious slave does not determine that he does not deserve such mistreatment in an exclusively individual sense, but he also realizes that this must apply to all fellow slaves. In fact, that individuals have often been willing to sacrifice their lives for such beliefs is a demonstration of their understanding that these values apply to humankind universally.

What will be argued is that the main features and the relations engendered by Camus’ concept of rebellion are not unlike Kierkegaard’s own notion of love. Both descriptions regard their object, rebellion or love, as arising from an experience and evaluation of the self (rather than being essentially and always other-regarding) and that an awareness of the Other is followed by the understanding of a loving, or at the very least protective relationship, to them as a duty, to name only two major similarities.

But such an analysis cannot overlook Christianity, which stands as the base of Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Thus, what will be argued here is not that God is irrelevant in this discussion, but that despite the difference in metaphysical foundations between the two thinkers, their commandments and descriptions of love are nonetheless significantly similar. As was the case with their experience of the absurd, each thinker offers a critique of the opposite position. For Kierkegaard, all secular love (or un-Christian love) is overly poetic (Kierkegaard’s critiques of poetic love will play a major role in providing a negative definition of his views), largely
unilateral, and too fickle and materialistic. For Camus, Christianity is one of many ideologies that stand in opposition to rebellion (which will be equated to love), for it is necessarily eschatological and will therefore neglect present conditions and duties in search of an unobtainable end.

What will be argued is that both thinkers manage to avoid the criticisms of the other. While Camus denies God’s existence (or at least refuses to believe it), he nonetheless presents a view of rebellion/love that is largely reciprocal, and most importantly, one that is purely rooted in the natural experience of the emergence of values and the Other. The values derived by the slave when he rebels must be equated to some sense of a human nature and are therefore far from fickle. The few times Camus does mention love, he refers to it as something that is immediately experienced but that remains, along with its origins, undefined. This is not completely unlike Kierkegaard’s views of that love originates in God and thus we must therefore refrain from seeking its origins in any kind of materialistic or logical manner. While Kierkegaard does believe in God and salvation, he explicitly rejects eschatological views and practices, dedicating a whole chapter to our “Duty to love those we see” rather than looking for love elsewhere or passively waiting for it.

While the first section of this chapter will focus on our duties to and relationship with the neighbor in a fairly general sense, the second will place more focus on more concrete relationships between individuals and a further specification of the features of their duties to one another. One of Camus’ plays, *The Misunderstanding*, and the unfinished manuscript found in the car in which he died, *The First Man*, will be used to explore ideas related to the individual’s need for love. In *The Misunderstanding*, a man intends to surprise his estranged mother and sister upon his return home but refuses to tell them who he is, hoping instead that will realize it
on their own. His mother and sister, who for years have murdered the wealthy guests at the hotel they run, end up murdering him as well, only discovering his identity afterwards from his wife, who had insisted that he simply reveal himself all along. The play will be examined in terms of Kierkegaard’s views on the need for love as a value in itself (thus, those who need love the most are the richest), which apply to the main character’s insistence that his visit is for his family’s benefit alone rather than his own, for he doesn’t need love. Of particular significance are also Kierkegaard’s ideas on the expression of love as owed to others as part of our debt to them, and thus love cannot remain concealed if we are to do it properly.

*The First Man* presents some difficulties due to how recently it was published, which is itself a result of the larger problem, that it is an unfinished manuscript. On the other hand, the manuscript represents Camus’ first attempt to deal with the topic of love directly (it is thus the only attempt that falls under the “Cycle of love”) and is the most relevant source for any discussion of Camus and personal love. The title of the book refers to the main character, who is largely a surrogate of Camus. Because of his doubts over his relationship with his mother — whose near deafness and muteness prevented them from having a true, loving bond — and his nation of Algeria — the colonization of which prevents him from regarding it as an authentic homeland or culture to belong to — Cormery, the main character, exists without roots or history. In this sense, he is “the first man.” While Camus never wrote an ending, the course of the story, along with Camus’ notes, reveal that the resolution the story drives towards is the simple realization by Cormery that he is in fact loved, and that it is on such a realization that his ability to love others depends.

Thus, given the undefinability of love and its origins, we cannot ascertain whether we are loved, we must presuppose it. This is Kierkegaard’s concept of love as “upbuilding.” Love can
only build up from itself - it cannot be built upon any other base – and it can only be built up through the action of loving and being loved. However, we cannot create or generate love in someone else and thus, in order to build up love in them, we must presuppose that they love and have love, and thus we are able to love and be loved through this presupposition.

**AESTHETIC CREATION**

The final section of the chapter will address our ability to hold neighborly and preferential love simultaneously, as dramatized by Camus’ *The Plague*. This is a particularly contentious issue in Kierkegaardian scholarship. Many argue that such a synthesis of types of love is possible and encouraged by Kierkegaard, while others argue that, despite the initial claims in *Works of Love* to the contrary, Kierkegaard has a clear preference for neighborly love. M. Jamie Ferreira’s explanation of the need to ground preferential love in neighborly love will be of particular relevance here. Rambert, one of the main characters in *The Plague*, will serve as the main example of this grounding. Rambert spends a major part of the novel attempting to escape the town of Oran — which has been locked from the outside due to the spread of a deadly plague — in order to be with his beloved. It is only when he sees both the suffering of the dying and the resilience of those fighting the plague, who claim that their supposed heroism is mere decency, that he decides that he, too, must stay and provide assistance. Thus, Rambert’s discovery of the Other/neighbor renders him unable to focus solely upon his preferential love and it is only after the plague dissipates and the gates of the town are unlocked that he is able to embrace his beloved without his neglect for the neighbor, whose weight now and forever will have a presence in his heart.

The third chapter will probably be the most complex in the thesis. The first and the second chapter are connected in a fairly intuitive manner, one discussing the emergence of the
individual and the other discussing how the individual properly interacts with others. The leap from love to art is perhaps less intuitive and there are more obstacles to be addressed once the leap is made. In a sense, the third chapter will be approached as a reversal of the second: while Camus’ views on love were grounded on Kierkegaard’s there, some of Kierkegaard’s views on aesthetics might have to be grounded on Camus’ here. This will at least be the case for the transition from love to art, which is fueled by Camus’ belief that rebellion is best expressed and engendered through aesthetic creation, as explained in the fourth section of The Rebel. The two initial tasks of the chapter are therefore to ascertain whether this is commensurable with the previously established equation between love and rebellion, and most importantly, how this could reflect upon Kierkegaard’s views on love and art.

This problem may be approached in two ways and it is likely that a combination of the two will be undertaken. First, we must look at Kierkegaard’s first authorship, that consisting of pseudonymous works such as Either/Or and Stages on Life’s Way, to find his views on the aesthetic lifestyle as expressed through these pseudonyms. This will address the supposed clash between the aesthetic and the religious and will reveal Kierkegaard’s conception of art and the clear influences of 19th century Idealism had on it. The second approach, which may ultimately provide more productive results due to being more parallel to Camus’ thought in the fourth section of The Rebel, is an analysis of Kierkegaard’s second authorship, that consisting of signed works. It is here that we may find, not Kierkegaard’s views on aesthetics, but Kierkegaard’s work as an aesthetician and critic. It is in The Point of View for my Work as an Author that Kierkegaard directly addresses the purpose of his pseudonymous works and the idea of indirect communication and thus this will be a principal source. Furthermore, the so-called Attacks Upon Christendom, Kierkegaard’s political writings against the church towards the end of his life,
represent Kierkegaard’s most direct expression of his views and might therefore be more easily
categorized as related to love and the neighbor, given that they are much more polemical than
aesthetic and thus there is less conflict between aesthetic and religious spheres here (if we can
even speak about these late writings as representing a place within the existence-spheres).

One of the overarching questions underlying the chapter is that of the nature of the artist
and, more specifically, the author. It is problematic to mix or contrast the ideas expressed by
philosophers and well-known facts about their life. However, it might be fair to wonder whether
Kierkegaard’s life, one that was filled with neglect towards many of the things he prescribed and
was instead largely directed towards writing, was justified within his philosophy. Here we will
once again allow Camus to direct our approach, for many of his late writings hint at the concept
of the role, or perhaps even the mission, of the artist as opposed to the average individual.
Though there is a possibility that Kierkegaard will deny that the author represents any kind of
exception to the path delineated by his existence-spheres, we must nonetheless investigate his
late writings to see whether his work (qua work) is truly incommensurable with the content to be
found therein and what implications either answer could represent for his philosophy of love. We
may find that, for Kierkegaard, faith and love encompass all that is needed for most lives, but
that a select few have a task that requires them to go further, towards aesthetic creation.

CONCLUSION

These are the issues I would like to tackle. the ideas I want to establish, and the question I
want to open up in my undergraduate thesis, an exploration of the relationship between Soren
Kierkegaard and Albert Camus grounded on the philosophy love. Kierkegaard and Camus must
be regarded as critics of their age. They were reactive, cared little for purely intellectual
approaches to philosophy or life, and most importantly, were both fueled by an intense love that
allowed them to believe in others. Their criticisms therefore remain as relevant as ever in our age, but how and to whom they apply is what is truly in need of clarification, which I hope to achieve with this work.
Bibliography


