ALBERT CAMUS AND THE PHENOMENON OF SOLIDARITY

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by

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“Sisyphus was a grad student.” – Dr. Gina Zavota

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Born to a poor family in November 1913, in Mondovi, Algeria, Albert Camus soon became one of the most famous of the twentieth century francophone public intellectuals, moving in the Parisian Left-Bank intellectual circle with figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, André Malraux, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In Nazi occupied Paris, he worked as editor and contributor to the underground resistance magazine, Combat. Known among his friends to say that there was “nothing more absurd than to die in a car accident,”1 on January 4, 1960, Camus lost his life in the passenger seat of a Facel-Vega. Looking back during an interview at the age of 70, Sartre reflected on Camus: “there was a side of him that smacked of the little Algerian tough guy, very much a hooligan, very funny. He was probably the last good friend I had.”2

Camus and Sartre’s friendship had ended years before Camus’ death, after the 1951 publication of The Rebel and subsequent battle fought on the pages of Les Temps

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1 Olivier Todd, Albert Camus: A Life (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 200), 413.
Moderns, Sartre’s literary magazine. The Rebel marked Camus’ rejection of communism, for which he was ostracized, being the first of the Sartre-Beauvoir circle to break from Soviet Russia. However, The Rebel was much more than a rejection of communism: it was the last component of his “rebellion phase,” preceded by The Plague in 1947, State of Siege in 1948, and The Just Assassins in 1949. In order to situate these works and explain their significance for the present essay, I shall outline Camus’ oeuvre.

Camus’ Phases

The over-arching question of this thesis is whether Camus has an ethical theory. In order to answer this question, we necessarily must turn to his writings, but before properly engaging any particular work from Camus’ oeuvre, one must have an idea of how Camus envisioned his life’s work. The general scheme accepted in Camus scholarship is that Camus would write a few different works in different genres on a single theme, often referred to as a “stage,” “phase” or “series.” Camus envisioned three main phases, “absurd,” “revolt” and “love,” with a few less important phases in-between. During his 1957 trip to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize for literature, Camus spoke of his phases in some detail:

I had a precise plan when I started my work: I wanted first of all to express negation. In three forms. As a novel: this was The Stranger. Theatrically: Caligula, The Misunderstanding. Conceptually: The Myth of Sisyphus. I couldn’t have spoken of it if I hadn’t lived it; I have no imagination. But for me, that was Descartes’ methodical doubt, if you will. I knew one could not live in negation and I declared that in the preface of The Myth of Sisyphus; I foresaw affirmation, again in three

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forms. As a novel: *The Plague*. Theatrically: *State of Siege* and *The Just Assassins*. Conceptually: *The Rebel*. I already glimpsed a third layer, around the theme of love. These are the projects I have in motion.\(^4\)

“Negation” and “affirmation” refer to the phases “absurd” and “rebellion,” respectively.

In Camus’ *Notebooks VIII*, he says, ‘Before the third stage: short stories for ‘A Hero of Our Times.’ Themes of judgment and exile. The third stage is love: the First Man, Don Faust. The myth of Nemesis.’\(^5\) The themes of judgment and exile almost certainly refer to Camus’ collection of short stories, *Exile and the Kingdom*, as well as his novella, *The Fall*. This corrects an earlier statement in Camus’ *Notebooks V*, in which he associates the posthumously published semi-autobiographical novel *The First Man* with the series on judgment. In this same entry, Camus mentions a series to follow “love,” which is “Creation corrected or The System: Big novel + great meditation + unplayable play.”\(^6\) The novel for this phase, identified elsewhere simply as *The System*, was not just “big,” but was planned to take 1,500 pages.\(^7\) Therefore, a comprehensive view of Camus’ projected work would look something like the following:

**Series 1: Absurd (Solitary Revolt)**  
**Novel:** *The Stranger*  
**Essay:** *The Myth of Sisyphus*

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\(^7\) Ibid., 151.
Plays: *Caligula, The Misunderstanding*

**Series 2: Rebellion (Community of Shared Struggles)**  
Novel: *The Plague*  
Essay: *The Rebel*  
Plays: *State of Siege, The Just Assassins*

**Series 3: Judgment and Exile**  
Novella: *The Fall*  
Short Stories: *Exile and the Kingdom*

**Series 4: Love (Unfinished)**  
Novel: *The First Man* (Published posthumously, incomplete)  
Essay: *The Myth of Nemesis* (Never started)  
Play: *Don Faust* (Never started)

**Series 5: Creation Corrected or The System (Never started)**  
Novel: *The System* (Never started)  
Essay: unnamed “great meditation” (Never started)  
Play: unnamed “unplayable play” (Never started)

Why is all this series-business relevant to the present essay? For one thing, Camus has neatly divided up his work, which allows us to talk about the different groupings of it thematically, and for another, he tells us that Series 2: Rebellion is the phase that focuses on solidarity and creating meaning in the face of an absurd universe: “Compared to *The Stranger*, *The Plague* does, beyond any possible discussion, represent the transition from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, it is in the direction of solidarity and participation.”\(^8\) In the Series 1: Absurd, Camus tells his readers how to revolt against their solitary absurd condition; in Series 2: Rebellion, Camus seeks to extend the solitary revolt from the previous series, so that people might act in solidarity

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against a shared absurd predicament, such as Nazi occupation. Camus alludes to the same progression from *The Myth of Sisyphus* to *The Rebel* in the introductory pages of the latter work: “This essay proposes, in the face of murder and rebellion, to pursue a train of thought which began with suicide and the idea of the absurd”\(^9\) (suicide and the idea of the absurd were the themes of *The Myth of Sisyphus*.) In the following pages, Camus shows how the train of thought begun in *The Myth of Sisyphus*—“the repudiation of suicide”\(^10\)—leads to the claim that life “is good for all men,” and that “murder cannot be made coherent when suicide is not considered coherent.”\(^11\) Colin Davis explains: “Camus’s argument is essentially very simple: if I do not kill myself, it must be because I accept that my own life is a necessary good; if I accept this for myself, then I must accept it for all others as well, so that if I reject suicide I also reject murder.”\(^12\) This argument is notoriously poorly formed, but it clearly shows the connection Camus envisioned between his series on solitary revolt—the Absurd—to his series on revolt in solidarity—Rebellion. Camus makes the importance of rebellion clear at the end of the first part of *The Rebel*: “Man’s solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and rebellion, in its turn, can only find its justification in this solidarity.”\(^13\)

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11 Ibid.


When trying to engage Camus’ views on solidarity and morality, one can use his organizational scheme to pick out which works are the most relevant to our question according to Camus: namely, the works from Series 2: Rebellion, which are *The Plague*, *The Rebel*, *State of Siege*, and *The Just Assassins*. Thus, the main focus of this thesis will be on these works, with special emphasis on *The Plague* and *The Rebel*, for reasons that will become clear in the next section.

**The Road to David Sherman’s Camus**

The first day of my first philosophy class, we read the last section of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. I can no longer recall exactly what I thought of it at the time, except for a tremendous feeling of awe at what Camus was trying to do. Our professor summed up Sisyphus’ message as staring the gods in the face with both middle fingers waving and I thought, “this is philosophy? I can do that!” After the class was over, I went out, bought *The Stranger*, and read it cover to cover. I harassed the professor about doing more Camus until a couple semesters later, when he taught *The Plague* and a few of Camus’ short stories. I liked Camus’ move from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, and, already having picked up some knowledge of Camus’ phases, I wondered how his conceptual work would change from absurd to revolt, that is, from *The Myth of Sisyphus* to *The Rebel*. My professor gave me a copy of *The Rebel*, and that, basically, sealed my fate. I wanted to know if Sisyphus’ solitary revolt could extend to create intersubjective meaning, but my unguided reading of *The Rebel* did not help much. So, I looked to secondary sources on the topic, most of which I barely understood, if at all, and I convinced myself that I wanted to write on “Camus’ ethic.”
This train of thought began to take the shape it now has when I told my (then, soon to be) thesis advisor I wanted to write on Camus’ ethic, and she asked me, “Does Camus have an ethic?” The only response I could muster was, “well…he’s got these books…and he’s definitely doing something.” When it came time to propose thesis topics, I proposed three topics, all to do with Camus’ rebellion phase. I was fortunate enough to have a thesis advisor willing to work with me on the topic, and it was she who originally discovered Sherman’s book, Camus, only a year after its publication. Her email regarding this read: “Here’s your entry into your thesis. Brand new book, so very current, cutting edge! Sounds like fun, yes? Camus as virtue ethicist…maybe not. But phenomenological ethics? What the heck is that? FUN!!”14 My thesis, at the time ostensibly titled “Albert Camus and Existential Solidarity,” was motivated by the question, “Can we cull anything like an ethics from Camus’ ‘Rebellion Phase’?” Naturally, when we discovered Sherman’s book, we were very excited by the summary on the back cover:

The book covers all of Camus’s significant writings and includes thorough expositions of The Myth of Sisyphus, The Stranger, The Fall, The Plague, and The Rebel. A discussion of the metaphysical and practical connotations of Camus’s celebrated concept of the Absurd lays the foundation for a discussion of the later works, which are considered in the context of Camus’s basic ethical orientation. This, it is contended, harks back (and, with its recent resurgence, forward) to a virtue ethics of sorts. It is argued that Camus’s literary characters are purified phenomenological portraits that reflect the existential temptations of an overwhelmed modern consciousness, and the ethico-political works reflect the efforts of a morally committed consciousness to come to grips with a modern world unable to make good the moral imperative. In the end, it is argued, Camus

offers a phenomenalological ethics, which is all that is left of virtue ethics when social life has broken down.\textsuperscript{15}

Most exciting were the comparison to virtue ethics and the positing of a phenomenalological ethics. I had never heard about phenomenalological ethics before, and was very excited to see to what Sherman could be referring by the term. Sherman’s book looked like a great place to get going with my Camus and ethics project. However, once I started reading the book, I realized that Sherman would serve more as a foil than as a guide.

Thus, while nominally on the question of Camus’ ethic, this thesis is in large part a reply to the work done on the topic by Sherman. Sherman takes up the issue of Camus’ ethic in his book \textit{Camus}, which gives an excellent study that covers the breadth of Camus’ published works. Sherman delivers the main thrust of his argument in Chapter 5: Solidarity and Chapter 6: Rebellion. Here, as I will explain at length in the following chapter, Sherman argues that Camus’ ethic can be viewed initially as a virtue ethic, akin to that of Aristotle, Philippa Foot, and Alasdair MacIntyre. In order to establish this, Sherman analyzes three important characters from \textit{The Plague}: Rambert, Rieux, and Tarrou. Sherman claims that, for Camus, each of these characters represents a unique commitment that informs Camus’ virtue ethic. However, according to Sherman, due to the tragedies and atrocities of WWII, Camus experienced the fallout of shared communal values that traditionally inform the polis in a virtue ethic. According to Sherman, this reduced Camus’ virtue ethic to a phenomenalological ethic, which Camus sought to rebuild.

in *The Rebel*. It is because Sherman relies most heavily on *The Plague* and *The Rebel* that I focus on these two works from his Rebellion series.

**The Plague**

On the surface, Camus’ *The Plague* is a novel about the struggle of the inhabitants of Oran, Algeria, against an outbreak of the bubonic plague, but the intended allegorical reading is as the struggle against Nazi occupation in 1940s Paris. At first, a few rats start running out into public places and keeling over. The number of dead rats starts climbing and before long, the trash bins on the street are overflowing with vermin. After some time, a few curious cases of fever and sickness start popping up in the human population, leading the local doctors to identify the onset of bubonic plague. Only after the townsfolk start dropping like flies does the government finally step in and quarantine the town. During the course of the quarantine, many measures are taken, such as the routine lancing of buboes, which rarely seems to have a stopping effect on the plague, the creation of a vaccine, which only helps sometimes, and the formation of sanitation squads, which do not make much of a difference to the spread of the plague. Despite the inefficacy of their efforts, the citizens of Oran do not stop fighting the plague, even when their struggle seems hopeless. After months of struggle and surprising shows of solidarity by the townsfolk, the plague begins to abate just as suddenly and irrationally as it came on.

16 In “Letter to Roland Barthes on *The Plague,*” Camus says that *The Plague* “has as its obvious content the struggle of the European resistance movements against Nazism… In a sense, *The Plague* is more than a chronicle of the Resistance. But certainly it is nothing less.” *LCE*, 339.
The novel details the struggle through the always-measured voice of Dr. Rieux, who retains anonymity until the last subsection of the book. Rieux’s response to the plague is largely utilitarian: he sets in immediately with the purpose of mitigating suffering and saving as many lives as possible. He is joined in his struggle by a number of characters, not the least of whom are Rambert and Tarrou. Rambert, a journalist from France stranded from his lover when Oran is quarantined, spends most of the novel trying to escape the city so that he might return to his lover. In the meantime, he fights the plague alongside Rieux and Tarrou. Tarrou, an ex-revolutionary who renounced revolutionary violence as hypocritical, organizes the sanitation squads that go about Oran cleaning up after the plague’s victims. I will discuss these characters in greater detail in Chapter III, in connection with their importance for Sherman’s argument.

The Rebel

As already mentioned, *The Rebel* represents Camus’ break from communism and revolutionary movements. In the work, Camus seeks out the origins of modern revolutionary thought through a series of meditations and essays on various persons and movements, from the Marquis de Sade to Nietzsche, from surrealism to Marx, and from Dostoevsky to the real-life Russian revolutionaries he wrote about in *The Just Assassins*. First, Camus introduces his notion of rebellion. In the next section, titled “Metaphysical Rebellion,” Camus discusses what he calls “the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation,” which he says is metaphysical because
“it contests the ends of man and of creation”\textsuperscript{17} The following section, “Historical Rebellion,” discusses various revolutionary movements from the past few centuries, mostly concentrating on French and Russian figures. In “Rebellion and Art,” Camus discusses aesthetic creativity in its connections to rebellion, and “Thought at the Meridian” finishes \textit{The Rebel} with a recapitulation of the dangers and possible benefits of rebellion, with suggestions for how to proceed. His principle concern is when movements of rebellion—characterized by a refusal of a present oppressive situation—indulge in gratuitous violence or decide to replace one oppressive regime by another, thereby pushing past rebellion into revolution.

According to John Foley, “Philosophically, \textit{The Rebel} is Camus’s most important book.”\textsuperscript{18} While this may be contested, for Sherman and the present thesis, it is certainly the most relevant of Camus’ conceptual works. As mentioned earlier, in \textit{The Rebel}, Camus seeks to extend his argument from \textit{The Myth of Sisyphus} that, on an individual level, nihilism should not imply suicide to a communal stance that nihilism does not imply a \textit{laissez-faire} moral relativism that condones violence against human beings. This thesis will focus on two main points from \textit{The Rebel}. The first has to do with Camus’ statement, “I rebel—therefore, we exist.”\textsuperscript{19} Camus explains this reference to the Cartesian \textit{cogito}: “[rebellion] is the first piece of evidence… [It] lures the individual from his solitude. It founds its first value on the whole human race.”\textsuperscript{20} Here, Camus is

\textsuperscript{17} Camus, \textit{The Rebel}, 23. This is the extent of Camus’ explanation for his word choice.
\textsuperscript{18} John Foley, \textit{Albert Camus: From Absurd to Revolt} (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 55. Sherman is not so ready to make such a claim: “\textit{The Myth of Sisyphus}…is arguably Camus’s defining philosophical work.” Sherman, \textit{Camus}, 23.
\textsuperscript{19} Camus, \textit{The Rebel}, 22.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
arguing that rebellion, as he envisions it, stands as evidence to the individual of the existence of a community that has value beyond the individual’s existence. Tied to this point, the second important thing to note in *The Rebel* is that Camus advocates a minimalist vision of human nature:

Analysis of rebellion leads at least to the suspicion that, contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought, a human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed. Why rebel if there is nothing permanent in oneself worth preserving? It is for the sake of everyone in the world that the slave asserts himself when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something in him which does not belong to him alone, but which is common ground where all men—even the man who insults and oppresses him—have a natural community.²¹

While Camus’ point here is unclear and perhaps tenuous, the important thing to extract from the passage is that, for Camus, the act of rebellion reveals the existence of a human nature whereby a natural community may be established. Both of these points, “I rebel—therefore, we exist” and the minimalist conception of human nature, will be discussed in detail in both of the following chapters, again in connection with Sherman’s project.

**A Final Clarification**

By far surpassing rebellion, the concept for which Camus is most known is “the absurd,” the focus of his first series. As Sherman notes, “The Absurd is both an experience and a concept.”²² The experience finds a close analogue in Martin Heidegger’s conception of anxiety.²³ Camus says,

> In certain situations, replying “nothing” when asked what one is thinking about may be pretense in a man. Those who are loved are well aware of

²¹ Ibid., 16.
this. But if that reply is sincere, if it symbolizes that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity.

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.  

The experience of the absurd is the falling sensation one feels in one’s gut when “the stage sets collapse.” Suddenly, the world no longer makes sense and all one is left with is an uncomfortable emptiness. While we can call this experience of the absurd “existential,” the concept of the absurd has a more metaphysical element for Camus. He says, “At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”

On Camus’ view, the concept of the absurd results from a human need for intelligibility confronted with a universe that is wholly unintelligible. The practical bearing of this is that, in a universe that is metaphysically absurd, there is no God or Truth (with a capital T) that gives a basis for moral judgment. In other words, if the universe is absurd, we have no objective basis that allows us to identify evil acts or justify our avoidance of them.

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25 Ibid., 28.
26 I use the convention “Truth (with a capital T)” to refer to the notion of objective truth, also known as truth divorced from perspective or the “God’s eye” view of truth. I use similar phrases like “Reason (with a capital R)” to refer to reason(s) justified by reference to objective truth. Occasionally I only capitalize the word in question (“Truth,” “Reason,” etc) without explicitly noting the capitalization (“with a capital T,” “with a capital R,” etc).
CHAPTER II

SHERMAN’S ACCOUNT

Sherman claims that Camus is a virtue ethicist at heart. This is problematic because in the world in which Camus lived, the norms and cultural guidance that inform traditional virtue ethics have been shattered by the Nazi atrocities. At the very least, those norms were in a state of great flux and indeterminacy. Sherman claims that once virtue ethics is stripped of these informing norms and shared values, all that remains is an ability to see or perceive the moral worth of a given action, which Sherman calls a “phenomenological ethics.” Sherman believes that this phenomenological ethics can work together with Camus’ theory of rebellion to recreate a virtue ethics. In the following, I will explain these claims in detail.

Traditional Virtue Ethics

Sherman wants to understand Camus by comparing his thought to contemporary moral theories. In an endnote, Sherman considers whether Camus could be a deontologist. Deontology views acts as good or bad apart from the consequences that arise from them. For example, a deontological theory might say that it is wrong to lie, even if lying will save a life. In a Kantian deontological theory, one must act from duties without exception. Sherman says, “Camus is surely not a deontologist, as any moral theory that abstracts from time, place, person, situation, and, especially, consequences is
not one that he would embrace.”\textsuperscript{27} Sherman’s assessment of Camus is on point. It is unlikely that Camus would appreciate an ethical theory that abstracts from context as much as, say, a Kantian deontological theory does. Living in Paris during Nazi occupation and working for the underground resistance newspaper, \textit{Combat}, Camus had to violate blanket rules like “do not lie” every day in order to produce the newspaper and avoid the SS arresting him. Therefore, Sherman must be right by eliminating deontology from the list of potential candidates for a Camusian ethic.

After ruling out deontology, Sherman considers whether Camus could be a utilitarian. During his character analysis of \textit{The Plague}, Sherman identifies the character Rieux as the symbol of utilitarianism. However, Sherman rules out utilitarianism: “at bottom, utilitarians are ‘calculators’… this is not Camus.”\textsuperscript{28} Utilitarians calculate in the sense that they take the sum of overall utility for all parties involved in order to determine which of a variety of possible choices is the morally correct one. Even when utilitarians do not explicitly assign numbers and calculate the aggregate utility for all possible choices before making a decision, their theory is at least predicated on the balancing of overall utility. A utilitarian could decide on a particular act, saying it would likely bring about more utility than another act would. Even though the utilitarian here is not explicitly assigning numbers and adding up utility, he is judging that something is correct because it will probably result in maximum utility. The “greatest good for the greatest number” is still in principle what makes an act right or wrong, even if the utilitarian does not actually do the math. Sherman wants to say that this is not Camus because Camus

\textsuperscript{27} Sherman, \textit{Camus}, 134.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 129.
ranks character ahead of method. In *The Fall*, Camus writes, “when one has no character one has to apply a method.” The tone of the quote is sarcastic, implying that a person of good character does not need to appeal to a method in order to determine the moral worth of a given act. In other words, a person should not have to assign numbers and calculate utility in order to understand the moral standing of a given act. Camus would not appreciate an ethics that says, “add together x, y, and z, and that will tell you what is right and wrong.”

As Camus considers method insufficient for solving ethical issues, having a good character enjoys a more prominent place in his thinking, which is evidenced by the previous quote from *The Fall*. Sherman takes this position and compares this aspect of Camus’ thought to virtue ethics as right character is critical in both. Sherman supports this by stressing Tarrou’s metaphorical importance in *The Plague*—the commitment to understanding. Camus indicates the significance of right knowledge when *The Plague*’s narrator says people are “more or less ignorant, and it is this that we call vice or virtue.” Camus believes that vice or virtue follows from a proper degree of comprehension, much as in traditional virtue ethics. This together with the importance of character situates Camus closely to the tradition, for Sherman.

Sherman then gives an account of two different types of virtue ethics that split over whether the virtuous action determines the virtuous agent or vice versa. The first

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30 Sherman, *Camus*, 129.
32 Sherman, *Camus*, 129.
type of virtue ethics is “agent-based,” meaning that virtuous agents preexist virtuous actions and that an action is rightly declared virtuous only if a virtuous agent would commit that action. On the other hand is “agent-focused” virtue ethics, which holds that virtuous actions preexist virtuous agents and that an agent is virtuous on the condition that the agent performs virtuous acts.  

Consider the case of Robin Hood, the virtuous agent of lore who performs the virtuous act of stealing from the rich so that the poor may eat. On the one hand, an agent-based virtue ethics would say that Robin Hood is virtuous and that is why we call his actions virtuous because in agent-based virtue ethics we call an act virtuous if it is the sort of act that a virtuous agent would perform. Because we consider Robin Hood virtuous, then all the acts he performs are considered virtuous. On the other hand, agent-focused virtue ethics would call Robin Hood virtuous because he performs acts that are virtuous, since in agent-focused virtue ethics, we call a person virtuous if he performs virtuous acts. Because Robin Hood is ensuring that poor people can eat, which is considered a virtuous act, he is considered a virtuous person. In the former, the agent makes the act virtuous; in the latter, the act makes the agent virtuous. Sherman says that Camus’ ethics fits the mould of agent-focused virtue ethics because Camus thinks “there are certain acts that are basically virtuous or vicious.” Although Sherman offers no textual support for this claim, it is not out of line with Camus’ project. Referring to Ivan Karamazov’s statement that “Everything is permitted,” Camus says that this “does not imply that nothing is forbidden.” Therefore, Camus probably thinks that

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31 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 130.
some acts are basically vicious, since they are forbidden. If one can be correct in calling an act virtuous without referring to the performing agent’s character, then virtue must be based in action and be independent of agent origin. Sherman uses the qualifier “basically” because every situation is unique and sometimes the virtuous act particular to a situation involves the violation of what is prima facie morally correct.\(^{36}\) Sherman uses the example of killing. Given that “killing is basically vicious,”\(^{37}\) a person is typically virtuous if she refrains from killing. However, sometimes situations call for killing, as in the cases of self-defense and the defense of others, and in those situations refraining from killing would be morally vicious.

The next major move Sherman makes is to note the manner in which a person comes to know the moral worth of a given act in agent-focused virtue ethics.\(^{38}\) According to Sherman’s reading of this tradition, the moral agent does not appeal to rule, duty, or calculation to discern the moral worth of a given action, as in consequentialist and deontological ethical theories. According to Sherman, Camus has little respect for method and determinate decision algorithms, because, in Camus’ view, a person of highly moral character should be able to distinguish between right and wrong without recourse to method. However, Sherman says, there is something of a decision making process in which the agent takes input from both reason and the emotions, which function together with a special way of knowing the moral worth of given actions: “With agent-focused accounts, what is dispositive is neither a rule nor a calculus but, rather, a certain

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\(^{36}\) Sherman, *Camus*, 130.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
kind of ‘seeing’ or ‘perceiving’ (as Aristotle, the father of virtue ethics, puts it), as well as a certain kind of decision making process, which is anchored in both our reason and our emotions.” 39 One cannot simply discover that a given act is wrong by reflecting on a rule or calculating net utility. Without a method, moral worth must be something that one sees. Lacking clear socio-historical guidance for understanding the moral significance of unique situations, a person reveals her character by this “seeing” or “perceiving” necessary for making moral distinctions.

One “sees” something irreducibly immoral in, for instance, the child sex-trade. This ability to perceive is very important, as it has the function of making finely tuned moral distinctions necessary for coping with the unique situations in which a moral agent finds herself. For example, in the context of medical research, it takes someone of a highly refined character to understand why it is wrong to offer research subjects overly attractive compensation for participating. Subjects can easily find themselves in a financial situation in which they have no other realistic option but to participate, and it is wrong to structure a research program in such a way that removes subjects’ abilities to make sufficiently autonomous decisions. This, however, is not immediately apparent, which is why such practices continue to this day. The highly virtuous person must have a tremendously developed ability to perceive moral worth because the uniqueness of situations demands a keen eye for discriminating what is ethically appropriate. As Sherman says,

This need to see or perceive results from the fact that every situation (even if only in the nuances, which are ethically dispositive) is different, and

39 Ibid.
without a method for making ethical decisions, it takes a person of highly refined character to see or perceive the right thing to do. Even in ancient times, when there was a relatively elaborate background comprised of norms that signified what constituted virtuousness (whether in person or in act) and ultimately “the good,” a person of highly refined character was one who could see or perceive the right thing to do when the particulars of the situation fell in the ethical cracks.⁴⁰

In the quote above, Sherman refers to an “elaborate background of norms.”

Traditional virtue ethics took for granted a number of things that were pertinent to the times in which virtue ethics was originally conceived. For example, traditional virtue ethics states that it is the society’s responsibility to impart ethical knowledge to its members. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says,

Each man can judge competently the things he knows, and of these he is a good judge. Accordingly, a good judge in each particular field is one who has been trained in it, and a good judge in general, a man who has received an all-round schooling. For that reason, a young man is not equipped to be a student of politics; for he has no experience in the actions which life demands of him, and these actions form the basis and subject matter of discussion.⁴¹

A person has to be inculcated into her society before she is equipped to study it. Then, for Aristotle, topics should be approached in a manner that is appropriate to the subject matter. It is inappropriate for someone who is inexperienced to engage in certain enterprises, i.e. lectures on political science or ethics, as he has not sufficiently developed his character or gained enough experience to understand and contribute to the discussion.

According to Sherman, one of the primary ways people learn about virtues is through the laws that a society deems correct. Since the political class makes the laws from which

⁴⁰Ibid.
the population gains its moral insights, the political class is ultimately responsible for the dissemination of moral education through the selection of appropriate laws: “For Aristotle, the first virtue ethicist, the task of moral education belongs to society, and, finally, to the political class, which by promulgating the right laws properly teaches us in ethical matters, but Camus’s problem is that “political society” is no longer up to this task.”42. These laws constitute the “elaborate background comprised of norms.” Therefore, virtue ethics finds a challenge in times where the society is no longer homogenous with values all its members understand and accept.

The Falling Out of Modern Political Society and the Entry into Phenomenological Ethics

Once crime was as solitary as a cry of protest; now it is as universal as science. Yesterday it was put on trial; today it determines the law.43

Albert Camus, Introduction to The Rebel

According to Sherman, back in the good old days of virtue ethics, there was a reliable background of shared norms that helped to inform the population of the difference between right and wrong. When Aristotle first started developing his virtue ethics, such a background was readily available. The community he designed his ethics around was Athenian. The only people who really counted were citizens who were property owners. Aristotle was only thinking about mature males as well, so he was excluding females, young males, slaves, and barbarians from consideration. He was speaking to men who shared a religion as well as a rich, extended history. Thus, the citizens in Athens Aristotle is speaking to would all be of the same ethnicity, gender,

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42 Sherman, Camus, 137.
43 Camus, The Rebel, 3.
religion, age-bracket, relative wealth, and cultural background. Those citizens would already have an intricate system of settled beliefs and shared values—an “elaborate background comprised of norms”—about what is right and what is wrong. There would have been a highly homogenized view of expectations and of the notion of “good.” Hence, Aristotle would have had little trouble in developing a virtue ethics founded on a community with shared values that his fellow Athenians would accept.

Traditional virtue ethics encounters a special problem in modern times. Whereas the ancients had a vast array of cultural norms to inform their virtues, Camus has experienced the falling out of the worth traditionally assigned to those norms. The problem, for Camus, is that the polis is no longer trustworthy, and values are no longer assumed to be shared by all. The Europe of the early 1930’s would have seen increasing immigration from the colonies in Africa. This intermingling of cultures with different conceptions of “good” resulted in the loss of homogeneity of the community and of the unspoken knowledge of propriety. Of course, this is part of what Hitler was targeting. The Nazis were looking to wipe away the loss of European and particularly Aryan homogeneity, namely by targeting the Jews as the scapegoats for the German economic crisis. The Nazis expanded their power incrementally to take rights from non-Aryans, homosexuals, and political opponents until Hitler ruled Germany and his conquered areas of Europe with an iron fist. Camus lived through WWII, while the German government systematically put millions of Jews to death. France and Germany had a fairly shared Western history and value system, at least until the German invasion. So the question is, once one watches a formerly friendly government commit such egregious crimes, how
does one trust society as a viable source of moral education? It seems completely insane that a country such as Germany should feel comfortable militarily crushing its neighbors and committing genocide on an unheard-of scale. The shared values of Christianity are reeling: How could a Christian society practice genocide? How can a good God allow the extermination of six million Jews? Thus the appeal of nihilism and the absurd in post-WWII Europe. The shared norms that ground traditional virtue ethics are seen by Camus, according to Sherman, as absent.

Once virtue ethics loses its background of shared norms, the community aspect of virtue ethics is gone and all that remains, according to Sherman, is an individual’s ability to “see” or “perceive” the moral aspect of a particular situation. The moral agent does not discover or come to understand the moral value of a situation but simply sees it. Within the variety of human experiences, an individual can “see” which of those experiences have something to do with specifically moral experience. For example, consider the instance of a woman at a café picking up her teacup, drinking from it, and setting it back down. Prima facie, there is nothing particularly moral about this action. For Sherman, the individual simply “perceives” that nothing moral is at issue in this case. On the other hand, consider the event of a man smashing a baby’s head into a wall. According to Sherman, one immediately sees the moral aspect of this situation: it is wrong to smash babies’ heads into walls. The individual simply “perceives” the morality (or immorality) involved in such an event. According to Sherman, the individual has this capacity to see a disparity in moral content between actions—in this case, watching
someone lift up a teacup versus watching someone crush a baby’s skull—and this allows Camus to hold onto a minimalist ethics in the face of nihilism and the absurd.44

This is what Sherman refers to as a phenomenological ethics: “with the breakdown of modern social life (and, concomitantly, the background of shared commitments and practices that could delineate virtuousness), virtue ethics reduces to a phenomenological ethics of sorts, and what we are left with, at least as an initial matter, is a bare seeing or perceiving.”45 Notice that the use of “phenomenological” here does not seem specifically to refer to a philosophical theory like that of Husserl, Heidegger, or Merleau-Ponty, but rather to a less technical sense of the word, on the order of simply “felt” or “experienced.” Sherman explains his use of “phenomenological”:

Phenomenology covers a variety of approaches, and if by terms such as “technically” and “specialist sense” you are (implicitly) holding up a theoretical apparatus such as Husserl’s as the model, then you are right: Camus is clearly not offering a systematic approach, which would be at odds with his general orientation. However, if by phenomenology we are talking about getting back to the basic structure of experience itself, and if by a phenomenological ethics we [are] talking about getting back to the basic structure of ethical experience, then the term, in my view, is appropriate.46

The ethics is phenomenological in the sense that for any situation in which morality is a concern, there is a phenomenological experience of the moral worth of that situation. Sherman thinks that, at bottom, ethical reality is primarily something we feel, and that ethics in its most fundamental aspect is founded on a bare phenomenological experience of the situation’s moral content. That is, according to Sherman, ethics is based on the

45 Sherman, Camus, 138.
46 Sherman, “RE: A question from a fellow Camus admirer.”
fact that we are able to discriminate between moral and non-moral situations. Thus, in Camus’ times in which people seem not to have shared values, they at least still have the ability to “see” the rightness or wrongness of a given act. Agents are left to their own abilities to perceive moral worth. Thus it is that “virtue ethics becomes phenomenological ethics.”

Sherman thinks that, with Camus’ help, we can reconstruct a virtue ethics from this minimal phenomenological foundation.

From Phenomenological Ethics to Virtue Ethics

Sherman thinks Camus dislikes both purely historical and purely ahistorical theories of morality. One example of the former is atheistic existentialism, personified by Sartre. According to Sherman, Camus appreciates the atheistic existentialists because they do not write off ethics as bourgeois, unlike communists. Camus’ problem with the atheistic existentialists, Sherman claims, is that atheist existentialists seek to extract morality from values that are purely historical, in the sense that those values have only developed according to the contingencies of history and are otherwise without grounding. On this view, it is just an accident of history that we believe genocide is immoral. Given a different human history, genocide could be viewed as valued and justifiable. Thus, according to Sherman, “it is only by avoiding a wholesale collapse into the logic of history that we might be able to avoid its ‘insanity,’” meaning that Camus thinks ethics needs an ahistorical grounding, albeit a minimal one, in order to avoid a society in which genocide is justifiable.

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47 Sherman, *Camus*, 130.
48 Ibid., 164.
On the other hand, Sherman thinks Camus is distrustful of a purely ahistorical ethics. As Sherman argues it, a purely ahistorical ethics cannot cope with the particularities of unique situations. For example, a deontological theory, such as Immanuel Kant’s, cannot deal with a situation in which two perfect duties conflict, such as when one is tempted to lie in order to save lives. Sherman says, “genuine moral decision-making is highly sensitive to its context, which is just another way of saying that time, place, person, and consequences are precisely what do matter.”49 For this reason, Camus must find a way of talking about ethics that avoids the traps of a purely ahistorical philosophy, such as Kant’s, but does not reduce to the wholly contingent nature of a purely historical ethic.

After the corruption of the web of norms that inform our moral thinking, Camus needs a way to reintroduce ethics to the world, according to Sherman. He thinks that Camus does this with his statement, “I rebel—therefore we exist.”50 Camus tells us that a rebel is “a man who says no.”51 Camus means that one becomes a rebel by refusing to be abused. For example, suppose we have a slave, call him Al, who is being whipped by his master. Al becomes a rebel when he takes the whip from his master, thereby drawing the line. One can accept being violated by others to a point, and after that, the rebel in essence says, “that’s enough.” The act of rebellion suggests the existence of limits, in the sense that a person can take only so much abuse before he will refuse to be abused any

49 Ibid., 144.
50 Camus, The Rebel, 22.
51 Ibid., 13.
longer. When the rebel says, “no,” he is saying to his oppressors, “this is where I draw the line.”

Simply “drawing the line” does not itself give that limit normative thrust. A rebel could say, “this is where I draw the line on being abused,” but such a statement stops short of extending the individual rebellion and limits to others. Strictly speaking, just saying, “I will not allow you to do this to me anymore,” does not mean that everyone is prohibited from abusing others in that way. However, if the act of rebellion, that is, saying “no” and affirming the existence of a limit, is to be taken seriously, then it must be asserted universally, according to Sherman. He says,

When asserting one’s rights, one cannot ultimately be making a claim on behalf of oneself alone; at some point in one’s chain of justification, even if only implicitly (as is generally the case), a universal value is necessarily invoked… What ultimately gives every assertion of a right (irrespective of how particular it might seem to be) its normative oomph is its claim to universality.\(^{52}\)

Thus, the act of rebellion, which is in itself individualistic, tacitly invokes universality. This brings us closer to understanding what Camus means by “I rebel—therefore we exist.” When Al rebels, he affirms a limit for himself, but if he wants his claim to his rights to be taken seriously, according to Sherman, he must accept that those rights extend universally to the rest of humanity.

Camus explains this a number of times in *The Rebel*, but one of the clearest statements is the following: “It is for the sake of everyone in the world that the slave asserts himself when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something in him which does not belong to him alone, but which is common ground

\(^{52}\) Sherman, *Camus*, 143.
where all men—even the man who insults and oppresses him—have a natural community.”

Sherman takes this to be essential for the reconstruction of ethics: the existence of a natural community. This goes along with the existence of a human nature, which Camus suggests becomes apparent in the analysis of rebellion. Sherman clarifies this point:

Camus wants to argue that ethical experience is rooted in certain kinds of natural reactions. Indeed, recall that while Aristotle (like MacIntyre) emphasizes the importance of a good polis, his ethics, even more fundamentally, is biologically grounded (i.e., based on the kinds of beings that we are). If you can look someone in the face and break their bones or smash an infant’s head against a wall, then you are a monster, and you are a monster regardless of the social framework. Or, put differently, consider a sociopath: imaging clearly shows that their brains do not “light up” in the way that they should when confronted with moral questions, which suggests that ethical experience is, in some sense, off limits to them, even if they can be taught to conform their behaviors.

Therefore, on Sherman’s interpretation, Camus grounds his ethics in human nature. People are hard-wired to experience certain acts as ethically loaded. Humans who are not sociopaths will invariably see smashing a baby’s head against the wall as having moral content. On the other hand, ethical experience is off limits to sociopaths, which Sherman explains is because they do not have the same neurological processes as normal people who experience morality. Sociopaths are biologically different in such a fundamental way that the grounding of ethics is lost on them. It is not that they stand as evidence against the biological grounding of ethics, so much as they stand outside of the group of biological beings for whom ethics can possibly be grounded. It just so happens that the vast majority of human kind has this minimal phenomenological moral “seeing.”

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53 Camus, *The Rebel*, 16.
54 Sherman, “Re: A question from a fellow Camus admirer.”
Therefore, ethical experience is biologically grounded for non-sociopathic humans. In this way, the value “I rebel—therefore we exist” is ahistorical, according to Sherman, since all non-sociopathic humans will experience smashing a baby’s head into a wall as morally wrong, regardless of time, place and culture. He argues that Camus believes that the value “I rebel—therefore we exist” is built into the fabric of human nature: all non-sociopathic human beings experience morality similarly as a consequence of their biological makeup. It has the effect of forging a community.

Sherman says that the value implicit in “I rebel—therefore we exist” is not a “fundamental principle” in the way that Kant’s categorical imperative is fundamental for the establishment of his ethics. This value is “irreducibly minimal” and only “guiding,” according to Sherman. It tells us nothing about how we should act toward one another. All it does is show that there is some basis upon which a community and thus an ethics can be established, and the mere existence of a community is not enough to found an ethics. This is because, as quoted earlier, “time, place, person, and consequences are precisely what do matter.” According to Sherman’s reading of Camus, the act of rebellion affirms the existence of a community upon which values can be founded, but it says nothing about the radically contingent nature of ethics based on “time, place, person, and consequence.”

To deal with the problems of purely historical or ahistorical ethics, Sherman suggests that Camus “splits the difference, and thereby qualifies both, by offering a two-

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55 Sherman, *Camus*, 144.
tiered approach.” The first tier involves the ahistorical value of “I rebel—therefore we exist,” as discussed above. Sherman claims, “it is only when we are faithful to this (relatively) non-negotiable first-tier ‘rule’ that we can forge a community that will produce the sorts of substantive (second-tier) virtues that are worth having.” In other words, rebellion ahistorically opens the door to historical values. The question of what these second-tier virtues are is still open; however, Sherman writes, “[Camus] emphasizes Nietzschean virtues like creativity, daring, and self-overcoming.” Unfortunately, Sherman offers no evidence or explanation of why this is the case. He claims that on top of these virtues, Camus leaves the evaluation of virtues open to dialogue, which is evidenced when Camus says, “the mutual understanding and communication discovered by rebellion can survive only in the free exchange of conversation.” The important thing for Sherman is that the community affirmed by “I rebel—therefore we exist” constructs a value-system that deals appropriately with the historical, spatiotemporal and cultural circumstances of given situations. Only by holding dialogue open can a community avoid the pitfalls of both ahistorical and overly historicized values.

56 Ibid., 164.
57 Ibid., 168.
58 Ibid., 171.
59 Camus, The Rebel, 283.
As I see it, there are five points of interest in Sherman’s argument. The first is when he tries to establish that Camus initially endorses a traditional virtue ethics. Second, Sherman claims that, during Camus’ times, traditional virtue ethics is stripped of its informing background of norms and shared values, and what remains is the individual’s ability to see or perceive a given events as moral or amoral. Third, Sherman calls this ability to see events as moral a “phenomenological ethics.” Fourth, according to Sherman, Camus builds a new ethics using this “phenomenological ethics” as the foundation. Fifth, and lastly, Sherman calls this new ethics a virtue ethics, albeit a nontraditional one. The only one of these claims I find tenable is the second. I will evaluate each claim in order.

The Establishment of Camus’ Initial Virtue Ethics

The manner in which Sherman argues that Camus is a virtue ethicist before the move toward phenomenological ethics is questionable. Sherman attempts a “characterological” analysis of The Plague, which I refer to as a

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60 Sherman, Camus, 113.
character analysis. He considers three characters from *The Plague* and argues that their importance in the novel revolves around three respective “virtues,” namely, commitments to happiness (Rambert,) understanding (Tarrou,) and the reduction of human suffering (Rieux.) His analysis holds water in the sense that the important parts of the plot that revolve around the given characters do seem to focus on these commitments. Many sections of *The Plague* in which Rieux, the doctor, is the important character tend to highlight the reduction of human suffering, and likewise for Tarrou, the ex-revolutionary, and understanding, and Rambert, the journalist, and happiness. Sherman fails to note, however, that none of these characters achieves resolution through their commitments. Each is faced with the absurdity of the plague: it targets indiscriminately, lasts an indeterminate period, and kills randomly. Its evil is unintelligible, and it is difficult to reconcile with moral theory. Each of the characters responds in his special way, often through the commitments just listed. However, these commitments do not do the characters much good, as none of the commitments provides its patron with a suitable response to the plague. Furthermore, Sherman ignores a number of other characters who are symbolic of important themes, most notably, Father Paneloux, who is symbolic of the commitment to faith in God, and Cottard, who is symbolic of radical self-interest.

Rieux attempts to reduce human suffering, and his efforts are never clearly effective. He struggles against the plague, lances buboes, administers serum, and so on, but he never knows if his victories are because of his work or, rather, just the result of the absurd arbitrary nature of the plague. It could be the case that all of his successful interventions only succeed out of pure luck and that he has not been a causal factor in the
patients’ subsequent recovery. Further, at the beginning of the novel, his wife leaves Oran to go to a sanitarium. Throughout the novel, Rieux continuously suppresses his longing for his wife so that his struggle against the plague might be more effective—he needs to keep his mind clear if he is going to fight. At the end of the novel, after months of struggle against an opponent that has no clear weaknesses, worn out and still missing his wife, when finally it seems the plague is over and Rieux will be able to return to his wife, he finds out she has died. Here, the absurd shows itself, as bad things happen to good people for no discernable reason.

Tarrou is committed to understanding because he worries about both over- and under-rationalization, and he wants to avoid causing more harm than good in his struggles, be they against the plague or against totalitarianism. However, there is nothing to understand about the plague, or, more specifically, there is nothing that understanding can do against the plague because it comes on randomly, strikes randomly, and ends randomly. That is why the plague is such an apt metaphor for the absurd. It is nonsensical, and no degree of intellection will solve the problem. Thus, Tarrou’s alleged commitment to understanding can do virtually nothing against the plague, since by its very nature it is not understandable. In addition, Tarrou eventually dies of the plague, so one would be hard-pressed to say that his response to the plague does him much good in the end.

Lastly, consider the character Rambert. Supposedly, he represents the commitment to happiness, for Sherman. He is in Oran by accident, ironically sent there to report on the sanitation conditions that likely contributed to the onset of the plague.
Thus, he is not condemned to this fate by any past association with Oran. He is simply stranded there at the onset of the plague, and spends most of the novel trying to escape from the town so that he can pursue happiness in the arms of his lover. One would think that a character who is supposed to exhibit virtue by embodying the commitment to happiness would eventually get his wish. However, when Rambert finally gets the opportunity to leave Oran and return to his wife, he chooses not to leave. If the commitment to happiness is one of Camus’ virtues and Rambert is the manifestation of this virtue, then why does he choose against happiness at the critical moment? Surely, if Camus wants his audience to think that people should be committed to happiness, he should probably have Rambert choose happiness. Even then, the question remains as to whose happiness one should be committed, and Sherman offers no response.

If Sherman wants us to take seriously his character analysis of *The Plague* and show that Camus is proposing virtues, he owes an account of why those virtues all fail their characters. Sherman should also be able to answer to problems that arise from extensions of his character analysis. As already suggested, the thematic commitment to faith surrounds Father Paneloux. Where others see the plague as a paradigm case for the disproof of God via the problem of evil, Paneloux sees it as the ultimate call to faith. His commitment to faith requires acceptance of the most despicable “acts of God”: “we must hold fast, trusting in divine goodness, even as to the deaths of little children.”

Further, Paneloux divulges that he is working on an essay, the thesis of which is “it’s illogical for

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a priest to call in a doctor.” By this claim, Paneloux is suggesting that, since a priest should have absolute faith in God, he should not call a doctor to intervene in an illness since the illness is part of God’s plan. In keeping with his commitment, when Paneloux contracts the plague, he refuses to accept treatment, which unsurprisingly leads to his death. Again, the character analysis points to a commitment that fails to help in any observable way.

After Sherman delivers his account of The Plague and virtue ethics, he moves his analysis to one of the plays from Camus’ rebellion phase: State of Siege. Camus wrote this play after the publication of The Plague and the subsequent criticism of the plague’s unsuitability as a metaphor for human evil. Instead of conceding to these criticisms, Camus names the main antagonist of State of Siege “The Plague.” Camus pretends to deny the importance of this choice in the author’s preface to Caligula and Three Other Plays: “State of Siege is in no sense an adaptation of my novel The Plague. To be sure, I gave that symbolic name to one of my characters. But since he is a dictator, that appellation is correct.” While it is true that State of Siege is not an adaptation of The Plague, the historical importance of naming the antagonist “The Plague” makes State of Siege a commentary on The Plague at least in part. This decision at least signifies that Camus is thumbing his nose at his critics. Sherman claims that Camus’ choice of name here has the significance of denying those criticisms as confusing the message of the novel: “Camus’s return to the plague metaphor must be seen as a deliberate refusal to

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62 Ibid., 202.
give credence to the types of distinctions that his critics desire to make on the grounds that such distinctions can frequently be used to obfuscate rather than to clarify.”

This is significant in light of Camus’ supposed commitment to understanding. Particularly relevant is Tarrou’s fear of strong arguments that justify evil acts. The implication is that criticism of the plague’s metaphorical aptness hides the importance of Camus’ goals in *The Plague*, particularly the importance of trying to do good without recourse to deceptively elegant mental gymnastics, e.g. the kinds of “greater good” arguments used by utilitarians to justify subjugation. For Sherman, Tarrou is relevant to *State of Siege* in that Diego, *State of Siege*’s main protagonist, takes a stance short of Tarrou’s wholesale injunction against killing in the sense that Diego does not categorically reject violence. For Diego, non-violence only holds *prima facie*. This is important to virtue ethics because there are some instances in which killing is the ethically appropriate action. Tarrou’s ideological commitments prevent him from choosing to kill even when killing is the right action. This means that there will be situations in which Tarrou cannot but fail to behave in a way that is morally vicious according to the perspective of virtue ethics. Diego stops short of Tarrou’s injunction and therefore stops short of committing morally vicious acts by refusing to kill when killing is necessary. In this way, Diego represents an improvement on the character Tarrou, but in the end, Diego fails as an exemplar.

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64 Sherman, *Camus*, 132.
65 Ibid., 132-33.
66 Ibid., 133.
Women have a prominent role in *State of Siege* in the form of a chorus and in particular the character of Victoria. In Sherman’s account, Victoria represents progress in the conceptualization of happiness much as Diego represents a step forward from Tarrou’s commitments. In *The Plague* Rambert’s commitment to happiness is encouraged but never acted upon, so the account of happiness’ importance is lacking. Sherman claims that Victoria adds to the account by being the support Diego needs in order to continue his struggle against the Plague.\(^{67}\) Without a modicum of happiness, an agent has nothing from which to gain strength in order to make difficult virtuous decisions. This resonates with Tarrou’s rhetorical question in *The Plague*: “a man should fight for the victims, but, if he ceases caring for anything outside that, what’s the use of his fighting?”\(^{68}\)

Victoria criticizes her father, Judge Casado, because he uses his legal position as a means of giving vent to his hatred.\(^{69}\) Victoria says this results from the fact that Casado has “never loved anything.”\(^{70}\) The implication Sherman draws from this is that Casado does not have his modicum of happiness and therefore does not have the support that allows him to make ethical decisions. Casado does not care because he feels no reason to do so.

Sherman claims that Victoria “speaks for the concrete happiness that history has denied for the nominal sake of its realization.”\(^{71}\) This refers to the scene immediately preceding Diego’s death, where after Diego declares that he loved Victoria with his

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 134.  
\(^{68}\) Camus, *The Plague*, 226.  
\(^{70}\) Ibid.  
\(^{71}\) Sherman, *Camus*, 134.
“whole soul” Victoria responds, “You loved me with your soul, perhaps, but I wanted
more than that.” Following Diego’s death, the chorus of women says, “Curse on
[Diego]! Our curse on all who forsake our bodies.” Sherman thinks that Camus’ ethics
must be founded in an appreciation for the body: “ethical ideas that lose the body turn
against the very impulse that motivated them in the first place.”

However, if we treat State of Siege as Sherman treats The Plague and do a
color analysis of the play, we can identify more thematic commitments, which again
fail the symbolic characters. Take the character Diego, for example. Recall that,
according to Sherman’s reading, Diego is something of an amalgamation of two
colors from The Plague, Rieux and Tarrou: “Diego…sets himself to the job of
alleviating human suffering as best he can, and…not only ceaselessly reflects on both the
limits and requirements of honor but also plainly rejects ‘the old argument that to do
away with murder we must kill, and to prevent injustice we must do violence’ (CTOP, p.
231).” One would suspect that Diego, the character who manages to combine two of
three of the principle commitments from The Plague, would find better fortune in his
dealings. However, in the end, Diego is forced to give up his own life to save the life of
his lover, Victoria. Sherman claims that Victoria “represents the moment of
happiness,” which he takes to be a concretization of and improvement upon the original
commitment as exemplified by Rambert. Thus, the symbolic value of Diego’s sacrifice
implies that the commitments to understanding and the reduction of human suffering are

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72 Camus, State of Siege, 229.
73 Ibid.
74 Sherman, Camus, 134.
75 Ibid., 133.
76 Ibid.
incompatible with the commitment to happiness. Moreover, as Diego’s sacrifice results in the loss of Victoria’s happiness, her commitment fails, too. This is ironic in light of Sherman’s claims.

Even if we ignore these difficulties, Sherman still owes an account of why commitments to happiness, understanding, the reduction of human suffering, and if we consider Paneloux, faith, are virtues in the first place. To gain some perspective on what constitutes a virtue, it is helpful to look to Alasdair MacIntyre’s account in After Virtue. In Chapter 14, “The Nature of Virtues,” MacIntyre attempts to cull from the diverse history of virtue ethics a “unitary core concept of the virtues.” He says,

My account of the virtues proceeds through three stages: a first which concerns virtues as qualities necessary to achieve the goods internal to practices; a second which considers them as qualities contributing to the good of a whole life; and a third which relates them to the pursuit of a good for human beings the conception of which can only be elaborated and possessed within an ongoing social tradition.

Put briefly, virtues are bound to practice, and contribute to both the individual good and to a contextualized social good, according to MacIntyre. Some of Aristotle’s virtues, for example, are courage, self-control, friendliness, and truthfulness. It is easy to see how, say, self-control is a virtue in this sense. It contributes to the individual good by stopping the agent from overindulging, which in turn contributes to the social good by not wasting resources and by encouraging the appropriate social norms and interactions relevant to ancient Athens.

78 Ibid., 273.
In this context, it is hard to see how Sherman’s account of Camus’ “commitments” could amount to virtues in either the Aristotelian or MacIntyrean sense. Since all of the commitments fail to provide a good response to the plague, Camus cannot be claiming that they ought to be practiced. As mentioned in the previous chapter, for Aristotle, virtues are gained through inculcation. This would mean that Camus’ commitments ought to be inculcated into the youth of Europe. However, do any of these commitments benefit the individual or social good? They certainly do not in the context of *The Plague*, since no single commitment actually has an effect on the plague, protecting neither their patrons nor the society at large. It is unclear why such vague commitments should be traits to be inculcated, since they all fail. It is not clear that Camus has a virtue ethics to begin with, since none of the commitments appear to be virtues.

After his character analysis, Sherman attempts to justify why virtue ethics should be the best candidate for how Camus thinks about morality. First, he says, “to make sense of Camus’ emerging ethics, we must at least frame it in terms of [contemporary moral] theories.” Next, as I have shown in the last chapter, Sherman dismisses deontology in a footnote, and explains why Camus would not be a utilitarian. After ruling out the deontological and consequentialist accounts of ethics, Sherman’s choice of virtue ethics as a third and last option is more of a default move. He says, “anything like a thorough summary of contemporary moral theories is well beyond what can be

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80 Sherman, *Camus*, 128.
undertaken here, which is fair. However, apart from virtue ethics, Sherman only compares Camus to two other contemporary moral theories, each of which can be shown to be anti-Camusian with little effort. Sherman thinks that virtue ethics is already close to Camus, because Camus was a fan of “character,” as I have previously mentioned. However, just as virtues are at least marginally important to most ethicists, so is character. Consider the case of Immanuel Kant. In _The Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals_, Kant says,

> There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will. Intelligence, wit, judgment, and whatever talents of the mind one might want to name are doubtless in many respects good and desirable, as are such qualities of temperament as courage, resolution, perseverance. But they can also become extremely bad and harmful if the will, which in its special constitution is called character, is not good. (My emphasis)

For Kant, the good will, the only thing “which can be regarded as good without qualification,” is based in character. However, we do not call Kant a virtue ethicist. Why, then, call Camus a virtue ethicist? At least for Kant, the importance of character is explicit. With Camus, the importance of character is announced by an untrustworthy narrator in _The Fall_, and (perhaps) indirectly exhibited by characters from _The Plague_, none of whose character leads to anything resembling triumph over the plague. This section of Sherman’s argument flounders unless he can offer more evidence demonstrating the importance of character to Camus along with an explanation of why this relates him to virtue ethics more than to any other theory concerned with character.

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81 Ibid.
Assuming Sherman could convincingly argue that, for Camus, the commitments to faith, happiness, understanding, and the reduction of human suffering are virtues, and that character plays a role meaningfully similar to its role in virtue ethics, Sherman still has not shown that Camus has a virtue ethics. In other words, the fact that a philosopher talks about virtues and character at some point does not necessarily mean that the philosopher espouses a virtue ethics. The term “virtue ethics” carries a great deal of philosophical tradition with it. For example, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says,

> Although modern virtue ethics does not have to take the form known as “neo-Aristotelian,” almost any modern version still shows that its roots are in ancient Greek philosophy by the employment of three concepts derived from it. These are *arête* (excellence or virtue), *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom), and *eudaimonia* (usually translated as happiness or flourishing).\(^83\)

Sherman’s analysis falls far short of these criteria. At best, he argues that Camus has some concept of *arête*, with no reference to the other concepts. Realistically, if we call Camus a virtue ethicist just because his thought can be interpreted in such a way as to yield virtues, then we must apply the term to all other philosophers whose thoughts can be construed in such a fashion. The same goes for his account of character. This would include any philosophers who expressed a preference of one thing over another, which would seem to describe every philosopher.

**From Virtue Ethics to Phenomenological Ethics**

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Sherman’s account of Camus’ virtue ethics leaves something to be desired. Even if we allow that Camus has a virtue ethic, we must now turn away from his problem in the previous section, and ask if his move from virtue ethics to phenomenological ethics makes sense. As you will recall, Sherman breaks down virtue ethics into two constituent parts: (1) a community of shared values, and (2) individuals who have the ability to see events as moral, immoral, or amoral. In a very simple sense, then, virtue ethics minus shared values equals individuals with the ability to see events as moral. This makes sense. It seems that if we could pull an ancient Athenian out of his place and time, he would still see the event of someone smashing a baby’s head into the wall as immoral, without any shared values to go by. In Sherman’s words, “if you can look someone in the face and break their bones or smash an infant’s head against a wall, then you are a monster, and you are a monster regardless of the social framework.” Since, according to Sherman, such a reaction is naturally grounded in what it is to be a highly sentient biological being, it is reasonable that this knee-jerk moral appraisal would survive being removed from cultural and temporal context.

**Camus’ “Phenomenological Ethics”**

If we continue with Sherman’s line of reasoning, that Camus does in fact initially espouse a species of virtue ethics, then the move from virtue ethics to phenomenological ethics makes sense. That is, if virtue ethics is understood in terms of a community of shared values and individuals who can perceive given events as moral, then removing the

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84 Sherman, “RE: A question from a fellow Camus admirer.”
shared values leaves only individuals who can perceive events as moral. An important question is, does it make sense to call this ability to see perceive things as moral an *ethic*?

It seems that the bare ability to perceive events as moral or immoral does not constitute an “ethic.” Suppose empirical scientists observed that humans across the board, with the exception of sociopathic outliers, experience an event as immoral. I find it hard to believe that philosophers would call an empirical result like this an “ethic.” There is no difference between what Sherman call Camus’ “phenomenological ethic” and a psychological observation that says people experience certain events as immoral. If we would not call an empirical observation an ethic, then we should not call Sherman’s “bare seeing” an ethic, phenomenological or otherwise. As far as I can tell, the fact that humans perceive things as moral only stands to indicate that moral experience is possible. When I (hypothetically) experience the event of someone smashing a baby’s head into a wall as morally wrong, this tells me that I experience some events in a moral way. Since I have a moral experience, moral experience is possible. Based on my interactions with other people who claim or otherwise evidence that they experience the world in a moral way, together with the conclusion that moral experience is possible, I infer that these others in fact also experience the world in a moral way. I fail to see how the near universality of moral experience in and of itself constitutes an ethic. Psychology tells us that moral experience is approximately universal, but that does not mean that psychology therefore yields an ethic. If this is the case, then the philosophical observation that humans have moral experience should not yield an ethic, either.
In the philosophical tradition, there has been a more systematic approach to morality, more than merely “experiencing,” to constitute a ethic. Consider the definition of ethics given by The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy: “the philosophical study of morality. The word is also commonly used interchangeably with ‘morality’ to mean the subject matter of this study.”\(^{85}\) According to this definition, we can be charitable to Sherman’s word choice, saying that “phenomenological ethic” is an appropriate term insofar as it, to an extent, refers to “the subject matter of [the philosophical study of morality].” However, when Sherman says, as quoted earlier, “virtue ethics reduces to a phenomenological ethics,”\(^ {86}\) he makes no distinction between virtue ethics as a type of “philosophical study of morality” and phenomenological ethics as “the subject matter of this study.” In short, Sherman is passing over an important difference in meaning. Either Sherman is wrong to say that phenomenological ethics constitute ethics in the traditional sense, or he needs to make clear the distinction between virtue ethics and phenomenological ethics, where the former constitutes an ethic as traditionally defined and the latter clearly does not.

One important question that needs to be answered when discussing whether or not such-and-such philosophy constitutes an ethic is, “what constitutes an ethic, anyway”? To this end, the work of Robert Louden is very helpful. In the essay, “Virtue Ethics and Anti-Theory,”\(^ {87}\) Louden identifies twelve criteria that, at the time of his writing, late twentieth century analytic philosophers want a normative ethical theory to satisfy and

\(^{86}\) Sherman, Camus, 138.
then discusses whether virtue ethics is even an ethical theory based on these criteria. The criteria are: solve problems, test beliefs, formalism, explicitness, decision procedure, universality, objectivity, abstraction, systematic hierarchy, no moral dilemmas, an imagined best way of life, and moral expertise. Louden does an excellent job summarizing the criteria, and since my summarizing Louden’s summaries would amount to little more than restating them, his criteria and explanations are included in Appendix B.

Louden uses his criteria as a way of explaining how virtue ethics diverges from traditional ethical theory. For example, virtue ethics fails to solve problems, it fails at formalism and explicitness, and has no decision procedure, objectivity, or abstraction. Louden says that the approach of virtue ethics “necessarily rejects the more formalistic trappings of modern ethical theory… But rather than labeling this rejection a total dismissal of ethical theory, I think the evidence shows instead that it is part of a larger effort to return ethical theory to more realistic possibilities.”

Even though virtue ethics does not satisfy all the criteria wanted by the twentieth century analytic philosopher, it is unfair to disqualify virtue ethics as an ethical theory. According to Louden, it can test beliefs, it has systemic hierarchy (at least in classical virtue ethics), and offers one of the best examples of moral expertise. In addition, on Louden’s reading, virtue ethics marginally satisfies universality, no moral dilemmas, and an imagined best way of life. His point in showing the divergence of virtue ethics from traditional ethical theory is not to say that virtue ethics is not ethics per se, but, “we ought not to take this particular

88 Ibid., 110.
[twentieth century analytic] conception of what constitutes an ethical theory as our only option. In other words, the late twentieth century analytic conception of ethical theory is overly restrictive, as it would reject virtue ethics as not satisfying all of its criteria.

It seems, though, that an ethic should satisfy at least some criteria, perhaps those that Louden thinks virtue ethics at least marginally satisfies. When we hold Sherman’s phenomenological ethic up to those criteria, we see that it fails. An ethical theory should test beliefs: “a normative ethical theory is also intended to provide a test for agents’ moral beliefs—to demonstrate which of an agent’s already formed moral beliefs are correct... Additionally, an ethical theory should be able to systematize and extend agents’ moral beliefs.” If I want to test my belief that individual autonomy is valuable, I can appeal to Kant’s categorical imperative, which tells me quickly that autonomy is intrinsically valuable. Utilitarianism will tell me that individual autonomy is valuable because a society without autonomy would have a lower net utility. Louden says that virtue ethics tests beliefs when it “sets up the local spoudaios [good man, moral exemplar] as the norm of moral truth and then encourages the rest of us to imitate him.” What would phenomenological ethics say? Phenomenological ethics tells me that I experience individual autonomy as morally good—something I already know, because that is what I experience in the first place. However, other people disagree with this. Thinking of me and the perpetrators of, for example, the Guantánamo Bay crimes, phenomenological ethics tells both of us that our beliefs are the right beliefs to have,

89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., 95.
91 Ibid., 103.
because we experience our beliefs as the appropriate ones to have. The testing beliefs criterion, if it works for phenomenological ethics, amounts to not much more than the statement, “if you think it’s wrong, then it’s wrong.” There is no point to testing beliefs if that test simply reaffirms every single belief we have—phenomenological ethics offers no way to arbitrate between competing beliefs.

Consider the next of Louden’s criteria satisfied by virtue ethics, which is systemic hierarchy: “the rules and principles which together compose the ethical theory are viewed as a deductive system. The less general are derivable from the more general in a hierarchical fashion.” In the same way, all of the theorems of Euclidean geometry can be traced back to the original five axioms. According to Louden, virtue ethics in the Platonic tradition exhibits systemic hierarchy, since “justice is viewed as an ordering principle which establishes harmony between the parts of the soul as well as between the classes of the polis: when each part performs its own task, justice is present.” Virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition exhibits systemic hierarchy, according to Louden, given the prominence of practical wisdom: “According to Aristotle, a man can be neither morally good if he lacks practical wisdom, nor can he possess practical wisdom if he is not also morally good.” The “assumption that the virtues can and should be systematically organized,” according to Louden, is present in contemporary virtue ethics, also. Since there are no real rules in phenomenological ethics, it is hard to see how its rules could form a systemic hierarchy. One could suggest one rule, “if you think it’s

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92 Ibid., 97.
93 Ibid., 106.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
wrong, then it’s wrong,” could sit at the top of the hierarchy, beneath which sits all of the various judgments that one has observed phenomenologically, such as “it’s wrong to smash a baby’s head into a wall.” However, in this system, there would only be two levels of generality, and conceiving of phenomenological ethics in this way offers no descriptive power. There is no need for the rule “if you think it’s wrong, then it’s wrong” to stand at the top of the hierarchy because, according to Sherman’s account, all of our bare perceptions of good and bad have nothing to do with a rule that hangs over them and says, “yes, the situation is as you see it.” We have perceptions of good and bad and that is the end of it. There is no meaningful sense in which the “less general [rules] are derivable from the more general” any more than the painfulness of a pinprick is derived from the fact that “what I perceive as painful is painful.”

The last of Louden’s criteria that virtue ethics clearly satisfies is moral expertise: “some agents may be more adept at reaching correct moral answers than others.” Here, according to Louden, virtue ethics shines: “Aristotle’s conception of the *phronimos* [the man who possesses practical wisdom] is certainly that of a moral expert.” However, a conception of moral expertise is absent from Sherman’s account. What would it mean, in terms of phenomenological ethics, for one agent to be better at reaching correct moral answers than another? Since the sole basis of the moral worth of an act is whether the agent perceives the act as good or bad, we cannot talk about one person’s perception as better than another’s perception in the case of disagreement. As previously argued, phenomenological ethics offers no way to arbitrate between competing views. The only

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96 Ibid., 98.
97 Ibid., 109.
way I can think of to talk about moral expertise in terms of phenomenological ethics is as quickness of perception: one person might take an eighth of a second to perceive the moral worth of an act, while another person takes a quarter of a second. However, this does not mean much, since we are talking about bare perceptions of moral worth, which occur almost instantly with negligible time lag.

Consider the criteria that virtue ethics at least marginally satisfies according to Louden: universality, no moral dilemmas, and an imagined best way of life. A system of ethics that satisfies universality “is binding on all rational agents, regardless of their particular space/time locations.” An ethics is not universal if it says that stealing is acceptable in one culture but not in another. If phenomenological ethics were universal, that would mean that the bare perception of any specific type of act would always result in the same assessment of moral worth, regardless of who commits the crime, when they do it, or what the circumstance were surrounding the act. However, this does not square up with the actual phenomenological experience. When a rich person steals food, his act of theft seems much worse than the same act committed by a starving person. Various relationships and responsibilities attached to agents cause us to evaluate their actions differently. Consider an act of unprovoked physical aggression, e.g. a kick to the shin. When a toddler performs this act, I might not perceive it as “bad,” but I would when, say, a violence-counselor or police officer does it. Hence, phenomenological ethics fails at universality. On the issue of no moral dilemmas, Louden says, “an ethical theory is supposed to enable agents to resolve rationally not just some problems but all

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98 Ibid., 96.
problems.” If we consider that disagreeing agents disagree because of bare perceptions of good or bad, phenomenological ethics leaves us no resources for deciding between the two assessments. Thus, phenomenological ethics fails this criterion. Consider also that a single agent can be ambivalent regarding the moral worth of a given act. She might know that there is something moral to do with, say, the legalization of the use of drugs, but her bare perception might be such that she has no strong impulse one way or the other toward good or bad. If having no moral dilemmas is important to ethical theory, then phenomenological ethics misses out. Lastly, consider the criterion regarding an imagined best way of life. Louden says, “traditionally, people have expected ethical theory to offer a vision of how we should live.” However, phenomenological ethics can offer nothing beyond the person who follows faithfully her moral intuitions, and even then, there will be conflicting visions between two people who are equally flawless at following their moral intuitions but disagree in their intuitions regarding the same acts. Therefore, it seems that phenomenological ethics does not posit an imagined best way of life.

If we took the time to consider even those of Louden’s criteria that virtue ethics clearly fails, we would find that Sherman’s phenomenological ethics satisfies none of them. Certainly, Louden gives good reason to claim that the traditional, particularly twentieth century analytic conception of ethics is too restrictive, but even considering this claim, there is no reason to say “phenomenological ethics” even comes close to ethical theory. Sherman could respond that calling this “bare seeing” an ethic is warranted by the fact that it comes originally from a Camusean virtue ethics before losing the

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99 Ibid., 97.
100 Ibid.
community of shared values. If this is in fact what Sherman claims, which I doubt because he never says so, then the truth of the claim still rides on whether Camus has a virtue ethics to begin with. I have argued that Camus does not have such an ethics.

Supposing Camus does originally espouse a virtue ethics, as Sherman claims, then there must be something other than a community of shared values together with the near-universal ability to experience the world as morally charged that gives an ethics its “virtue ethics-ness.” Alternatively, if “bare seeing” is an ethics because it comes originally from a virtue ethics, then there has to be some piece of the puzzle that carries over residually after the loss of the community of shared values. I fail to see what this residuum is and where it would come from. It would be like claiming that since two and three makes five, then two alone still has some five-ness. In that case, all numbers have five-ness, since for every number \( x \), there is some number \( y \) such that \( x + y = 5 \). This is trivially true. The term “five-ness” has virtually no descriptive power for any particular number. It seems that by extension, this residual “virtue ethics-ness” is likewise a meaningless concept. Even if such a residuum does exist, Sherman makes no note of it.

**From Phenomenological Ethics to the New Virtue Ethics**

Since, according to Sherman, any virtue ethics in post-WWII Europe loses its grounding in shared values, it is important to establish some sort of cross-cultural value from which a new ethics can be constructed. He tries to show that Camus’ ethics is ahistorically grounded, although minimally so. Sherman says, “When asserting one’s rights, one cannot *ultimately* be making a claim on behalf of oneself alone; at some point in one’s chain of justification, even if only implicitly (as is generally the case), a
universal value is necessarily invoked... What ultimately gives every assertion of a right (irrespective of how particular it might seem to be) its normative oomph is its claim to universality."\textsuperscript{101} I find this claim suspect. Certainly, when Al, the slave, says to his master, “this is my limit—this is where I draw the line,” Al is asserting that he has a limit, and that therefore limits exist. However, when Al asserts his limit, he is only asserting the fact that there exist beings who have limits and that he happens to be one of them. His assertion does not logically entail that all beings like Al have limits. It could be the case that Al has limits, and that some other slaves have limits, but slaves Jim, Judy, and Tim do not. There is nothing about the assertion of one’s limits that means they necessarily apply to others universally.

Furthermore, simply saying “no” is not an assertion of “rights” in the classical sense of the term. When I say no to a cup of tea, I am not asserting my right to abstain from tea. I am saying, “no, I would prefer not to have tea.” Likewise, when Al says no to his master, he could very well just mean, “no, I would prefer no more lashes.” Sherman’s talk of “normative oomph” falls prey to a similar criticism. When I pass on my chance to have a cup of tea, I am not making a normative claim, and I do not need to make a normative claim in order to refuse it.\textsuperscript{102} I do not need to say that it is wrong to drink tea, or that people in general ought to be able to refuse tea. When Al says no to his abuser, he does not need to make a claim with “normative oomph.” Nothing from the act of refusal requires “normative oomph,” unless you are talking to someone who demands normativity and universality from your statements in order to oblige them, in which case,

\textsuperscript{101} Sherman, \textit{Camus}, 143.
\textsuperscript{102} The failed theory of emotivism notwithstanding.
Al can just lie and pretend to imply what his master is looking for. Similarly, if someone were to demand of me that my refusal of a cup of tea required “normative oomph,” I could just say, “OK, everyone ought to be able to refuse a cup of tea,” and not mean a word of what I said.

Sherman could respond, “there is nothing moral about drinking tea, so normativity is not at issue. When we consider something that is morally loaded, like torture, which under phenomenological ethics is always a ‘no,’ our refusal necessitates a normative claim.” This is unconvincing, because it just reasserts that “normative oomph” is required of the statement that refuses to endure something immoral. Sherman asserts that this is the case, but he does not argue for his position beyond this bare assertion.

**Camus’ New Virtue Ethics**

If Camus establishes that a community exists, the mere fact of a community’s existence does not establish that the members of the community have shared values. If it were possible to take, say, an ancient Spartan, a British moralist, a care-ethicist, and Hitler, and force them to live in a community, they would not have shared values by the mere fact of their community’s existence. They would not even need shared values in order to successfully interact and keep the community going, supposing they agreed on some means of distributing goods. True, they might all value the means of distribution. However, the different members of the community could value this because of different background values, such as the liberty-preserving nature of the means of distribution, or the fact that it might be the best way for them to exploit their neighbors. In addition, some people might not value the means of distribution at all. It could be the case that
they are forced to submit to it against their values. I do not particularly value capitalism, but I have to be a capitalist in order to live in the community of twenty-first century America. I have to imagine that single parents do not value having to work eighty-hour workweeks in order to feed their families.

Recall that Sherman thinks that Camus’ “I rebel—therefore, we exist” recreates a community of shared values. Even if the community does have shared values, why does this necessarily lead to virtue ethics? If the members of the community got together to talk about values and decided they liked Kant’s or John Stuart Mill’s way of dealing with values and moral sentiment, then why is it that the community could not choose to go the way of the deontologists or utilitarians, rather than the way of Aristotle and MacIntyre? I imagine that Sherman would argue, “If we start with virtue ethics, lose the community with shared values, and then somehow reestablish a new and different community with new and improved shared values, then it seems we have restored the virtue ethics.” Completely apart from the fact that this still depends on the existence of a Camusian virtue ethics to begin with, the idea that we can just insert some new type of community of shared values and still have a virtue ethics is like suggesting that if we rip the front end off of a Chevrolet Corvette, and we replace it with that of a Mack Truck, then we still have a Corvette. Sure, we might still have a car, but it is not the same thing. If we insist on understanding Camus’ views on solidarity in terms of ethical theories, it might be more profitable to explain his ideas in terms of discourse ethics, care ethics, the ethics of pragmatism, or other deontological or consequentialist ethics, like particularism or game theory. On the other hand, it could be profitable to read Camus as proposing a unique
way of thinking about good and bad that does not fall into what philosophers have traditionally called “ethics.”
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The Process

When I first started wondering if Camus had an ethics, it was in relation to his early thought on the absurd, particularly in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It made sense to me that Sisyphus could create value by thumbing his nose at the gods who put him in his place of solitary toil. The original issue was whether this scorn for the gods could solve the problems of solipsistic nihilism—in other words, Camus was working against the tendency to think, “There’s no point to any of this, so why should I do anything? Why should I take pleasure instead of pain and why not kill myself?” However, I realized that, at least once one got out of the solipsism of absurd existence, new questions arise, such as, “Why should we do anything? Why should we take pleasure over pain and why not kill each other?” To my mind, if Sisyphus had the ability to push his rock up the mountain while smiling, effectively ignoring or fighting against absurdity, it made sense that this ability, whatever it may be, might be extended to create collective value. I wondered if Sisyphus could, by himself, use his scorn to create collective value or if the members of the collectivity needed to act in unison. In the worst-case scenario, it could be impossible to create collective value. My inclination was that, at the very least, an individual could find value in collective activity, even if he was the only person among the collectivity to experience that value. It seemed odd that an individual could affirm
collective meaning for the whole of the community by himself, so I thought that, should a collective value be created, it would require the unified action of the community—a community of individual Sisyphuses happily pushing a gigantic boulder up the hill, thumbing their noses at the gods in concert.

After thinking about these issues for a few years while pursuing my undergraduate degree, I eventually started talking about these issues with the professor who had originally introduced me to Camus. He gave me a copy of *The Rebel*, which I use to this day. He told me that *The Rebel* represented Camus’ move from the individual to the community, which was exactly what I was hoping to glean from Camus’ project. Contrary to my intuition, I found out that Camus thinks that individual rebellion is always done on the basis of a community that naturally exists. Here are a few quotes from the beginning of *The Rebel*:

> If the individual, in fact, accepts death and happens to die as a consequence of his act of rebellion, he demonstrates by doing so that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a common good which he considers more important than his own destiny. If he prefers the risk of death to the negation of the rights that he defends, it is because he considers these rights more important than himself.\(^{103}\)

> It is for the sake of everyone in the world that the slave asserts himself when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something in him which does not belong to him alone, but which is common ground where all men—even the man who insults and oppresses him—have a natural community.\(^{104}\)

> [The rebel] demands respect for himself, of course, but only in so far as he identifies himself with a natural community.\(^{105}\)

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\(^{103}\) Camus, *The Rebel*, 15-16.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{105}\) Ibid.
The individual is not, in himself alone, the embodiment of the values he wishes to defend. It needs all humanity, at least, to comprise them. When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and so surpasses himself.106

This account was interesting, especially since it was my first introduction to a philosophical stance that tried deal with the problem of generating or discovering collective values in the face of an absurd universe. In The Rebel, Camus saw himself as working out the details of collective values founded on the basis of a natural community. This community, as mentioned earlier in my analysis of Sherman’s account, is what any slave appeals to in an act of rebellion: the rebel asserts himself on the basis of a human collectivity that preexists any act of rebellion. The act of rebellion itself is important for Camus because his analysis of the act of rebellion allows the existence of the natural community to come to the foreground for the first time. Once this analysis is complete, for Camus, the individual should see that his act of rebellion is not solitary but affirms the existence of a community, and that all of his demands for respect are based on the fact that everyone in that community deserves a basic level of respect.

Camus’ account in The Rebel is unsatisfactory for a few reasons. First, he does not seem to take seriously the implications of metaphysical absurdity. Any idea that links an individual action with a collective affirmation by necessity ignores the issue that, since the universe is absurd, claiming any “necessity,” even logical necessity, has no meaning or value. A second related issue regards Camus' affirmation of a human nature: “analysis of rebellion leads at least to the suspicion that, contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought, a human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed. Why rebel if there is nothing

106 Ibid., 17.
permanent in oneself worth preserving?” If we take metaphysical absurdity seriously, then we must admit that we have no way of affirming the objective existence of a human nature, even if it does exist. This could explain Camus’ use of the phrase “leads to the suspicion,” rather than “leads to the conclusion.”

However, Camus’ careful word choice here does little to cover the difficulties intrinsic to founding an absurdist philosophy on the existence of a human nature. His move here is more rhetorical than substantive. Further, his rhetorical question, “Why rebel if there is nothing permanent in oneself worth preserving?” does not get his project past metaphysical absurdity so much as it points to an issue that metaphysical absurdity raises for establishing collective or any value. This issue rises from the concern that, since there is no objective way to establish unity among human beings (via the existence of universally common characteristic, rights, etc.), there is no objective reason to affirm basic rights for the community. Thus, the rhetorical question does not point to the existence of a human nature but raises the question of how collective values can be established supposing that there is no human nature in the first place. Slips in judgment such as these led me to think that I would not find what I was looking for in *The Rebel*.

*The Plague* was, for me, a much more promising response to the challenges to ethics posed by metaphysical absurdity. In it, I saw people fighting together against an overwhelmingly absurd adversary. The plague came to Oran randomly, took victims randomly, was impossible to target with any action such as treatment, quarantine, or vaccination, and, when it finally left, did not seem to do so for any particular reason or

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107 Ibid., 16.
causal connection, exiting as capriciously as it had arrived and killed. Every character
had a particular approach to engaging with the plague and reacting to it, and no single
character’s mode of engagement seemed to be any more efficacious than any other
character’s. Despite the senselessness of the struggle against the plague and the fact that,
at moments, defeat seemed inevitable, the citizens of Oran did not stop fighting against it.

Take this exchange between Dr. Rieux and Tarrou:

    Tarrou nodded.
    “Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that’s all.”
    Rieux’s face darkened.
    “Yes, I know that. But it’s no reason for giving up the struggle.”
    “No reason, I agree… Only, I now can picture what this plague
    must mean for you.”
    “Yes. A never-ending defeat.”

The lesson I took from *The Plague* was that just because all human struggles are by
nature Sisyphean endeavors does not mean that we cannot work together against them,
even though we work together against sure defeat—our deaths. All that absurdity meant
in the context of *The Plague* was that there is no Reason (with a capital “R”) to choose
any one approach over another. In an absurd predicament that we have to share, it might
be enough to settle for whatever reasons we find sufficient to give meaning to our lives
and collective struggles here and now, even if those reasons and meanings cannot
withstand metaphysical absurdity. I was hoping Sherman could help me navigate this
Camusean maze.

    He did not. What irritated me most was that in Sherman’s book, Camus’ “ethic”
does not end at a phenomenological ethic as his abstract misleadingly implied, but rather,

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with the aid of *The Rebel*, it eventually turns back into some new sort of virtue ethics, on Sherman’s reading. Next, regarding the “bare seeing or perceiving” left over from virtue ethics once stripped of the community of shared values, I found it peculiar that Sherman would refer to this as an “ethic.” Granted, as mentioned earlier in reference to the definition found in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, the word “ethics” is sometimes used synonymously with “morality” to refer generally to “the subject matter of ethics.” However, I found nothing in Sherman to discriminate between virtue ethics, which clearly falls under “ethics” in the traditional sense of the philosophical study of morality, and this “phenomenological ethics,” which at best refers to raw experience, a tiny subset of “the subject matter of ethics.” If Sherman meant to make this discrimination, he should have said so. If, contrary to this, Sherman wanted to put “phenomenological ethics” under the same taxonomical scheme as virtue ethics, deontology, consequentialism, and so on, it appears that he would be wrong to do so. Consider again a statement from the email I quoted earlier: “If by phenomenology we are talking about getting back to the basic structure of experience itself, and if by a phenomenological ethics we [are] talking about getting back to the basic structure of ethical experience, then the term, in my view, is appropriate.”¹⁰⁹ My question that prompted this response was about the appropriateness of the phrase “phenomenological ethics.” When I first read this, my instinct was to interject that any belief in a “basic structure of ethical experience” should be eliminated by phenomenological bracketing. If we are supposed to bracket any conceptual schemes at the outset of phenomenological

¹⁰⁹ Sherman, “RE: A question from a fellow Camus admirer.”
inquiry, then we should bracket schemes that presuppose ethical experience in the first place. However, I am at this point convinced that Sherman did not mean to refer to ethics in the more robust sense, but rather, as moral intuitions.

Another big issue I took with Sherman was over characterizing Camus as a virtue ethicist. Rightly, I believe, Sherman constantly stresses that Camus is against any efforts toward systematization in the traditional vein of philosophy. This came up in our email conversation: “Camus is clearly not offering a systematic approach, which would be at odds with his general orientation.”¹¹⁰ I agree wholeheartedly with this assessment. However, if we want to call Camus a virtue ethicist and we agree that Camus is decidedly against systematic philosophy, we are left with the conclusion that virtue ethics is unsystematic. While this might have been the opinion of late twentieth century analytic philosophers, this is definitely not the case, as Louden’s essay, “Virtue Ethics and Anti-Theory,” has established. Thus, I conclude that Camus is not a virtue ethicist, because the approach of virtue ethics is too systematic to jive with Camus’ position. At any rate, it is fair to say that Camus’ thought is similar to virtue ethics because, for both, character plays an important role, but suggesting that Camus in fact is a virtue ethicist goes much further than I am comfortable going.

Before answering the question of whether Camus has an ethic, we must first return to the question posed earlier with reference to the work of Louden: “what constitutes an ethic, anyway?” On the one hand, Louden is right to complain that his contemporaries espoused far too strict a standard for what constitutes an ethical theory.

¹¹⁰ Sherman, “RE: A question from a fellow Camus admirer.”
On the other hand, it seems like there should be a standard of robustness for an ethical theory. We would not call just any value assertion an ethical theory because simply stating preferences is not theory building. In order to be a theory, there must be some rhyme or reason for why these preferences rather than others. Certainly, there must be a more balanced view of ethics between the extremely narrow twentieth century analytic one that Louden criticizes and a terribly broad one that characterizes any statement about good and bad as an ethic. There probably is no single definition that would capture most of the ideas we want to call an ethic without unfairly excluding others. However, I think that we can ask for some degree of robustness and completeness from what we would call an ethic. In my estimation, it is probably best to take an approach similar to Louden’s. If we can argue that we can cull something from Camus’ corpus that satisfies a few of Louden’s criteria marginally or completely, it would be reasonable to claim that Camus has an ethic. However, I am of the opinion that this cannot be done. In order to satisfy enough of Louden’s criteria, there would need to be some (at least minimally) systematic approach undergirding Camus’ project, at least enough to bring some unity to his thought and to be able to extract from his thought things like decision procedures, belief testing, problem solving, and so forth.

I am inclined to believe that Camus would have been opposed to such things. Consider the following often quoted interview excerpt: “I am not a philosopher. I don’t believe enough in reason to believe in a system. What interests me is knowing how one ought to conduct oneself. And more precisely, how to conduct oneself when one believes
neither in God nor in reason.”

Here, Camus evinces his anti-philosophical bent that makes me think he would have been against systematizing his thought for the sake of producing an ethic. He distrusts systematic thought, as I have discussed previously in this thesis in connection with Camus and with Sherman. Further, his notion of metaphysical absurdity renders any system groundless. While Camus does propose some personal values, e.g. a nod to revolutionary trade-unionism, he does not try to offer rational systematic justification for his preferences. Even so, if Camus is true to his conception of metaphysical absurdity, no justification such as this is possible. It appears that Camus’ goal is to provide a space for people to interact without recourse to rational systematization or appeals to divinities. It is unlikely that Camus would have thought that a robust ethic is necessary to accomplish this task, especially since he was decidedly against the sort of systematization we typically think is necessary for generating such an ethic.

As I said earlier, we would not call a result from empirical psychology that observes near-universal human moral inclinations an ethic. We would, however, admit that such a result would have implications for systems of ethics. For example, such an empirical result could be used to bolster claims about core-beliefs common to all humans. In the same way, it is completely reasonable to suggest that many of the things Camus contends have implications for systems of ethics. Perhaps most obvious among these implications, his criticism of systematization would suggest that any ethic that relies


\[^{111}\text{My translation. Originally, “Je ne suis pas un philosophe. Je ne crois pas assez à la raison pour croire à un système. Ce qui m’intéresse, c’est de savoir comment il faut se conduire. Et plus précisément comment on peut se conduire quand on ne croit ni en Dieu ni en la raison,” Albert Camus, “Interview A ‘Servir,’” in }\textit{Essais: Tome I}, 1427.\]

\[^{112}\text{Camus, }\textit{The Rebel}, 297.\]
heavily on systematization, such as Kant’s or Mill’s ethical theories, are probably too focused on rationality and not enough focused on the subtleties of human moral experience. Camus’ emphasis on character, discussed in this and the preceding chapter, gives us good reason to value virtue ethical theory above the various theories where character plays less of a role. This still does not mean that Camus is a virtue ethicist, but that the moral inclinations that led Camus to suggest the importance of character would likely make him appreciate virtue ethics more than consequentialism.

Another important topic to mention in this regard is the statement, “If there is no God, everything is permitted,” most famously attributed to Dostoevsky. In *The Rebel*, Camus says, “With this ‘everything is permitted’ the history of contemporary nihilism really begins… Nihilism is not only despair and negation but, above all, the desire to despair and to negate.” In this quote, we begin to see Camus’ real concern. The problem is not that there is no Truth (with a capital T,) but rather, that “nihilists” take the absence of truth to mean that evil acts are encouraged. For example, Camus characterizes Ivan Karamazov’s dilemma as, “to be virtuous and illogical, or logical and criminal,” meaning that, if everything is permitted, logic advocates malicious acts. Camus’ point comes out more clearly when talking about Nietzsche’s contribution:

The essence of [Nietzsche’s] discovery consists in saying that if the eternal law is not freedom, the absence of law is still less so. If nothing is true, if the world is without order, then nothing is forbidden; to prohibit an action, there must, in fact, be a standard of values and an aim. But, at the same time, nothing is authorized; there must also be values and aims in order to choose another course of action. Absolute domination by the law does not represent liberty, but no more does absolute anarchy…

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113 Ibid., 57-58.
114 Ibid., 58.
When it comes to the statement “everything is permitted,” Camus wants to point out the other side of the coin. If there is no God or Truth on which we can base our moral judgments, we cannot categorically reject a given action as objectively evil or wrong. On the other hand, there is no basis by which we can say a particular act is good, “authorized” or worth encouraging, in any objective sense. The point is that, if there is no God or Truth, the old conception of “permissibility” goes out the door. Contrary to Ivan Karamazov’s dilemma, it is not the case that logic advocates criminality, but rather that logic no longer can objectively dismiss or advocate any particular act. Outside of these contexts, “everything is permitted” appears three more times in The Rebel. Each time, Camus is criticizing Russian revolutionary movements that “[identify] history and absolute values.” Camus’ point in these sections is that these revolutionary movements were wrong to infer a right to destroy human lives from the absence of God and Truth. This is a great example of Camus saying meaningful things about ethics as a general field and in critique of various ethical theories.

While Camus does not offer his own ethical theory, there are many lessons to learn from him. There probably is no objective reason for solidarity outside our own human desire for it. The problem of metaphysical absurdity boils down to the fact that it makes no difference in the cosmic scheme of things if we are good or bad. However, it

115 Ibid., 71.
116 Ibid., 160, 163-64, and 173.
117 Ibid., 173.
might make a difference to us, in the here-and-now. Even though the world is cosmically absurd and there is no Meaning, we can have meaning between ourselves. In a notebook entry written at twenty-three years of age, we already see the intellectual and moral intuitions that made Camus great: “If someone told me to write a book on morality, it would have a hundred pages and ninety-nine would be blank. On the last page I should write: ‘I recognize only one duty, and that is to love.’” While the horror of the absurd is the realization that there is no difference in the cosmic scheme of things whether we do good or evil, that does not logically entail that we cannot choose to do what we perceive as good. Camus teaches us that even in the face of the absurd we can still choose to love each other. If we want, we can push our rocks up the mountain together. We don’t need an ethic to do so.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Hello Zac:

Phenomenology covers a variety of approaches, and if by terms such as “technically” and “specialist sense” you are (implicitly) holding up a theoretical apparatus such as Husserl’s as the model, then you are right: Camus is clearly not offering a systematic approach, which would be at odds with his general orientation. However, if by phenomenology we are talking about getting back to the basic structure of experience itself, and if by a phenomenological ethics we talking about getting back to the basic structure of ethical experience, then the term, in my view, is appropriate.

Now, what does “felt or “sensed” have to do with ethics. I think that Camus wants to argue that ethical experience is rooted in certain kinds of natural reactions. Indeed, recall that while Aristotle (like MacIntyre) emphasizes the importance of a good polis, his ethics, even more fundamentally, is biologically grounded (i.e., based on the kinds of beings that we are). If you can look someone in the face and break their bones or smash an infant’s head against a wall, then you are a monster, and you are a monster regardless of the social framework. Or, put differently, consider a sociopath: imaging clearly shows that their brains do not “light up” in the way that they should when confronted with moral questions, which suggests that ethical experience is, in some sense, off limits to them, even if they can be taught to conform their behaviors. Camus’s
concern, as I see it, is that a certain kind of “syllogistic reasoning” that he sees as endemic to the modern age has obscured these natural inclinations, which are a necessary part of ethical experience.

I hope this helps, and I am glad that you liked the book.

Sincerely,

David Sherman
Before examining the case for virtue ethics as an anti-theory, it is important to clarify the concept of “ethical theory” itself. What exactly do philosophers today mean when they invoke the term “ethical theory?” What are the defining characteristics of “ethical theory?” Ultimately, the ethical theory question leads one into even larger and darker territory: what is a “theory?” I shall not attempt to traverse such territory here, in part because most writers agree that there are certain basic differences between moral and scientific theories. Also, we should admit at the start that “ethical theory” itself is something of a contested concept: there exists no detailed, univocal definition of the term which is employed faithfully by all who profess to be ethical theorists. Still, certain key characteristics do crop up again and again when one surveys statements made by contemporary writers on the nature of ethical theory. What follows is merely an attempt to first highlight and then elaborate briefly on the most frequently mentioned properties of ethical theory as the term is currently used by practitioners in the field. Certainly not all ethical theorists would agree that each of the following properties constitutes a necessary part of what is meant by “ethical theory.” The most that can be hoped for is that most ethical theorists would accept most of the following characteristics as together constituting a definition of “ethical theory,” with some theorists choosing a slightly shorter list of defining characteristics, and others, perhaps, a slightly longer one.
(1) Solve Problems. A normative ethical theory is supposed to help agents decide what to do when they are faced with a moral problem. Modern ethical theorists typically assume that their theory construction efforts have practical import: agents who correctly apply their theories will be able to resolve moral quandaries. As R.B. Brandt states in the opening sentences of his Ethical Theory: “What is ethical theory about? Someone might propose as an answer: ‘Everyone knows what an ethical problem is; ethical theory must be about the solutions to such problems.’”

(2) Test Beliefs. A normative ethical theory is also intended to provide a test for agents’ moral beliefs -- to demonstrate which of an agent's already formed moral beliefs are correct and which are incorrect. Additionally, an ethical theory should be able to systematize and extend agents' moral beliefs. A body of beliefs is systematized once the various individual moral beliefs are made internally consistent with one another, and when their relationships to each other are understood. A body of beliefs is extended when it is applied to new moral issues concerning which the agent has not yet formed beliefs. Ethical theories thus provide a means of eliminating errors in one’s moral belief system and of justifying those moral beliefs which pass muster. Bernard Williams emphasizes this particular feature of ethical theory when he writes: “An ethical theory is a theoretical account of what ethical thought and practice are, which account either implies a general test for the correctness of basic ethical beliefs and principles or else implies that there cannot be such a test.”

(3) Formalism. Modern ethical theorists typically espouse a formalist model of rules and principles which are to be applied to individual cases. The correct decision is to
be deduced from the relevant rules and principles, much as a solution to a problem within a formal mathematical or logical system is reached.

(4) Explicitness. Closely related to the previous point is the criterion of explicitness. In order to have what most modern philosophers mean by an ethical theory, moral beliefs must be represented as explicitly statable rules and principles. In fact actual moral communities do not represent most of their values in such a rationalistic manner, but at the same time we can easily see how the requirement that moral beliefs be made explicit makes the work of theorists more manageable.

(5) Decision Procedure. Ethical theories are designed to solve moral problems rationally by providing agents with a step-by-step decision procedure. Theorists assume that agents who apply their decision procedures correctly will always reach correct answers. The steps to be taken can all be laid out discursively, thus eliminating guesswork, bias, subjectivism, and all other non-rational factors from moral deliberation.

(6) Universality. Most modern ethical theorists yearn for a system which is valid not just for one society or for one group of people but which is binding on all rational agents, regardless of their particular space/time locations. Alan Donagan emphasizes this particular feature when he defines “the theory of morality” as “a theory of a system of laws or precepts, binding upon all rational creatures as such, the content of which is ascertainable by human reason.”

(7) Objectivity. Ethical theories are not supposed to reflect merely the perspectives of one individual or one group of agents over others but rather to represent reasons for acting which make claims on all agents, regardless of their subjective preferences. Stephen
Darwall, a contemporary advocate for this doctrine, writes in the Introduction to his *Impartial Reason*: “this book seeks to vindicate the feeling of the moralists that considerations other than self-centered ones are reasons to act, indeed, that moral requirements, suitably understood, provide reasons for any agent that generally *override* those based on the agent’s own individual preferences. It maintains that practical reason is, at its base, *impartial* rather than self-centered.” The words “universality” and “objectivity” occasionally are used interchangeably by writers in ethics, but they can be distinguished in the following way. A moral rule is universal if all agents are obliged to follow it in the appropriate circumstances. It is objective if the reasons why all agents are to follow it are not contingent on any of their particular desires or perspectives.

(8) *Abstraction*. Closely related to the objectivity requirement is the feature of abstraction. Ethical theorists assume that *anyone* who employs their methods correctly will arrive at correct moral answers. Background features such as the agent’s character, community traditions, etc. are believed to be morally irrelevant, and are hence abstracted from.

(9) *Systematic Hierarchy*. The rules and principles which together compose the ethical theory are viewed as a deductive system. The less general are derivable from the moral general in hierarchical fashion, “with the king consideration at ease on the apex -- ... [a] one-principle system that incorporates all of the moral rules.” Bentham’s principle of utility and Kant’s categorical imperative both would be classical examples here; Gewirth’s principle of generic consistency is a contemporary illustration.
(10) No Moral Dilemmas. An ethical theory is supposed to enable agents to resolve rationally not just some problems but all problems. This is a particularly stern requirement to place on a theory, but it is also one that is clearly embedded in the dominant schools of modern ethical theory, as the contemporary debate on moral dilemmas demonstrates. Christopher Gowans, in the Introduction to his recent anthology, *Moral Dilemmas*, writes: “...with few exceptions, philosophers from Plato on have viewed moral dilemmas as mere appearances. This has certainly been the case in the two predominant traditions of modern moral philosophy -- Kantianism and utilitarianism. Both Kantians and utilitarians have thought that, for any apparent conflict, either one of the conflicting ought statements is not true or the two statements do not really enjoin incompatible actions.”

(11) An imagined best way of life. Traditionally, people have expected ethical theory to offer a vision of how we should live. Stuart Hampshire, in his *Morality and Conflict*, emphasizes this particular feature of moral theory when he writes: “All moral theories, which we would consider seriously, imply, when they do not explicitly state, a more or less precise conception of what virtues a man must have if he is to be praised in an unqualified way as a human being, and imply also an order of priority among these virtues; and they either imply or state a rather definite conception of the best way of life, and of several distinct dispositions and interests which this admired and sought after way of life will satisfy.” The requirement that ethical theories offer an imagined best way of life squares well with classical and medieval approaches such as Aristotle’s and Aquinas’, but it does not describe accurately modern liberal approaches which are
committed to the “priority of the right over the good.” In the latter case morality typically is conceived of as something which places constraints or limits on what one does, regardless of how one construes the good life. According to the modern liberal conception, morality’s function is primarily negative rather than positive. Since we are concerned here primarily with modern conceptions of ethical theory, inclusion of this particular characteristics on a list of necessary features of ethical theory is debatable. However, it clearly remains part of what some influential, contemporary writers in ethics mean by “ethical theory,” and it is also quite relevant to the virtue ethics debate. So I have chosen to include it.

(12) Moral Expertise. Finally, it would seem to follow from the earlier-described features of formalism, explicitness, and decision procedure that some agents may be more adept at reaching correct moral answers than others. Just as some people are better at solving problems in arithmetic or proving theorems in logic than others, so some should be able to solve moral problems more efficiently. Pincoffs writes: “There would be moral experts if the claims of ethical theory were true .... They would know what the formula is by with we determine the difference between right and wrong, and they would know how best to apply it to cases that arise.”

The above dozen-items list is by no means intended as the last word on what constitutes an ethical theory. It is intended primarily as an aid in deciding whether or not virtue ethics shares the same assumptions and goals as the leading forms of modern normative ethical theories. If, after considering the above conjunction of properties, the reader is inclined to protest that I am using an objectionably narrow sense of the term
“ethical theory,” and to insist that so-and-so is an ethical theorist, and she certainly does not hold that (e.g.) a decision procedure can solve every moral problem, this is perhaps not such a bad thing. For one of the essay's subplots, to be developed below, is that the dominant conception of ethical theory within modern philosophy is precisely that: too narrow.