



Undergraduate assignment feedback form (to be completed by marker)

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Module title: Phenomenology & Existentialism (HPPH6023)	Student number: 1604459
For completion by marker: Comments: Overall, this is a well written essay that presents a convincing argument as to why Camus can be considered an existentialist. The essay is well structured with clear signposts throughout. In places, claims could be analysed in more depth - this would develop your argument a little more & make it a bit more robust. Secondary reading is effectively incorporated, leading to a well considered conclusion - but I think the conclusion would be a bit stronger	
Marker's signature: <i>[Signature]</i>	Date: 26/11/19
Provisional mark: 70%	
NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.	

if closer consideration were given to your critical analysis on p. 4.

In what sense, if any, is Camus an existentialist?

This essay will provide an argument that is supportive of Albert Camus being an existentialist. I will firstly give a description of existentialism and where it originated from. In the second section I provide some exposition of how Camus can be considered an existentialist, drawing examples from his work The Outsider and The Myth of Sisyphus as support. In the third section I attempt to show that Camus is not an existentialist, which is the alignment that Camus himself believed. This attempt unabashedly leads to further support that Camus is an existentialist. Which is where I will conclude with this essay, by stating that Camus is unequivocally an existentialist.

Good intro.

Albert Camus was a French-Algerian novelist, who through political and social circles became friends with Jean-Paul Sartre, now a known existentialist philosopher. It is arguably due to this link that the label existentialist is applied to Camus as a result of his proximity to Sartre. I will argue however, that the label of existentialist is applied to Camus as a result of the themes his work deals with. Before I can answer whether Camus is an existentialist, I will briefly explain what existentialism is. The origins of Existentialism can be traced back to the work of 19th Century philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche¹, although it gained considerable traction around 1940 – 1950s through cultural experiences in France and Germany.² Existentialism concerns itself with the existence of human beings, with some emphasis on one's own freedom and authenticity.

Good attention to presentation.

Unlike other aspects of philosophy that focus on different features of the world, Existentialism grounds itself in the exploration of finding meaning and worth in human existence beyond physical make-up and moral standing. Every existentialist philosopher has their own theory of *raison d'être*.³ For Sartre, human existence is related to one's freedom, of which he proclaims that we are condemned to be free.⁴ For Camus, however, the meaning of human existence comes through a human's experience. He was influenced more so by Edmund Husserl's phenomenology than he was of Sartre's work on existentialism. This is shown throughout Camus' catalogue of fictional works. However, his label as an existentialist philosopher is attributed to three main works: *Caligula* (1939)⁵, *The Outsider* (1942)⁶ and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)⁷. It is in these fictional works that he discusses the nature of the Absurd.⁸ The Absurd is born of a confrontation between the rational mind questioning outside of itself and the inability to receive a succinct answer. In clearer terms, searching for meaning in existence where there, at least for Camus, there is none. It follows further, that the Absurd exists because of a human being's expectation of life amounting to something, the constant commitment to an action in hopes that at the end lies a reward.

NOT SURE what you mean here. clarity needed.

¹ Steve Crowell, 'Existentialism' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2015), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>> Section 1 'The Emergence of Existentialism as a Philosophical Problem'

² Crowell, *ibid*

³ Or reason for being

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, (Yale University Press: 2007)

⁵ Albert Camus, *Caligula*, ed. by Philip Thody, (London: Methuen Educational Ltd, 1973)

⁶ Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. by Sandra Smith, (London: Penguin, 2013)

⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005)

⁸ Camus, *ibid*, pp 4-5

The main characters in these literary works have been created by Camus as the Absurd heroes for different classifications. Meursault is the contemporary hero; Caligula is the historical hero and Sisyphus is the mythological hero.⁹ While these characters are not all identical, they are cut from the same cloth, they stand aside from the norm of society whilst perpetuating Camus' perception of the truth of humanity. The norm differs from this truth of humanity because human beings naturally reject it, upon the first encounter of the Absurd, because they do not understand it. Sartre in his critical essay *An Explication of The Stranger*, writes in defence of this 'and we ourselves, who, on opening the book are not yet familiar with the feeling of the absurd, vainly try to judge him according to our usual standards. For us, too, he is a stranger.'¹⁰ Sartre is referring to the character of Meursault here, but I pose that further this statement alludes to the reader's interpretation of Camus and the inevitable misunderstanding that appears upon analysing a fictional novel under the scrutiny of a philosophical lens.

Further explanation is needed in order to clarify the concept of the Absurd. Whilst the Absurd is born from one's futile expectations, when one encounters the Absurd it appears that life succumbs to having no meaning. This is a false supposition, realisation of the Absurd leads to three choices: suicide, a leap of faith or recognition and acceptance. Camus argues that the only true action is to recognise it and accept it. And I agree with this, only through acceptance of the Absurd can we gain liberation from false hope which in turn allows freedom to live life. Sartre in his explication of The Outsider confirms this and writes that 'the absurd man will not commit suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty... He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him.'¹¹

From here on, I will use the text of *The Outsider* with support from *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The Outsider is told from a first-person narrative by the main character Meursault and split into two parts: Part One which consists of the events that lead to Meursault shooting and killing an Arab, and Part Two which consists of the events that occur after the shooting: his incarceration, trial and being sentenced to death. Most of the existential anguish is found in Part Two, where Meursault attempts to make sense of his impending and inescapable end. However, in Part One, the reader is subjected to a creating a description of Meursault that secludes him in a bubble outside of the norm. Meursault's account of the events is succinctly laid out by Camus, in an intentional literary subjugation of the reader. This will be pivotal as the story progresses, as we the reader unintentionally parallel Meursault's journey to acquire meaning, which both arrive at the same point¹². There is potentiality for divergence upon the reader's confrontation with the Absurd in Part Two. I will gloss over the events that occur in Part One and move now to an explanation of existentialism that is found in Part Two.

Gr. { Starting with the revelation that the prosecution has uncovered in their investigation damning information about his personal life with regards to his mother's death.¹³ This is one of the evidences that assist in Meursault's conviction and it is an important literary point for the reader. Meursault's lawyer questions him regarding his emotional state on the day of the funeral, as if to prompt Meursault into confessing that his manhood was the only logical reason Meursault did not openly

⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Camus*, (Great Britain: WM Collins & Sons, 1974), Section V, page 27

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'An Explication of The Stranger' in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Germaine Brée (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1962), p111

¹¹ Sartre, *ibid*, pp 110-111

¹² Sartre, *ibid*, p111

¹³ Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. by Sandra Smith, (London: Penguin, 2013), p58

show emotion. However, Meursault answers truthfully and says 'no, because it isn't true.'¹⁴ His lawyer's reaction to his answer is the first instance in the literature that confirms to the reader what may have already been thought was the case, that Meursault is different to other people in society.¹⁵ From this encounter, Meursault interacts with more characters that add to this narrative of him being the outsider. On page 61, the presiding judge in his trial meets with Meursault and begins to question his faith in God and demands of Meursault to believe in God lest he negate the magistrate's meaning in life. (S)

'He told me that it was impossible, that everyone believed in God, even those that turned away from Him. This was his firm belief and if he ever had cause to doubt it, his life would have no meaning. 'Do you want my life to have no meaning?' he shouted.'¹⁶

A more in-depth reading of this passage symbolises that Camus' offering of a leap of faith in order to avoid the Absurd is a viable and popular option to take. Another time when a leap of faith is used to avoid the Absurd is found with Camus' encounter with the Chaplain¹⁷, this is the crucial part of the novel, as even in the few pages preceding this encounter Meursault has not fully accepted his fate and is still trying to circumvent his death.¹⁸ The Chaplain in his inability to accept the Absurd tries to keep Meursault hooked in the same worldview as him, he repeatedly attempts to deny Meursault his metaphysical freedom in a futile attempt to secure his physical freedom from death. The magistrate and the chaplain are the only characters that attempt to deny Meursault the Absurd only to push him closer to accepting it. It is in Meursault's exasperated berating of the Chaplain, where he has the lightbulb realisation that life has no meaning that can be achieved outside of ourselves. 'I may look as if I had nothing, but I was sure of my myself, sure of everything, sure of my life, sure of my impending death.'¹⁹ Meursault's acceptance of the Absurd brings with it a predisposed clarity and for the first time in the book, a genuine positive emotion. Up until this point, Meursault is portrayed emotionally ambivalent and almost disinterested at what surrounds him. Never is there a point where he is not portrayed as an outsider, however this new realisation ascends him to a different category of detachment from society. This realisation that life is absurd comes to him on the dawn of his execution, suggesting that it is death that causes the absurdity of life. Despite this Camus does not argue this and I will show using The Myth of Sisyphus that it is life itself, that is absurd.

Could you relate explicitly to essay task!
Good.

The Myth of Sisyphus was Camus' first offering of a philosophical novel, written shortly after The Outsider. Camus opens the book immediately by stating that 'there is just one truly philosophical problem and that is suicide.'²⁰ I find that a bold statement for to have been made, let alone by someone, whom persistently rejected the label of philosopher, to have made. He further contends that his intention with this essay, which regards the relationship between suicide and the Absurd, is to seek 'the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd'.²¹ Camus concludes that suicide is not a solution for the absurd. To exemplify this, he uses the Greek myth of Sisyphus as an example of how one can achieve the solution. Sisyphus is a Greek mythological character that is, for disputed reasons, condemned by the gods to forever push a boulder up a mountain, only for it to fall

¹⁴ Camus, *ibid*, p59

¹⁵ Camus, *ibid*, p59

¹⁶ Camus, *ibid*, p62

¹⁷ Camus, *ibid*, pp105-110

¹⁸ Camus, *ibid*, p103

¹⁹ Camus, *ibid*, p109

²⁰ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), p1

²¹ Camus, *ibid*, p5

Topics

to the bottom when it reaches the top. Camus suggests that the natural humanistic reaction is one of exasperation and futility²², and I agree, Sisyphus after all was originally a mortal man, it seems logical that his reaction to his eternal punishment would be of exasperation and denial of his situation.

The condemnation of Sisyphus to spend eternity pushing a boulder up a mountain leads one to a logical conclusion of absurdity. It seems ridiculous that anyone should be subjected to a life of futility, and it is, but human beings are parallel to Sisyphus, and are also condemned to a life of futility, whether they acknowledge their fate or not. Sisyphus, however, does not turn away from his fate, he accepts that his task is to push the boulder up the mountain and follow it back down whence it falls, to push it back up the mountain, ad infinitum. To quote Camus himself 'One must imagine Sisyphus happy'²³, and by this I take it to mean that not only is Sisyphus aware of the futility of spending eternity pushing the rock up the hill, but that he accepts it is his fate and further that he has no issue with it. By doing so, he has made peace with the existence of the Absurd. This grants Sisyphus freedom and happiness. ✓

He is an existentialist through the themes he explores in his books that relate to human life. The futility of life in The Myth of Sisyphus, the defiance of Meursault to not conform to society's expectations. These works dive into the depths of existentialism and rise to the top exposing Camus as an existentialist.

Following the previous section of support for Camus as an existentialist, it seems to me, an impossibility to deny him that title. However, he denied the label of existentialist, and even wrote The Myth of Sisyphus as a counter to existentialism as a theory²⁴. He begins at the same starting point as other recognised existentialists, in that he is questioning the nature of human existence. It is in his conclusion where it differs, and for Camus, this is supportive of why he is not an existentialist. It is not his intention to look outside of the human capabilities for an answer to the question he is posing. Indeed, he stumbles upon the Absurd necessarily through trying to find an answer that does not exist. A self-fulfilling prophecy almost, that will constantly lead to the same conclusion, regardless of how many times or different ways he may try to find an answer. I feel that this is supportive of his view as an anti-existentialist, as instead of trying to find a way around the Absurd to find an answer that will solve his problem, he accepts that the Absurd is the answer. He defends this position by addressing where the existentialists are going wrong with their pursuit of meaning, which is their desire to look outside of themselves for an answer. He says 'I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning...'²⁵. Camus also accepts that it is not possible to locate knowledge outside of the capabilities in which one, or humankind, is able to comprehend 'what can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms.'²⁶ This distinguishing argument is probably the best support that Camus has for not being an existentialist. But it is futile, because while his acceptance of the Absurd differentiates his path from other existentialists, it still fulfils existentialism, as it produces discourse with regards to human existence and meaning. Perhaps Camus' intentions were to take his philosophical thinking beyond existentialism and onto something else, however I do not find this

²² Camus, *ibid*, p117

²³ Camus, *ibid*, p119

²⁴ Ronald Aronson, 'Albert Camus' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2017)

²⁵ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/camus/#CriExi> Section 3.3 'Criticism of Existentialists'

²⁶ Camus, *ibid*, p49

²⁶ Camus, *ibid*, p49

seems a bit disjointed here.

Is this a quotation? or not why is it indented?

Could you say make here as this could be crucial?

But is this what existentialists are trying to do? Your claim depends on an answer in the affirmative

Will you critique this? subjective stating point of existentialists - relevant here.

clearly addressed in his writing. Furthermore, his resolving statement is that life is absurd, and this emanates throughout his work, or at least this cycle of Absurdity²⁷. I believe that the Absurd is an existentialist theory rather than one of phenomenology. It is ironic that The Myth of Sisyphus was intended to argue against existentialism when it provides an undeniable strong defence of it. ✓

In my attempts to answer the question of ^{whether} Camus being an existentialist, I have found no other answer than yes. I muse here that whilst he rejects the label and attempts to attack other existentialists for the differences in conclusions, that he is mistaken in what the subject matter he is writing about, for example, the Absurd, suggests. His work necessarily fulfils the criteria of existentialism in ways I am not sure that Camus was aware of. His literary nuances when scrutinised in philosophical terms fall to this, and perhaps Camus was just not completely aware that philosophy could be found through works of literature such as The Outsider. I claim this as his attempt at a philosophical novel was so distinguished and set out in terms of philosophical exploration. Undoubtedly, for me, Albert Camus must be recognised as an existentialist philosopher.

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well presented
bibliography

²⁷ The cycle of Absurdity refers to the three works he produced with the intention of highlighting the Absurd, Caligula, The Outsider and The Myth of Sisyphus.

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