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# UNIT 4 ATHEISTIC EXISTENTIALISTS

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## Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Jean Paul Sartre
- 4.3 Albert Camus
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Key Words
- 4.6 Further Readings and References
- 4.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The main objective of this Unit is to present another group of existentialists who developed their philosophy in which God did not have any place. It is not that God did not find a place in their philosophy, but God could not have found any, as their philosophy did not give any opening to the Transcendent.

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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The short General Introduction given at the beginning of the Unit on ‘Theistic Existentialists,’ is equally valid for this Unit to situate Sartre and Camus, the two atheistic existentialists we are considering. The first atheistic existentialist we consider is Jean Paul Sartre, with whom contemporary atheism is almost identified. His philosophy is centred on the exaltation of human existence. Camus’ philosophy got developed from his concrete experience of injustice; and he gave expression to it in two ways: a violent expression (Camus-I) and a moderate expression (Camus-II). Although, for the believing people with a positive frame of mind, their philosophy may appear to be negatively exaggerated, it is quite useful that the students are introduced to it, so that they can purify and develop their philosophy of life.

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## 4.2 JEAN PAUL SARTRE (1905-1980)

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### Introducing Sartre

“God is impossible; reality is absurd; man is absolutely free; he makes his morals and destiny; he lives in anguish and despair; hell is other people; man is a useless passion; death is the end of his absurd existence; ...” These few sentences sum up and point to the philosophy of Sartre, one of the most popular of contemporary philosophers. He became popular due mainly to two reasons: the content of his philosophy and the mode of communication. The content of his thought was quite appealing to the people at that period of history—a time of the struggles of wars and the after-effects of wars, a time of people of under oppression of colonization

challenging the colonizers, a time of the cold-war dividing the world into two socio-economic systems, a time when people began asking questions about the meaning of their existence. Such a juncture of history was the ripe time for his leftist-leaning, negative-centred and atheistic philosophy to be sold out. Besides, Sartre put forward his thought the popular means of novels and plays, as a result of which his philosophy was easily accessible and available even to people of academically and economically lower standing. His philosophy had a good market in the independent India with a newly awakened hatred towards all structure of exploitation and injustice.

Jean Paul Sartre was born in 1905 in Paris; his father died when he was only two years old. His mother married a second time, when he was eleven years old and hence he was brought up in his uncle's house. His life was a bundle of bitter experiences; he became unsociable and lonely and he spent much of his time in libraries and cafes. "Cafe," he says, "has an immense advantage of indifference." He rejected all honours, including the 'Nobel Prize' for literature, as he did not want to be tied down to any institution. Some of his important works are: *Being and Nothingness*, *Nausea*, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, *Existentialism and Humanism*, *Troubled Sleep*, etc.

### Analysis of Being

Sartre distinguished reality into two opposing modes: Being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*) and Being-for-itself (*être-pour-soi*). The object of consciousness which is non-conscious is called 'Being-in-itself. It is always material. All that we can say about it is this: it is there; opaque, compact density; without aspiration, hope or fear, meaning or relation. It is uncreated; it is there without any reason for its being; it is superfluous, unjustifiable, contingent and absurd. Such an absurd being-in-itself generates in us a disgust, a nausea. The existence as unmasked in being-in-itself, and revealed in its terrifying obscene nudity is absurdity—there is no necessary reason for it to be with this particular 'suchness,' it just happened to be! It is superfluous. The superfluity of the in-itself is found true also of myself, the conscious being. There is no reason for me to exist either. Even doing away with my life would be superfluous as well. Thus existence for Sartre is nauseating, absurd and contingent.

Reality is not exhausted by the compact material things, there is also 'consciousness', through which there exist similarity, meaning, difference, etc. The 'sea' gets different meanings according to the consciousness that encounters it: for the swimmers, a place of adventure; for the fishermen, a source of livelihood; for the artists and poets, a source of inspiration; etc. Consciousness is being-for-itself. It is vacuous, and is characterized by potency and incompleteness. It is based on the 'in-itself' which alone is *being* in the proper sense. The 'for-itself' is nothingness. It is through the conscious being or man that 'nothingness' enters into the world. A piece of chalk is complete in itself, but man finds it as incomplete or half; an arch is found to be an incomplete circle. Consciousness finds absence, incompleteness and lacks. My being conscious of my watch goes with my consciousness of its not being my pen. The source nothingness must itself be nothing. Sartre shows that nothingness exists, just as gap, silence, hole, darkness, none, etc. Man is the oppositional unity of the in-itself and the for-itself, body and consciousness; man is the struggle to bridge them, which is bound to fail.

## The Destroying Presence of the Other

As I observe the in-itself entities, I become aware of other people observing me. Awareness of myself as acting (subject) goes with the awareness of myself as being acted upon (object). There is nothing more remarkable in Sartre's philosophy than his phenomenological analysis of the other as staring. Sartre clarifies it with an example. Suppose, I am peeping and eavesdropping through the key-hole of another's room. Then I realize that someone else is observing me. This awareness 'nails me to the spot'; I am petrified and immobilized in the act. I *become ashamed*. Shame is the recognition that I am as the other sees me. To be ashamed is to be aware of the presence of someone else. It is at the expense of my subjectivity that the existence of the other is revealed. In the stare of the other—which is always hateful—I am reduced to an 'object'; the other is revealed as the one who hatefully stares at me. My freedom is frozen under his stare. To regain my subjectivity, I try to reduce the other to an object by my stare. Thus each one is trying to enslave the other; the result is the inevitable conflict. If a third person looks at 'us in conflict', *we* become objectified for the third person, and 'we' become ashamed. To love another means to hate the common enemy. Love, for Sartre, is an impossibility. Out of the futile effort to love is born hatred which annihilates the freedom of the other in mortal combat.

## Human Condemned to Freedom

The essence of man is consciousness or nothingness. To fill in this emptiness, man makes free choices. Man is necessarily free; the only necessity of man is his freedom. He is absolutely free: he is so free that he is not free not to be free. According to Sartre, freedom is a curse, a horrible yoke, a condemnation. The terrible responsibility attached to freedom fills man with anguish. "I am responsible for everything, and I am condemned to be so. I find myself alone with my heavy responsibility, from which I cannot get out, nor can I throw it onto someone else. Anguish is the awareness that everything is upto me. To evade from this responsibility of freedom man devices 'bad\_faith'—pretending to oneself and to others that one is bound or obliged to act in a particular way, namely, by duty, law, or temperament. In bad faith, unlike in lying, truth is hidden even from oneself. Even sincerity can be a form of bad faith.

## Impossibility of God and of Moral Values

Sartre is the most ardent atheist in existentialism. He gives several proofs for the impossibility of God. (1) The existence of a God will make man dependent on God. But man is absolutely free. Hence there cannot be a God. (2) If there is a God, he will be the other, who will be reducing me to an object. I will not be able to stare back because of his transcendence. For man to be perpetually unfree is impossible. Hence there cannot be a God, (3) If there is a God, he has to be the fullness of being (in-itself) and consciousness (for-itself). It is an impossibility to identify being and nothingness. Hence God is an impossibility. According to Sartre, God is not merely dead, but there cannot be a God. Man and God cannot co-exist. Just as there cannot be a God because of man's freedom, so also there cannot be a system of moral values. Man creates values in his freedom. Every act is concrete, and it is performed in a definite situation. Hence there cannot be any pre-set moral principles. The only sin that man can commit is to act in bad faith, deceiving oneself with the *ought* of eternal values, or with the hope of a reward or fear of punishment.

### Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) How has Sartre analyzed Being or reality?

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2) Dwell on Sartre's conception of the other.

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3) Delineate Sartre's Understanding of freedom and its implications.

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## 4.3 ALBERT CAMUS (1913-60)

### Introducing Camus

Albert Camus was born in 1913 in Algeria; his father died in the war, when Albert was only one year old. He experienced extreme poverty during the childhood. He was a great lover of nature, which is evidently present in his writings. Together with poverty he experienced illness as well (Tuberculosis); during world war II, he worked with resistance group. In 1957 he received nobel prize for literature. In 1960 died in a car accident. His main works are: *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Stranger*, *The Rebel*, *The Plague*, etc.

The North African background of Camus must have had a role to play in his "Neo-paganism and love for nature." There is in every Algerian, an earthly naïvité by which he lives the present life to the full – the sensual empirical life world. Camus is critical of the European approach—an attitude that is more "future oriented". They, says Camus, turn their back to the concreteness of the here and now, and turn to the delusion of power; they reject the misery of the slums in preference to the mirage of an eternal city, ordinary justice for a promised land. Hence he refuses to repudiate the pleasures, joys and beauties of the world.

### Absurdity and Rebellion: Camus-I

The theme of absurdity is as old as the book of *Ecclesiastes*, but Camus has expressed it so accurately as the mood of his time. The setting was ideal, and he

epitomized the prevalent climate of France under German occupation. He does not equate absurdity with meaninglessness, as life has still some meaning, though absurd.

### Contributing Factors

There are many contributing factors for his development of absurdity in the world. Man seeks reasons and explanations, but he is frustrated as no explanation is forthcoming. The following are presented as the contributing factors for this frustration.

(1) *Science*: Despite its dogmatic claims, science ends in hypothesis, and thus inadequate. Science has made the world and reality a bundle of atoms. When he looks for understanding and clarity, he finds irrationality and opacity of the world. (2) *Monotony of life*: Life goes on in an orderly and systematic way: the daily time-table, the weekly programme, the monthly schedule, the yearly plans... all these go on in an uninterrupted way. They suddenly become monotonous, when we become conscious of it. The 'awakening' of the humans gives use to 'monotony'. (3) *Time*: Man suddenly becomes aware that time is his worst enemy. We are being carried by time, and suddenly it destroys us, as it takes us to the "no further." This too begets absurdity. (4) *World*: The darkness, opacity and hostility of the world, which mostly remain dormant, suddenly show themselves; and the humans are thrown into absurdity. (5) *Inhumanity*: Camus says: "men too secrete the 'inhuman'. We perform meaningless actions, and utter formal words; but they remain purely external show, without any inner basis of conviction. When we pause and look, we find the 'absurdity of it. (6) *Death*: The inevitability of death puts an end to all of man's plans and ambitions. The futility of man's life comes to the forefront, and we are thrown into absurdity.

### Absurdity and the Responses to it

The world is neither rational nor absurd in itself; only in relation to human consciousness (awareness) it becomes absurd. The *absurd* is born of the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world to give reason. The absurd is neither exclusively in the humans nor in the world, but in their confrontation. This confrontation can be between one's intentions and the given possibilities, between an action and the world not in accord with that action.

*The Myth of Sisyphus* quite dramatically presents the absurd hero. Based on this, absurdity can be explained as the "awareness of oneself as condemned to tragic purposelessness." Sisyphus was the personification of it as he had, without purpose, to roll the huge stone up the hill to allow it to roll down. Sisyphus was punished for disobeying the gods by refusing to return to the underworld. He was forcibly taken to the underworld where the stone was awaiting him. His scorn of gods, hatred of death, passion for life, brought about this punishment. There is happiness in him in his refusal to give in, in his resentful stubbornness to remain in this struggle. In his *The Stranger* Camus presents 'indifference' to everything as the meaning of absurdity. The world is indifferent to the humans, and the humans are indifferent to everything in his life and death.

**Responses to Absurdity:** One of the common responses to absurdity is that of escaping from it either by physical suicide or by philosophical suicide. Physical

suicide is the voluntary termination of life. Philosophical suicide is a taking refuge in faith and religion to escape the absurd. According to Camus, neither physical suicide nor hope (philosophical suicide) is the authentic response to absurdity. Suicide is a cowardly act, by which absurdity is destroyed. It is not an expression of revolt. These are 'facile solutions' in the face of absurdity. Both physical and philosophical suicide lacks a fundamental honesty, since they represent a refusal to face the situation of absurdity. It is a cowardly compromise.

After rejecting physical and philosophical suicide as a way out, Camus opts to face the absurd squarely by constant confrontation. Man has to engage in an ongoing struggle, although he knows that he can never win the struggle. It is a confrontation between man and his own absurdity. The sight of such a struggle is an example of human pride in action. There is Majesty in this relentless struggle. According to Camus, "it is essential to die un-reconciled". His 'absurd man' can be said to be without hope only in terms of the two human dreams of eternity and total understanding.

Man's revolt against the absurd results in a new freedom. He begins to experience genuine freedom. There are no restraints in his actions. This freedom is owing to his having no future and no superior being. He is his own master. The truly liberated man is completely indifferent to the future, and thus rejects all scales of values. That is, he rejects the 'ethics of quality' and accepts an 'ethics of quantity'. What is important for the 'absurd man' is not the 'best' way of living, but the 'most' living. He strives to live more, and not better. Every action is of equal value. Man can live with the 'irresponsibility of the condemned criminal,' who has nothing to lose.

### **Moderation and Reconciliation: Camus-II**

After the World War II, Camus began to show signs of moderation from his philosophical extremity. The Myth of Sisyphus conclusions were in agreement with Hitler's atrocities. Camus became convinced of a change, since the Nazi atrocities were the logical outcome of an 'ethics of quantity' that admits of no distinction between right and wrong. In his letters to a German friend he openly confessed his inability to continue his Sisyphus thought-pattern. Camus opts for some sort of values in life and limit in freedom.

In the later works of Camus, he gradually expressed his changed thought. In his *The Plague* (1947) Camus argues that we must extend a helping hand to our brothers in combating the 'plague' of the irrational absurdity. But it falls short of the Judeo-Christian attitude to suffering. In the common struggle against the oppressive plague, men have discovered their solidarity. And with this, they have learned meaning of compassion. Man has an obligation to keep the human solidarity alive. But in spite of man's solidarity and love for each other, there is still a collective impotence, i.e., despite his fight against the absurd, man's ultimate end is defeat and death. Thus no victory over the absurd is possible. Still Camus has now opted for an 'ethics of quality'.

In his *The Rebel* (1951) Camus makes the penetrating analysis of 'rebellion'. He takes the rejection of suicide as the foundational principle in this work; man has decided to live since our personal existence has some value. Camus distinguishes between metaphysical and historical rebellion. Metaphysical rebellion denies absolute freedom, and acknowledges existence with some limits. When the slave

says ‘no’ to his master, he means to say ‘up to now “yes” but ‘beyond it, “no”’. He chooses to fight for justice rather than for his own life. It is not an interchange of roles, rather an affirmation of the value of humanity, a value shared by others as well. Revolt is based on a belief in a common human dignity. Camus also looks at the way some of the historical figures, under the guise of defense of human rights became notorious oppressors of humanity. All dreamers of utopians have ended in failure, as they lost sight of ‘limit’ (*mesure*).

In his last two works, *The Fall* (1956) and *Exile and Kingdom*, Camus enters into a state of repentance. Man is presented not as the ‘innocent rebel’ but as ‘the guilty other’. He cannot live with his conscience. He looks for a judge who will condemn him and then pardon him, but there is neither condemnation nor pardon in sight. “Who would dare condemn me in a world without judge, where no one is innocent?”

### Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is Camus’ understanding of ‘absurdity’?

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2) Clarify the authentic and inauthentic responses to absurdity.

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3) Dwell on Camus’ Phase of ‘Moderation and Reconciliation’.

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## 4.4 LET US SUM UP

Sartre takes man to the heights of absolute freedom, and drops down to utter meaninglessness. I march forward in triumph alone to my own future; but death puts a halt to my triumphant march. Sartre cries out in good faith: “It is meaningless that we are born; it is meaningless that we die.” It is to his credit that Sartre has brought to the open the naked, dark, and hidden aspects of life; but he did it at the expense of all positive aspects. Camus met with a sudden death. With in a

short period of time, he has imprinted his mark on the literary and philosophical world. He is an eloquent spokesman of our age. He had the intellectual honesty to change his views, instead of stubbornly holding to the earlier views of absurdity; he kept himself open and thus ended up in solidarity, justice and compassion, and repentance. Both the thinkers have contributed in their style towards clarifying some of the aspects of human existence, however unpleasant they may appear to be. A holistic philosophy of life can be developed only with the help of a multidimensional clarification of the reality of human existence.

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## 4.5 KEY WORDS

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**Being-in-itself** (*Être en soi*) : material reality

**Being-for-itself** (*Être pour soi*) : conscious reality

**Shame** : the intentional experience of one's subjectivity  
being killed

**Absurdity** : experience of meaninglessness

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## 4.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress I

#### 1) How has Sartre analyzed Being or reality?

Sartre distinguishes reality into two opposing modes: Being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*) and Being-for-itself (*être-pour-soi*). The object of consciousness which is non-conscious is called 'Being-in-itself. It is always material. It is there; opaque, compact density; without aspiration, hope or fear, meaning or relation. It is uncreated; it is there without any reason for its being; it is superfluous, unjustifiable, contingent and absurd. Such an absurd being-in-itself generates in us a disgust, a nausea. The existence as unmasked in being-in-itself, and revealed in its terrifying obscene nudity is absurdity—there is no necessary reason for it to be with this particular 'suchness,' it just happened to be! It is superfluous. Reality is not exhausted by the compact material things, there is also 'consciousness', through which there exist similarity, meaning, difference, etc. Consciousness is being-for-itself. It is vacuous, and is characterized by potency and incompleteness. It is based on the 'in-itself' which alone is *being* in the proper sense. The 'for-itself' is nothingness. It is through the conscious being or man that 'nothingness' enters



into the world. Consciousness finds absence, incompleteness and lacks. Man is the oppositional unity of the in-itself and the for-itself, body and consciousness.

## 2) Dwell on Sartre's conception of the other.

As I observe the in-itself entities, I become aware of other people observing me. Awareness of myself as acting (subject) goes with the awareness of myself as being acted upon (object). There is nothing more remarkable in Sartre's philosophy than his phenomenological analysis of the other as staring. The awareness of being stared at 'nails me to the spot'; I am petrified and immobilized in the act. I *become ashamed*. Shame is the recognition that I am as the other sees me. To be ashamed is to be aware of the presence of someone else. It is at the expense of my subjectivity that the existence of the other is revealed. In the stare of the other—which is always hateful—I am reduced to an 'object'; the other is revealed as the one who hatefully stares at me. My freedom is frozen under his stare. To regain my subjectivity, I try to reduce the other to an object by my stare. Thus each one is trying to enslave the other; the result is the inevitable conflict. If a third person looks at 'us in conflict', *we* become objectified for the third person, and 'we' become ashamed. To love another means to hate the common enemy. Love, for Sartre, is an impossibility. Out of the futile effort to love is born hatred which annihilates the freedom of the other in mortal combat.

## 3) Delineate Sartre's Understanding of freedom and its implications.

According to Sartre, man is necessarily free; the only necessity of man is his freedom. He is absolutely free: he is so free that he is not free not to be free. According to Sartre, freedom is a curse, a horrible yoke, a condemnation. The terrible responsibility attached to freedom fills man with anguish. "I am responsible for everything, and I am condemned to be so. I find myself alone with my heavy responsibility, from which I cannot get out, nor can I throw it onto someone else. To evade from this responsibility of freedom man devices 'bad\_faith'. Sartre gives several proofs for the impossibility of God, all of which are based on the absolute freedom of the humans: if there is a God, man cannot be absolutely free. Hence God is an impossibility. According to Sartre, God is not merely dead, but there cannot be a God. Man and God cannot co-exist. Just as there cannot be a God because of man's freedom, so also there cannot be a system of moral values. Man creates values in his freedom. Every act is concrete, and it is performed in a definite situation. The only sin that man can commit is to act in bad faith, deceiving oneself with the *ought* of eternal values, or with the hope of a reward or fear of punishment. Thus Sartre's notion of freedom has many serious consequences.

## Check Your Progress II

### 1) What is Camus' understanding of 'absurdity'?

The theme of absurdity is accurately expressed by Camus as the mood of his time. The setting was ideal, and he epitomized the prevalent climate of France under German occupation. There are many contributing factors for his development of absurdity in the world. Man seeks reasons and explanations, but he is frustrated as no explanation is forthcoming. The following are presented as the contributing factors for this frustration. He points out some of the glaring aspects from the contemporary life as factors that accelerated the experience of absurdity. The

world is neither rational nor absurd in itself; only in relation to human consciousness (awareness) it becomes absurd. The *absurd* is born of the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world to give reason. *The Myth of Sisyphus* quite dramatically presents the absurd hero. Based on this, absurdity can be explained as the “awareness of oneself as condemned to tragic purposelessness.” Sisyphus was the personification of it as he had, without purpose, to roll the huge stone up the hill to allow it to roll down. Sisyphus was punished for disobeying the gods by refusing to return to the underworld. He was forcibly taken to the underworld where the stone was awaiting him. There is happiness in him in his refusal to give in, in his resentful stubbornness to remain in this struggle.

## **2) Clarify the authentic and inauthentic responses to absurdity.**

Camus, before presenting the authentic response to absurdity, speaks on the ordinary and inauthentic responses. One of the common responses to absurdity is that of escaping from it either by physical suicide or by philosophical suicide. Physical suicide is the voluntary termination of life. Philosophical suicide is a taking refuge in faith and religion to escape the absurd. According to Camus, neither physical suicide nor hope (philosophical suicide) is the authentic response to absurdity. Suicide is a cowardly act, by which absurdity is destroyed. It is not an expression of revolt. These are ‘facile solutions’ in the face of absurdity. After rejecting physical and philosophical suicide as an inauthentic way out, Camus opts to face the absurd squarely by constant confrontation. Man has to engage in an ongoing struggle, although he knows that he can never win the struggle. It is a confrontation between man and his own absurdity. There is Majesty in this relentless struggle. According to Camus, “it is essential to die un-reconciled”. Man’s revolt against the absurd results in a new freedom. He is his own master. The truly liberated man is completely indifferent to the future, and thus rejects all scales of values. That is, he rejects the ‘ethics of quality’ and accepts an ‘ethics of quantity’. Man can live with the ‘irresponsibility of the condemned criminal,’ who has nothing to lose.

## **3) Dwell on Camus’ Phase of ‘Moderation and Reconciliation’.**

After the World War II, Camus began to show signs of moderation from his philosophical extremity. The *Myth of Sisyphus* conclusions were in agreement with Hitler’s atrocities. Camus became convinced of a change, which he gradually unfolds. In his *The Plague* (1947) Camus argues that we must extend a helping hand to our brothers in combating the ‘plague’ of the irrational absurdity. In the common struggle against the oppressive plague, men have discovered their solidarity. And with this, they have learned meaning of compassion. Camus has gradually opted for an ‘ethics of quality’. In his *The Rebel* (1951) Camus makes the penetrating analysis of ‘rebellion’. He distinguishes between metaphysical and historical rebellion. Metaphysical rebellion denies absolute freedom, and acknowledges existence with some limits. Historical Rebellion is a fight for one’s own self. He chooses to fight for justice rather than for his own life. In his last two works, *The Fall* (1956) and *Exile and Kingdom*, Camus enters into a state of repentance. Man is presented not as the ‘innocent rebel’ but as ‘the guilty other’. He cannot live with his conscience. He looks for a judge who will condemn him and then pardon him, but there is neither condemnation nor pardon in sight. “Who would dare condemn me in a world without judge, where no one is innocent?” Thus Camus gradually moved towards a phase of reconciliation in his thought.