Abandoning Rational Explanations

Responses to the Problems of the Human Condition

Existence or Essence: HONR 300H IW
Dr. J. Ann Cothran
13 December 1999

Jason Waltman

Wittenberg University
Class of 2001

Introduction to Our Problem

As I sat down to complete this study, I reviewed the notes I had taken in class during the semester. One paper that caught my eye was dated: 25 August 1999—the second day of class. I remember that day. Dr. Cothran handed the two students nearest to her a stack of paper to be passed around the room. As we each received our own copy and gazed at the words before us, we instinctively looked—first at each other—then at the door closing behind the woman who posed the question, as she left us alone without further guidance. There were three words on that paper: "Who are you?"—And we were supposed to answer. As it turned out it was that question, in some sense or another, which the authors we would soon be reading, would attempt to answer.

As humans, the things that we know, we 'know' as a result of some sort of reason, which we then organize into some (what will be) 'inherent' classification. The sky is blue (instead of green, for example) because someone early in our life associated the color that sky appears to be with the word 'blue.' The grass is green (instead of blue) for the same reason. Given a basic set of facts that we must assume to be true, all other knowledge can be deduced—and even questions like "Who are you?" can be answered. Well, at least that was the common Western thought prior to the twentieth century. In the seventeenth century, the scientific revolution brought about the idea that everything was considered to be able to be explained through science. However for many, the notion of some 'first principles' to comprehend the world beyond the contingent Earth was still necessary. The term *logos* is used to refer to word, truth, reason, logic, and law. It is also associated with the idea that Christianity can be considered an explanatory system. *Logos* and logocentric thought were, until about 100 years ago, the primary tool used to attempt to solve the problems of the human condition in the Western world.

Recently, it has been observed that everything we understand about our relationships to the world has been constructed: it is not necessarily natural. Things

do not have meaning in and among themselves. Things do not have names, nor do they have qualities—we give those attributes to them. Language is the only tool that we have to communicate the (possible) 'meanings' that these things have, or at the least, their meanings in relation to human consideration. It is this notion that split open the rigor of previous Western thought and caused a denial of reason as a means to explain the world; it left the once assumed, now questioned. But why in the first place does it matter whether or not we can answer all our questions given a certain viewpoint or another?

It has to do with the reality of the human condition. Mortality is the primary attribute of our situation—the fact that at some point, we will die and there is nothing we can to about it. In addition, contingency—that is, life bounded by chance or dependent on something else—and discontentment are also characteristics used to describe human existence. Combined, these traits pose an important question: What, if anything, is the meaning of life? What defines 'the self'? What truly is the definition of human existence? By rejecting previous philosophy and focusing on this new outlook to the relationships we form with the world, it is this problem that authors in the twentieth century try to solve.

Humans seem to have their own system to which they and all that they can comprehend are part of. Traditionally (i.e. pre-twentieth century), that which is essential, natural, and significant—in other words, that which gave life meaning—was located outside the system, the primary example being God. What has been conceived in the past 100 years however, is that maybe instead of 'meaning' being on the outside, it is really *inside* the system. Maybe meaning is instead contingent, constructed, and/or relative. Maybe the meaning of life is tucked away inside us somewhere…maybe it is associated with what we are doing at a given moment…maybe it is the fact that we are waiting to see if traditional thought was correct after all while in the meantime adding hopelessness to our own life. These notions severely limit the possibility of explanation. It limits the number of questions that we can ask and therefore the number of answers we can receive. It involves a

revision of the categories that have become inherent and basically a shift in our understanding of reality.

The twentieth century has called into question previous logocentric thought on the manner in which humans give meaning to their world by abandoning rational explanations and exploring, in a new mode, relationships between reality, meaning, and language, in their own lives. The remainder of my discussion, in the subsequent sections, will focus on three twentieth century authors and their conceptions on human existence. Although the authors we shall look at have all denied reason and conventional Western thought in order to respond to the problems of the human condition, each has his own point of view. This fact is important to recognize, as there is no universally accepted 'answer' and in no means is one proposed here.

The authors we will be looking at are namely, Marcel Proust ('Overture' from *Remembrance of Things Past*), Albert Camus (*The Stranger*), and Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*). Proust seems to be unique among the twentieth century authors in that his denial of rational thought is through the use of sensation to respond to the problem—instead of experience, for example—by defining the self as a retrievable essence comprised of all past experiences. Camus' response we see is quite the opposite, as he argues that the meaning of life is determined by the event that is happening at present, whereas the past (and really everything else) does not matter. Beckett takes yet another approach in that he, in actuality, defines human existence as waiting for the solution to the problem to present itself.

The manner in which one feels he or she exists in the world has much to do with the manner in which they choose to live their lives. The answer to the question as to what gives life meaning, or whether or not there is any significance in living, is also derived from one's own opinion on human existence. My purpose, as was the purpose of Dr. Cothran's class, is simply to present various ways that people have recently rejected reason, in the hopes of stimulating the readers' thought so that they may be able to form their own opinion.

J. D. W.

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4 Abandoning Rational Explanations

A Retrievable Essence

Marcel Proust's 'Overture' from *Remembrance of Things Past*

A Retrievable Essence

Marcel Proust's 'Overture' from *Remembrance of Things Past*

AS WAS DISCUSSED IN THE INTRODUCTION, OUR HUMAN CONDITION IS defined by mortality, contingency, and discontentment. This reality combined with the new outlooks of relationships between our lives and the objects that surround us in our world, have caused authors in the twentieth century to question traditional Western thought. In *Remembrance of Things Past,* Marcel Proust extends these comparisons to include one's use of memory and sensation as well as objects. By doing so, he temps to answer the question: 'Who or what is the self?' and in looking at this work, we begin our look at the abandoning of reason in order to try and find a solution to our situation. According to Proust, the self is the retrievable essence defined as the summation of all observed experiences and their relationship in and amongst themselves. He represents this idea by establishing the importance of memory and providing a key event in the life of the protagonist whose own quest is a solution to this problem.

The novel begins with Marcel's awakening—both literally and metaphorically (in relation to his quest to define the self). At the critical moment between sleep and consciousness, various thoughts pass in and out of his mind. He is disoriented—not exactly sure of his current location as his thoughts are those of experiences from a different place and time. His thoughts are unlike any he has had while awake; his confusion therefore, justifiable:

> …I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence…I was more destitute than the cave-dweller; but then the memory—not yet of the place in which I was, but of the various other places where I had lived and might now very possibly be—would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself… (5-6)

The phrase, "and might now very possibly be," exemplifies Proust's idea that although literally he is not anywhere aside from in his own bed, Marcel is—in some way—still at a time and location he experienced previously. The memory fills his body thus making his partial existence whole, a feat that alone—that is, without these subconscious thoughts—he could not accomplish. We see here a bit of 'foreshadowing *de l'esprit*,' as those same, undeterminable thoughts, Marcel will understand later, are some of the pieces to the solution he fails yet to realize he is searching for.

Proust continues his illustration of the importance of memories though their connection to habit. We all have the need for a certain order in our lives. The protagonist however (although not quite an obsession) does seem to have problems functioning in the absence of routine. The author's intention is revealed through Marcel's character, calling to our attention the true nature of a magic part of human life. That is, that objects themselves cannot be labeled 'familiar'—they need a human connection to be described as such:

> Habit! that skilful but slow-moving arranger who begins by letting our minds suffer for weeks on end in temporary quarters, but whom our minds are none the less only too happy to discover at last, for without it, reduced to their own devices, they would be powerless to make any room seem habitable. (9)

Marcel needs habit to remain sane and to be able to find a 'place' to live (note the author's word choice: habit is necessary for a place to be *habit*able). Everything must remain the same: his mother's goodnight kisses, the absence of love scenes in novels read to him, and maybe even the vicissitudes that cause his worry. He is irritated with the lantern that projects changing images on his walls and even is haunted by the night his mother sleeps in his room because he knows that it can never happen again. Anything that disrupts habit seems to cause Marcel inordinate distress.

One might define habit as the repeated notion that the memory of yesterday is the same as the day before yesterday, until the memory of yesterday feels right today. Habit is an anchor. In the case of the main character, it is an anchor that

holds his sanity. To reiterate, note that the essential factor in obtaining habit is memory. Without the ability to retain memories, habit would be an incomprehensible notion, and in Proust's mind, the self would be undefined.

The 'awakening' of the protagonist to the role of memory in completing the definition of human existence, leads directly into Proust's conception of the self. Not only is memory the key ingredient of habit, but also the container that holds our experiences. Every event that takes place in our life, every road we walk down lined with hawthorn bushes, every church we walk in, or every steeple we see from the distance, becomes a part of us. As an example, one subset of these experiences is in the people that we meet. We decide to form or not to form relationships with these people depending on our opinions of them. Those who we have met previously influence these opinions. Had we not met a particular person beforehand, the opinion of new acquaintances might be different. These experiences, held in our memory, are an addition to our existence. Therefore combined, the layers of 'memories,' that is, the summation of all our experiences, contribute to the conception of the self. One would not be the same person he or she is today if the events that took place yesterday would not have happened.

We cannot consciously recall every event that has occurred in our past. This, Proust feels is justified by the fact that the memory we can recall on-demand is unable to hold the entire experience:

> [S]ince the facts which I should then have recalled would have been prompted only by voluntary memory, the memory of the intellect, and since the pictures which that kind of memory shows us preserve nothing of the past itself, I should never have had any wish to ponder over this residue… It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. (47-48)

The memory that lies "beyond the range of the intellect," can be retrieved only given a specific set of circumstances. When some object and its complimentary factors align themselves—without human intention—the event to which these circumstances are attached seem so perfectly real that one finds it amazing that they could not recall it on their own.

The author's point is made quite clear in the episode of *les petites madeleines*. Marcel dips the cakelet in the tea, tastes it, and all of a sudden he feels as if Heaven itself has opened up, reached down, and made him whole, if only for a second. Initially he is taken back to a Sunday morning in Combray when he was a child—an event that was tucked away, brought to life by a certain set of circumstances climaxing with the sensation of the tea touching the roof of his mouth. With this one event, Proust takes a major step towards defining the self:

> …a shudder ran through me and I stopped…this essence was not in me, it *was* me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. …It is plain that the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself. The drink has called it into being, but does not know it, and can only repeat indefinitely, with a progressive diminution of strength, the same message which I cannot interpret, though I hope at least to be able to call it forth again and to find it there presently, intact and at my disposal, for my final enlightenment. (48-49)

Marcel realizes that that which he is seeking is hidden within him. A simple drink from an ordinary cup has used him as a interpreter in bringing the truth to a visible surface. For a moment, Marcel exists with the absence of fundamental human attributes—he is an essence.

Human existence is only an outward, visible foundation of our lives. The true self is the layers of hidden memories piled on top of our simple being. Thus, Proust's point: we are (or perhaps our significant being is), in fact, an essence—and furthermore, that essence is retrievable. Every event that we have experienced is somewhere inside us. It is not important to be conscious of them *tout le temps*, yet

still understand that they are there and subconsciously, they do have an effect on the way in which we view objects and the opinions we take on others' ideas at present. Quite literally, who we were is all of who we are.

Proust defines the self as an essence comprised of layers of hidden memories depicting past experiences. The memory and all that it contains, is stored behind a sort of 'one-way' door. Old events ever change the way that new events will be stored; new events on top of the old will change the way the latter were once viewed. For the most part, the door is locked. It opens only for a split second, given the correct key, if for no other reason than to prove that everything is still there—the self still defined—and nothing has ever been lost.

Nothing Matters

Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

Nothing Matters
Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

Just as much as Proust fills our existence in his solution to the human condition, the next opinion we shall look at opinion will leave us empty. Proust feels that everything that happens to an individual during life becomes a part of that individual and is always with him or her. That is, the past is more of who we are then the present. Quite a different attitude would be that the past has no meaning and the only point in time of our life that really matters is that point which is happening at present. Furthermore, when life is over, the existence is also over; the hope of some sort of salvation from a God is pointless. Albert Camus illustrates this exact view in *The Stranger*. Camus feels that one exists only in the world physically and therefore the presence or absence of meaning in one's life is alone revealed through that event which he or she is experiencing at a particular moment. These thoughts are presented through Meursault, a man devoid of concern for social conventions found in the world in which he lives, and who finds his life deprived of physical pleasure—which he deems quite important—when unexpectedly put in prison.

The opening line of the novel sets the tone for Meursault's dispassion towards most things. The novel is introduced with the words: "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know" (3). Although the uncertainty originates with an ambiguous telegram, it seems that the tone alone could justify changing the meaning of the words 'I don't know' to 'I don't care.' In a sense, in the days following, he only goes through the motions of the vigil and then the funeral; the only emotion he expresses is joy when his bus takes him home and he is able to sleep. At one point, he looks back at the events of the past few days, realizes that he has to go to work, and notes: "that, really, nothing had changed" (24). Despite these reactions, there is evidence that Meursault did indeed love his mother, observed both in his defensive argument at the 'old people's' home as to why she was put there in the first place and in his recollections of the time when they lived together. This fact implies that people

(at least here, his mother) do have some effect on his life. It is his lack of concern for following normal social conventions that eventually hinders the impression he makes on others.

Further evidence of Meursault's indifference is demonstrated when he meets with Marie at the beach on the day following the funeral. Marie is a former co-worker "whom [he had] a thing for at the time" (19). Keeping with character, the implication of that description is that he hadn't thought about her since then, until now. The two end up spending a lot of time together, swimming, going to the movies, and even sleeping together, but when asked if he loved her he recalls: "I told her that it didn't mean anything, but that I didn't think so" (35). These words are somewhat surprising given the relationship portrayed here. At the same time, it is important to realize that Meursault actually does care for Marie—however the word used to express that feeling, in a sense, is practically absent from his vocabulary. This notion becomes more evident with his reaction to the principle of marriage, which he regards as basically insignificant: "…Marie came by to see me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said it didn't make any difference and we could if she wanted to" (41).

On a related notion, when his boss offers Meursault the opportunity to further cultivate his life via a transfer to Paris, Meursault simply doesn't want to go: "I said that people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't dissatisfied with mine here at all. …I wasn't unhappy" (41). The notion that 'one life was as good as another,' first mentioned here, will surface again by the unmoved Meursault towards the end of the novel.

This perception represents the first direct insight to Camus' thoughts on the meaning of life and the realization that the only exceptions to Meursault's apathy seem to be with those things that give him physical pleasure. That is to say, he actually expresses emotion when it comes to things like sleeping, walking along the beach, swimming, and having sex. Consequently, seeing what he enjoys in life, his accepting an invitation to spend a day at a friend's beach house (especially when

Marie is invited too) seems reasonable. Ironically though, what happens before the sun sets on that particular day will change his life forever.

Meursault had become aware of a group of Arabs that had been following a friend. They are seen numerous times on the day of the trip to the beach house, first at the bus stop in the morning, and again during various walks on the beach later in the day. On one of these walks Meursault is alone and carrying a gun, when he comes across one of the Arabs that had been following him and his friend. Two forces work against Meursault—his conscience advising him to just walk away, and the intense pressure of the sun influencing him to pull out the gun. The sun's persuasiveness appears to be the stronger:

> [T]he whole beach, throbbing in the sun, was pressing on my back. …The trigger gave; …I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I'd been happy. Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness. (58-59)

With this one event, he has invited discontent into his life—a life that now has forever changed. As he stands there, time continues to move forward as it had before, but in some sense now, Meursault is no longer freely floating but feels society pulling him towards its customs. It is as if he has been placed on the porch of a stranger and left like a homeless child to be taken into another world.

Upon his conviction and despite Meursault's continuous refusal, a priest decides to come and talk to him. Meursault simply says that he does not believe in God and confirms the fact that he feels that when one dies, one dies—nothing remains. He had been found guilty, and there was nothing that could be done about it; the forgiveness of a 'sin' that the priest was talking about made no sense to him. When asked to look for a divine image in the walls of his cell, he responds:

> I had been looking at the stones in these walls for months. …Maybe at one time, way back, I had searched for a face in them. But the face

> I was looking for…belonged to Marie. I had searched for it in vain. …And in any case I'd never seen anything emerge from any sweating stones. (119)

Meursault is looking for the same physical pleasure that he had outside the walls—nothing more. If he looks instead for something outside this world—something 'better'—then the life he had lived thus far and everything that had given him pleasure until now would have become meaningless.

As the priest continues, Meursault simply refuses to accept anything that is said. The certainties and hopes that everyone around him seems to have he feels are all blind assumptions that have no consequence or significance for life at all. The priest is attempting to deny the value of his life:

> He seemed so certain about everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head. He wasn't even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man. Whereas it looked as if I was sure about me,…sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting for me. …I had as much of a hold on it as it had on me. I had been right [and] I was still right. (120-121)

The 'hope' that the priest wants him to believe in is a refusal of the present and consequents he has always had. And with that understanding, Meursault discovers that he truly loves his life. He loves living and being alive; his life—and the way he has lived it—has become meaningful. Social and religious conventions have no impact on the way one's life is to end. Had Meursault chosen to do certain things instead of others, the only difference those acts would have made would have been at the particular time in which they happened:

> Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. …Throughout the whole absurd life I'd lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real then the ones I was living. (121)

To Meursault, the end of one's life is defined early on. Nothing—including any sort of hope—could change that. In the end, the consequences of experiences and choices have meaning only at the moment in which they occur, following that they become equated because of death. This Meursault recognizes is how he lived his life, and therefore, he is happy. At the end Meursault feels as if he is a brother to the indifferent world—a world that has no comprehension of the objects in its existence—as he is unconcerned with the objects in his own life and finds meaning only within himself.

Meursault does not care for objects in his world. He does not see the importance of certain words whose definitions attempt to explain human relationships either amongst themselves or their emotions in general. He does not follow 'conventional' social beliefs nor does he believe in God, nor salvation. Meursault however loves his life. It is a pure love derived from enjoying his existence on a day-to-day basis, rarely looking back and never looking forward. His love is not dependent on doing what society or some religion has deemed correct, but on what he feels he wants to do despite what most would consider common.

They Do Not Move

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

They Do Not Move
Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

THUS FAR WE HAVE LOOKED A TWO OPINIONS, EACH VERY DIFFERENT FROM the other; the final, we will see, will continue in this tradition. Although, returning to Proust for a moment, he does seem to be unique among twentieth century authors in that he uses sensation—as opposed to 'concrete' observations—in order to make the existent complete, while the remainder of the authors seem to illustrate a more hopeless attitude. Proust felt that every action and experience that takes place during life is significant; Camus felt that only one action or experience at a time could be important. In contrast, this last view questions whether any of these actions or experiences are important at all. In *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett asks what it is that we are really doing on Earth. He feels that God plays a key role in the solution to the human condition, however, since we do not truly know if God exists, life it would seem is simply a quest to search for an alternate explanation. Most of the time we attempt to distract ourselves from the issue and try desperately to bring some sort of meaning into our life while silently waiting for someone or something to come and give us an answer. According to Beckett, the definition of human existence is waiting to ascertain if the possibility of salvation with a possible God exists, or if all that lies ahead is darkness; he feels that all other aspects of life are insignificant and essentially can be reduced to nothing. These ideas are illustrated in a play where time seems to be irrelevant, nothing of importance ever happens, and the main characters are left waiting for someone who may or may not ever come.

At the very beginning, Beckett hints at his proposal to the solution to the human condition. Vladimir tells the ignorant Estragon the story from the Bible of the two thieves that were crucified at the same time as Jesus. Apparently, one of the thieves believed in God, the other did not—the one who believed was saved. In Vladimir's opinion, this is not that bad a deal: "One of the thieves was saved. (*Pause.*) It's a reasonable percentage" (8). It seems that according to the story, reward

or punishment is handed out depending on behavior (or at least belief). Vladimir's thoughts are somewhat parallel to those of the French philosopher Pascal who rationalized that given the possible outcomes, one is better to bet that God exists. However, as Vladimir continues, Beckett makes an important point in the variations of the four versions of the story: "And yet…how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of the thief being saved. The four of them were there—or thereabouts—and only one speaks of a thief being saved" (9). Therefore, in the Book that many have long considered to hold the solutions to all our problems, there are 'inconsistencies'. Beckett poses the questions: 'Is anything really for certain?'; 'Can assumptions at all be made?'. In a word, he responds: no. And right away, he gives the first evidence of a major theme.

In the same vein, there seems to be some problem with time—which could be viewed as directly related to this overall problem of uncertainty—evident throughout the entire play. The characters (especially poor Estragon) have an especially difficult time remembering events, the days on which events occurred, and the people involved. They do not know if what happened 'yesterday' happened, or if it was a dream. They do not know if they are in the right location, or even what day it is:

> V: What are you insinuating? That we've come to the wrong place?
>
> …
>
> E: We came here yesterday.
>
> V: Ah no, there you're mistaken.
>
> E: What did we do yesterday?
>
> V: What did we do yesterday?
>
> E: Yes.
>
> …
>
> V: He said Saturday. (*Pause.*) I think.
>
> …

E: (*very insidious*). But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (*Pause.*) Or Monday (*Pause.*) Or Friday? (10-11)

These problems continue throughout the play. In Act II, Estragon cannot remember Pozzo or Lucky (nor can he say that there was even a tree!). On the other hand, Pozzo cannot remember seeing either Estragon or Vladimir the day prior and goes as far to say that tomorrow he would not be able to recall seeing them today. The boy who obviously appears at the end of every day can never say he had come before. The tree in Act I is bare. The same tree in Act II has leaves. Given this fact, and despite stage directions, it is obviously not the "*next day*" (36) but sometime much later. Hence, the past, present, and future seem to literally have no meaning.

By far the best illustration of loss of significance in the structures found in our world is in Lucky's speech (28-29). While it is actually *pages* in length, it is in no way comprehensible; it has no unifying content or evidence of a theme; it has no form and continuously changes topics; it has no punctuation. Theological issues, scientific problems, academia, sports, et cetera—are all evoked, and therefore all become insignificant. Beckett uses both the structure and the content of the speech to demonstrate the deterioration of literally everything in the real world. Here Beckett's major theme is further illustrated as the speech closely parallels the play as a whole. It is completely filled with everyday activities and concerns; however, when Lucky stops we have not learned anything of real importance and we are left as we were before—confused, hopeless, and still waiting.

Literally, nothing significant happens in the play. Save for a tree the stage is empty, the language used is simple (except for Lucky's speech), and there are only five cast members. There is a lot of activity (or at least 'conversation') but no action, and nothing gets accomplished: "Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That's been going on now for half a century" (42). They try on boots that appear to have just been left behind; they contemplate hanging themselves (but in the end decide they lack the proper equipment); they worry

about if they should eat carrots or turnips. If they should run out of carrots Estragon says he will go find more but just stays where he is:

> E: I'll go and get a carrot.
>
> *He does not move.*
>
> V: This is becoming really insignificant.
>
> E: Not enough.
>
> *Silence.*
>
> …
>
> E: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist? (44)

Vladimir and Estragon do the things they do simply to pass 'time' and to attempt to give some sort of meaning to their lives—to de-emphasize the fact that what they are doing, in actuality, is waiting. Vladimir comments that what they do day after day is getting to be 'really insignificant'. There is nothing else to do however—nothing is any *more* significant then what they are doing—so they stay. But at the same time, are they actually doing anything?

Well, yes. Despite the fact that no one knows what day it is, in spite of the lack of activity, and regardless of what is or is not accomplished, they are doing something. And actually to Vladimir, what they are doing is the only thing that is clear:

> V: Let us do something, while we have the chance! …Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! …What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come—
>
> …
>
> V: Or for night to fall. … (51)

Unfortunately, it always appears to be the latter that finds them before Godot ever makes it, which means that the following night they will have to wait again. Vladimir and Estragon themselves have nothing. They are homeless and hungry, they get beat up, and they sleep in ditches. However, despite the arguments and the talk about parting, they do seem to be fairly good friends. They never actually find anything better to do then be with each other. Therefore, I suppose one might argue that although it seems they have nothing, that they actually have each other.

Possibly, but maybe not. I believe together, they form one existent. Vladimir represents the mind: he is the leader, he has the food (but for some reason never eats it), and it is he who always remembers that they are in fact waiting for Godot. Estragon, on the other hand, represents the body: he is just there, he is down to Earth, and for some reason cannot remember anything (remember, he is just a body…no mind). What they actually have is not each other, but conflicts between the two fundamental parts of the self: the 'conscience' that feels the most important thing is to keep waiting because nothing seems more significant; and the 'physical body' that has trouble remembering the reason they continually sit around and blather about nothing who also thinks it might be better if they parted. Of course, if the two parts of the self separate, the existent dies—which is exactly Beckett's point. In the end, one can either wait or die—there are no other choices:

> E: I can't go on like this.
>
> V: That's what you think.
>
> E: If we parted? That might be better for us.
>
> V: We'll hang ourselves to-morrow. (*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes.
>
> E: And if he comes?
>
> V: We'll be saved.
>
> …
>
> V: Well? Shall we go?
>
> E: Yes, let's go.

They do not move. (60)

Immediately, given these choices, it seems they apt for the waiting. But just how long can one wait for hope—or salvation—and especially given the fact that possibly that for which they are waiting is partially of their own invention. Godot obviously represents this hope, but never does the spectator learn the details of the absent 'character.' How do they know that they are supposed to wait? How do they know where to wait and at what time? If neither of them has ever seen Godot, where did they get their information? What proof do they have that he will indeed come? That just happens to be the problem. They honestly do not know anything. Everything they know of Godot seems to have either come from their own minds or from ambiguous 'signs' such as the boy's appearance in place of Godot every night. They are just hoping that he will come and give them the solutions to their all problems. Until he comes it seems they will continue with the same routine:

V: Well? What do we do?

E: Don't let's do anything. It's safer.

V: Let's wait and see what he says.

E: Who?

V: Godot.

E: Good idea.

V: Let's what till we know exactly how we stand. (12)

Given the numerous 'indirect' references to the Bible, there are great implications that Beckett is referring to God or salvation through Christ. But the fact does remain, that Beckett's *God*ot never shows up. This does not mean that He does not exist, but this continuous waiting is like a silent plea for meaning and answers; the lack of response seems to force hopelessness on all those waiting. Beckett says that life is waiting—waiting for salvation, damnation, or nothing, where everything else, every other human task, is meaningless:

> Am I sleeping now? To-morrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of to-day? That with Estragon my friend…I waited for

> Godot? That Pozzo passed…and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? …We have time to grow old. …But habit is a great deadener. (58)

It is unfortunate that after waiting so long and nothing positive ever happens (besides a few leaves on a tree) that even the persistence of the 'conscious' seems to begin to fade as well.

Beckett poses some interesting questions. If all we are doing on Earth is waiting—waiting for answers whose meanings we may never comprehend—is anything that we do significant at all? As humans, it seems that in a sense we do, somewhere in us, realize our condition. However, we try to remain ignorant of it. We look for distractions; we look for something that seems to have meaning just so the absolute absurdity of our life remains masked. We search for answers—answers that may or may not ever come. In our continued waiting nonetheless, it seems our situation continues to become more hopeless.

Conclusion

In redefining the relationships that humans share with the rest of the world, the twentieth century has continued (albeit taking a unique approach) where past cultures have left off in attempting to give some meaning to human existence and determine the solution to the human condition. In ancient times, villages constructed huge temples in order to please their gods in the hopes that by doing so, they would be protected from disease or other unforeseen elements. Some thousands of years later, a similar solution is proposed with the introduction of Christianity and the concepts of salvation and eternal life. In contrast though, authors in the past 100 years have completely denied this kind of thought. Instead, they observe that the relationships we have with the Earth are all constructed—that things have no inherent meaning in and amongst themselves—and the connections between our own lives with reality, meaning, and language should be reconsidered.

On that second day of class, when we were asked to respond to the question: "Who are you?" we watched our professor leave the room without giving us any insight to our problem. Looking back, it appears that she was trying—if only for a few minutes—to turn us into one of these writers, to force us to recognize our condition, and then respond to it given our observations of the relationships we form with the world. After a few minutes, I ended up stating a quote from Tennyson in my response: "I am a part of all that I have met…". I believed it then, and largely still believe it now. Since the time I wrote it though, I have witnessed many opinions and thus many new ideas have surfaced in my own mind. Similarly, the authors of the twentieth century as a whole quite possibly could have stirred up this discussion just enough, that maybe in the next 100 years a completely new set of solutions will emerge and deny the past once again. To paraphrase a quote by W. B. Yeats I heard on the final day of class: "We cannot know the truth, but we can live as though we do." As time continues, thoughts change, and opinions remain varied, this would appear to be not that bad a way of regarding the problem as we can each then look for our own answers and try to remain content in the lives that we live.

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