Understanding Purpose in Works of Existential Fiction

by

Michael Agadis

Bachelor of Philosophy in Politics, Philosophy, and Economics, Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, 2024

Submitted to the Undergraduate Faculty of

the David C. Frederick Honors College in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2024

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

DAVID C. FREDERICK HONORS COLLEGE

This thesis was presented

by

Michael Agadis

It was defended on

March 20, 2024

and approved by

Dr. Nandi Theunissen, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh

Dr. Nancy Glazener, Professor, Department of English, University of Pittsburgh

Dr. Greg Barnhisel, Professor, Department of English, Duquesne University

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Gayle Rogers, Department of English, University of Pittsburgh

Understanding Purpose in Works of Existential Fiction

Michael Agadis, BPhil

University of Pittsburgh 2024

There are many works of fiction that explore the idea of existentialism. A problem arises however when categorizing these works into a particular tradition of responses to the existential question. This paper's focus was to draw out each author's response to the matter by highlighting a clear throughline in their offering of some system of moral value. The four works discussed throughout the paper are Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), and Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947). Given the association of many of the authors with postmodernism and absurdism, these authors also grapple deeply with the potential answer that is nihilism. Throughout this paper, it is argued that attaching a pro-nihilist bent to any of these authors goes directly against the moral outlook they ultimately offer. Whether the response is a Theist, Deist, or secular humanist approach, all of these novels evaluate and dispense with the nihilist tradition and instead offer to their reader some other avenue for moral activity.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In literary study, classifying texts into different groups is an important technique in comparative investigation. Categorical requirements are the easiest way of making these kinds of divisions. Works might be divided across historical era, theme, plot type, etc. There are also the more famous divisions of this kind. For example, *genre*. While genre is usually concerned with a number of factors, this paper will focus on a division solely by philosophical bent. The philosophical position discussed throughout this paper is a basic form of existential nihilism. Works that explore this position are often lumped together, especially those that take the positive form of the view. The most digestible form of existential nihilism is the notion that human existence is meaningless. Therefore neither suffering nor happiness, nor the range of subjective experience in between, have moral content or value. This piece will discuss four major works of the Western canon across an almost 200 year time span that could promote this positive view. However, this piece will offer an alternative perspective regarding the view promoted by these works, specifically that they promote the *negative* view of existential nihilism and instead offer some constructive version of ethics.

The four works discussed in this piece are David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), and Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947). It is important to note that none of the four works express either position outright but investigate the philosophical position using plots, characters, and other techniques. It's also important to realize that many of these works have already been read in what might be termed a *moralist* interpretation. This is especially true of *Infinite Jest*;

However, this paper's argument about Wallace is centered around rejecting the postmodern label attached to him.

This paper will discuss the ways each author contends with the problems aroused by an acceptance of existential nihilism. These greater potential problems include things like cultural hedonism and human consciousness' proclivity toward purpose. It is clear that authors of these four works understand the issues that come with existential nihilism. In no way do they embrace or encourage the belief that life is meaningless. In fact, all four authors offer alternatives to the strong existential nihilist claim. These alternatives include things like objective moral guidance (God), human secularism, and a general responsibility toward the preservation of humanity.

Purpose, in the discussion of existentialism will be used to discuss the *goal* of human existence. What end does human life serve? What should human experience strive for? The nihilist perspective on this matter might be a scientific approach. In this way the advent of humanity might simply be a random amalgamation of matter in an entropic universe. In this case, human consciousness and experience would therefore also be random and inconsequential. However, just because human life might have a purpose, nailing down its particulars is harder still. There are many avenues that have attempted to explain the purpose of human life and each of these works develops a singular answer to the question.

A longstanding answer to the question of whether human existence has purpose is the belief that omnipotent and omniscient God that created humanity. There are many forms of belief in God, but all point toward the same idea: there exists some greater, supernatural form that *in itself* defines the boundaries of moral activity. Good actions, moral actions, are like God. Bad actions, immoral actions, are *unlike* God. Therefore humans, as God's creations, have

purpose insofar as they strive to be like God.[1] However, God's eternality is a presupposition of this argument. Ideas like the afterlife and everlasting communion with *the good* give temporal human action moral content. It seems plausible to conceive of a God that acts as an objective moral standard *without* an afterlife, but most religious frameworks tend toward the former view. This view is extensively discussed in three of the four works and is strongly defended by Dostoevsky. Other answers to the question of whether human existence has purpose are views akin to secular humanism. This view is based on premises that presuppose the value of human consciousness. Simply, the fact that complex human consciousness exists is enough to justify its defense and promulgation. These include claims like utilitarianism, which may posit by extension that 'suffering is bad' and that moral action should aim to reduce this suffering wherever possible.

We can imagine a number of strong rebuttals and hypotheticals to question both of these prominent positions, but that is not the purpose of this piece. None of the pieces discussed promote a view that falls directly in line with either position offered above, but all four certainly recognize both as strong interpretations about human purpose. In the separate discussions of each piece, the authors' alignment with both views will be discussed and their clear differences will be drawn out.

In David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* both views are discussed. The view regarding an omnipotent God is found in two main places in the novel: (1) in a conversation between Hal and his brother Mario, and (2) in one of the tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous which many addicts find difficult to accept. AA doesn't even require that an alcoholic's belief in God have any additive or prescriptive views. In other words, this person doesn't need to follow a religion or

[1] In dogmatic religious contexts this might also be described as becoming 'closer to God' or 'through Grace, approaching God.' But the fact of God's necessity as a moral being inheres in every interpretation.

scripture, they must simply accept the fact that there exists some Higher Power. The second, secular humanist view, arises with the Quebecois Separatists and Gately's love of the addict community with which he is now intimately intertwined. Gately's devotion to others and the selfless deaths of many of the A.F.R members are heroic examples of the second view, that people should strive for this greater humanitarian good.

In *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, it's unclear which view Kafka endorses. The overbearing and all powerful legal system can be interpreted in a few ways. Firstly, it may be that the legal system represents an objective moral arbiter that cannot be outsmarted. This seems like the Diest view. On the other hand, the absurdity of the legal system, its supposed failures throughout the novel, might bring Kafka closer to the secular humanist view. The main character Josef K. acts selfishly and thereby against the common human good that is protected under the law. Regardless, Kafka offers K. many opportunities to redeem himself, to correct course and take the path that betters those around him.

Notes from Underground by Fyodor Dostoevsky is a much different work from the other three as it approaches the philosophical position of nihilism directly. The book itself is concerned with the development of nihilism in 1860s Russia. Although Dostoevsky does not use an appeal to God to attack nihilism in the novel, his intentions are clear. As a devout Orthodox Christian, Dostoevsky appeals to the human spirit's great internal war: between rationality and irrationality. The Underground Man is left at a standstill, hoping there is something greater than spite to lead human life. Of course Dostoevsky's answer lies in the acceptance of God as moral truth.

Albert Camus' *The Plague* seems to strongly take a more secular humanist approach to the nihilist problem. Father Paneloux's ignorance, downfall, and eventual death seem to indicate a strong dislike of the Deist position. However, the interplay between Riuex, Cottard, and Tarrou

builds a case for the strong humanist claim. In all of the suffering and death, it is the collective action of the community and the will of individual humans to protect their fellow humans that ultimately brings the novel to an end.

Another view to detail briefly before diving into the body of this project is Emmanuel Kant's ethical theory. While the basic Deist position aims to ground the good in God and the nihilist rejects the good outright, Kant sets up a distinction between what is good and what is right. For Kant, right and wrong actions are not derived from the notion of goodness or badness, instead they are derived through proper use of our 'faculties of reason.' This theory is mentioned because it uses the concept 'rightness' or 'correctness' to co-opt moral terms like 'good' and 'bad,' allowing them to be removed from the picture. This ethical worldview is important to both Camus' and Kafka's absurdism, which bring up in-text difficulties in 'grounding' their philosophies.

Each novel offers philosophical issues with each of its views, even with those argued to be the works' primary focus. The authors design plots to test their characters and structure discussions to engage with ideological positions. The novels discussed each concern themselves with aspects of human value and purpose, seeking to draw out the great questions of human life's ultimate meaning. Although these novels primarily talk around these issues, their goal is clear and teasing out an ultimate or broad message, as it relates to this topic, is this paper's purpose.

1.0 Notes from Underground

Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground* in response to a cultural movement called 'Russian nihilism.' Many of the movement's 'intellectual leaders'[2] fell into a camp associated with early socialism, determinism, and atheism (Petrov 1). Authored in 1864, throughout *Notes* Dosteovsky is also directly responding to a famous work from this movement: Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, published in 1862. The work explores a clash of old and new ideologies in Russia; namely romanticism vs. secular philosophy (nihilism).

Early on, at its core, Russian nihilism was a movement that offered scathing, radical criticism of establishment politics and government (1). However, as it developed, the movement became more associated with ideas like atheism and hard determinism, the latter of which helped to push Russian nihilism toward more standard beliefs associated with existential nihilism including the rejection of morality (1).

The Underground Man's disagreement with his Russian nihilist contemporaries is offered *in response* to an imaginary conversant. This makes *Notes* read more like a written dialogue than a philosophical treatise. The UM's rebuttals of the nihilist position basically boil down to differing appeals about the nature of humanity, a nature that the UM believes poses problems for the ideal society posed by the Russian nihilists. The basic argument of the Russian nihilists begins with the premise that 'Humans act in whatever way they believe increases their

[2] Please take this term lightly. It refers to myriad thinkers operating in temporal proximity, many with widely different worldviews.

own advantage.' Accordingly, if the 'advantage outcome'[3] of actions were revealed to humans in every instance, humans would never take action that would be against their advantage. The Russian nihilists have deemed reason to be the tool used by humans to determine this increase or decrease of advantage. Given more information, or data, through the advancement of knowledge (in the sciences, humanities, etc.) reason can better determine the advantage of actions. By advancing the breadth and capabilities of knowledge, and therefore also in reason, we could, ideally, reach a society in which humans knew which actions would increase advantage in every scenario and could not take action otherwise.

The UM steelmans this argument throughout *Notes'* first section. But readers will immediately notice a strong double-bind between the UM and the ideology he describes. The UM actually agrees with many of the parts of the Russian nihilists' argument. But this is the issue: You may concede the validity of *parts* of arguments you're presented with even though it makes you squirm and shudder on the inside. As an intelligent, well-educated man, the UM *agrees* with the power and strength of reason and actually concedes that if point 2 were true, a utopia could be constructed. However, his concern is that the rational side of humanity only makes up one part of its being.

> For my assailant [those who support pure rationalism] would perhaps have slapped me from the laws of nature, and one cannot forgive the laws of nature; nor to forget, for even if it were owing to the laws of nature, it is insulting all the same (Dostoevsky 9).

No matter the unbending essence of the laws of nature, the atomization of life that rationalism can provide, the emotions of human experience will never go away. To prove something

[3] My own technical term denoting whatever *calculations* (loose term) would be used as systems of knowledge developed that could the advantage of actions in different contexts. Obviously, these calculations exist only in a Russian nihilists' idealist view.

unlikeable is to butt heads with emotion, with feeling. The UM recognizes the reckless, irrational individuality that is humanity, but he does not see it as a weakness. Rather, it is our greatest gift.

The UM's rebuttal to the basic argument of the Russian nihilists that I have just laid out concedes its conclusion. The UM says that he will grant the fact that if knowledge were advanced enough and it were possible to gather enough information about a situation (in fact *all of it* in this scenario) we could predict what any person would do in a given scenario. Given that this is true, it is also the case that whatever action science has predicted a person will take *is unavoidable for that person*. In addition, moral action might be defined as when a human deliberates between options in a given scenario and commits that action which provides the most advantage for those involved and perhaps also for society at large. Therefore, if all actions are entirely predictable, moral action is impossible because deliberation is impossible. Dostoevsky then adds another point, an extension, made by the UM as to why the Russian nihilist's constructed utopia, even if it lacked actions with moral worth, would be an untenable organization for society. This extension stems from an argument the UM presents about the two sides of human nature: one rational and one emotional. This emotional side would not always seek to act in accordance with increasing advantage. Even given perfect knowledge of the utilitarian consequences of any action, human nature is innately at odds with the Russian nihilists' idyllic scenario because of the fact that they are hardwired for emotion.[4]

The UM rejects the conclusion of the pure rationalists of his day—again, the notion that a utopia can be reached just as long as humanity resolves to follow the conclusions that rationalism provides—but one must wonder, what is his solution? What is he offering as an alternative?

[4] Dostoevsky refers to this 'emotional side' in a few different ways. At one point he uses the term 'impulses.' He also calls it the 'human caprice.' The basic idea seems to revolve around its unpredictability. According to the UM, it is this oddly undefinable emotional side of human beings out of which springs what we call personality. It is the feature of humans that makes each of us different.

Again, the intense duality of the UM's character is his agreement, in part, with the nihilists. The Russian nihilists offer up a new god to the world, natural law, the universal order of all things. They offer logic (reason), and by way of extension physics, math, etc. And he agrees that their logical constructions, specifically insofar as they relate to calculations of welfare, are undeniable. Eventually the UM comes to the confusing, cyclical idea that he himself is somehow to blame for the stone wall—a symbol for the laws of nature—and that it comes out of his acceptance of it. He tells us that "as soon as [the rationalists] prove to you, for instance, that you are descended from a monkey, then it is no use scowling, accept it for a fact" (13). And that they will say again: "Nature does not ask your permission…and whether you like her laws or dislike them, you are bound to accept her as she is" (13). So even though he, the UM, knows he's bound by the stone wall's restrictions, he doesn't have to like them. He doesn't have to, like the man of action, agree that this is the endpoint, that this is some complete solution to all his problems. That would be simple-minded. If he doesn't like it, no matter its firm logical consistency, he doesn't need to listen to it. Logical consistency isn't a guarantee of truth.

> How much better it is to understand it all, to recognize it all, all the impossibilities and the stone wall; not to be reconciled to one of those impossibilities and stone walls if it disgusts you to be reconciled to it (13).

The next piece of the UM's answer comes out of a rejection of the Crystal Palace—the utopia that comes out of the Russian nihilists' ideology. The Crystal Palace is an enlightened state of humanity. It's a society built on the power of rationalism and its complete acceptance by all people. In fact, given the power the UM sees in the rational approach, taking it to the nth degree seems like the right course of action, even in his mindset. The fact of the matter is that in humanity's inner war between emotion and rationality, even aiming for the Crystal Palace engenders an authoritarian hand. The UM's problem with the Crystal Palace is the distinct part of

human nature that is our desire to sometimes act *irrationally*. The UM clarifies again: "I did not say because I am so fond of putting my tongue out. Perhaps the thing I resented was, that of all your edifices there has not been one at which one could not put out one's tongue" (34).

In the discussion of the stone wall and the crystal palace there is a human element of irrationality described by the UM that makes up a distinct part of his argument. While the UM believes that the calculations of reason are valid he thinks that the way the rationalists conceive welfare misses an important 'advantage.' Advantage, as described by the UM, can be individual or subservient to the greater cause. Another way to say this is that greater individual advantage can be achieved at the expense of more broad advantage and vice versa. They enjoy an inverse advantage relationship. What the rationalists will say is: "man only does nasty things because he does not know his own interests; and that if he were enlightened, if his eyes were opened to his real normal interests, man would at once cease to do nasty things" (21). The UM notes that the Russian nihilists have marked down their advantages, "prosperity, wealth, freedom, peace"[5] and designated them to be achieved (22). But the UM's problem with these, shall we say, 'collective advantages,' is that the rationalists devise their equations but leave out the most important one. It is the most important one to the man as an individual. First, the UM acts the innocent question: "What if it so happens that man's advantage, *sometimes*, not only may, but even must, consist in his desiring in certain cases what is harmful to himself and not advantageous?" (21). But in what sort of calculations could it be better for someone to desire something that *lowers* their advantage? The UM's answer is that there is a hidden value in the 'independent choice,' the choice made freely regardless of its consequence. This UM believes that choosing independently

[5] Note here that these advantages are advantages of the many i.e. the freedom of all people rather than the freedom of one man, the prosperity of a whole group of people. The Russian nihilists have seen the individual benefits of these things and it is their goal to bring it to as many people as they can.

is important to humans. Man prefers to have the option to make bad decisions for at least they can maintain their freedom. The UM tells us that "man everywhere and at all times, whoever he may be, has preferred to act as he chose and not in the least as his reason and advantage dictated" (24). And it's clear that the UM prizes this freedom of choice highly. He calls it the "most advantageous advantage" (24).

So, the UM rejects the Crystal Palace because by its nature, it takes away peoples' free choice. And he hates the stone wall simply because he can. His response to it all, the alternate choice, is stasis, what he's been pursuing for most of his life. He laments in the opening: "Now, I am living out my life in my corner, taunting myself with the spiteful and useless consolation that an intelligent man cannot become anything seriously, and it is only the fool who becomes anything" (4). Dosteovsky's vessel for ideological warfare tells us that "the long and short of it is, gentlemen, that it is better to do nothing! Better conscious inertia" (35). This is his suggestion.

Spite seems to be the UM's current, albeit temporary, purpose. "I am a sick man…I am a spiteful man" are the UM's first words to the reader. Spite consumes him (3). The exact word used by Dostoevsky in Russian in that very opening sentence is 'злой,' often alternatively translated as *evil*, *malicious*, or *wicked*. The opening section seems to act as an endpoint for the UM's philosophy. He tells us the kind of person he is, what he's come to. He describes many of the conclusions he'll develop in the coming chapters, stating them simply as truths he's discovered in the nature of the world. I want to discuss the quote used in the previous paragraph: "Now I am living out life in my corner…" (4). Intelligence without conviction amounts to nothing. In a world with so many conflicting ideas about its own nature, even among the intelligent, how is someone supposed to choose a path and believe in it completely? Consider this observation in the UM's position. He agrees completely that the power of rationalism is

incredible, uniquely poised to help humanity, but he cannot give into the control entailed if humanity were to worship it religiously. He is stuck, completely frozen in a state of mental war. So what is he to do? What should be his guiding light?

> It was not only that I could not become spiteful, I did not know how to become anything: neitherspiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect (4).

The UM seems to come to spite as a kind of placeholder form of value. The UM's comparison of the stupid man of action and the intelligent man of acute consciousness does well to describe those people who choose illusory forms of value. He discusses the two kinds of men in a discourse surrounding both justice and revenge. Basically, he says that when insulted, the man of direct action will accept justice as a reason to revenge himself and then will do so. He calls this reason—one that brings a person to perform an action—a primary cause. The man of acute consciousness however, when insulted, considers justice, but does not believe in its primacy (11, 12). The more intelligent man will deliberate endlessly trying to convince himself of a primary cause to revenge himself. Any of these intelligent men will inevitably "[grind their] teeth in silent impotence to sink into luxurious inertia, brooding on the fact that there is no one even for [them] to feel vindictive against, that [they] have not, and perhaps never will have, an object for [their] spite, that it is a sleight of hand, a bit of juggling" (18). And because they have nothing but spite, these intelligent men, because they have found nothing to satisfy their idea of a primary cause, because they analyze unceasingly and use their aptitude for reason to attack whatever they come in contact with, spite becomes their cause (that is, if they choose to do anything at all). The UM shares this sentiment, saying that "spite, of course, might overcome everything, all my doubts, and so might serve quite successfully in place of a primary cause, precisely because it is not a cause" (18).

But spite is not a suitable answer. It is not a concept through which one can order their lives or make sense of the world. And the UM knows this. Dostoevsky does have a solution; it's embedded in the UM's instability, the uneasiness in his soul. It's the lack of conviction mentioned earlier that makes the UM so incredibly human. He wants to believe, wants to understand. He confesses to us at the end of Part 1: "I will tell you another thing that would be better, and that is, if I myself believed in anything of what I have just written. I swear to you, gentlemen, there is not one thing, not one word of what I have written that I really believe" (35). He has chosen spite as the solution to the prison-like mental state that is his continuous deconstruction and criticism, but he knows it's inadequate. In the first chapter he even tells us that "the real sting of it lay in the fact that continually, even in the moment of the acutest spleen, I was inwardly conscious with shame that I was not only not a spiteful but not even an embittered man, that I was simply scaring sparrows at random and amusing myself by it" (4). Instead of providing him with something approximating morality, he was using spite, not because it was comprehensive, but because it brought him sadistic pleasure. So, he recognizes the problems with spite, but where do we see that he desires for more? Hasn't he been living in his "wretched, horrid" room observing the world through spiteful eyes for the past twenty odd years? Perhaps, but a closer reading, I think, reveals a desire for more, a redemptive and instructive ideal, one the UM can put his faith in. Regarding the understanding that spite is unfit for continued use he says that "no knowing what and no knowing who, but in spite of all these uncertainties and jugglings, still there is an ache in you, and the more you do not know, the worse the ache" (13). It seems that the UM thinks there might be something out there, lurking in the moral ether, some better way to live life. The answer is the supernatural, belief in an eternally present moral arbiter—a perfect primary cause.

> Shower upon him every earthly blessing, drown him in a sea of happiness, so that nothing but bubbles of bliss can be seen on the surface…He would even risk his cakes and would deliberately desire the most fatal rubbish, the most uneconomical absurdity, simply to introduce into all this positive good sense his fatal fantastic element (13).

Spite has its stopping point much like the singularly destructive nature of irony described by David Foster Wallace. It simply has no constructive purpose. Spite is the result of human nature in conflict with self-imposed rational confines. Simply put, there are some things about being human which cannot be related rationally. However, Dostoevsky and Wallace have quite different ideas in mind about what should replace spite or irony, which have filled the purpose-void. Carol Apollonio, writes plainly that "in *Notes from [the] Underground*…the author makes his most profound statement of the human need for Christ. It is here that he initiates the exploration of human separation from God that will dominate all of his mature work" (1). Although the work does not state this belief plainly to the reader, critics usually look to an external letter where Dostoevsky opines the changes made to and subsequent release of the final two chapters. However, as Apollonio rightly notes, if the work's goal was to promote Christian beliefs, surely the removal of one chapter would not render the same thesis mute.

Throughout this piece I discuss the work of great authors in drawing up the strongest versions of their ideological opponents. It is only in this way that moral advancements and worthwhile criticism can emerge. The key here is redemption. It is the great disconnect that separates the UM from the nihilists. Given that the irrationality of man is true, humanity now requires a way to reconcile the great conflict that pure reason brings about. The UM refers back to the crystal palace to highlight this divide. The UM says that "if it [pure rationality] were not a palace, but a hen-house, I might creep into it to avoid getting wet," but he could not rightly call it *a palace*. But if the UM believes that "if one must live one had better live in a mansion" and he is opposed to the nihilists' crystalline ideology, "do change it," he appeals (33). "Allure me with

something else, give me another ideal" (33). And this something else, although it appears only subtextually, is faith in something that fully supersedes *merely human desire*: God. The UM even says that he would give himself over to an ideal so long as it would be entirely purposeful. In fact the UM actually concludes the small section where he likens human irrationality to sticking out one's tongue by claiming that he would "let [his] tongue be cut off out of gratitude if things could be so arranged that I should lose all desire to put it out" (34). But the UM is clear that he does not believe this can be arranged by merely human means: "It is not my fault that things cannot be so arranged, and that one must be satisfied with model flats.

And now the pieces are in place: (1) There is a decisive disconnect between strict rationality and human individuality. (2) This desire to 'stick out one's tongue' is part of human nature and therefore cannot be reconciled by the merely human means of the Crystal Palace. The penultimate chapter, although not what Dostoevsky fully intended, leaves the reader with a better answer he surely hopes to illuminate. In the chapter's final lines the UM asks rhetorically "Then why am I made with such desires? Can I have been constructed simply in order to come to the conclusion that all my construction is a cheat? Can this be my whole purpose? I do not believe it."

2.0 Infinite Jest

The public relegation of David Foster Wallace's writing as a mere extension of postmodern tradition or as nihilist in itself is easily understood. His discursive and maximalist prose in combination with his metanarrative games and intricate plots seems to place him in with the traditions of his predecessors—Pynchon, Barthelme, Barth, and other experimental postmodernist writers. And although his writing seems to follow in a postmodern style, below the literary gameplay the *raison-d'etre* and presuppositions of Wallace's writing in his novel *Infinite Jest* put him at odds with the philosophy of his predecessors. Instead, *Infinite Jest* appears to take the assumed existential nihilism of postmodernism to its natural, or perhaps overblown, conclusion and places its characters in a culture whose people have been taken with a kind of sad hedonistic consumerism.

In Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram" he describes the evolution of postmodernism from its infancy in the 1960s to the 'modern-day' of the essay's publication in the 1990s. The basic thrust of "E Unibus Pluram" is that television has adapted, or taken on, the qualities of early postmodernism which helped to make it popular, especially the irony and irreverence pioneered by the cadre usually known as the 'black humorists.' The main attributes of postmodern fiction, and of the art that they influenced in the following decades, include irony, self-reference, and the inclusion of low-culture topics. Irony is arguably the most important aspect in the rise of postmodernism. More pointedly, it's the use of this irony to challenge authority and habit, and thereby also the preexisting values. By reusing the methods these black humorists deployed to criticize their culture, television itself becomes immune from many of the admonishments calling out places where the early postmodern approach failed. Wallace writes in "E Unibus Pluram" that

television's solution "entailed a gradual shift from oversincerity[6] to a kind of bad-boy irreverence in the big face TV shows [the American public]. This in turn reflected a wider shift in U.S. perceptions of how art was supposed to work, a transition from art's being a creative instantiation of real values to art's being a creative instantiation of deviance from bogus values" (Wallace). In sum, television simply cannot serve to promote *or help develop* any values to replace those it denounces.

Television, by its very nature, takes on the other two aforementioned aspects: self-reference and the inclusion of the low-culture. While the early postmodernist did work to ensure a "whole new marriage between high and low culture," television cannot but help to include it. The whole idea of television is to reflect American culture, to show people what they want to see (Wallace). As one of his argument's premises, Wallace writes that "if we want to know what American normality is - what Americans want to regard as normal - we can trust television (Wallace)." Television is not so much a recreation of reality as it is a parody—a parody that dresses up the unsavory parts of the human experience surely, but a parody nonetheless. And with self-reference, hopefully now all is made clear. Television viewers, according to Wallace, are essentially viewing themselves. They ask for what they want to see, are given it, normalized to it, and are presented it once more.

Rhetorically, Wallace then poses the question which ties his argument together: What exactly does television's appropriation of the techniques of the early postmodernists have to do with literary fiction? To answer this Wallace turns to his predecessors once again. At one point, the strategies of postmodern fiction writers seemingly had valuable social utility. But in the new

[6] Seen in the nascent television programming of the 1950s and early 1960s.

age of a medium that has subverted this "involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm and rebellion" for hedonistic voyeurism, can those techniques progress any further? Can new writers, with full knowledge of their artistic lineage, take back those methods of change to create true authentic art? It's clear Wallace doesn't think this will be so easy. While "the assumptions behind this early postmodern irony…were still frankly idealistic: that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure" it seems to have reached its productive end.

> This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing…But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks (Wallace).

Instead, Wallace believes that a new generation of writers, a group he terms 'anti-rebels,' might arise. They will again "treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (Wallace). They will, in a sense, operate in reverse. The anti-rebels will refuse to continue in the tradition that brought valuable fiction to its stopping point. This is David Foster Wallace's goal. He *cannot* be a postmodernist. In order for him to be a postmodernist he would have to use irony to destroy institutions. Although he recognizes and utilizes the techniques of his predecessors, Wallace also understands their limitations. Wallace clearly hopes to regain the parts of fiction that once served *the good*.

In the novel *Infinite Jest*, there exists a movie, itself called Infinite Jest[7], so impossibly entertaining that once a person catches even a glimpse of the film, they'd prefer death than to stop watching. It serves almost as a MacGuffin, tying all the work's narrative threads together. At points in the story we see characters who've looked at the film being fed through plastic tubes to keep them alive as they refuse even to sustain themselves. The Entertainment serves as a kind of hedonistic cultural peak—the most potent escape from reality ever devised. But Wallace

[7] Alternatively called 'The Entertainment' throughout the novel.

paints those who fall prey to the overwhelming film as the most desperate kinds of addicts, not as people who've found some kind of universal purpose. The nihilist, even the optimist sort, would have to contend with the reality of such a movie. The Entertainment *is* a deadly piece of art. No one, not even the most disciplined minds, who sees it can resist becoming enthralled with it. One character in the book, Hugh Steeply, relates a story of a diabetic friend who'd accidentally seen a glimpse of the movie. Steeply says that though he was a man who was known to have "a will of steel" he was now being kept under control in "four-point restraints" (Wallace 507). So Wallace presents an addiction that's essentially free from responsibility as long as you don't know what you're about to view. It literally *cannot* be resisted. The rational faculties that usually come into play with addiction are not found with the Entertainment; there is no 'secondary will' a person can employ against its power. However, Wallace despairs what the Entertainment brings about.

Is this kind of addiction not positive? In a world where irony has succeeded in tearing down the basic moral structures, hedonistic pursuits seem bound to arise. Seeing this movie, must, in effect, fill a void or complete a life for it to be as addictive as it is. For the hedonist, this would seem to be the ultimate in life's meaning—the truest and most pure kind. Simply watch this movie until you waste away from starvation and dehydration and you will have been fulfilled. But it's clear that Wallace doesn't think this is the answer at all, which seems like it might be self-evident. He simply doesn't believe this is the kind of *telos* human beings have. This is the nihilist landscape Wallace sets up for his characters, all of whom are chained to their personal, ultimately empty addictions. And it is a dark and dangerous landscape. His characters do not have easy tasks to live up to undertake. Although I argue that Wallace doesn't take existential nihilism as an underlying truth in his writing, he does devise a world where it is the standard view. Wallace makes it clear that addiction to things like entertainment, narcotics, or

sex, no matter their hedonistic value, can never constitute an escape from reality or negate the responsibility that existence demands.

Throughout the novel Wallace submits almost every character to some kind of addiction that slowly unravels their lives. And in each character's evolution, Wallace eventually forces them, the characters, to deal with addiction's effects and find a new nucleus to center their lives around. Among the Incandenza's we see each paired with the following major addictions (though they have various others): Hal: Marijuana, James: Wild Turkey, Orin: Sex, Avril: Wanting to be a good mother. Joelle and Don find themselves in the depths of addiction to freebase cocaine and narcotics respectively. Wallace uses the double binds of his characters, not only situationally but internally, to truly fight against the nihilist bent of his predecessors. His use of character evolution serves as a unique and personal way to explore what are usually philosophical and broadly ontological concerns. To exemplify Wallace's use of this technique I will focus on two specific characters in the novel, namely Hal Incandenza and Don Gately.

To provide a kind of overview for some of Wallace's primary themes in *Infinite Jest*, I will explicate a discussion between two major characters that is broken up throughout the course of the novel. I believe that this conversation, dealing with commentaries on American culture and the Entertainment, captures much of Wallace's thesis in *Infinite Jest*. The conversation between Remy Marathe, an A.F.R. member of uncertain loyalty, and Hugh Steeply, an O.S.O.U.S. agent attempting to stop the weaponization of the Entertainment, atop an outcropping Northwest of Tucson, AZ is fractured and scattered throughout the text. Marathe, a French Canadian, serves as the novel's most lucid critic of the radical consumerism of American culture. In one section of the pairs' conversation Marathe even tells Steeply "you know there can be no forcing to watch a thing. If we disseminate [the Entertainment], the choice will be free no?"

(Wallace 430). He asks Steeply why, if he believes in an American ethos centered around freedom, he wouldn't trust most Americans to avoid the allure of the film (assuming they knew of its consequences).

Wallace sets up a novel notion of 'fanaticism' even earlier in the pairs' conversation. Marathe asks Steeply about the word 'fanatic' itself: "Do they teach you it comes from the Latin for 'temple'?...meaning, literally, 'worshipper at the temple'" (107). Marathe succinctly summarizes his worldview in this section asking rhetorically "are we not all of us fanatics?" (97). And because it is Marathe's belief that all humans are, by nature, fanatics, we should choose our center of worship, of our fanaticism, extremely carefully as this central devotion will affect all other choices. Marathe is a Quebecois nationalist committed to the survival of his culture even if the task requires radical measures. Instead of the pursuit of self-satisfaction, Marathe tells Steeply that "your nation outlives you. A cause outlives you" which makes devotion to them worthwhile (107). It's a commitment to the betterment of some part of humanity, one that you are a part of, but eventually will not be. To Marathe, this kind of cause is purposeful. Wallace also makes clear that a nation's ideology is only that which its people hold (in the same way a government doesn't have its own will, but merely the collective will of those who make it up). So the pair discuss the match-up: the self-indulgent individualism of Americans against the collective identity and national pride of the Quebecois. In the moral landscape, given the novel's continual disparagement of consumer culture, the Canadians certainly come out on top. Where are the uniting principles of America in this novel, the beliefs by which they can motivate the common citizen? Wallace's goal seems to be to place America on the defense, steelmanning the A.F.R. and French Quebecois position on the matter. Steeply's reply is that the devotion they're speaking about doesn't always come to be as rationally as Marathe is describing it. Sometimes,

Steeply argues, devotion just arises "without deciding" (108). And this seems to capture what Wallace believes is the ethos of the modern American era: a culture of individual independence and personal pursuit without the thought of *the bigger picture*, a misguided aim for satisfaction. Marathe notes that if this is the case those people who love without deciding are, in effect, "[fanatics] of desire…by yourself and alone, kneeling to yourself…the slave who believes he is free" (108). Marathe serves as the stalwart against the book's description, and perhaps exaggeration, of United States culture. Wallace sets up his villain, the terroristic A.F.R., to be as ideologically sound as possible and leaves it up to his major characters, all of whom are American, to fight out of their hedonistic culture toward the same level of fanatic, but this time worthwhile purpose. The ideological warfare that Wallace skillfully devises between the distinct factions in the novel is one of the many ways he uses irreconcilable differences to probe his characters.

Wallace structures much of *Infinite Jest* in series' of double binds, mentioned earlier, bringing about purposely difficult circumstances for his characters. The double binds in *Infinite Jest* force the novel's characters to undergo a transformation or act against their habits. It is in this way that Wallace attempts to bring moral teaching, or at least a discussion of the old "unsexy" morality, back into the conversation of good fiction. This can be seen within the Family Incandenza itself, with its middle child, Hal. The second youngest child of the family, Hal, serves as a kind of main character for the novel. His actions end up connecting the myriad narrative threads that are developed throughout the book. Hal is a hyper-intelligent, severely substance addicted, and prodigiously gifted young tennis player who we meet in the wake of his father's suicide. As a character Hal has a number of double-binds that he deals with throughout the novel, the most obvious of which is the marijuana addiction that he is forced to break in order

to compete in future tennis competitions. However, another of the double-binds Hal must deal with, and perhaps the one with the most depth, is his combination of lexical prowess and inability to experience emotion.[8] The source of Hal's emotional failure is left ambiguous although the issue is textually clear. Wallace writes that "Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like joie and value to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being – but in fact he's far more robotic…" (694). This contrast makes for such a compelling predicament because of the way humans use language to express our subjective experience. Obviously, in common speech, humans believe language, in its almost limitless combinations, can describe our internal experience in a way that it can relate to other people with consciousnesses similar to their own. Hal's range of vocabulary and syntactical expression is among the best of a generation, meaning he should be able to express his inner experience with great precision. It is this emotional connection between people, usually reached *through language*, that presents Hal with a difficult disconnect to overcome: Can human experience without emotion be relatable to other human beings?

Hal's inability to actually *feel* emotion throughout much of his childhood allows him to slip into a kind of solipsistic mental state which his father attempts to bring him out of by creating The Entertainment. This isolated mentality that Hal develops is corollary to the same postmodern nihilist bent that Wallace describes as having pervaded American culture, the destructive irony that's been co-opted by popular television. Although he's a high performing student and athlete bound for great future success on the professional tour, Hal struggles to fill

[8] Hal's fate at the end of the novel is a reemergence of internal emotions while losing the motor functions required for speech. An ironically tragic conclusion.

the same purpose-void that Wallace so clearly believes is common in many people living in modern society.

Hal, in his strong self-reflection, knows that he struggles with purpose. Hal even states that "[he] was waking up every day feeling as though there was nothing in the day to anticipate or lend anything meaning" and that the real question then was "whether the [drugs] had somehow become not just the high-point of the day but its actual meaning" (853). Hal goes on to say that, if this were true, it would "be appalling" (853). But why should this be appalling? Again, it seems trivial to say that drug use is a *wholly unfulfilling* enterprise, but on what grounds? On the other hand, turning to the devotion-type fulfillment brought up by Marathe, Hal says that "we are all dying to give our lives away to something" (900). Hal even considers his father's filmmaking in this light, noting that it seemed like a "black miracle…that people could actually care deeply about a subject or pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end" (900). But it's clear that Hal dislikes the conclusion of this position as well saying that there's "something pathetic about it" (900). To Hal, such a devotion, in his case being forced to train for competitive tennis, is actually "a flight-from in the form of a plunging-into;" it's like running away from the real problem (900). To Hal the whole notion of devotion, regardless of the choice of dedication, is a distraction.

Marathe's concern is that the capacity for devotion/addiction/fanaticism in each person goes toward something *greater than themselves*. Hal, in his emotional vacancy, has become a high achiever to fulfill the expectations that others have of him, particularly his mother as well as the other leaders and prorectors at the academy. His source of purpose is merely the bar that authorities in his life set for him. It isn't even true devotion. The energies propelling him forward in life aren't derived from things he truly believes in. To be fair, it seems reasonable to assume

that Hal can't yet even consider something greater than himself, although it should inevitably be his goal. He must first reassemble the bits and pieces still left floating around in his consciousness. So Hal is left in a kind of limbo. He rejects both avenues as a means for proper fulfillment. But this does not mean Hal is helpless. He has a savior, someone trying to help him realize the truth: his father.

We hear James Incandenza talk about his purpose in creating the film when he's in wraith-form near the end of the novel. He explains that besides himself no one else in the Incandenza Family "would see…the fact that the graceful and marvelous boy [Hal] was disappearing right before their eyes" (838). So, to save his son, Dr. Incandenza says that "he spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply converse" (838). More specifically, Incandenza's goal was to "make something so bloody compelling it would reverse on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life" (839). Dr. Incandeza's goal with the Entertainment is to reclaim those valuable parts of entertainment itself, as Wallace spelled out in "E Unibus Pluram."

Don Gately, another of the novel's central characters, is a narcotics-addicted jewel thief turned resident recovery house staffer. Gately is often classified as the novel's hero, which is quintessentially shown through his staunch refusal to accept pain medication after being shot defending one of his recovery patients. In the novel, Wallace presents his abstraction of the next generation's hero, something he calls the hero of non-action. In a section of the book devoted to one of Hal's papers submitted for a film class. Hal argues that over time just as viewers have grown tired of the "hero of action" so too will they grow tired of the postmodern "hero of reaction" (142). Eventually, viewers will recognize the hero of reaction as trapped in the

"reactive moral ambiguity of 'post-' and 'post-post' -modern culture" (142). It seems clear that Gately's arc as a character fulfills the qualities of the hero of non-action. Consider again here connections back to "E Unibus Pluram." The notion of a 'reactive moral ambiguity' seems akin to irony's singularly destructive capability.

As a character, Wallace writes Gately to be as predisposed to addiction as anyone can be. His mother was an alcoholic whom Gately, as a child, tried to keep from drinking by consuming some of her alcohol (Wallace 2). He's an early high school dropout with close connections to organized crime syndicates. But, although Gately is a lifetime criminal, he is not a man of violence, despite his physical immensity. Gately's eventual life-purpose turnaround comes after the accidental murder of a homeowner whom he had robbed. Between the options of prison and the Ennet Recovery House, Gately ends up getting clean and begins a long journey in Boston AA. As a resident staffer he becomes incredibly protective of the addicts who check in at the halfway house and becomes a kind of confidant and instructor to the newly recovering. His own personal path toward acceptance of many of the AA tenets and relinquishing the kind of addictive drive he has is recounted at different parts in the novel.

We must ask: how is Gately as a character showing an escape from the nihilist pit and what then is his alternative? Because of his prior severe addiction to Demerol and alcohol, relapse is shown to be the bottom of his personal pit. Here, Wallace grapples with the side effects of the so-called nihilist problem and the perception altering escapism provided by drug abuse. It's a hard thing to try and place the actual *reason* that drug addiction itself is bad. It's not really something you ever think of having to describe.

> Do exactly as you please — if you still trust what seems to please you (141).

And Wallace doesn't really make that a priority. Instead we see it done mainly through the AA sessions he describes. A lot of the sessions described are speaker sessions where Wallace constructs exaggerated (or not exaggerated, it's a bit hard to tell) addiction horror stories. Stories about accidentally killing children and abusing spouses and hiding hangovers and withdrawals in terrible ways. What Wallace seems to find so depressing about these folks is their abandonment of responsibility, their inability to grapple with the conscious reality of their being alive and of others being dependent on their existence. This seems to be the ultimate motivator in Wallace's mind and Gately comes to serve this ultimate purpose, a purpose that serves others.

Gately takes on, or is the best exemplification of Hal's, and most likely Wallace's, new hero, "the catatonic hero, the one beyond calm, divorced from all stimulus" (142). He is the hero of a generation that has moved past the destructivity of its postmodern predecessors. Wallace's description is the archetypal form that Gately approaches. He learns to abandon cynicism, a cruel extension of the ironic postmodern culture, in favor of unadulterated servitude to his fellow man. Gately talks at length about his struggle to accept and fully understand the tenets of AA. Wallace's description of the attitudes of long-time Boston AA members, known as the Crocodiles, makes the organization's points very clear. Wallace writes that the reader should know that "causal attribution, like irony, is death" at AA meetings (370). "Crocodiles' temple veins," Wallace says "will actually stand out and pulse with irritation if you start trying to blame your disease on some cause or other" (370). No one gets a pass and that's the terrifying beauty of responsibility. Although the addicts in AA have support from the group, accountability is the most important factor in sobriety success.

> And so this unites them, nervously, this tentative assemblage of possible glimmers of something like hope, this grudging move toward maybe acknowledging that this unromantic, unhip, clichéd AA thing — so unlikely and unpromising, so much the inverse of what they'd come too much to love — might really be able to keep the lover's toothy maw at bay. The process is the neat reverse of what brought you down and In here: Substances start out being so magically great, so much the

> interior jigsaw's missing piece, that at the start you just know, deep in your gut, that they'll never let you down; you just know it. But they do. (350).

The end of Gately's development happens while he lies in a hospital cot, hurting and contemplating. In an act of self-sacrifice and dedication, Gately is shot by A.F.R. members looking for Bruce Green, a resident who has killed a small dog. While he is hospitalized his doctors continually try and tempt Gately with many different kinds of narcotics. Early on in his hospital stay when Gately spies a certain doctor that he "almost had to reach up and swat this M.D. after surgery to keep him from hooking up a Demerol drip" (885). A Muslim M.D. even tries to empathize with Gately in an attempt to convince him to take painkillers saying that he "abstain[s] also, by religious law, from all abusive compounds as well…Yet if I have suffered trauma…I submit as a Moslem to the imperative of my pain and will accept relief" (887). And although he refuses the enticements of his doctors, he continues to battle internally against his own impulses.

The great problem Gately comes to realize is that he would be justified in taking the medication—it would be understandable. He fears that all along, lying mute in pain, he might currently be in direct contact with "the Sergeant at Arms, the Disease, exploiting the loose security of Gately's fever-addled mind, getting ready to fuck with his motives and persuade him to accept Demerol just once, just one last time, for the totally legitimate medical pain" (833). Again, this pain is 'totally legitimate.' This is one of Gately's difficult double-binds. Even more, Wallace writes that in those weeks Gately's "increasing self-pity leaves little room or patience for anybody else's self-pity" (835). In the context of the Crocodiles' hatred of attribution, Gately has been placed, by no choice but his own, into the most vulnerable position a drug addict, struggling to retain their composure, could possibly be in.

But in the end, as the minutes pass agonizingly slowly, Gately recognizes that there is light. Even while Gately swims through the most devastating memories of his past in a pain-induced haze his will remains unbroken. Wallace even writes that “Gately wants to tell Ferocious Francis how he's discovered how no one second of even unnarcotized post-trauma-infection-pain is unendurable. That he can Abide if he must" (885). Gately has realized the truth that Marathe elucidated earlier. Humans have this fanatical, devotional, addictive impulse and so, instead of pushing it aside, it must be confronted and reshaped. Even AA seems to recognize this in some basic form. Many of the members, even long sober ones, routinely relate the fact that the hunger for addiction never truly dies. Sometimes it's a simple routine that keeps the hunger at bay. However, Gately transcends this simple recognition by repurposing this innate desire.

Both Hal Incandenza and Don Gately are addicts. Any length of sobriety or lifestyle change will never change this fact. But Wallace’s position is that they fit into a much larger group all struggling with the same problem. This problem is the main issue facing an American society that glorifies or encourages hedonistic pursuits. This kind of pursuit is the existential nihilists’ stopping point. It is the place where irony can progress no further. More importantly however, Wallace believes that it is a distraction from devotions that *are worthwhile*. Worthwhile, purposeful devotion is to a cause greater than oneself that has lasting and defensible values. For different people this will certainly amount to different devotions, whether it is their country, their immediate community, or their family. Whatever the proper devotion is, it’s evident that Wallace is not a postmodernist in the way the outlook operates. Wallace is clear that postmodernism’s ironic destruction can do nothing in the way of forging new worthwhile values. In this way, *Infinite Jest* supports a moral position that each person should have a purpose that

serves the common good or, at least, something greater than oneself and cannot sustain a postmodern nihilist reading.

3.0 The Trial

Kafka's *The Trial* has been widely understood as 'absurdist literature.' This is a category of canonical works that emphasize the notion of an inherently irrational universe, its absence of meaning (existential nihilism), and characters who lack, and sometimes seek, a life purpose. Existential nihilism is a core presupposition of absurdism. Again, it's easy to understand the familiar conclusion that *The Trial* is a work of this kind—it contains an irrational accusation and a character trying in futility to use rationality as a weapon against the universe. But, the mistake in categorizing *The Trial* in this way is that Kafka doesn't really insist on the point that the world itself has no meaning. Neither the narrator nor K. himself seems to believe this is true. If it were the case, this would seem to imply that K. could not redeem himself from, specifically, (a) whatever he has been charged with and, more importantly, (b) his prior worldview. The reason a truly nihilist reading of *The Trial* cannot be sustained is due to the redemptive opportunities laid out in the plot, something that could not be tolerated under a nihilist schema.

As a character K. is both repulsive and selfish. Any attempt to characterize the sum total of his patterns of thought and behavior throughout the novel will call him *repugnant*, *egotistical*, *thoughtless*, and *status driven*. Kafka himself is said to have written that he found K. as a character to be "ugly, almost nauseating" (Kafka). K. is a hedonist, a simple but fitting way to describe his lifestyle. He is a creature of comfort and of status—a man for whom wealth and societal position is important. Early in the novel Kafka characterizes K. as someone "always inclined to take life as lightly as he could, to cross bridges when he came to them, pay no heed to the future, even when everything seemed under threat" (Kafka 3). In many scenarios, we see K. literally rank himself socially amongst those present. Rather comically, he is always trying to

determine who, in an interaction, has the high ground and when he realizes, as he does many times, that it isn't him, does his best to work his way up. For example, when K. is questioned by the two officers and later their superior he wonders whether he really must stand there and listen to the "chattering of base functionaries" —clearly an insult to the status of the two men (5). He looks past the pair again in the same scene and orders the men to take him to their superior (5). When K. returns to the courtroom's building he sees the lineup of 'the accused' and notes, peculiarly, that, just by their haircuts, he could identify that many of them "belonged to the upper classes" (44). Moreover, when K. speaks with one of the accused individually, he notes that though the man clearly retains a fairly high social status K. pities him for being unable to express the superiority that usually goes along with such a station (44). This is one of K.'s major character flaws: judging people based on their status compared to his own rather than treating everyone like an individual with dignity and worth.

We see K. and his problems: the way he looks down on others, his deep and obsessive concern for his breakfast routine, his attempts to seduce a married woman. But what is the proof that Kafka believes this kind of behavior is *morally wrong?* The answer is made clear in the novel's structure, specifically in its episodic building blocks. There is a trial, K. is stressed, K. feels guilty, his routine is being thrown off, people are being tortured in his office building. Something is clearly *wrong* and what's more, something needs to change. In every episode in the novel K. is given chances to abandon the hedonistic lifestyle that's culminated in this upending disruption and he rejects or fails them every time.[9]

[9] Note here that the thing he valued most, his lifestyle, is being taken away from him and he's deeply stressed trying to recover it. This again supports the idea that Kafka's thesis may involve a distaste for the hedonism K. himself enjoys.

The novel's episodes are structured in lessons, opportunities for K. to redeem himself, to let go of his old mindset. Most of Chapter 2, on the initial hearing, is devoted to K.'s epic rant in front of the elderly court members. K. is reprimanded for his tardiness as soon as he makes it to the attic courtroom. Kafka writes that K. "had decided he would do more watching than talking, so he did not defend himself for supposedly having come late, and simply said, 'Well maybe I have arrived late, I'm here now'" (27). Kafka is clear that K. doesn't even make an effort to excuse himself to a court that he's conceded power to simply by appearing in front of them. This is a small, but important display of Kafka's emphasis on responsibility. The same goes for the rant itself. He was expected to remain quiet, as a subordinate in the courtroom. Instead, he chooses to berate the court and its officials and is laughed out of the room. Another of K.'s potential lessons can be seen when discovering the two officers being tortured in a closet in his office building. One of the officers being tortured cries out to K., saying "we're [being] beaten because you made a complaint about us to the examining judge" (57). This happened in K's courtroom rant. But instead of recognizing the results of his brazen disrespect to the bureaucracy and acknowledging his part in the terrible thing being done in front of him, he cowers in fear. "I didn't make any complaint," K. tells the pair, "I only said what took place in my home" (57). And though he makes an attempt to stop the 'whip-man,' once Franz screams and almost accidentally brings unwanted attention to the closet K. refuses to help any further.

In rationalizing his cowardice after the fact, K. comes to the conclusion that he probably would have been able to dissuade the whip-man if Franz had not yelled while being beaten because it might draw other bank employees to the closet where they'd see K. in a closet with two nude men and their torturer. Because of this, there's simply nothing further to be done. He tried to fix the problem he created and it failed, so he gave up. We see the same failure to take

responsibility and K.'s weakness of constitution when he wants to sleep with the attendant's wife. As K. is considering a married woman, someone connected to the court, it seems plausible that K. would think twice about having relations with her, especially after panicking that his original accusation may have been related to sexual impropriety. Instead, K.'s immediate thought is that "maybe there was no better revenge against the examining judge and his cronies than to take this woman from him and have her for himself" (39). And it seems, yet again, that K. is being tested. He is being given opportunities to remove himself from the selfish behavior he enjoys and give in to the message that the universe seems to have for him. This might be a less *personally* enjoyable way of life, one that requires more dedication and fortitude than the one he currently lives, but he will be better off for it.

In each lesson K.'s weapon against the injustices he's been forced into is *rationality*. He presents a logical argument to explain his cowardice and lack of personal commitment; this is his nature. K.'s courtroom rant is a perfect display of this concept at work. K.'s goal in his oration is to undermine the validity of the court he's in front of. He claims that his case, in which someone was wrongly accused, is not a singular occurrence. In fact, he's representing a community of wrongly accused peoples in speaking to the court. He tells the room that the goal of the faceless bureaucracy is to "arrest innocent people and wage pointless prosecutions against them," which, of course, seems immoral. Moreover, after insulting the quality of the bureaucracy's lowest ranking members which he claims can only come from the invalidity of its foundational elements,[10] he asks: "How are we to avoid those in office becoming deeply corrupt when everything is devoid of meaning?" (33). In an episode mentioned previously, the closet torture

[10] Throughout the course of his rant K. insults not only the police officers that arrested him but also their supervisor, the examining judge overseeing his case, and, by the end, every member of the organization present in the courtroom.

episode, we see K. making the same sorts of rational arguments, only this time, he uses it to justify his own actions *to himself.* After the two officers tell K. that they're being punished because of a complaint that he made, K. defends himself: "I didn't make any complaint, I only said what took place in my home. And your behavior was not entirely unobjectionable, after all" (57).[11] And then immediately after, when he pushes Franz back into the closet, back toward his torturer, K. rationalizes this terrible decision, saying "but of course, it became impossible for him to do anything as soon as Franz started screaming" lest the bank staff catch him talking to undesirables in the closet.

But an oral, rational argument criticizing the bureaucracy gets K. nowhere. Nor does it do anyone any good when rationality can be used to justify pushing a man toward torture. But if rationalism fails at every turn, what is the solution? What is Kafka's solution? It seems that there are a few plausible 'answers' that *could* be supported by the text, though some surely present as more likely than others. However, each possible answer must, in a way, be extrapolated from the writing itself or, in other words, be discovered beyond the final page. Again, it's clear that K.'s lifestyle is at odds with the universe which indicates that Kafka is arguing for the existence of not only some natural order, but also some proper way that humans are meant to behave *within* that order. Now, the aforementioned solution surely correlates with the way in which Kafka believes humans ought to behave. The practice of ethics is Kafka's choice of telos for rational human beings.

[11] In other words: "Yes I did make a complaint to your superiors, although I'm not quite ready to accept the consequences my pompous anger may have caused."

4.0 The Plague

Albert Camus routinely engages with the great question of life's meaning and the reason for humanity's existence. His characters are placed into weird situations where they are forced to fend for their moral lives. And his writing does seem to portray this kind of malleable worldview, where oddities and aberrations make their way into the mundane. There's *much* similarity between Camus' and Kafka's unique takes on absurdism. Most notably it's the characters' casual acceptance of whatever extraordinary thing that's just happened to them. It's even clearer with Camus' writing how readers could see his absurdist bent as just random torture on his characters. However, Camus is pushing his characters to extremes, forcing them to withstand difficulties so that they might be better in the long run. In no way does Camus engage with nihilist attitudes simply by being an absurdist. In fact, the 'lessons' built into his writing, especially in *The Plague*, are evidence that he must believe that human life has some inherent meaning.

The danger in *The Plague* is more real than some of the others described in this piece. That is, it actually threatens the lives of the characters at every moment in the novel. Unlike the nihilist problem set up by *The Trial* and *Notes*, which revolve around a main character, the plague affects an entire town. Camus cleverly sets up Oran as a science experiment for his characters: a closed system with a violently spreading disease. The fictional city is perfect for allowing Camus to manipulate external forces and allow for effects on characters within the system to simply unfold. And much like the previously discussed works Camus creates unique issues for his characters to deal with, giving them chances to rectify wrongdoing. These

characters are the citizens of Oran, the ones who primarily advance the plot: Paneloux, Tarrou, Cottard, Grand, and Rambert.

Dr. Bernard Rieux is the mysterious narrator of this novel. He's a man of great intelligence, foresight, and discipline. Rieux is intensely practical and straightforward. Even at the plague's height, Rieux serves in his profession as a kind civic duty. He manages to head off the disease's initial outbreak by appealing to the naive Prefect and the town's other authorities. The use of comedy in Camus' unique absurdism is a tactic designed to bewilder the reader, to place the funny, or the weird, into a more typical situation. Understanding the purpose of the absurd draws forth Rieux's position in the novel. He's the comedic straight man. And when you notice the ensemble of unusual characters that make up the town's citizens, the reason for his composition is elucidated even further. He's positioned to make commentary *about* the absurd, to notice its unusual qualities.

Rieux is also bound to objectivity in his narration. It's certainly something that comes out of both his personality and his practicality. Rieux even writes, before he's revealed as the narrator: "That it may be said in passing, is why, so as not to play false to the facts, and, still more, so as not to play false to himself, the narrator [himself] has aimed at objectivity" (Camus 180). Even more, Rieux says that he has refrained from excessively changing the details he has collected, only shifting the facts to make narration more presentable (180). In fact he even lets the audience know that, though he tried to keep everything perfectly objective, the distress he felt being separated from his wife increased as the days went by, so it's more than likely some of his personal feelings have made their way into the pages. It is his honest desire for objectivity that makes Rieux, by default, the perfect character to draw out the themes and messages Camus

builds, including those of community strength and linguistic clarity. He will, as best he can, try and give us the facts at hand, even when they are out of the ordinary.

Rieux along with Tarrou, who has a similar outlook but with a different emphasis, outline a secular humanist worldview. Rieux's own beliefs are centered around duty in his professional life. As a physician his job is to heal the sick. This is his core belief. And in fact, almost every time personal information about Rieux is given, of course by himself, his devout duty to medicine is referenced. For example, when Rieux encounters the first of the plague's victims he looks out at Oran's skyline and calms himself by noting that "There lay certitude,; there, in the daily round…the thing was to do your job as it should be done" (41). Rieux even characterizes the plague as an *actor* writing that "It was, above all, a shrewd, unflagging adversary; a skilled organizer, doing his work thoroughly and well" (180). And again he mentions that, due to the strain of his work fighting the Plague, one the 'fixed ideas' he now keeps at close attention is "to take, the moment the plague ended, a complete vacation, of a week at least, which he would devote, "hats off" to his work in progress" (190-1). The fact that Rieux is the narrator of the tale also gives a unique weight to his focus on work. Given the remarkably little personal information revealed about Rieux throughout the novel, this focus would seem to make up much of Rieux's framework. To generalize, each person might have some duty according to their ability and talent that rote professional work will help to fulfill and also ground them with its inherent consistency.

Rieux is even more clear about his beliefs, especially in relation to God, when speaking with Tarrou in the Part Two of the novel. When Tarrou questions Rieux on the matter of his own belief in God Rieux notes that "if he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him. But no one in the world believed in a God of that sort" (127). So Rieux characterizes his professional duty also as a 'defense' of the sick; it is the act of fighting

against the world as it is, with its suffering, even if it is created by God. Their conversation culminates in Rieux's statement that "since the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in him and struggle with all our might against death" (128). In the end, Rieux's beliefs don't hang on the question of the existence of God, even if his actions are merely impermanent gestures of benevolence. Rieux will fight because he can limit suffering through his actions, something he believes a good God would surely do on his own. He has filled his moral void with a desire to protect humanity against the brutality of nature and has vowed his goal's pursuit until death.

After Rieux, Father Paneloux is the easiest to deal with in terms of beliefs and motivations. It's easy to dismiss the priest and his call for penitence before the Lord. But when such a time comes and reality has been shaken a little too hard for a town to withstand, is his offer really that unreasonable? He remarks, at the beginning of his first sermon that:

> The first time this scourge appears in history, it was wielded to strike down the enemies of God. Pharaoh set himself up against the divine will, and the plague beat him to his knees. Thus from the dawn of recorded history the scourge of God has humbled the proud of heart and laid low those who hardened themselves against Him. Ponder this well, my friends, and fall on your knees (95).

As a member of the audience, as the reader of a novel, we know that the plague's initial breakout was the fault of either human negligence or ignorance.[12] Either way, why? Is there a reason for the increase in human suffering? Paneloux, even more directly, tells his congregation that "the just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause to tremble" (95). According to the Jesuit priest this calamity is not random punishment against the citizens, but rather its violence is meant for the sinners amongst them.

[12] Of course, we assume the latter.

Despite this, Paneloux serves a counterintuitive role later in the novel when the characters grapple with the death of an innocent child. Paneloux, as a man of supposedly devout faith, admits that the death of an innocent child cannot be rationally understood by man. Instead Paneloux tells the men that "[this] sort of thing is revolting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand" (218). But Rieux is unsatisfied with this answer that forces a code of ethics to be adhered to on blind faith alone. Riuex replies to the priest succinctly saying "No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture" (218). And although Paneloux continues to profess this belief, it's clear that after the innocent child's death Paneloux had been affected in some way. For example, the second sermon he gives is far less effective than the first and he gives it to a church that's only three quarters full. Rieux notes during the second sermon Father Paneloux "spoke in a gentler, more thoughtful tone…and several times was noticed to be stumbling over his words" (222). Moreover, Rieux notes that an even more significant change was that the priest used 'we' rather than the pronoun 'you' to refer to the congregation. Despite these changes and the internal struggle that Paneloux might be going through, Rieux tells the reader that Father Paneloux restated his earlier position throughout the sermon, again defending a relinquishing of fate to God. Rieux writes that "[Paneloux] would boldly say to those who listened to his words today: 'My brothers, a time of testing has come for us all. We must believe everything or deny everything. And who among you, I ask, would dare to deny everything?' (224)." The question of unnecessary, brutal suffering that afflicts the innocent is a question that the God-fearing will always face. In a world with a God that intervenes in human affairs, is God *allowing* the innocent to die or is He causing their death? And Rieux, the scenario's recounter, questions the Father's motivations carefully, asking "For

who would dare to assert that eternal happiness can compensate for a single moment's human suffering?" (224).

Camus' beliefs about this kind of opinion are clearly represented in Paneloux's fate. When Paneloux takes ill he refuses to call for medical attention believing that he will be saved by the power of God alone. Even in death, Paneloux's actions are justified by his primary concern: God. Certainly his own death was willed by God as was his suffering. In a way, Paneloux's worldview is one kind of demolition of the self. It's rather similar to the notion of foregoing individualism to give oneself over to a greater cause, just like Marathe and Steeply at the Tucson outcropping. The thrust of their conversation about French nationalism is the willingness of the Quebecois to give themselves over to something greater, a selfless contribution to a cause that will outlast them. However, in Paneloux's version, God is the ultimate and greatest cause. When Paneloux dies, almost certainly not from the plague, Rieux's commentary about the man is simple: "Doubtful case" (234).

Almost in opposition to Paneloux, Tarrou is a character who represents the fundamental ideas of secular humanism. He does not believe in God nor in the safety of an afterlife. However, in no way does Tarrou reject beliefs about morality or duty. Rather, he seems to believe in them wholeheartedly. Tarrou's problem lies in the grounding or derivation of his beliefs. And while Tarrou expresses some concern about the bedrock of his beliefs, one of his obsessions throughout the novel is "learning how to become a saint" (255) and more specifically "Can one be a saint without God?" (255). From this, it's clear that even under a secular humanist framework the perfection of humanity is of great importance. Clearly, Tarrou believes that moral activity exists.

At the core of Tarrou's belief lies the principle of the preservation of human life, both innocent and guilty. This strong belief manifested earlier in Tarrou's life in his lengthy protest against capital punishment. This is not to say however that Tarrou rejects the notion of ethical standards which can be followed and applied, but merely that failing to meet a moral standard does make that person immoral or evil necessarily. In Part 4 of the novel Tarrou uses plagues and sickness as a metaphor for describing his conception of human nature. Tarrou tells Rieux that "[he] can say I know the world inside out, as you may see—that each of us has the plague within him" (253). The tenet at the heart of Tarrou's worldview is purification of the spirit,[13] with complete understanding of its grueling and meticulous requirements. Tarrou confesses that "the one who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention" and that "it needs tremendous will-power, a never ending tension of the mind, to avoid such lapses" (253). Tarrou admits, freely, that the process is a life-enduring one and that the alternative is quite attractive.

Despite their differences, Tarrou and Rieux's outlooks have almost identical practical implications. Tarrou tells Rieux that he's "decided to take, in every predicament, the victims' side, so as to reduce the damage done" (254). So, although Tarrou's framework involves a consideration of the relationship between victim and oppressor in different situations, his goal is to reduce suffering, to limit the effects and spread of the plague. Although Tarrou and Rieux openly admit that their moral positions might have issues at their core, individually they are able to derive value from just the world around them, from something embedded in the very nature of humanity.

[13] Whatever one might call the moral piece of human nature. Tarrou desires its perfection.

Another major character, Cottard, an eccentric criminal who shares Grand's apartment building, offers yet another worldview that contrasts with elements of the previously mentioned three. Among the worldviews yet discussed, Cottard's outlook values human life more generally, and also his own, the least. It's striking then to apply Tarrou's understanding of repentance and judgment regarding the death penalty to Cottard's attempted hanging. In Tarrou's understanding there's arguably no worse action; suicide, especially in Cottard's case, where he is under criminal investigation, seals guilt into a person's fate. Tarrou spent much of his life defending criminals for the sole reason that he believes in the opportunity for redemption. He doesn't believe that penitence and reconciliation can *always* be achieved, but that it must be offered in every case.

In another way, Cottard's lack of defined, life-orienting goals makes him the antithesis of Rieux, the ever-practical and profession driven. While neither Rieux nor Cottard seem to have any *codified* worldview, at least nothing compared to those of Tarrou and Paneloux, Rieux certainly believes he has duties. To be fair, they may not be *moral* duties like Tarrou's fight against the death penalty and interest in sainthood, but Rieux has an obvious duty to his profession and its very nature achieves moral action. It may not be that Rieux has faith in the medical profession as some kind of moral guide, but being a doctor necessitates human intervention with the express intent of the saving of human life, of preventing suffering. It is the most basic nature of the profession that arguably motivates Rieux. Cottard has no such profession; In fact, he has no stable human-to-human relations. Rieux's grounding in his profession, as part of his community, is the very thing that Cottard lacks. Being a doctor might be the *only* thing that makes Rieux the practical and straightforward man that he is and Cottard

lacks this. He is the least defined character in terms of position in the community and general belief system in the novel.

In light of Camus' broader themes about change and community in the novel, Cottard's lack of emotion or care for others makes him the character most at odds with the novel's message. In light of Tarrou and Rieux specifically, citizens who've sacrificed their wellbeing for their fellow man, Cottard seems cowardly. Tarrou, not even a true resident of Oran, is loyal to the defense of humanity as a whole. Cottard is forced to meet the moral, is-ought gap head on. Although he does not mistreat his neighbors or discourage those who mitigate the plague's effects, he does not assist himself. Of course Camus doesn't state anywhere that there exists any moral imperative for collective action against the specter of disease, but it does seem as though, without lingering on the philosophical implications, Camus might believe Cottard's outlook is the worst case scenario. Where Paneloux has blind devotion (faith) as his reprieve and long standing cause, Cottard has nothing to fill the void except for himself.

The thread that connects these novels appears over and over again. All of the authors share in a message that devotion to oneself is inherently wrong. Like in *Infinite Jest,* there are seemingly gradations of this devotion to something. The Quebecois Separatists are ranked more favorably than someone who devotes their life to themselves or to drug use[14], although those latter two may be one and the same. Cottard's final position in the novel is even further evidence that a self-oriented outlook must be poisonous. As the number of plague victims begins to wane and the town prepares to reopen its gates, Cottard is oddly anxious for its end. With a return to normality certainly comes a return of regular law enforcement, an institution that's been concerned with plague's effects all this time. As if on cue, while Tarrou and Cottard are

[14] For Wallace, drug use might also just be devotion to oneself.

discussing the changes that will come when Oran is back to normal, two officers appear to arrest Cottard and he flees. In the final chapter of the novel Rieux walks to Cottard's neighborhood where he's informed that there is a mad shooter in the area, later discovered to be Cottard himself. In a very brief end, Cottard is attacked and arrested by the police and later dies of the plague.

In sum, Camus doesn't seem to take clear sides in the ideological clash set up between four of the novel's primary characters: Paneloux's dogmatism, Cottard's self-preservation, and Rieux and Tarrou's slightly different kinds of secular humanism. But throughout the novel it's evident which of these views Camus sees as flawed from its very nature. Paneloux's almost authoritarian belief system and Cottard's disregard for human life are portrayed as the worst among the lot. However, Camus does not target either view outright. Rieux's objective narration clearly points out elements of the two problematic outlooks which are positive; they are in fact grasping at the right straws. Moreover, that is also not to say that either of the secular humanist perspectives offered in the novel do not themselves have issues, especially with their grounding. In the end, none of the four worldviews give a comprehensive or well-founded schema for humanity to engage in moral, worthwhile behavior, but it's clear where Camus wants to direct his readers. Camus believes in the secular humanist approach, where the protection of humanity from suffering is an overarching guide for all other action. It is clear then, that a nihilist reading of *The Plague* cannot be sustained.

5.0 Conclusion

For a piece of writing to rightly be called nihilist, in any sense of the word, its author must aim to promote a nihilist outlook. The piece's message must justify nihilism for its reader; it must make the nihilist case. Despite quarrels over the 'correct' definition of the word or of its implications, at root the nihilist is convinced that the world, inherently, has no meaning. Most commonly, this also means that things like value and morality are illusions, stemming from the same fruitless search for human purpose. The incredible void, hole, or perhaps absolute confusion, the supernatural end humanity has wrestled to understand for its self-conscious existence; this is the same question the nihilists claim to have solved. In fact, they've boiled it down, deconstructed its precepts, and have come to realize one important thing: the question itself is the issue. If any of these texts concede and refer to a morality that hinges on human cognition or even simply some value in human nature, they must also contend with their metaphysical implications. One cannot accept a theory of inherent value while simultaneously holding a belief that humanity has no purpose. Instead, all of this value, as the nihilist would surely have to admit, must be constructed. Therefore, the truth of the value of humanity, for example, would not be a *universal* truth. It would be contingent only on the reasoning structure humanity has manufactured to undergird it. Seeing as the earlier writing on the pieces demonstrates that each author maintains a belief in the inherent value of humanity, one not designed by humans *for* humans, this value must exist independently. As a belief such as this would directly contradict with a nihilist worldview, a nihilist reading of these texts cannot be sustained.

Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, particularly its first section of philosophical dialogue, provides quintessential opposition to early nihilist beliefs. The Underground Man brings forth a discussion of human spirit and its dual nature. Throughout the novella, Dostoevsky maintains that man's two natures, our ability to reason and to hold individuality, will not allow for the complete domination of the rational utopia the Russian nihilists are aiming for. Instead, individual choice, freedom of the will, is a necessary condition for human activity. Even when presented with the total consequences of his actions, man will strike against a purely rational framework for his actions because of his own nature. But seeing as Dostoevsky concedes the power of rationality as a means of understanding some level of morality, he posits a supernatural connection between the individuality that seems to cause its failure: God. As *Notes from Underground* is unlike the other pieces explicated in this paper, its position in light of the overarching thesis is a bit different than the rest. Instead the discussion of *Notes* offers a clear example of a counterattack on the strict, hard determinist nihilist position. For the Russian nihilist, whether created by God or not, rationality is a means to an end. Properly executed, the expanded natural sciences, themselves pure extensions of reason, could fully determine the moral quality of any activity guided by a utilitarian perspective. For Dostoevsky, morality and human value are inherent qualities of the universe as created by God. Rationality or reason are a means to apprehend these qualities, but in order to fully reconcile the tool's limits, God must bridge a gap which humans alone cannot themselves erect.

David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* presents its reader with a world fully taken by a nihilistic hedonism. Rampant alcohol abuse, drug use, and sex addiction are the hallmarks of the novel's setting. And these things, these temporary pleasures, are attempts to fill in a gaping hole in the human soul, one that the novel's characters have lost touch with. Impermanence is their

enemy. Each character desires an everlasting solace. Hal's temporary purpose is to please his mother. Gately's, formerly, was drug use, as were the vices of Joelle and Mr. Incandenza. Each character, through their own double binds, come to realize the singularly *unspecial* nature of their guiding lights. Instead, each character recognizes their need for serving something 'greater than themselves,' be it their community, their nation, or their family. A truly nihilist reading of *Infinite Jest* would have each character fully understand their place in a meaningless universe. Instead, Wallace brings his characters, through intense tribulation, to a recognition of something greater. Seeing as Wallace rejects the ability of early postmodern art to construct new value, a return to a discussion of, what he deems, 'unsexy' truth and meaning is his goal. Therefore, a truly nihilist reading of *Infinite Jest* cannot be sustained.

Kafka's *The Trial* offers its readers with a kind of supernatural force that K. fights against. An absurdist reading of *The Trial* would place K. and the novella's other characters in a world with merely constructed meaning. But, K. makes no attempt to develop or to find a meaning of his own; his lifestyle is hedonistic and self-centered. Instead, Kafka places K. in a kind of battle with the legal system, which has taken on the form of an all-powerful and mysterious governmental body. Throughout the novella, K. is given many opportunities to make better decisions, to reject the lifestyle he has fallen into. And time and time again K. rejects each offer for redemption. After each failure, K. seems to become further embroiled in his legal case. It is clear then that Kafka holds some overarching inherent morality that K. is failing to live up to, meaning a nihilist reading of *The Trial*, or any interpretation which posits a constructed theory of human value, cannot be sustained.

In *The Plague,* Camus offers a variety of unique perspectives on human purpose and value, but seems to side primarily with those of the secular humanists, Rieux and Tarrou.

Although he does not outright reject the beliefs of Father Paneloux, the dogmatic Christian priest, he takes issue with the precepts that he espouses. In a similar manner, Camus offers criticism of the humanists, particularly taking issue with the grounding of their beliefs (how they might understand that humanity has value without the permanence of a God). However, seeing as both Tarrou and Rieux seem to provide the novel's moral righteousness in protecting civilians at any cost and defending against the plague's destruction, it seems as though their beliefs are favored in the mind of the author. Again, if humanity has inherent value, as humans *qua* humans, a nihilist reading of *The Plague* cannot be maintained.

The novel is an artistic creation. Its technique involves a crafting of language. These novelists, in all their philosophical musings, hope to tell a story. Although not discussed thoroughly in this paper, the second half of *Notes from Underground*, titled 'Apropos of the Wet Snow' is a series of vignettes written with a more narrative voice, in sharp contrast to the UM's solipsistic dialogue that takes up the first section. Each of these authors was deeply invested in philosophical tradition and it is clear in these works. Stepping back, philosophy is about how humans achieve truth, meaning, and understanding. And if art should do anything, as David Foster Wallace likes to put it, it should reflect human values, and therefore probably also the way we try to formulate these values: philosophy.

All the progress that has ever been made in philosophy has been achieved *in language*. Language is the way people speak and communicate; it's also most often the way people think. In many ways, language helps to give structure to human lives. So, to structure a philosophical investigation, which all of these works certainly can be considered, in the form of a novel, seems to be a fruitful avenue for exploration. By having characters, who are human themselves, struggle with existence, a kind of inward reflection can be brought about in the reader. This is

what these authors have attained. They ask interesting questions of their characters and of their audience, or at least present a kind of problem. They construct a philosophical dialogue out of story and imagination. A careful reading of each of these texts clearly reveals an ongoing moralist conversation within their narratives. In sum, by creating a mechanism to explore the fundamental nature of human existence, each of these authors have produced art centered around human value.

Bibliography

Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Penguin Classics, 2020.

Curtis, Paul M. "'Yo Man so What's Your Story': The Double Bind and Addiction in David Foster Wallace's 'Infinite Jest.'" *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2016, pp. 37–52. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030596. Accessed 17 Mar. 2024.

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from the Underground*. Dover Publications, 1992.

Frank, Joseph. "Nihilism and 'Notes from Underground.'" *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 69, no. 1, 1961, pp. 1–33. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27540632.

Kafka, Franz. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*. Penguin Random House, 2023.

Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Schocken Books, 1999.

Petrov, K. 'Strike out, right and left!': a conceptual-historical analysis of 1860s Russeian nihilism and its notion of negation. *Stud East Eur Thought* 71, 73–97 (2019).

Peterson, Gregory Robert. "Introducing the Hero of Stasis: An Examination of Heroism in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest and The Pale King." 2018. *The Keep, Eastern Illinois University*, https://thekeep.eiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4736&context=theses#:~:text=Gately%27s%20successful%20struggle%20with%20drug,authentic%20hero%20in%20Infinite%20Jest

Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. fiction.." The Free Library. 1993 Review of Contemporary Fiction 16 Mar. 2024. https://www.thefreelibrary.com/E+unibus+pluram%3a+television+and+U.S.+fiction.-a013952319

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest* : a Novel. Boston :Little, Brown and Company, 1996.

Wallace, David Foster. "How Don Gately Found God (Excerpt from Longer Work-in-Progress)." *Harvard Review*, no. 1, 1992, pp. 95–98. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27559400.