

Four Reasons for Rebellion: On the Existentialist Revolt against the Crowd

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To rebel, Albert Camus tells us, is to say ‘no’ (1991b: 13). It is to resist some external force that wishes to impose itself upon us, to refuse the dictates of some external authority regarding what to think or how to act. But, Camus adds, to rebel is also to say ‘yes’ (1991b: 13). It is to affirm that there exists within ourselves something worthy of defence. By asserting a limit to the intrusion of others, we also assert the value of what lies beyond that limit. Hence, the rebel is never totally without a cause; they always have their reasons (Camus 1991b: 19). The goal of this chapter is to give an account of some of these reasons. I will explain why, and against what, various existentialists would have us rebel.

THE PROBLEM OF THE CROWD

Rebellion comes in many forms, but it is possible to distinguish them in terms of the power or force being resisted. Sometimes the power is a political one. Being a rebel is about revolting against a governmental entity that would subjugate people to its will. This is one of the main topics of Camus’s *The Rebel* (1991b). Other times, rebellion has a religious target. Søren Kierkegaard (1998a), for example, speaks of resisting the Danish state church, and Fyodor Dostoevsky (2003) has Ivan Karamazov talk about rebelling against God. Finally, sometimes rebellion is directed against something abstract: one revolts against the world or reality itself. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, praises those who defy the absurdity of life (1991a: 121–23). Miguel de Unamuno, in *The Tragic Sense of Life*, extols those who refuse to succumb to the crushing truth of their insignificance (1972: 291–92).

This chapter will focus on social rebellion. In particular, I will be discussing the form of rebellion that resists the force of the ‘crowd’ or the ‘public’ (see Aho 2020: 62–67; Cooper 1999: 110–16; Tuttle 1996). In modern society, many existentialists observe, we do not only encounter isolated individuals. We also confront the nameless, faceless masses. Other people merge into an enormous, anonymous collective that seeks to impose its will upon us. This ‘crowd’ or ‘public’ pressures us to do what they think is right. They command us to be normal—or endure their wrath. It is against this force that many existentialists would have us rebel. Their hero is the individual who refuses to do what the masses would have them do, who rejects the norms of modern society.

I will look at four reasons for rebellion that we find in existentialist writings, which can be summarized as follows. First, we ought to rebel against the norms of mass society because they are wrong or misguided. Second, our social norms merit resistance because

they are insufficiently inflexible; they cannot handle the exceptional case. Third, we should rebel against our social norms because they are one-sided. That is, they ignore the possibility of other equally legitimate points of view. Fourth, we ought to resist the authority of the crowd simply because we ought to resist all external authorities.

Some qualifications are in order. To begin, these four lines of argument are not exhaustive. It is possible to find others in the existentialist literature. They also are not mutually exclusive. Embracing one does not require rejecting the rest. Indeed, they overlap at many points. As such, it may be better to regard them as different frameworks for interpreting the motivation behind social rebellion than as distinct justifications. Finally, I have structured this chapter around four reasons for social rebellion defended by existentialist thinkers. This approach might suggest that existentialists generally support social rebellion. There is something to this impression. It comports well with the long-standing interpretation of existentialism as individualistic (Kaufmann 1975: 11–12). But there is another side to the story. Many existentialists worry about the costs of social rebellion or regard it as a threat. To capture this ambivalence, I will conclude the chapter by examining some of social rebellion's downsides.

ORDINARY REBELLION

Our question, once again, is why the crowd merits resistance. Why do the existentialists urge us to reject what the masses would have us do? One answer is that we ought to rebel against the crowd because the norms it pushes upon us are wrong or misguided. As this is the most straightforward justification we will consider, we may call it *ordinary rebellion*.

A catalogue of errors

The norms of mass society may be misguided in a variety of ways. First, they may be *immoral*. One example is Simone De Beauvoir's critique of mass society in *The Second Sex* for encouraging women to be feminine. By femininity, she means the disposition to be submissive and deferential, especially towards men. This mindset, De Beauvoir claims, dehumanizes women. It discourages them from taking control of their own lives and choosing their own futures; it deprives them of the liberty that is the hallmark of their humanity (Beauvoir 1953: 27).

Second, the norms of mass society may be *epistemically problematic*. That is, they may inhibit us from gaining access to specific truths or from acquiring certain forms of knowledge. We encounter one version of this complaint in Martin Heidegger's assertion that society discourages us from thinking or talking about death (2010: sec. 51). Heidegger regards the ever-present possibility of death as a defining feature of our human nature (2010: sec. 50). It is part of what makes us the kind of beings we are. Thus, by pressuring us to ignore our deaths, society inhibits us from discovering the truth about ourselves.

Third, our received social norms may be *psychologically debilitating*. For example, they may hinder our ability to develop good self-esteem. Friedrich Nietzsche defends a version of this objection in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. There, he points out that the morality of the masses, which he identifies as Judeo-Christian morality, demands that we be meek and humble (Nietzsche 1989: sec. I.14). We must regard ourselves as sinners who are nothing before God. It is hard to think highly of ourselves, he argues, while adopting this attitude (see Leiter 2002: 113–36).

Fourth and finally, the norms of mass society may be *aesthetically impoverished*. Abiding by them may not cut us off from the truth or deprive us of our humanity but simply be dull and boring. Although Kierkegaard himself does not endorse this criticism, one of his pseudonyms, A, gives voice to it in *Either/Or*. A looks out at the world and sees that to do well in society is to be as busy and productive as possible. Such an existence strikes him as absurd (Kierkegaard 1987: 25). Our lives would be more interesting and appealing, he suggests, if we were not as committed to productivity as society demands (Kierkegaard 1987: 298–99).

Optimism versus pessimism

Notice a couple of things about these errors. First, they pick out specific problems with specific norms. Therefore, it is possible to acknowledge them and still think mass society is good in other respects. In other words, the errors mentioned so far do not require a global rejection of mass society. They are consistent with a limited form of rebellion.

Second, the errors described above pick out contingent problems with mass society. It is a contingent fact rather than a necessary one, for example, that our society endorses the patriarchal norm of femininity. Society could have been structured otherwise. This suggests that reform is possible. The norms of mass society could be changed so that they no longer exhibit the defect in question. De Beauvoir is explicit on this point. She declares in the conclusion of *The Second Sex* that we can reshape society's expectations for women if we work at it (Beauvoir 1953: 681; see Flynn 2006: 99).

Not all existentialists share De Beauvoir's optimism. Some fear that the badness of our social norms is not contingent but necessary; it is an essential truth about the crowd that its principles and ideals are impoverished. This pessimistic stance is sometimes paired with the view that it is not specific norms of mass society that are problematic but all norms whatsoever. As such, rebellion must be permanent and global.

Kierkegaard often defends this radical position. Most famously, he declares in *Point of View* that 'the crowd is untruth' (Kierkegaard 1998b: 106–11). The fact that a given norm is endorsed by mass society is a sign that it is deficient. He concludes that a defender of the truth must always be counter-cultural. (He sometimes hedges this claim by adding that he is talking only about ethical and religious matters (Kierkegaard 1998b: 106n1). The crowd might speak the truth in other areas of life.)

Kierkegaard's position is analogous to one we encounter in contemporary aesthetics. It is sometimes said concerning art that what is popular is therefore bad (Carroll 1998: 15–109). For, to be popular, a work of art must appeal to the lowest common denominator of taste and intellect. It cannot be so sophisticated that only a few people can understand it or so refined that only a few people possess the sensitivity necessary to discern its details. It must gain traction with the boorish as well as the brainy. Similarly, to be popular, a work of art must be easy to enjoy. It cannot ask too much of us in terms of time or energy, for few of us have much of that to offer. We are overburdened with other responsibilities. However, good art—art that has a high degree of aesthetic value—is not like this. It challenges our taste and intellect; it demands a lot from its audiences.

According to Kierkegaard, much the same holds for social norms (1998b: 110). To have mass appeal, a norm must be attractive to those of modest intellect and limited education. It cannot be difficult to grasp or presuppose a lot of background knowledge. In addition, the norm cannot be demanding. Adherence to it must be possible for those who are lazy or overworked. However, good norms—norms that encourage us to flourish as human beings—are not like this. They push us to our limits and require tremendous effort. That is why good norms will never be popular and popular norms will never be good.

Kierkegaard concludes that the virtuous person is necessarily a rebel. They will always reject the norms embraced by mass society and always be persecuted as a result. Of course, persecution is not a sufficient sign of being on the right path. It is possible to depart from what is popular in problematic ways. Still, being counter-cultural is a necessary part of living well on Kierkegaard's view (1991: 190–99).

EXCEPTIONAL CASES

For some existentialists, the problem with our social norms is not that they are bad or wrong but rather that they are insufficiently flexible. They may be fine in general; they may work well for most people in most cases. But they do not work well for everyone. In particular, they cannot handle people who occupy atypical circumstances or are themselves atypical. Such folk will be harmed if they are forced to adhere to the norms of mass society, so they are justified in rebelling in the name of self-defence.

Preserving one's identity

Gloria Anzaldúa articulates a version of this view in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987: 15–24, 77–91). She argues that, for the sake of expediency, mass society assigns labels to people. Such labels tend to come in binary pairs: gay/straight, native/immigrant, white/non-white, and male/female. The problem is that some people—those whom Anzaldúa calls *mestizas*—live on the borderlands between these binaries. They are neither gay nor straight, male nor female, native nor immigrant. Thus, by applying these labels to *mestizas*, mass society distorts them (see Anzaldúa 2009: 45–46). It also encourages them to distort themselves: it

pressures them to cover over or cut out those parts of themselves that do not fit. Thus, to preserve their identities, *mestizas* must rebel (Anzaldúa 1987: 20–23).

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* describes another sort of exceptional case. It retells the story of Abraham, who also finds himself at odds with society because of who he is. But the part of Abraham's identity that creates conflict is not his ethnicity or gender. It is his relationship with God, which is to say his faith. To test Abraham's faith, God commands him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Going through with the sacrifice, however, would be to violate the social norm against murder. So, Abraham can hold fast to his faith—he can remain true to his identity—only if he considers himself an exception. He must believe the norms of society are suspended in his case (Kierkegaard 1983: 54–67). Unfortunately, this is not something he can make anyone else understand (Kierkegaard 1983: 82–120). Therefore, from the point of view of society, Abraham remains an outlaw, a rebel.

Abraham's story is religious, but a secular version is possible (see Lippitt 2003: 148–52). An example comes from Bernard Williams' (1981) retelling of the life of Gauguin. Like Abraham, Gauguin must choose between what he loves and what society demands of him. Gauguin's passion, though, is not for God but for painting. He wishes to leave his home in Paris and travel to tropical Tahiti so that he can depict the beautiful scenes of native life there. But pursuing this dream will mean abandoning his wife and children. He will have to violate the social norm regarding supporting his family. Nevertheless, Gauguin follows his heart and goes forward with his artistic project. He refuses to abide by social norms because it would mean compromising what he loves and thus who he is.

The question of scope

How common are such cases? Sometimes existentialists talk as if they are rare. The rules and categories set up by society do not require *most* people to obscure who they are or compromise their identities. They only require it of *a few*. Thus, we are dealing with genuine exceptions here.

This position has a tendency to carry elitist overtones (Cooper 1999: 111). In *Two Ages*, for example, Kierkegaard says the problem with the crowd is that it prevents the superior person from being who they are (1978: 75, 84–85). By treating everyone the same, it keeps the great person from being great. This complaint is echoed by Jose Ortega y Gasset (1932: 61–77), who laments that the levelling force of the masses inhibits the possibility of individual excellence. In a similar vein, Nietzsche gripes that herd morality is a problem because it fails to leave room for the higher type of person (Leiter 2002: 113–63).

Some existentialists, however, endorse a democratic version of the view (Cooper 1999: 111–12). They maintain that *everyone* is exceptional in some way or other. All people live on the borderlands, and all people are like Abraham in that their defining passion puts them at odds with society. Kierkegaard himself heads in this direction in *The Sickness unto Death* (1980: 33–34). It is not just the elites; mass society pressures everyone to efface their uniqueness. It encourages everyone to grind themselves down to the same basic shape.

One of the more prominent defenders of this position was Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2000: 5; see Guignon 2004: 55–60; Taylor 1991: 27–28; Trilling 2009: 58–67). He suggested that, in order to get along with others, we must put on metaphorical masks. We must pretend to want, think, or believe things that we do not. More pointedly, we must pretend to be people we are not. Thus, all of us face a difficult choice: we can have felicitous relations with others, or we can remain true to ourselves. The rebel is the person who selects the latter option.

The rebel's ambitions

The rebel may have more or less ambitious goals. On the one hand, they may just want to carve out space in society where they can be themselves. That is, they may just want to fight against the pressures of conformity to the extent that it enables them to give expression to their identities. But they may also hope for something more: recognition and acceptance. They may wish to persuade society to regard their alternative ways of life as legitimate. To this end, they may advocate for new, more flexible norms that are capable of handling their atypical situations.

The more ambitious goal requires more optimism. The rebel must believe not only that the norms of society can be changed but also that it is possible to develop norms that are nuanced enough to handle the idiosyncrasies of everyone's identities. As mentioned, Kierkegaard lacks this level of optimism. He suspects there will always be conflict between the individual and society. Thus, in his mind, authenticity requires ceaseless struggle (Kierkegaard 1982: 1.121–22, 163–65; see Khawaja 2016: 62).

WHY IT IS GOOD TO BE BAD

Let us turn to a third reason for rebellion. It is predicated on the judgment that the norms of mass society are not so much mistaken or crude as one-sided. They may capture what is right and good from a certain point of view, but there are other points of view to consider. And from some of these other points of view, what society condemns is actually praiseworthy. That is why it is sometimes good to be bad.

Loving bad art

The realm of aesthetics once again offers an illuminating example. It is sometimes said that if everyone embraced our society's aesthetic norms, the result would be dystopian (Nehamas 2007: 83). We would all like the same things for the same reasons, and such homogeneity would be boring. This is true even if our society's norms were reliable guides to aesthetic excellence—even if they directed us towards what is in fact beautiful. Thus, for the sake of interest and excitement, the rebel may find it worthwhile to enjoy what our society deems ugly.

Such is the defence that Matt Strohl offers for watching bad movies (2021: 184–94). Critically acclaimed films tend to lack aesthetic diversity. The plots, acting, dialogue, and so forth always hit the same notes; they always conform to the same ideals regarding what counts as good. Hence, watching them becomes dull after a while. Against this backdrop, a ridiculous accent can liven things up. So too can a scene with bizarre over-acting, an incongruous plot twist, or an especially disgusting joke. There is much delight to be had in such violations of cinematic convention, Strohl concludes.

Camus's ethics of quantity

What is important about Strohl's argument is that it provides a reason for rebelling against social norms *even if those norms are legitimate*. Camus offers us a related argument in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The best life, he says, is not the one in which we enjoy the greatest possible experiences—whether that means the most pleasurable, the most meaningful, or something else. It is rather the one in which we enjoy the greatest variety of experiences. We do well if we substitute quantity for quality, to use his words (Camus 1991a: 60–62).

Strict adherence to the norms of mass society will not help us reach Camus's ideal. This is true even if we assume those norms are reliable guides to pleasure, meaning, and goodness. For if we only ever do what the norms of mass society would have us do, we will have a limited set of life experiences. Yes, we will enjoy what is pleasurable, meaningful, and so forth. But we will never do what is bad, ridiculous, irrational, or foolish. Maximizing the diversity of our experiences requires engaging in these behaviours as well.

In defence of whims

There is a third argument in this vein worth considering. Assume once again that our social norms are reliable: they track objective goodness in the various domains of life. It remains the case that following our social norms may require forgoing what we desire. After all, there is no guarantee that what we want will align with what is right or good. Thus, adherence to social norms can be frustrating even if those norms are valid.

This complaint might sound sophomoric, akin to the teenager's lament that they are not allowed to do whatever they want. Hence it is common in the history of philosophy to dismiss it out of hand. The teenager is just being a slave to their passions; they ought to be their master.

This rebuttal, however, is predicated on a specific conception of the good life. It assumes the human ideal is rational self-determination. The existentialist tradition offers us an alternative picture, one according to which the ability to follow our whims is among our true goods. A classic spokesperson for this view is the Underground Man (Dostoyevsky 1972: 29–39). He depicts the person who always behaves in a perfectly logical way as a kind of inhuman robot. We do more justice to our humanity by indulging in a bit of wildness from time to time.

Reasons of love

It is not only our fleeting desires that may conflict with the norms of mass society. What we love may do so as well. This is important because, unlike our fleeting desires, our loves are often bound up with our identities. They are central enough to our sense of self that they define us. Thus, violating them is not merely a matter of frustration; it is a matter of self-betrayal (Cooper 1999: 114–16).

For this reason, we are told to choose what we love wisely. We should make rational decisions about what stands at the centre of our hearts. But this is not always possible. Sometimes we just love what we love. Good examples again come from the domain of aesthetics. Few of us choose what music we prefer. That part of our personalities is simply a product of our past histories. We enjoy garage band metal because our older brother did; we delight in rap because it dominated the high school locker rooms when we came of age. Moreover, it is not as if we could extricate these preferences from our hearts and replace them with new ones if we tried. Even attempting to do so might feel inauthentic.

Therefore, we are well motivated to hold on to our musical loves. This is true even if we recognize that our loves do not track actual musical greatness (Riggle 2015). We may admit that Mozart and Radiohead deserve their places in the canon—but add that they do nothing for us personally. Our own tastes lie with things farther down the list, or that are not on the list at all. We may love music that we know is bad. Thus, if we only ever listened to what society said was best, we might end up having greater musical experiences. But it would come at the cost of our identities. So, we rebel.

THE REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE

I began the chapter by saying that, for Camus, rebellion is never just a ‘no’ to the masses. It is also a ‘yes’ to oneself. It is an affirmation that there is something within oneself worth defending against the dictatorship of the crowd or the public. This suggests, I argued, that rebellion always has a reason. It is always done in the name of something (Camus 1991b: 19).

In popular culture, however, we encounter what looks like an exception to this rule: the fabled rebel without a cause. If we take the description of this figure at face value, they appear to lack a justification for their resistance to society. There is no further goal or end that they are trying to achieve. They are just rebelling for the sake of rebelling.

Rebelliousness as a personality trait

We encounter various passages in existentialist literature that seem to give voice to this attitude. One example is the second chapter of Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*. It begins with the assertion that Anzaldúa has ‘movements of rebellion’ in her blood (1987: 15). They cause her to become enraged whenever anyone, including her own mother, tells her what to do. In the ensuing pages, Anzaldúa adds another metaphor. There is a rebellious Shadow-

Beast who dwells within her and refuses to take orders from outside authorities (1987: 16). It kicks out at any hint of limitations on her by others.

How should we interpret Anzaldúa's words here? One option is to say that, for her, rebellion is not a philosophical position. It is not something for which she feels the need to offer a reason or justification. It is just part of who she is—a feature of her personality. She is a rebel and that is all there is to it.

While this interpretation may capture how it goes with some people, it is too quick in the case of Anzaldúa. There is something else going on with her. Anzaldúa is not presenting herself as an exception to the general rule that the rebel always has a reason. She is rather getting at a unique kind of reason for rebellion.

The right to autonomy

The key is to see that, when it comes to being a rebel, 'without a cause' often means 'without a *determinate* cause.' That is to say, there is not a particular action the rebel wishes to do that other people are preventing them from doing. There is not a specific experience they want to have that society is inhibiting them from having. And there is not a definite part of their identity they wish to express that some cultural authority is telling them to keep hidden.

Instead, what the rebel without a cause is defending is the right to figure things out for themselves. They want to be able to make up their own minds—rightly or wrongly—about what to believe and how to act. Thus, they do not resist social norms because they disagree with the content of those norms. Rather, they do so because the mere existence of social norms interferes with their ability to cut their own path through life (Anzaldúa 2009: 22). In short, they revolt in the name of their own independence or autonomy.

Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* elaborates on this point. In a famous passage, Climacus, the pseudonymous author of the text, declares that 'subjectivity is truth' (1982: 1.203). What he means is that getting things right is not what matters. What matters is the struggle to figure out what is right for oneself. Indeed, it is better to come to the wrong conclusion on one's own than to have the right conclusion handed over by someone else. Possessing the proper result is, in and of itself, 'nothing but junk' (Kierkegaard 1982: 1.242). For this reason, Climacus tells us to ignore all outside voices. We should close our ears to even our most well-intentioned friends when they try to point us in the right direction.

Jean-Paul Sartre endorses a similar idea in 'Existentialism is a Humanism' (1975: 349–50). He claims that none of us has a pre-determined essence. There is no pre-existing truth about who we are. Thus, Rousseau was mistaken. Our task is not to discover ourselves; it is to create ourselves (see Aumann 2019: 39–58). But this gives us a good reason to rebel against outside authorities. Anyone who tells us how to live must be resisted because they are interfering with the all-important process of self-definition.

Striving games

For both Climacus and Sartre, life is thus what Thi Nguyen calls a 'striving game' (Nguyen 2020b: 8–9). Many games are 'achievement games,' Nguyen observes. We play them to win, to achieve victory. In a striving game, however, the goal is different. Rather than aiming at victory, we aim to enjoy the process of striving for victory. What is valuable is not the result but the struggle to achieve the result.

Aesthetic appreciation, to return to one of our themes, has this structure. What matters when it comes to appreciating a work of art, Nguyen (2020a) says, is not coming up with the right interpretation. It is coming up with that interpretation by and for ourselves. Hence, if an expert comes along and tells us the proper way to interpret a work of art, it ruins the fun. By giving us a shortcut to the end result, the expert deprives us of the opportunity to delight in the struggle to achieve it on our own. That is why Nguyen (2020a: 1146–47) thinks we are justified in disregarding art experts. It is also why Anzaldúa *et alia* think we are justified in ignoring authorities elsewhere in our lives.

THE COSTS OF REBELLION

What I have said thus far might suggest that the existentialist tradition supports rebellion. This is at most a half-truth. For while some existentialists do support it, others adopt a more ambivalent attitude. Indeed, almost all of them raise at least some concerns.

In some cases, these concerns have to do with forms of rebellion I am not discussing in this chapter. Kierkegaard criticizes rebellion against God, for example, on the grounds that it is a form of despair (1980: 72). Ortega, pushing in a different direction, objects that the crowd itself is the rebellious party (1932: 11–18). The masses have wrongly revolted against civilization by embracing a barbaric, principle-less worldview.

Yet, existentialist writers often do target the kind of rebellion at hand. Consider the fact that many of the social rebels depicted in existentialist literature are not exactly heroes. The Underground Man is a case in point. Dostoevsky does not set him up as an example for us to imitate. Instead, he is a problematic figure that society must solve. Something similar can be said about Camus's Meursault. His refusal to abide by social norms in *The Stranger* is as much a cautionary tale as anything else. To do justice to this theme, I will end the chapter by surveying some of the costs and drawbacks of social rebellion.

The need for a stable, shared world

One criticism worth considering is suggested by the Underground Man himself. He points out that social rebellion is destabilizing; it threatens the order of our world (Dostoyevsky 1972: 29–39). This is a problem because a world without order is one in which it is difficult to pursue our personal projects. For to pursue our projects effectively, we need to make plans. And to make plans, we need to be able to predict the likely outcomes of our decisions. Such predictions are possible, however, only if our social world exhibits order and regularity. Thus,

if everywhere we encounter randomness and chaos—if everywhere we meet rebels who refuse to follow social norms—we are sunk.

The second criticism is related to the first. Pursuing our personal projects does not only require a stable world. It also requires a shared world in Heidegger's sense: a shared understanding of the objects we may encounter and the roles we may occupy (2010: sec. 14). Put differently, we need each other to buy into the same conceptual framework. If I am driving down the street, I need other drivers to interpret and follow road signs in the same way that I do. If I am building a house, I need my fellow workers to share my view of how long an inch is and how much a pound weighs. All this becomes impossible if everyone is a rebel—if everyone defies social conventions and does things their own way.

The rebel cannot dismiss these objections as irrelevant to their concerns. Why not? Well, many of the reasons for rebellion we have considered are based on the rebel's desire to pursue their own projects. And, like all people's projects, the rebel's projects depend on the existence of a stable, shared world. Thus, at a deeper level, the problem with social rebellion is that it is self-undermining. It threatens to destroy the conditions that must be in place for the rebel to achieve their own goals.

Of course, it is really only widespread social rebellion that creates a problem. The rebel cannot will that most people rebel about most things. They cannot will that most members of society reject most norms in most areas of life. But this is consistent with willing that there be a few radical rebels or many moderate rebels (that is, people who revolt against a few social norms in a few areas of life). In fact, society might fare better under those conditions. Having a few rebels around might prevent society from becoming stagnant and inflexible. Thus, the rebel and the crowd are not as diametrically opposed as they might initially seem. They help each other out in some respects.

The threat of persecution

Nevertheless, it is easy to understand why the crowd resists the rebel. This resistance often involves imposing social costs. The rebel is harassed, persecuted, or even ostracized to make them fall in line. This is no small matter. Although existentialism is often linked to individualism, most existentialists acknowledge that we are social creatures (Flynn 2006: 81–103). We have a psychological need to be recognized and accepted by others. Thus, ridicule and exclusion are not things we can easily shrug off.

This is why rebels sometimes create their own alternative communities. They band together with like-minded individuals to provide each other with the support they fail to receive from society writ large. As Kevin Dunn (2016: 19) puts it, they attempt to carve out a social space in which the expression of their alternative identities is acceptable.

But can a rebel community arise without recapitulating the errors it is trying to escape? Can it construct a social environment without imposing oppressive social norms? Camus fears not (1991b: 25, 109; see Foley 2008: 58). There is a tendency, he says, for rebel communities to perpetuate the cycle of oppression. The rebel frequently becomes the tyrant.

Rather than granting others the freedom they themselves sought, they end up imposing their own way of life.

One modern, aesthetic example of Camus's worry is the punk scene. It was established to challenge the small-mindedness of traditional norms. It was supposed to serve as a welcoming home for those who were not accepted by mass culture. However, it frequently devolved into a scene where what counted as punk and what did not was heavily policed (Prinz 2014: 590). To join the local punk community, one had to embrace a specific ethos or attitude. Despite its anti-tyrannical origins, punk ended up becoming tyrannical in its own way.

Camus (1991b: 304–6) holds out hope for the possibility of avoiding this kind of outcome. But it is not clear he is right to do so. Scepticism seems warranted if we accept Heidegger's point that we need a shared world in which to work out our personal projects. We need a shared sense of the meaning and significance of our words, tools, roles, concepts, and so forth. It is difficult to imagine how this shared set of meanings could arise and persist without some sort of hegemonic norms. There has to be a system in place, such as the force of the crowd, that gets people to conform to the rules governing our world. An important conclusion follows. We can say that Dostoevsky was right to declare that there will always be a place in society for someone like the Underground Man (1972: 13). Such a figure will never belong to a bygone era because there will always be reasons for rebellion.

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