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## REREADING JOSEPH HELLER'S *CATCH-22* FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY AND CAMUS' ABSURDISM

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### Abstract

Published in 1961, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* came into prominence among important American novels of the twentieth century. It coined a new expression that connotes the illogical, inconsistent and irrational situations. It deals with the absurdities and unsolvable paradoxical policies of the state's policymaking groups that drive the individuals into a meaningless, absurdist worldview. It is likely as well to assert that *Catch-22* is a novel, which reflects and promote an existential worldview. However, this worldview is closer to Sartre's standpoint than that of Camus'. Considering the novel, the existential philosophy of Sartre (which suggests that we're able to basically invent meanings of our own) and Camus' absurdism (which suggests that the search for meaning is in itself both absurd and determined to fail, so; we should embrace the absurd and find happiness in it), this article aims to underline the importance of adopting the existential philosophy of Sartre for the individuals to cope with the sense of nihilism when confronted with the absurdities of today's world policy making groups.

**Keywords:** Catch-22, Absurdism, Camus, Existentialism, Sartre.

### INTRODUCTION

In order to understand and evaluate a novel written decades before the time in which we live, contrary to New Critics who focus merely on the form dismissing the historical back ground of the work and the experiences by which the author has created the work, it is essential to have a look on social, political issues and the zeitgeist of the period.

In the period when Joseph Heller wrote his famous novel *catch-22*, it was the heydays of postmodern worldview that can be summed up as the reaction to the failings of modernism that promoted projects associated with totalitarianism. After WW2, people began to interrogate the modernist worldviews, which were in search of building peace and harmony in society by creating metanarratives through science, logic and reason. Having witnessed economic crisis, two world wars and totalitarian states in the period of modernism, they felt a sense of loss, insecurity and anxiety and lost their traditional values and beliefs in politics and politicians of the period. In such a tumultuous transition period, Americans, too, were criticizing the idea that American institutions and politicians were fully credible, reliable and free from decay and immorality. Many Americans began to reconsider their trust in politicians and the government because of the manhunts of 1950s in which people were chased and blacklisted because of their thoughts. Especially, The Great Depression of 1929, which caused people lose their assets, The Vietnam War, which caused many lives, the Watergate scandal and some other social disruptions accumulated dysphoria and led the emergence of some civil rights movements, which focused on black and women rights. People started to question that though politicians had led the country into such disruptive conditions, why they were still holding their posts in the bureaucracy of the state. In line with the increase in number of the questions, American people began to question the absurdities of the time. And this immense demand of the American people and their peers from other European countries for a better world purified from war, corruption and hypocrisy (concepts of which were thought of being the consequences of a modernist thought) stimulated and provoked the scholars and artists of the period to dismiss, to a certain extent, the modernist point of view and to search for a more humanistic way of life that heeds the individual over the institutions. Thus, the concept of postmodernism emerged. Although there have been disputes and controversies on what modernism and postmodernism denote, Mary Klages presents a clear definition regarding modernist and postmodernist worldviews. Modernity, she says, "is fundamentally about order: about rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos" (2001, p. 10). As for postmodernism, she asserts, it, "in contrast, does not mourn the idea of fragmentation or incoherence, but rather celebrates that" (Klages, 2001,

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10). Hoffman likewise makes a similar statement asserting, "Postmodern approaches seek to deconstruct previous authority sources and power. Because power is distrusted, they attempt to set up a less hierarchical approach in which authority sources are more diffuse" (2008: 1).

Published in 1961, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is a clear satire on postmodern American life, with messages of opposite revolt that were peculiar to the decade in which it appears. It satirizes the social and political issues of the period of the Second World War and its consequences systematically, and holds these issues in an ironic manner. These issues seem to be the ones such as the frustration of the individual against powerful and faceless bureaucracies, the witch-hunt and cleansing of the communists, Cold War and its foxy hypocrisies and strong antiwar issues that dominated postmodern America. The novel promotes the individual and it satirizes such fundamental institutions as the government, the military, the bureaucracy and business companies. Yossarian, in order to tackle with all these traps, inconsistencies and absurdities of the government, pursues moral and self-preservation in an existential way of thinking. To stand against absurd and corrupt authority dismissing the superficial values of avidity and materialism, contrary to Camus' absurdism, which suggests that the search for meaning is in itself both absurd and determined to fail, so; we should embrace the absurd and find happiness in it, Yossarian makes up his own mind about how to respond to a demoralizing and meaningless situation through assimilating Sartre's existential philosophy, which suggests that we're able to basically invent meanings of our own.

### I. VIEWS ON EXISTENTIALISM

The movement of existential philosophy is likely to be considered the most familiar one among all other philosophical movements due to such renowned philosophers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus. Although Sartre and Camus have rejected being labeled as existentialists, nonetheless they are considered as the two milestones of the movement. Douglas Burnham et al, in this regard, state that "most of the philosophers [...] either never used, or actively disavowed, the term 'existentialist'. Even Sartre himself once said, "Existentialism? I don't know what that is."" (Burnham & Papandreopoulos). According to Sherman, Camus also rejected to be labelled as a philosopher saying that he was not a philosopher, because he did not believe in reason enough to believe in a system (2009: 1). What interests him, he says, "is [to know] how we must behave and more precisely, how to behave when one does not believe in God or reason" (Sherman, 2009: 1). Existential philosophy is such a vague field that many philosophers who have contemplated on the term have their own version of explanations. Even some worldwide dictionaries define it with some slight differences. American Heritage Dictionary defines the term as "A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, [it] regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts" (American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2011). Another definition made by Merriam Webster reads as "a chiefly 20th century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines but centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad (existentialism. (n.d.). However, it is likely to say that the most comprehensive definition is the one made by Webster's New World College Dictionary, which defines existentialism as:

"a philosophical and literary movement, variously religious or atheistic, stemming from Kierkegaard and represented by Sartre, Heidegger, etc.: it is based on the doctrine that concrete, individual existence takes precedence over abstract, conceptual essence and holds that human beings are totally free and responsible for their acts and that this responsibility is the source of their feelings of dread and anguish" (1988, p. 476).

In simplest terms, it is likely to say that existentialism is a way of life searching for the meaning of human existence and asking questions like why we are here in that universe. Where did we come from? What is the purpose, if there is any, of that limited life? Does the universe exist to serve human beings who have been created with intrinsic value? Or, are we the aimless, meaningless and unimportant ingredients of an unintelligent, purposeless, accidental process? One can increase the number of such questions. More or less, it is most likely that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus have as well asked such questions while searching for the meaning of this life. Nevertheless, it seems that they have come to divergent conclusions in their search of meaning and morality, or in other words, in their search of God. It is likely to say that three-world view emerged from this search. One is the theistic worldview the first precursor of which was Kierkegaard; the second is the agnostic, and the third is the atheistic worldview. The theistic existentialist believes that God is the ultimate reality that created man for a reason. The individuals are free and capable of their own to make moral

decisions and choose the rights or wrongs. There are some certain rules made by God, and the individual will be responsible for his account of obedience. Thus, the individual has an answer for the question why he is here on the earth. As for Agnosticism, Shollenberger states that it is "the view that the existence or non-existence of God or gods is currently unknown but is not necessarily unknowable, therefore one will withhold judgement until more evidence becomes available" (2014, p.294). Thirdly, Atheistic existentialism denies any supreme, supernatural, or religious beliefs even though it causes anguish or grief. Richard Osborne, in this regard, states that atheistic existentialists concede their anxieties without relying on any expectation of being saved by a God, and without any appeal to such supernatural beliefs as reincarnation (1992). To put it in other words, existentialism emerges with Soren Kierkegaard and some other theologians and philosophers as Paul Tillich, Gabriel Marcel. All these theist thinkers believed that Christianity had become intentionally falsified, and Christianity had departed from its originality that instills the ultimate meaning. Love, mercy, kindness, God's will, undoing of evil acts are some major premises of the theist existentialism. The theist existential philosophers suggest that everyone has to decide independently regarding their choices. Each person suffers from the anguish of indecision (whether knowingly or unknowingly) until he commits to a particular choice about the way to live. (Kierkegaard, 2004, p. 24). This theist worldview is followed by a counter discourse called atheist worldview philosophized by Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus who excluded any supreme, supernatural, and divine beliefs from philosophical existentialist thought. Nietzsche, being a critic of Christian theology is known by his famous words that "God is dead". Therefore, he is associated with Nihilism, which also means "nothingness" and denotes to "a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless" (nihilism. (n.d.). Sartre suggested that human beings have no essence before their existence because there is no Creator. According to him, "existence precedes essence". (Sartre, 1948, p. 26). He proposed that the individual is responsible for his actions, which form his authenticity (life experiences, not knowledge) and he has to form this authenticity even if he is aware of the "death" waiting for him (1948). Camus is aware of the relation between the individual who intrinsically is in search to find meaning in his life and the life as producing no meaning. The individual's infinite search for the meaning and the outside world's infinite silence is an absurd interaction. Our life must have meaning for us to value it. If we accept that life has no meaning and therefore no value, should we kill ourselves? (Camus, 1955, p. 3-8.) According to Camus, the absurd is "man's search for the meaning (God, morality, eternal truth and values), nevertheless it is futile because this world or universe is an unintelligible world devoid of meaning, unity, and clarity. Here it must be underlined that Camus' stand in the face of this utility differs from that of Nietzsche's. Thus asking the question that if the realization of the absurd requires suicide. Camus' answer is "No. It requires revolt" (1955, p. 3-8.)

So far, from the above explanation one can conclude that in the search for the meaning the individual comes across three options. 1) To appropriate the theist existential worldview that creates a framework through the belief that God is the ultimate reality that created man for a reason. 2) To appropriate the atheistic existential worldview from which emerges three different standpoints. Namely, a) Camus' absurdism that accepts the lack of meaning but while accepting one should simultaneously rebel against it by being contented with what life offers. b) To appropriate Nietzsche's viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless. Therefore, it is pointless to try to construct our own; or to rebel against this senselessness is also senseless, so suicide is the real salvation from the anguish and torment of nothingness and meaninglessness. c) To appropriate Sartre's standpoint which suggests, "Existence precedes essence," which means that human beings have no essence before their existence because there is no Creator (Sartre, 1948). His premise is that the individual is responsible for his actions, which form his authenticity (life experiences, not knowledge) and he has to form this authenticity even if he is aware of the "death" waiting for him. The difference between the theist existentialists and Sartre's premise seems to be that while the theist existentialists have the belief that the "essence precedes existence," Sartre asserts that "existence precedes essence".

## **II. ABSURDITIES IN CATCH-22**

In light of all above explanations, now, the article is going to dwell on the experiences that Captain John Yossarian lived and the path or paths that he chose when confronted with the absurdities that life presented. Considered as an antiwar novel, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* deals with the bureaucratic absurdities of the military and military mind and the protagonist's struggles to cope with this lunatic mentality. Its setting is the island of Pianosa of Italy, at a time when WW2 continues with all its brutality. The protagonist Yossarian is a pilot in a squadron whose only mission is to fly and make bombardments on some villages that no one in the squadron knows the reason. Yossarian is a pilot who performed around sixty bombing missions. Because he is afraid of being killed in such a nonsense war, he hates war. He is desperately in search of being released to go home.

However, he has to perform a certain number of missions before being discharged. Each time when he comes close to finish his missions, the number is increased, and he is compelled to fly more. Yossarian and his friends are the victims trapped in a squadron. Having witnessed the brutalities that war brought and rejecting to internalize those absurdities, they feel being trapped in a paradox that called catch-22. There are two groups of people in the novel. Those who have power and those who do not. The generals and colonels have power, but they also have a machine-like mentality. They are obstinate and inflexible that everything must fit neatly into the rules that they created for their interests. They are portrayed as being interested only in furthering their own careers, caring little for the lives of their men. The ones who lack power are those who became caught up in the illogical rules of Catch-22. The dictionary of Merriam Webster defines the term Catch-22 as 1) "a problematic situation for which the only solution is denied by a circumstance inherent in the problem or by a rule, 2) the circumstance or rule that denies a solution. An illogical, unreasonable, or senseless situation" (catch-22. (n.d.). In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). It is also considered as an idiom. Cambridge Idioms Dictionary defines it as "It is a no-win dilemma or paradox similar to: you cannot get a job without experience, but you cannot get experience unless you have a job" (Catch 22. (n.d.) in Cambridge Idioms Dictionary). In such a situation, it seems that the ones who do not have power are most likely to appropriate one of the three versions of the above-mentioned existential path. They have no choice other than to lean on either the Christian existentialism (represented by Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel) or the atheist existentialism (represented by Sartre and Camus), or the nihilistic existential attitude (represented by Nietzsche). In both, theist and atheist way, the individuals struggle with the universal to find the truth depending on their subjectivity and relativity. However, for the nihilist who rejects both theist and atheist existential thought, there is no other choice than to put an end to his life that he thinks it is nothing else than anguish, despair and meaninglessness. The Christian existentialist would try to cope with the absurd and meaningless impositions of the superiors by appropriating a leap of faith where he thinks he can find or feel the eternal creator, whereas the atheist existentialist thinks that the leap into the abyss of nothingness is certain but it lacks a God waiting at the bottom. To put it in other words, for the Christian atheist, Abraham is the archetypical hero who admits to sacrifice his son Isaac without any judgement though he loves his son. As for the atheist existentialist, it differs. For those who adopt Camus' existential standpoint, the archetypical hero is Sisyphus who took on the challenge, though unwillingly, of being condemned for eternity to roll a stone uphill, though he knows that the moment he nears the top the rock is going to roll back downhill. For those who adopt Sartre's existential standpoint, the archetypical figure is the one who controls his life taking an active role in his actions. Contrary to Camus' existential hero who confesses his absurd condition without any alternative actions, Sartre's existential hero is the one who chooses to take action in controlling the matters, the life experiences that will create his essence. In this respect, it is likely to come up with the claim that Yossarian can be deemed as Sartre's existential hero.

In the case of Yossarian, one can say that his existential struggle is in the form of atheistic one who denies any supreme or supernatural structures. Beside admitting that he does not believe in God when he speaks with Scheisskopf's wife saying that "You don't believe in the God you want to, and I won't believe in the God I want to" (Heller, 1994, p190), Yossarian's revolts against the corrupt and unreasonable impositions of the superiors indicates that his survival is the only important issue for him. In this regard, Leah Garreth asserts that War has taught Yossarian, "Humans are nothing but sacks of bones, disposable matter, and trash" (2015, p. 395). Nevertheless, this perception does not lead him to a nihilistic landscape. He does not stay inactive when confronted with a problem. He tries to outrun the weapons aimed at [his] body (Garrett, 2015, p. 395). For him, Garrett goes on, "all larger systems, be they corporations, politics, or religion are seemingly false and misleading. Each man is his own little island, a physical site in constant danger of destruction" (2015, p. 395). Yossarian's attitudes indicates that his existential stance can be concretized in Sartre's view of existentialism that inhere a kind of pragmatism, not in Camus' view, which propounds that human beings have to be in eternal struggle both with nihilism and existential philosophy (be it theist or atheist) which insist that nihilism is likely to be overwhelmed by creating meaning. If Yossarian had confessed the absurd rules imposed by the superiors, in other words, if he had not chosen to desperately search for an escape from the paradoxical and absurd entrapment of the Catch-22, then it would be likely to categorize him as an individual who internalized Camus' view of existentialism having been concretized in the behaviors of Sisyphus. However, Yossarian struggles to escape to Sweden. Thus, he creates an alternative meaning, which will provide him a safe and free will until that inevitable end (death) waiting for him. It is likely to say that Yossarian's choice is an existential behavior in line with Sartre's view, which asserts that since there is no creator, "existence precedes essence. So man first of all exists, encounters himself, grows in the world, and defines himself afterwards" (Sartre, 1948). The theory that

“existence precedes essence” is the key premise of Sartre’s position. To put it simply, Sartre asserts that man is not a predetermined creature. He has to create his own essence through his own actions, which will shape his existence and will. Although both Sisyphus and Yossarian are entrapped in absurd conditions (Sisyphus pushing a rock up the hill with nothing to do but watch it roll down again, Yossarian being obliged to fly missions under the rule of Catch-22), While Sisyphus confesses his absurd condition, Yossarian is in search for a way to escape from that absurd condition.

Throughout the novel, one comes across with absurd and paradoxical conditions many times. For instance, Chaplain Tappman is accused of committing a serious crime by a major and colonel from the government. Upon asking what the crime is, he gets the answer as “we do not know yet, but we are going to find out” (Heller, 1994, p. 391). Tappman is accused with a non-existent guilt, which menaces his existence. In such a situation, one is likely to lose his belief in justice. Another character, Doc Daneeka secludes himself after a sequence of events. He is logged as dead in a plane crash. He cannot be legally disbanded because he is dead. He tries to prove that he is not dead, but no one takes him into account. Upon being ostracized, he writes a letter to his wife “begging her to bring his plight to the attention of the War Department and urging her to communicate at once with his group commander, Colonel Cathcart, for assurances that—no matter what else she might have heard—it was indeed he, her husband” (Heller, 1994, p. 355). However, at the same day she receives another letter from Colonel Cathcart, her husband’s group commander, saying:

Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss, or Mr. and Mrs. Daneeka:

Words cannot express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father or brother was killed, wounded or reported missing in action (Heller, 1994, p. 355).

Upon receiving this letter, Mrs Daneeka takes her children and moves to another city without leaving an address (Heller, 1994, p. 355). Faced with such an absurd condition, Doc Daneeka chooses a nihilistic existential approach by secluding himself in a forest. In Catch-22, all the societal regulations are legislated to serve for those who are in exertion to manipulate the society for their interests. Being compelled to obey to those nonsense rules and regulations, the characters lose their sense of belonging to the institutions. Consequently, from such conjunctures emerge chaotic situations in which the individuals lose their beliefs in humanity productivity. All the characters adopt the absurd impositions of the superiors who do not care anything else but their interests. However, Orr and Yossarian are aware of the absurd condition, and they do not surrender struggling not to leave the control of their will to the hands of the others for whom their life is nothing else but a step of the ladder.

### III. CONCLUSION

Reading the novel from the standpoint of existential philosophy, one is likely to conclude that humanity has been in search of finding out the meaning of life ever since they had the ability to be aware of their conscience, in other words their sense of right and wrong. In this search, they have tried to answer the question that why they exist in this life. Thus, the philosophy of existentialism emerges. Although at the beginning, they are more convinced to have found the meaning of existence by the belief that there is an ultimate creator called God, later some philosophers bring forth a counter discourse that there is not an ultimate creator. In this long process of debates on the meaning of life, it is likely to highlight that there came out three worldviews, namely theistic, atheistic (Sartre’s standpoint that though there is not essence before we are born, we have to create our own, Camus’ standpoint that can be embodied in the figure of Sisyphus, and Nietzsche’s standpoint which is more likely to instill a sense of nihilism), and agnostic approaches that have been aforementioned. Of course, the query of existence is not an endeavor special to philosophers only. It is a query that all of us have somehow been intermeddled with. Hence, it is also likely to claim that the individual will adopt one of the three approaches when confronted with the question that why we exist in this world.

There are many absurd conditions stemmed from the bureaucracy that humanity has constructed to bring order. Man’s search for meaning in such a chaotic universe has led him to bring order and unity for a better life. Nevertheless, it seems that whatever he regulated to construct a meaningful life metamorphoses into absurdities. Being imposed with those absurdities and unsolvable paradoxical policies of the state’s policymaking groups or bureaucracy causes the individuals to delve into a meaningless, absurdist worldview. Confronted with absurdities of the institutions that they have constructed to bring order and meaning, the individuals react in different manners. While some of them confess their conditions though they are aware of the absurd like Sisyphus, some other make a leaps to escape from the absurd and meaningless aura of their circumstances, and they create alternative meanings in the process of their limited life. Yossarian is an individual who struggles against a huge absurd and meaningless bureaucratic corruption, be it corporal or

commercial corporations. He searches for all possible alternative ways to flee from the entrapments of the rule of Catch-22, which serves nothing and no one else except the ones who created it for their own interests. For Yossarian, there are three corrupt institutions, which lead the individuals of the squadron to adopt different existential standpoints. These institutions are the bureaucracy of military, bureaucracy of enterprise, and the political institutions that have the authority to appoint some ones to higher posts. Having been imposed with the absurdities of these institutions, while some of the characters do whatever they are told like Sisyphus, some other are dragged into a sense of nihilism. As for Yossarian, It is likely to assert that he is a character who seems to have adopted Sartre's existential standpoint, which suggests that although we have not a primordial meaning, we have to create our own on our own subjectivities.

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