

Meursault and  
bartleby on the love  
of suffering  
philosophy essay



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"Does not man perhaps love something besides well-being?" Dostoyevsky's protagonist asks his readers in "Notes from the Underground." According to Aristotle, this can certainly be true—in fact, in following the logic of his philosophy, "happiness" can come from a degree of suffering. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains the meaning of happiness and why he believes it is the chief good. Aristotle concludes that happiness is something complete and self-sufficient as it is the end of things attainable in action. By complete, he means an end that is not pursued because of something else, but is choice worthy in its own right and because of this end. Self-sufficient refers to something that all by itself makes life fulfilling and lack nothing. Aristotle also thinks happiness is the chief good partly by definition. If all actions seek a good end, and every action achieves an end, the good achieved in action will be this end. This introduces the concept of completeness. Since there may be multiple ends, some are not chosen for the end itself, the sake of happiness, rendering these ends not good and therefore incomplete. The best good is something complete, so the good we seek will be this end (Aristotle 7-8). In this definition, one could argue, are the roots of an existentialist's feelings and eventual happiness, presented in Dostoyevsky's "Notes from the Underground" as well as the central characters in Camus' *The Stranger* and Herman Melville's *Bartleby*.

If happiness is defined by completeness and self-sufficiency, the notoriously existential characters of Meursault in *The Stranger* and Bartleby in Melville's work are "happy" according to Aristotelian philosophy. Both Meursault and Bartleby believe that life is meaningless, and they maintain this conviction simply as a belief in itself, which is unwavering even in the display of utmost

compassion, and thus independent of circumstance. This not only makes their thoughts and actions "complete," but demonstrates self-sufficiency in that they couldn't imagine spending their existence thinking of life otherwise. Meursault and Bartleby find comfort in the notion of death, that life, however they choose to live it, is bound to end some day. Whether they are to love life or suffer through it, it will end regardless, so their existential beliefs, all by themselves, make life fulfilling in their eyes. Their lives "lack nothing" because if life is inevitably going to end, they certainly may as well live it as they believe they should, not how society thinks they should. Therefore, although not "happy" according to the modern denotation of the word, and actually suffering, it is evident through the examination of Meursault and Bartleby that man can be "just as fond of suffering" as he is of "well-being," especially given their creators' philosophical beliefs at the time.

Since existentialism is woven so thoroughly into both stories, it is not surprising that the intimate thoughts and beliefs of Meursault and Bartleby were rooted in the minds of the philosophers and authors who wrote them. In his book *Existentialism and Humanism*, French existentialist philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre introduces the principles of existentialism, which were often physically manifested by characters in literature. Sartre starts with the "first principle of existentialism"-existence precedes essence. Man first exists and encounters himself, then defines himself afterwards. As the existentialist sees it, man is not definable because he began as nothing. He will not be anything until later, perhaps after death; then he will be what he made of himself during his life, but nothing else. Thus, the first effect of existentialism puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places

the responsibility for his existence in his own hands. Man "chooses" himself, and all of the actions he may take in order to create himself as he wants to be, thus every man creates himself as he believes he ought to be created (Sartre 28- 29). Therefore, Sartre explains, "to choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable to ever choose the worse (Sartre 29)." This can lead readers to conclude that if there is no "worse" choice to make, then the choices one makes are ultimately meaningless-regardless of who one fashions himself to be, he does so according to his own beliefs, which in his mind are always the right beliefs, and then he will eventually die, regardless of the nature of these beliefs.

If existence precedes essence, Sartre continues, one will also never be able to explain his actions with reference to a "given and specific" human nature. This assertion suggests that there is no determinism; man is free. He thus has neither behind nor before him a realm of values, or any way to justify himself. Sartre claims that he is "left alone" and "condemned to be free"-he did not create himself or ask to be created, yet he is at liberty and is responsible for everything he does (Sartre 34). This feeling of "abandonment" that comes with having to decide one's own being is what leads to existential anguish. Man limits himself to relying only on what is within his will, or within the probabilities that render his actions feasible. Such elements of probability are always present when one "wills anything." Sartre introduces the example of a friend who is visiting by train-while counting on this visit, man presupposes that the train will arrive on time, or that it will not derail. Though he remains in the realm of possibilities, he

doesn't rely on any possibilities beyond those that are concerned in his actions. To the existentialist, once the "possibilities under consideration" cease to affect his actions, he disinterests himself altogether. Since he is free to create himself, he can in this way adapt "the world and all its possibilities" to his will (Sartre 39). " 'Conquer yourself rather than the world (qtd. in Sartre 39)," Sartre goes on to quote Descartes, meaning that man should learn to act without hope. If man embraces this freedom and the anguish which emanates from it, his concrete circumstances and actions "can have no other end and aim but [in themselves]," as Aristotle claimed regarding completeness and self-sufficiency, which in turn combine to equate happiness. Once he has seen that values depend only upon himself, in this state of abandonment, he can only know that freedom is the "foundation of all values (Sartre 51)."

Upon understanding Sartre's analysis of the existential man, it seems that Meursault in *The Stranger* is certainly one of them. He lives in poverty, has no interiority, makes no choices, has no real purpose, and has no God. Even his crime is not really "his"-it is automatic, mechanical. Meursault cannot choose a role in society, thus he has no identity except the one which society has arbitrarily given to him at his trial, although this identity does not fit him at all. However, it can also be argued that Meursault is a "happy" man, one who embraces his suffering. By the story's conclusion, Meursault accepts his poverty and way of life because they are his. Through the existential man's freedom, the foundation of all values and the only tool one has to fashion himself, Meursault freely elects to affirm his absurdity and meaningless

existence rather than submit to the definition that society gives him (Merton 292- 293).

There are examples in both halves of *The Stranger* which suggest that Meursault can be simultaneously an existentialist and "fond of [his] suffering," as the previous paragraph states. In the first half of the novel, Meursault is a passive being living a "vegetative, sensuous life" (Merton 293), existing in total indifference to life's abstract questions. Not steered by ambition, he floats through life, only integrated in a symbiotic sense to nature and the rest of the world. Although the reader can sense Meursault is alienated, this doesn't hurt him, and he couldn't care less. "He is in many ways quite happy," claims Thomas Merton, a twentieth century American Catholic writer (293). This suggests that he could appreciate life to some degree, even if merely in a superficial way.

It seems evident in the first half of the novel that Meursault derives some satisfaction for life through his observance of nature, but at the same time allows this to act as a shield deflecting possible interest in anything deeper. The moments before shooting the Arab, for example, describe that the "sea gasped for air with each shallow, stifled little wave that broke on the sand . . . I could feel my forehead swelling under the sun . . . And every time I felt a blast of its hot breath strike my face, I gritted my teeth (Camus 57) . . ." He is not thinking that shooting the Arab would cause him any guilt or grief; he is only thinking of how the weather is affecting him in that moment. Nature is personified as the sea "gasp[s] for air" and the sun's "hot breath" strikes his face, rendering even his surroundings more human than himself. Also, while it is a keen observation and describes the setting in <https://assignbuster.com/meursault-and-bartleby-on-the-love-of-suffering-philosophy-essay/>

such a way that the reader can feel the tiresome, draining quality of the weather and the hot sun, Meursault does this to displace his own emotions, so he can avoid feeling anything internally.

Thus, the reader can infer that Meursault is merely perturbed by the weather. The blazing noonday sun of North Africa is his enemy, not the Arab. There is no discrimination involved in shooting the Arab-although he doesn't treat the Arab as a person, he doesn't regard himself as a person either (Merton 294). Essentially, they are two nonhumans who meet on equal footing, under the sun of an African beach. The Arab is lying in the shade with the breeze of the spring touching him; Meursault, only mindful of the weather, is drawn to the coolness. However, the impulse that draws Meursault to the spring is not at all violent. Meursault happens to have a revolver, but his urge to shoot was simply blind, perhaps driven only by an instinct to be where the Arab happened to be by the spring. Inarticulately, Meursault gravitates toward "unity in nature (Merton 295)" because he refuses to face his inner life and sloth. This constant observation, especially in nature, suggests the existentialist's endless search for purpose, emphasizing the importance of the tangible, visible details of the world when they cannot find the former. To an existentialist, such as Meursault, he cannot turn inward to look for his purpose; he has already established that his life is meaningless because intrinsic freedom leaves him abandoned. His life lacks nothing, because it was always just that-nothing. His actions at the beach that day also prove that his life is not only self-sufficient, but complete-the motivation of his crime is rooted in the intensity of the belief

itself that only the facets of the physical world are worth observing, and worth fighting for.

Now that Meursault's completeness and self-sufficiency is explained in light of existentialism, it is next essential to show that Meursault, the existentialist, is "happy" in light of Aristotle's philosophy. If justification of life and happiness can be described as "the attainment of a final personal integrity of some sort (Merton 293)," Meursault to some extent has achieved this. Meursault is presented as the lone individual in the authenticity brought about by his completeness and self-sufficiency, and the reader may expect him to justify this existence by exposing the hypocrisy of society and the law, resisting them unto death. However, staying true to his existential beliefs, he allows people to have their preferred opinions of him, but he does not allow them to impose their ideas upon himself. Meursault does not consider his existence justified; he knows that he is not right, but he also knows that he is not completely wrong. He simply accepts his death sentence because he is secure in his belief that his fate doesn't matter because life is meaningless (Merton 295), and that he has lived completely within the confines of these beliefs all along. It is with these beliefs that Meursault makes a personal commitment of his entire being: if his fate is to die, he will accept death on his own terms, which correspond to his genuine experience of himself rather than a formula dictated to him by the court of law in terms of the fictitious identity that it fashions for him. Thus, it seems the guilt is as much society's as it is his own, so he will allow the law to destroy himself and his life, but he will not allow it to dismantle his self-definition (Merton 296). This demonstrates that Meursault lives purely in



accord with his own beliefs and for their own sake and nothing more; he once again emerges as self-sufficient and his life lacks nothing.

" God can help you (Camus 116)," the importunate priest tells Meursault in the death cell during the second half of the novel. " Every man I have known in your position has turned to Him (Camus 116- 117)," the priest continues. However, Meursault makes it clear that he will have nothing of it. " I acknowledged that that was their right . . . I didn't want anybody's help (Camus 117)." Meursault knows this submission to fate does not justify his actions or give his life meaning; it simply confirms the lack of meaning it had all the while, and that living in meaninglessness is only the beginning of his true " happiness," not the end (Merton 297). Confidently referring to the end of his life as a new beginning, Meursault claims that:

" What really counted was the possibility of escape, a leap to freedom, out of the implacable ritual, a wild run for it that would give whatever chance for hope there was . . . nothing was going to allow me such a luxury . . . I would just be caught up in the machinery again (Camus 109)."

As indicated in this passage, Meursault renounces the desire to justify his actions, and thus any hope of a consoling sense of his righteousness, in order to move forward in solidarity in action and resistance that are conscious of their own limitations (Merton 297- 298). A non-existential being would give life meaning if it didn't openly present itself by living in solidarity and openness with others, but Meursault is impoverished in this sense because he is utterly alone. He is caught in his own existential tendencies

because, having rejected the hypocrisy of society and the court system, he has not entered into solidarity with anyone else (Merton 298).

" Since we're all going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter (Camus 114)," Meursault announces to readers a few pages later. Put simply, because all humans will eventually meet death, all lives are equally meaningless. Just as Meursault is indifferent to much of the universe, the universe is indifferent to him. Paradoxically, it is only after Meursault reaches this dismal realization is he able to attain the true beginning of " happiness." When he fully comes to terms with the fact that he will inevitably meet death, whether by execution or old age, this understanding enables Meursault to put aside his fantasies of escaping execution by filing a successful legal appeal. Meursault sees that any hope for sustained life has been and will always be a burden amidst its mechanical boredom, the " machinery" of a like-minded society. His liberation from this false hope means he is free to live life for what it is, and to make the most of his remaining days in a state of happiness that blossomed from a lifetime of suffering.

Readers may not be entirely convinced of Meursault's happiness, and would likely view it as simple resignation. However, Bartleby of Herman Melville's *Bartleby* provides them with another existentialist in literature who is ultimately fond of his suffering as well. According to the religious studies professor and author Maurice Friedman, it is the inability to trust in a meaningful existence that lies at the core of the resemblance between Meursault and Bartleby (Friedman 76). Both, for instance, look for ways to deprive themselves, as Meursault did spiritually by refusing faith and <https://assignbuster.com/meursault-and-bartleby-on-the-love-of-suffering-philosophy-essay/>

Bartleby did physically by starving himself. Also like Meursault, it can be argued that Bartleby is an existentialist, whose life is defined by completeness and self-sufficiency, the two tenets of Aristotelian happiness. Throughout the course of Melville's story, Bartleby eats almost nothing but gingernuts when he is at the office, and while in the Tombs declares " 'I prefer not to dine today . . . It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners (qtd. in Friedman 76).'" On the employer's second visit to the Tombs, he was asked whether Bartleby would dine that day or whether he lives without dining. " Lives without dining (qtd. in Friedman 76)," he confirms, and closes the eyes of the washed out Bartleby, who was apparently sleeping, but actually dead (Friedman 76).

Like Kafka's hunger artist, Bartleby may have eaten if he found a food that he liked, if he had found some opening into a meaningful existence. However, he wants to starve because he can find no other meaningful way to live and therefore no access to an actual life, or authentic existence (Friedman 77). Here, food can be regarded as a metaphor for desire and avarice. Bartleby, who prefers not to have desires, dies by the end of the story due to starvation. Bartleby's death, while symbolically caused by his withdrawal into apathy, is physically caused by his preference not to eat-his preference not to engage in the avarice and greed of the materialistic world that surrounds him, which is often representative of the rest of society at large. In addition, reflecting upon the fact that Bartleby lives on gingernuts and that ginger is a spicy thing while Bartleby is not, the employer concludes that ginger had no effect on Bartleby. This idea, as Sartre claimed, was an existentialist's triumph of the will over natural cause and effect (Friedman

80). It is as if life doesn't excite him enough to even live it at all, conquering his mind and feelings rather than relying on the world to mask his pain; like Meursault, Bartleby knows his life is meaningless and lacks nothing, because he started out as nothing, just a being abandoned at the hands of freedom.

Another quality shared between Meursault and Bartleby is that they not only demonstrate self-sufficiency, but that their lives are complete. Instead of placing Bartleby with the other workers, the lawyer assigns him to a corner on his side of the folding doors so the quiet, reliable Bartleby was within earshot if his assistance was needed. However, it is interesting that Bartleby's window commands no view at all, though it gives some light through a small opening between the buildings. He is isolated further as the employer put up a high green folding screen which entirely separates Bartleby from his sight without removing him from his commanding voice (Friedman 66). Much like the physical alienation Bartleby experiences in the office setting, he experiences this alienation to an even greater extent in his mind. For instance, Bartleby's window could be symbolic of his awareness of the outside world, but the fact that it doesn't provide a view could represent his close-mindedness and narrow existence, or his lack of desire to experience the pleasures of a world outside of himself. This suggestion is compounded by the passage in which the employer tells the reader that " it occurred to me that [Bartleby's] unexampled diligence in copying by his dim window for the first few weeks of his stay with me might have temporarily impaired his vision (Melville 126)." Bartleby hyper-focuses on his work in the external world, just like Meursault observes nature in the physical world, to avoid examining himself too closely and feeling anguished as a result.

Therefore, the "vision" that Bartleby is denied is not so much literal as it is figurative—he fails to sharpen any ability he had to "see" inside himself or envision a purposeful future. Since Bartleby believes that his life holds no purpose, it is still "complete" according to Aristotle because he lives for the sake of this belief, despite the fact that he is starving and that the lawyer tries to dissuade him from thinking this way. His existence is good enough for him, and he sees no point in sharpening his vision because he sees life as a whole as also having no point, no purpose, and no meaning.

The final similarity between Meursault and Bartleby is that both characters find relief and contentment in death. When Meursault is faced with death, he realizes that he would not have lived his life any other way because he would only die anyway, regardless of any efforts he put into living it. This culmination of his complete and self-sufficient state helps him decide that he is happy during the last few days of his life, despite all the suffering he endured to get there. Thus, in a sense, Bartleby's death may also be for the reader an image of the outermost limit of an existentialist's condition—a condition which forces Bartleby into his somewhat self-imposed exile, but does not leave him there. He is relieved by the idea of death, the idea that his life of suffering will definitely end. The suffering Bartleby endures is as inescapable as death at present, but it nonetheless represents his genuine and personal struggles (Friedman 81).

Ultimately, in their own unique ways, Meursault and Bartleby learned to grow emotionally in life's grip, even if it meant accepting and realizing their inevitable deaths as its only sweet release, because it was the first time that they had preferential feelings about anything at all. Since it is clear that both

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characters fit Sartre's description of an existentialist, they were able to leave the world behind while staying true to themselves and the situations to which their hopeless souls had to respond. However, in this struggle, and in it alone, remains a possibility of authenticating humanity (Friedman 81) by living completely, self-sufficiently, for no one but oneself, and therefore "happily" according to Aristotle-maybe not "happily" in the traditional sense of the word, but in a way that allows them to love and appreciate their suffering, as opposed to well-being, for shaping them into who they've become.