

Are We Forgiven Without Religion?

Abstract

This paper examines the point at which the Sacrament of Confession and its modern societal equivalent go from being a ritual of absolution to an infinite cycle of self-incrimination. Traditionally, confession functions as a structured resolution of guilt, mediated by an external authority and the concept of grace. Drawing on Augustine, Aquinas, and Kierkegaard, I establish that traditional absolution requires a divine figure of authority, a “transcendent other,” to break the cycle of internal guilt and repentance. However, in our post-religious secular society, defined by Alasdair MacIntyre as a loss of stable moral structures, modern substitutes for confession attempt to *self-designate* this divine authority. By reading Foucault’s ideas of a confessing society alongside Hegel’s belief that self-consciousness necessitates external recognition, this paper argues that self-legislation fails to function as an authority capable of providing absolution to guilt. The result of a self-legislated authority is an infinite cycle of confession, a phenomenon depicted in Albert Camus’s *The Fall*. While Clémence’s condition of being trapped in an infinite cycle of confession with no absolution mirrors Camus’s definition of the “Absurd,” Clémence’s position as a judge-penitent prevents the very stability necessary for a Camusian Revolt against this new, moral Absurd. Ultimately, this paper concludes that without accepting the existence of an entirely external authority, confession becomes a terminal and infinite moral state from which there is no possibility of an existential rebellion.

All Christian thinkers, from the old to the new, cite acknowledgment of guilt as the first step in the ritual of confession. In St. Augustine's *Confessions*, he explains that confession begins with a transparent and self-indicting look at one's own soul. The sinner, upon looking into his own soul, must tell the truth that he finds there to God; not because God is not conscious of his sin, but because God needs to hear the acknowledgement of sin from the sinner himself. This self-indictment is meant to inspire a greater love for and connection to God, as Augustine writes in Book II that "I will now call to mind my past foulness... not because I love them, but that I may love Thee, O my God." This is further corroborated by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* (Tres Partis), where sin is considered the "matter" of the sacrament of Confession, the first condition for which is "contrition," an acknowledgement and deep remorse for committing a sin. Aquinas importantly notes that this acknowledgement of sin, repentance, is not merely an act of passion but a conscious direction of the will towards the intention of removing a sin. The emphasis on acknowledgement of guilt being a conscious direction of the will is a crucial philosophical anchor here, as it's used as a bridge to a wealth of the philosophical texts used in this paper to analyse Clemence and confession. A particularly useful philosophical framework for understanding acknowledgement of guilt is given in Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard argues here that the moral structure of an individual is defined by their level of consciousness. And thus the ritual of Confession means becoming conscious of oneself as a sinner in the presence of God. Kierkegaard goes on to argue that the more consciousness one has, the more "will" and "self" they possess. Thus in acknowledging one's guilt and sin, they not only grow stronger in their love for God (the highest external authority), but they expand their consciousness and grow stronger in will. Specifically, Kierkegaard defines this acknowledgement of guilt as a "movement of the will." As sin is a

position of the will, acknowledging it and intending for its destruction constitutes a re-orientation of the will towards God. A key thing to note is that according to Kierkegaard, guilt only becomes sin once it is acknowledged before God. Once sin has become explicitly acknowledged before God, this "transformed" self gains a new quality by virtue of being directly in the sight of God. And without the transparency of an explicit acknowledgement of guilt directly before God, the self will always remain in a state of quiet, hidden despair. This philosophical view of confession is one that will be echoed by most other philosophers discussed in this paper and later Camus himself.

Once one's sin is acknowledged, the next step in confession is to take that sin to an authority. Confession is, of course, incomplete without God and therefore entails some degree of authority. But there is debate around what constitutes the authority of the middleman between you and God. For Augustine, having a preacher hear your confession and absolve you of your sin is necessary. Augustine attributes his personal growth in confession to the ministry of the Preacher. Augustine further claims that confessions, far from being private, belong to the community of the church. Augustine's own confessions were indeed written for "the believing sons of men." An example of the need for external authority is given through the story of Victorinus. Victorinus claimed that he was already a Christian in private, but Simplicianus refused to believe him "unless I see you in the Church of Christ." Faith is incomplete without a public profession of it in the sight of all that are faithful and under a divine authority. The nature of such an authority of the church is expanded on in Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* when he explains that the priest is a mediator between God and the people who both bestows Divine things and "makes satisfaction" for sins. A priest stands in God's place, and when a sinner confesses to them their forgiveness is a sacrament that is granted by the "power of the keys," which is vested exclusively in the ministers. The

ministers therefore have a tangible divine authority, though they act not of their own power but “in the person of Christ,” using the power delivered at their ordinations.

For a philosophical anchor with which to ground this understanding of divine authority in mediating confession between sinner and absolution from Christ we turn once more to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard explains the necessity of divine authority by the fact that human beings themselves are not self-derived. Kierkegaard defines the “self” as a relation that “has been constituted by another.” Because the self is therefore derived, it cannot remain in equilibrium by itself. And because the self cannot be in equilibrium alone, it cannot generate a “movement of the will” or any moral resolution of confession without an external authority. For Kierkegaard, Christ is the only physician who is capable of healing the mortal sickness of the spirit. On the further necessity of authority, Kierkegaard emphasizes that it is the authoritative act of forgiveness which “establishes sin so securely as a position that it seems a perfect impossibility to do away with it again—and then it is precisely Christianity which, by the atonement, would do away with it so completely that it is as though drowned in the sea.” And without the external authority in confession, the self would remain trapped in a space of despair from which they are unable to free themselves on their own.

The largest part of confession, and the ultimate goal of the ritual to begin with, is of course absolution from sin. A huge theme in *Confessions* is that Augustintine cannot resolve his own guilt, his absolution from sin and guilt must come from an authority external to the human will. For Augustine personally, his will was bound by a chain of its own making, and even when he wished to change, it was God that needed to facilitate this change in his will. But to communicate with God and have one’s will moved Augustine claims there is a distinct need for a mediator between the sinner and the “immortal just One.” He argues that all

human attempts to reach God through what he calls curious visions lead only to delusion. He relies on the Man Jesus Christ as a mediator, and therefore by extension also the priests who act In Corpus Christi. Aquinas again provides more specific details on the theological nature of absolution. Aquinas teaches that human acts alone cannot blot out sin as they require the infusion of Divine grace. The forgiveness of guilt and the debt of eternal punishment belong to God's act while release from temporal punishment belongs to man's cooperation with the Divine. Everything surrounding confession is at least somewhat linked to the existence and necessity of some external authority, as even the very internal act of repenting is inspired by God, since a person cannot "justify themselves without God." The distinctly authoritative act of forgiveness restores moral order and brings the soul to a state of peace. Guilt, as Aquinas describes it, is a state of disorder. And forgiveness through grace restores the proper order. Thus absolution from sin and a complete ritual of confession necessitates an authoritative external authority from outside the self.

The Ritual of Confession Without Authority

Thus far, we have seen how all elements of the Catholic sacrament of confession (and indeed elements of confession rituals from all religions) necessitate an external authority from outside the self. Religious thinkers like St. Augustine or Thomas Aquinas indicate that these external authorities take the forms of priests, Christ, and God himself. But is there a strict rule on what that external authority looks like, even within catholicism? And how much control do practitioners of faith have over who they choose to be an authentic source of authority in confession? A study titled "Algorithmic Absolution: The Case of Catholic Confession Apps" conducted by Sasha A. Q. Scott tackles these questions. The article studies the Catholic ritual confession as practiced through various mobile "Confession apps."

Specifically, it studies how religious definitions of “authority” change when a piece of software replaces a priest. The study aggregated data from app descriptions and 311 user reviews from multiple confession apps such as ConfessIt, Mea Culpa, and Confession: A Roman Catholic App. These apps have been downloaded hundreds of thousands of times, and generally receive a lot of support from Christian communities. Most importantly, the study found that most users of these apps don’t question the automation of the ritual, and they experience their confession as entirely authentic and legitimate. And while this study clarifies that a lot of users only use these apps as memory aids to avoid the anxiety of forgetting sins while speaking to a priest, in this paper I will be discussing the argument that the software behind these apps can act as an authority, as it is not neutral and when it returns an absolution from sin for a user it is acting as a moral and social agent.

But how do these “confession apps” compare with the structure of the sacrament of Confession that I outlined in the beginning of this paper? Confession apps, as discussed in Scott’s study, replicate the entire moral structure of the traditional Sacrament of Penance. They feature personalised checklists, usually based on the Ten Commandments, that allow users to catalogue sins by age, sex, and vocation. The apps, in a similar if not identical manner to that of a priest, guide users through “progressive stages of sorrow, confession, absolution and penance,” including scripts to be spoken out loud and the “Act of Contrition.” And after absolving the user of their sin, the apps display prayers for further reflection, which closely mirrors the post-confession tradition of further reflection. The obvious difference between these apps and their traditional counterparts is the displacement of the priest as a mediator. As we’ve seen, in traditional theology the priest acts *in persona Christi* to “move the will” of the sinner and orient their mind towards God. In the case of apps, the work priests are replaced by a mere binary processing algorithm. This lack of a mediator is more distinct

in some apps, such as The Confession App, where there is a literal button to be pressed in order to absolve one of their sins with as little human intervention as possible.

But even though the traditional sacramental authority is removed from these apps, Scott claims that their users do not abandon all notions of authority, but rather transfer it to new sources. The new authority of these applications is the algorithm. The algorithm is the new governing logic that assigns meaningfulness to the user's moral actions and intentions of ridding themselves of sin. The study further notes that in much broader and sometimes atheist confessional forums such as PostSecret or Twitter, the "authority" of confession is an imaginary audience or a community of shared thought. And even though this definition of authority is as far from Augustine's description of the power of the keys as you can get, it is eerily similar to his same ideas of confession being a public practice for "the believing sons of men." The study notes that Confession is a "surprisingly persistent social norm" that flourishes in the modern digital economy, and since users describe these rituals as feeling fully authentic, Scott suggests that authenticity is now determined by the user's perception rather than what institutions deem to be authentic authority. And the degree to which Christians adopt these tools into their daily lives suggests that they are now choosing their *own* mediators to develop their relationship with the Divine.

Foucault's Confessing Animal and MacIntyre's Sovereign Confessors

The idea that confession has made its way into the fabric of society in forms other than that of the original ritual has been discussed by many other philosophers, particularly Michel Foucault. His work, *The History of Sexuality*, touches on the transition of what society views to be an authentic "confessional authority" in many important ways. Foucault

explains that the Christian tradition established an imperative to pass everything related to one's conduct and desires through the "endless mill of speech," such as the confession apps discussed above. A Western society implicitly built on the impressions of Christianity have subjected people to constant and meticulous self-examination. And it's this meticulous self-examination that has put us in a state of being subject to the infinite task of telling, the need to tell one's self and everyone around everything that concerns our pleasures and thoughts. Foucault further reflects Scott's observation of the "transition" of the ritual of confession to more modern equivalents, but he details a very useful philosophical framework with which to understand this transition of confessional authority. Foucault explains that as confession gradually lost its ritualistic localization within the Sacrament of Penance it moved towards other fields such as psychiatry, medicine, pedagogy, and family relations. And while in the traditional ritual of Confession the priest had the role of being what Foucault terms the "forgiving master," in modern confession it is the listener of the confessor who becomes a "master of truth." The master of truth validates the confession by understanding and deciphering it for the confessor just as the "forgiving masters" of old absolved the confessor of sin.

Foucault's *History of Sexuality* further helps us understand how the confessing animal that remains in the aftermath of a society that has "killed God," as Nietzsche would have it, continues to seek out authority to replace that of the priest. According to Foucault, one of the biggest shifts in this direction was the "medicalization of the effects of confession." Confession and its effects have been restructured and morphed into therapy sessions, where the participant is "healed" instead of "absolved," this time at the hands of a medical authority. Foucault here leans towards categorizing the self as a kind of authority, where the individual can find many benefits to the authentic feeling of confession he obtains from maintaining a

discourse of truth with himself, by virtue of meticulous self-examination. This transition but ultimate permanence of Confession is understood by Foucault as a byproduct of a “will to truth” that is so essential to the Western identity that it remains a necessary part of our lives even when the original religious authority of truth is long gone. The obligation to confess our innermost thoughts and feelings is so deeply engraved in Western society that members no longer perceive it as a constraint of power. Instead, we feel that truth lies hidden within our nature and needs to resurface. This surfacing of truth is no longer viewed as a sacramental act, but as an act of liberation. And therefore the most crucial shift we have seen in the ritual of Confession in an increasingly secular society is the shift from truth being an aspect of Divine power to truth being a symbol of freedom.

Foucault’s explanation of the shift of confessional authority has a philosophical concurrence in Allistair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. MacIntyre explains that the displacement of the priest from modern confessional rituals reflects the rise of the “autonomous moral agent” in modern society. These new autonomous moral agents have been liberated from the external authority of divine law and traditional hierarchies, and speak freely, unconstrained by the necessity of “externalities” such as mediators. And as to the selection of a confession app specifically, these algorithms detailed by Scott mirror MacIntyre’s idea of the managerial function of expertise. Just as a manager has authority based on knowledge and demonstrated effectiveness in controlling social reality, a confession app presents a face of control that the user accepts as an authentic substitute for the judgement of a priest. MacIntyre further claims that modern people are “detached from all social particularity.” And thus the modern confessor is free to choose what counts as authority, whether that authority is an app, a social network, or something else of the confessor’s own design.

The Instability of Self-Designated Authority

We have seen that as the ritual of confession has seeped into the modern day, the ability to designate confessional authority has transitioned from the religious to the personal. But can people really designate their own authority? And is such an ability as stable as pre-designated authority such as that of a minister? Immanuel Kant, in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, establishes that “self-origination,” or autonomy, is the only thing that gives any action moral worth. Kant defines autonomy as the property of the will by which it is “a law to itself,” and can exist independently of the objects towards which the will is oriented. For Kant, looking to an external source (a priest, divine command...) is heteronomy. If a law is given by an external object, then it is more of a *suggestion*: its imperative is hypothetical rather than definitive. Kant claims that the only thing man is subject to in this universe are the laws he legislates by himself, for himself. And to follow any external law out of fear or some hope for reward, according to Kant, is to deprive morality of its purity.

So then what, according to Kant, becomes of confession? Every iteration of confessional rituals we have seen, from the original to the modern equivalents, has necessitated some form of external authority to absolve one’s self of guilt. But how is that authority truly external when they installed it themselves? Kant can resolve this dilemma not by creating a new category of external authority, but by dividing the self into two “standpoints.” Kant argues that the human being belongs to two worlds: the sensible world, the world in which we are subject to desires and natural laws, and the intelligible world where we are guided by our rational intelligence. Thus, in being divided in two, the self becomes its own mediator. The individual as a rational intelligence gives the law of absolution and designates that as an authority for the sensible self. And this authority, in

belonging to the intelligible world, is outside the bad will of the sinner, but still remains inside the rational essence of the human being.

So far we have seen that the central concern with confession is that when the self installs its own authority, absolution loses its binding force. But for Kant this lack of validity can be avoided simply by providing a different explanation for what makes a moral judgement binding. Kant argues that the only thing that should move the will is pure respect for practical law. This respect is just the feeling that these rational laws create, and they don't originate from any divine external pressures. A rational being has inherent value, or as Kant defines it, "dignity," because they are a provider of universal laws. If the authority to forgive or to judge came from the outside, it would violate the inherent dignity in people being their own authority figures. In Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, there is no decisive act of forgiveness by an external agent. Moral worth is found in the Good Will, which remains independent and intact regardless of the external world or priestly interventions.

For Kant, confession is not an infinite cycle because of what he deems to be the "restlessness" of reason. Kant acknowledges a certain state of existential infinity in claiming that the mind and reason restlessly seeks the unconditionally necessary. Reason often finds itself in a dialectic where it tries to argue against strict laws to satisfy personal preferences and desires, and this dialectic need not be finite. But being infinite is not the same thing as being imprisoning or limiting if it is just the condition of reason. The metaphysic of morals must be cleansed of everything empirical, which includes finding relief or closure, and thus the Kantian self is in a state of *permanent* self-legislation. For Kant, the closure at the end of confessional rituals is not absolution, but a continual submission of the will to a rational law without external interventions.

Unlike Kant, Sartre isn't so allowing of authority to be designated by the self. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* proposes an analysis of "sincerity," which demonstrates that self-designation of authority is inherently deceptive. Sartre defines sincerity as a person's project to "be what one is." However, human reality is shaped entirely by consciousness, which is inherently for-itself. And as a consequence of that self-containment, consciousness's mode of being is to be what it is not, and not to truly be what it is. Thus when someone confesses to being guilty of something, they are attempting to solidify themselves into a singular, definite, thing (an in-itself) to escape the freedom of being a consciousness that can always be otherwise. By choosing one's own authority to whom they confess, the person acts as what Sartre calls a "champion of sincerity," who demands they be judged as a thing, while also remaining the free subject who installed that judgement in the first place.

Sartre expresses a necessity for an outside mediator, as absolution cannot come within the self for one cannot judge one's self without the necessary distance. One cannot truly be an object to themselves. They can delude themselves into thinking they are an object, but because the consciousness is inherently free it cannot be truly reduced to an object within itself. However, one can be an object relative to another. And thus Sartre claims that "The Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me." Deliberately designating external authorities turns the Other into an object rather than a subject. As soon as the Other becomes an object, they lose the key to being a mediator, as they cannot truly perceive one's self as an object. The kind of absolution provided by an application is therefore powerless, because the person who installed it is the one maintaining the need for such an app. In bad faith, a person decides on the exact requirements for truth, and they are satisfied when it is barely persuaded. And thus a person, in bad faith, in choosing their own confessional

authority provides non-persuasive evidence that allows them to escape the burden of their own freedom without truly resolving guilt, only the superficial manifestation of said guilt.

While Sartre identifies the bad faith inherent in designating one's own authority, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* provides the rigorous philosophical foundation to demonstrate why this self-selection ultimately fails as a mechanism of true absolution. For Hegel, the problem of self-selected confessional authority is fundamentally an example of a failure in mutual recognition. This concept is central to his analysis of self-consciousness, which he argues is "only as a recognized being". Self-consciousness cannot reach certainty of itself in isolation; it necessitates an independent "Other" to establish its own truth and reality.

This reflexive contradiction of installing one's own authority mirrors the failure of the Master in Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic. In this relationship of Mastery and Servitude, the Master demands recognition from the Servant but refuses to recognize the Servant in return. Because the Master has reduced the Servant to an "inessential object," the recognition the Master receives is inherently one-sided and unequal. Consequently, absolution without an external, independent force loses its binding power. Just as the Master's self-certainty remains untrue because it derives from someone he does not respect as an equal, a self-selected confessional authority, whether an algorithmic app or a self-constructed moral system, lacks the necessary ontological strength to provide absolution. If the authority is merely an object installed by the subject, its supposed forgiveness is nothing more than an echo of the subject's own will, completely lacking the independent weight necessary to bind the conscience.

Hegel's analysis of the "Beautiful Soul" directly addresses this reflexive contradiction, describing a subject who seeks to remain pure within their own self-certainty. The Beautiful Soul is trapped in the impotence of inwardness. It lives in the absolute certainty of its own self but completely lacks the force to relinquish itself and act within the real world. It attempts to maintain a pure heart by aggressively avoiding the strain of external actuality. By installing their own authority, the modern confessor engages in what Hegel calls a "dissembling game." This creates a deep hypocrisy where the consciousness switches between its internal certainty and the external world. The subject pretends to be judged by an Other, while simultaneously knowing that the Other is actually themselves. Because this consciousness fundamentally refuses to be mediated by a truly external Other, it falls into an infinite flight, a yearning which only loses itself. The modern confessor becomes trapped in cycle of self-consciousness that never achieves actual forgiveness.

For Hegel, moral closure and forgiveness are events that must occur between two free, self-conscious beings. This decisive act begins when the evil or guilty individual confesses their singularity to the Other, declaring "I am he." This confession is the act of casting its actuality aside to make oneself universal. However, the self-installed authority of a judging consciousness refuses to reciprocate this confession. It repels this community from itself and remains locked up within itself. Reconciliation only decisively occurs when both sides completely renounce this one-sidedness and recognize itself in its opposite. Hegel concludes that it is this reciprocal recognition where the confession occurs between two independent selves. Without a truly external Other to speak conduct the recognition part of reconciliation, the subject remains hopelessly trapped in the unhappy consciousness, a state of infinite movement and unreconciliation.

Clémence and Infinite Confession

The literary realization of this infinite confession is reflected in the character of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, who turns the traditional religious ritual into a self-perpetuating cycle of judgment in Albert Camus's *The Fall*. Clamence provides a concrete example of how a moral structure collapses into a permanent condition when external authority is fundamentally removed. Clamence invents what he calls his "noble profession": the judge-penitent. This role is a merger of three traditionally separate confessional roles: the sinner who confesses, the judge who condemns, and the authority who interprets guilt

As the sinner, Clamence indulges in public confession as often as possible, continuously accusing himself. He details his vanity, his inherent selfishness, and most notably, his cowardly refusal to save a drowning woman. Yet, as the judge, the ultimate goal of his confession is not humility, but rather the acquisition of power. Clamence realizes that "inasmuch as one couldn't condemn others without immediately judging oneself, one had to overwhelm oneself to have the right to judge others". By acting as the self-appointed authority, he ensures that by being the first to speak his shames, he permanently sets himself above his listeners. He explicitly claims that his intimate knowledge of his own duplicity gives him "the right to speak" and the power to "hand out definitive testimonials of bad character".

Clamence utilizes his confession as a way to trap his audience, designing something that implicates humanity as a whole and ensures that no one remains innocent. He fashions himself a mask, a portrait of his own failings that is so "lifelike and stylized" it becomes an inescapable image of all humanity. He describes this transition from personal to collective

guilt as a deliberate trick. Once he shifts the narrative from "I was the lowest of the low" to "This is what we are," he pools his listeners into his own guilt, allowing him to judge them while remaining in the same pool as his victims. He functions as an "Elijah without a messiah," constantly passing his judgement onto a world that "cannot endure any judgment" precisely because it has lost the divine law behind such judgement.

Because Clamence has successfully "installed" himself as his own authority, he is trapped in the reflexive contradiction where forgiveness is functionally impossible. His entire philosophy rests on the absolute denial of grace. He asserts that while we can never assert the innocence of anyone, "we can state with certainty the guilt of all". Consequently, he creates a system of pity without absolution. He explicitly states his inability to provide any form of moral closure: "I pity without absolving, I understand without forgiving". Without a transcendent other to mediate grace, Clamence is reduced to tallying up the crimes. He compares this agonizing state of consciousness to the "little-ease", a horrific medieval dungeon cell where a prisoner could neither fully stand nor lie down. This cell represents a permanent moral restriction, a state where "the condemned man learned that he was guilty" every single day.

Without an external word of reconciliation Clamence's confession becomes a permanent condition, a Sisyphean loop that provides double enjoyment rather than spiritual resolution. He pursues immortality through sin, confessing to "begin again lighter in heart," not with the intention to stop sinning, but rather to "taste a double enjoyment, first of my nature and secondly of a charming repentance". This establishes the Moral Absurd, where he describes his life as a tedious navigation in what he describes to be a dead sea. He makes apparent progress, but tragically, "nothing is changing". His confession is just a perpetual

pursuit of itself that is incapable of ever reaching the "atemporality" of true forgiveness. The novel ultimately concludes with the finality of "too late," as Clamence recognizes that the opportunity for a decisive moral act, saving the drowning woman, is gone forever. He realizes that even if he were given a second chance, he would likely fail again, stating "It's too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately!"

Infinite Confession & The Absurd

This permanent condition fundamentally parallels the absurd as described by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The moral absurd is generated by the confrontation between the human demand for meaning (or forgiveness) and the world's refusal to provide it. Camus defines the absurd as the profound birth of a confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. In Clamence's case, this confrontation occurs directly at the moral level: his longing is a very strong demand for moral resolution and forgiveness, while the silence resulting from that longing is the agonizing lack of an external, authoritative source to provide that absolution. The feeling of absurdity is characterized as a divorce between man and his life, perfectly paralleling the alienization of Clamence's experiences. He is a sinner actively acknowledging his guilt, yet completely divorced from the possibility of closure. He represents an impossible condition where logic is deeply desired, but contradictions remain constant. He attempts to use the logical process of confession to reach a state of absolution that his secular, self-legislated world no longer supports.

Clamence's endless confession perfectly mirrors Sisyphus endlessly pushing his rock. The gods originally condemned Sisyphus to roll a rock up a mountain because they believed there was nothing more dreadful and existentially punishing than endless labour. Clamence's

self-imposed confessions, which never end mirror this, where the strenuous effort to confess itself becomes the ultimate punishment. Just as Sisyphus must watch his rock rush back down to the plain, knowing he must push it up again, each of Clamence's confessions merely restarts the cycle. Camus notes that living is keeping the absurd alive, something Clamence follows not by conscious, liberating choice, but through the trap of the permanence of his universal guilt. Meticulous self-examination will ensure that the rock that is his guilt will inevitably always roll back down to the starting point.

The Impossibility of Revolt

While Camus argues that the proper response to the absurd is a vigilant revolt, Clamence's position utterly destabilizes the subjecthood required to affirm such a condition. For Sisyphus, the descent from the mountain represents the so-called hour of consciousness where he becomes somehow superior to his own fate because he maintains a unified lucidity. Camus argues that "to understand is, above all, to unify". Clamence completely fails in this regard because his consciousness is fundamentally fragmented. Because he is simultaneously the judge, the accused, the witness, and the confessor, it is practically impossible for him to achieve the unity required to find existential peace. Revolt demands a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity and a crystal clear vision of the fate you are subject to, but without the resignation that usually comes from that. Sisyphus is capable of revolt because he remains the master of his own, crystal clear, days, contemplating his unrelated actions as his fate created by himself. Clamence, conversely, is a slave because he has installed himself as the very punishing authority from which he needs to be liberated. By creating his own moral framework, he has committed a form of philosophical suicide, negating his own distinct subjecthood to sustain a permanent condition of guilt.

Consequently, he cannot achieve the lucid recognition of self that allows one to rebel against the absurd.

The essays in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* and *The Rebel* demonstrate why this infinite confession precludes true revolt. In *The Rebel*, Camus notes that modern crime is no longer a cry of passion but a logical act supported by philosophy. Clamence's invention of the judge-penitent is a great example of an execution of this logical crime. By taking refuge in a self-constructed moral doctrine, Clamence makes his own failures as universal as science, effectively making every murderer a judge of their own victims. This logic is an extension of the Romantic Rebellion and the Dandy. Because the dandy has severed his coherence from his Creator, he must "take himself in hand" to create unity through an "aesthetic of singularity". Living in a world without God, symbolized in *The Fall* by the empty Just Judges panel, Clamence adopts the dandy's slogan "to live and die before a mirror". His confession is a performance designed to maintain a coherent character rather than to genuinely seek moral change.

Furthermore, the infinite cycle of universal guilt inherently destroys the possibility of solidarity, which is the bedrock of Camusian rebellion. Camus argues in "Reflections on the Guillotine" that because nobody is absolutely innocent and everyone has done some degree of wrong in their lives, no individual has the right to pronounce a definitive, absolute judgment. Clamence takes this philosophical truth that we are all in a sense subject to history and weaponizes it. Instead of using shared guilt to build solidarity, he creates what he deems to be a "casuistry of blood" where he is the first among sinners and, therefore, the first among judges. And because Clamence demands total recognition from his slaves without recognizing them in return, he enters a blind alley where autonomy is irrelevant to the

individuals he judged. He is trapped in his own monologue instead of actual dialogue, and thus actual forgiveness is impossible. True rebellion says, "I rebel—therefore we exist," affirming the existence of a certain nature common to all men. But he is trapped in an infinite but terminal state where nothing ever changes, proving that confession without external grace is fruitless.

Ontological Guilt

The inability of the subject to achieve resolution through self-designation is further discussed by Martin Heidegger's existential analysis of Dasein in *Being and Time*. Heidegger provides the ontological ground for why this guilt is so insurmountably persistent. He argues that Being-guilty (Schuldigsein) is not merely the result of a moral requirement. Rather, it is a primordial existentials of Dasein, a kind of Being that Dasein inherently possesses long before it ever commits a specific sin. Heidegger defines Dasein as Being-the-basis of a nullity, meaning that because Dasein is perpetually thrown into existence, it is never the absolute master of its own origin. This powerfully supports the reality of Clamence's infinite confession: his guilt is entirely un-resolvable because it is deeply rooted in the very structure of his Being, a foundation he did not create and can never fully ground.

In an attempt to escape this primordial guilt, the modern confessor turns to the public sphere, falling victim to what Heidegger terms the "They" (das Man). The they-self represents a state where Dasein is fully dispersed into the public, having its Being taken away by the Others. By broadcasting his confessions to humanity, Clamence remains inside the they, existing in a realm where everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The primary function of the they is the disburdening of Being. Clamence's self-appointed judge-penitent

role is a highly sophisticated form of this disburdening: by universally decreeing that everyone is guilty, he perfectly ensures that nobody who was truly responsible for his specific failures.

For Heidegger, Resoluteness is the authentic equivalent to Camusian Revolt. Resoluteness requires "projecting oneself upon one's ownmost Being-guilty," entering a state that is ready for anxiety. Clamence cannot achieve this because he uses the mechanism of confession to flee anxiety rather than own it. Furthermore, authentic existence strictly requires a "Being-towards-death," acknowledging death as Dasein's "ownmost, non-relational possibility" to stabilize the self. Clamence destroys this stability by turning his guilt into a social mirror, making it publicly relational. By doing so, he loses the vital non-relational component required for a decisive existential breakthrough. He is trapped in the state of falling (Verfallen), a plunge into the groundlessness of public interpretation where Dasein is always too late to own its thrownness. His endless confession is not an authentic hermeneutic circle, but rather a vicious circle.

The Imperialism of the Same

Finally, Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* demonstrates exactly why a self-generated confessional structure inevitably collapses into the absurdity of recursive isolation. Levinas frames the confrontation between the human demand for forgiveness and the absence of absolution as the tragedy of a being trapped entirely within the "Imperialism of the Same". A world without the authoritative Word of the Other is "an-archic", fundamentally without principle or beginning. In this world the isolated subject is "made game of" by an "evil genius," where every self-generated appearance is a potential lie. This directly parallels Clamence's miserable condition: without a truly external Other to speak a definitive yes of

affirmation, his entire moral world remains suspended in a state of permanent confession. True forgiveness, for Levinas, is fundamentally an act of infinity because it arrives from a transcendent source that the subject can neither contain nor produce. The Idea of Infinity is defined precisely as a content that boundlessly exceeds its container. When a subject like Clamence attempts to serve as their own source of absolution, they act as a finite container hopelessly attempting to hold an infinite content. The resulting structural disproportion creates the dizzying vertigo of the absurd. Without the genuine face of the Other to shatter this isolation, the subject is violently exposed to the "There Is" (Il y a), the horrifying, anonymous, and indeterminate rustling of being that relentlessly returns behind every negation.

This dynamic creates a Sisyphean cycle of self-legislation because the "cogito" (the self-thinking self) can never logically find a stopping place in its own internal negation. The cogito's movement is merely a descent into deeper and deeper confession. Because affirmation can only legitimately arrive from the Other, any internal Yes generated by the self is always strictly provisional and instantly subject to new doubt. Levinas defines atheism as a state of separation so complete that the being is entirely at home with itself and willfully ignorant of the Other. While a degree of separation is necessary for human freedom, when it becomes absolute, as perfectly demonstrated in Clamence's role as judge-penitent, the subject becomes trapped in a suffocating uniformity and complete monotony of identity. By completely rejecting the external Other, the subject actively enters the bad infinite or the *apeiron*, a quality that qualifies absolutely nothing and originates from nowhere. Infinite confession morphs into this *apeiron*: it is a frantic search for a future that ceaselessly escapes its form because it is utterly ungrounded in any ethical relation with a transcendent Master.

Revolt is thus completely impossible because the identity of the judge-penitent entirely dissolves the stable subject required for action. Levinas argues that total reflection, the ability to see oneself entirely from the outside, is categorically impossible for a living subject. When a subject attempts to act as its own supreme judge, it depersonalizes itself. Clamence effectively becomes a third party to his own life, a detached survivor endlessly judging his own works, which utterly destroys his capacity to act as a singular presence.. For Levinas, truth is not a matter of visual disclosure but rather of justice, which strictly requires the ethical relation of the Face-to-Face. By installing himself as the sole judge, Clamence eliminates the vital asymmetry of intersubjective space. He establishes a monarchy of the self where there is absolutely no higher power to logically justify his freedom. Levinas posits that "Pardon" is the singular force that can undo history. However, Pardon is a profound retroaction that must decisively come from the Other. Because Clamence fundamentally rejects the Other as a mediator of grace, he permanently traps himself. He cannot revolt because he cannot be pardoned.

When confession persists without a credible concept of grace or external authority, it ceases to function as a structure of moral resolution and devolves into an endless cycle of self-accusation. This terminal condition, powerfully exemplified by Jean-Baptiste Clamence in *The Fall*, traps the individual in the inescapable role of the judge-penitent. By attempting to self-legislate absolution, the modern confessor triggers a reflexive contradiction that drains forgiveness of its binding, ontological force. The resulting structure heavily mirrors the absurd as described by Camus, producing a condition of futile, Sisyphean labor where guilt is constantly recounted but never fundamentally resolved. However, with a deeply crucial difference: the absolute instability of self-designated moral authority critically fractures the

individual's subjecthood. Caught in a void of inauthentic idle talk and trapped within the imperialism of the Same, the subject completely loses the stability, resoluteness, and reciprocal recognition inherently required to affirm their condition. Thus, confession without external grace produces not merely an absurdity, but a terrifying, inescapable absurdity from which existential revolt can never emerge

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