Existentialism Revisited:
the big lie from Nietzsche to Lu Xun

Haozhan Sun

A thesis submitted to the University of Sussex for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

May 2022
University of Sussex
Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree. However, the thesis incorporates to the extent indicated below, material already submitted as a separate article for its publication: “The Compatibility between the Religious and the Nihilistic Currents”, which has been accepted by *Labyrinth: an international journal for philosophy, value theory and sociocultural hermeneutics*

Signature: ...........................................................................................................................
What commonality holds together all existentialists? Existentialism is notoriously difficult to define and there seems to be little agreement on how to use the term. At the same time, a cursory look at the content pages of the authoritative works on existentialism reveals that their authors discuss more or less the same list of thinkers. If this is so then it feels reasonable to assume that there is something tangible that holds the concept of existentialism together. This thesis aims to identify the commonality of existentialism by analysing the ideas of five existentialist writers—Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus—whose status as existentialist thinkers is rarely questioned in the relevant literature.

This thesis is an interdisciplinary project that employs Deleuze’s methodology of conceptual personae to facilitate a dialogue between literature and philosophy. Conceptual personae are idiosyncratic figures that help philosophers to enunciate complex ideas without resorting to reductive definitions. My thesis reads some of the key literary figures in writers’ novels as conceptual personae, thereby achieving a methodological transition from textual analysis to conceptual analysis. By closely analysing these chosen conceptual personae, this thesis identifies a common paradigmatic structure that all the major works commonly agreed to be works of existentialism share. This structure consists of the following constituents: (i) a realisation of the existential lie; (ii) a movement towards a transitional state of reactive nihilism; (iii) a presentation of ultimate demands.

The identification of the existentialist paradigm enriches our conceptual understanding of existentialism. Importantly, it gives us a tool to discover existentialist thinkers outside of the Western tradition. The last chapter employs this tool in the Chinese cultural context and helps identify the influential Chinese writer Lu Xun as an existentialist. This discovery will then turn out to have some exciting implications for our understanding of China’s Cultural Revolution.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to University of Sussex’s School of English for their support over the past four and half years. I would also like to thank my MA course convener, Nicholas Royle, who initially made an offer to me to study at Sussex.

There are many people whose support and criticism have been essential throughout the process of writing this thesis. I would like to thank my primary supervisor, Keston Sutherland, and my second supervisor, Peter Boxall, for their guidance, support, and many inspiring conversations. In particular, I am grateful to Keston who gave me the freedom to explore a variety of areas which substantially broadened my understanding of a number of issues. His guidance has played a crucial role in my learning how to conduct critical and independent research. Furthermore, I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to discuss my ideas with many knowledgeable and inspiring people over the past several years. From among those, I would like to single out a good friend and comrade of mine, Ivo Dragoun, who made some invaluable criticisms and suggestions.

My greatest debt is to those who made this dissertation possible in a more fundamental sense. I would like to thank my beloved parents, Jianwen Sun and Meisheng Wang, whose support gave me the strength to overcome all of the obstacles on the way to the completion of this thesis. I am forever grateful for that. I would also like to thank my new-born son, Buzhou Sun, for his optimistic and therapeutic presence. And, finally, I want to thank my dearest wife, Yi Xie, without whose unwavering emotional support and positive presence in my life none of this would have been possible.
Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: The Existential Lie .................................................................................................................. 13
  1.1 The prima facie interpretation of the lie .......................................................................................... 15
  1.2 An analytic examination of the notion of a lie .............................................................................. 18
    1.2.1 the definition of the lie ........................................................................................................ 18
    1.2.2 The existential lie as self-deception ..................................................................................... 20
    1.2.3 The problem of self-deception ......................................................................................... 22
  1.3 The metaphysical understanding of the existential lie in Nietzsche and Dostoevsky .......... 24
    1.3.2 The existential lie in Dostoevsky ......................................................................................... 26
    1.3.3 The logic of Kirilov’s suicide ............................................................................................ 28
    1.3.4 The psychological understanding of the existential lie .................................................... 30
  1.4 The existential lie in Kierkegaard .................................................................................................. 34
    1.4.1 The aesthete and the stages of life ...................................................................................... 34
    1.4.2 Philistinism ......................................................................................................................... 37
    1.4.3 The ethical sphere and teleological suspension of the ethical ........................................... 40
    1.4.4 The tragic hero .................................................................................................................... 41

Chapter 2: The Transitional Stage of The Reactive Nihilism ................................................................. 45
  2.1 Nihilistic finding ............................................................................................................................... 46
    2.1.1 The basic definition of nihilism .......................................................................................... 46
    2.1.2 The dynamic model of reactive nihilism .......................................................................... 48
    2.1.4 Kierkegaard’s temporary recruitment of nihilistic positions ......................................... 55
  2.2 The Compatibility between the Religious and the Nihilistic Currents in Dostoevsky’s World ............................................................................................................................................... 58
    2.2.1 The debate between Two Camps ....................................................................................... 58
    2.2.2 The semantic scopes of the religious and the nihilistic ..................................................... 61
    2.2.3 The Religious Dimension Expressed in the Model of Reactive Nihilism ...................... 67
  2.3 The ultimate demand to overcome the nihilistic desert ................................................................. 73
    2.3.1 Nietzsche’s concept of freedom/power ............................................................................. 73
    2.3.2 Dostoevsky’s concept of freedom .................................................................................... 76
    2.3.3 Kierkegaard’s concept of faith ......................................................................................... 78
    2.3.4 Commonalities and Differences among existentialists’ ultimate demands ..................... 81

Chapter 3: The Ripe Fruit of a Century-Long Campaign: Sartre ....................................................... 86
  3.1 The notion of bad faith ..................................................................................................................... 87
    3.1.1 Sartre’s ontological account of human existence ............................................................. 88
    3.1.2 Psychological understanding of bad faith .......................................................................... 91
    3.1.3 The origin of bad faith ........................................................................................................ 93
  3.2 Nausea and the notion of Contingency ........................................................................................... 97
    3.2.1 Various readings of Nausea .............................................................................................. 97
    3.2.2 Nausea as the awareness of the absurdity of the world .................................................... 98
Chapter 5: Chinese Existentialism

5.1 Introducing Lu Xun ................................................................. 149
5.2 Literature as an anti-traditionalistic project to dispel the existential lie ..................................... 153
  5.2.1 Lu Xun’s anti-traditionalism ................................................. 153
  5.2.2 The existential lie in Lu Xun’s world ..................................... 162
5.3 Holistic tradition and nihilism ................................................. 165
  5.3.1 Chinese holistic presupposition ........................................... 165
  5.3.2 Lu Xun’s nihilism ................................................................. 169
5.4 Lu Xun’s ultimate demands ...................................................... 173
  5.4.1 Nietzschean ultimate demand .............................................. 173
  5.4.2 Political reactive nihilism ..................................................... 174
5.5 Chinese Cultural Revolution as a political reactive nihilism ......................................................... 179
  5.5.1 Explanatory insufficiency of the available theories regarding the origins of the Cultural Revolution ......................................................... 179
  5.5.2 Lu Xun’s influence on Mao’s thinking .................................. 183

Conclusion .................................................................................... 190
Appendix ......................................................................................... 193
Bibliography .................................................................................. 194
Introduction

Conceptual Troubles with Existentialism

The concept of existentialism is notoriously difficult to define. No single definition seems to be rich enough to capture all the works labelled as existentialist. The term existentialism first appeared in German, in the form of the word ‘Existentialismus’. Later on, it gained widespread currency after being adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre in his famous book Existentialism Is a Humanism (2007). Initially, most philosophers and writers labelled as existentialists (except Sartre) rejected the label. More recently, scholars have held various and often contradictory views on what constitutes existentialism as a concept.

There seem to be at least two major camps regarding the understanding of existentialism. The first camp sees existentialism mainly as a philosophy. Jean Wahl (1949: 32) asserts that it is a ‘philosophy of existence’ which originally derives from Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Fernando Molina (1962) defines existentialism as a type of philosophy that offers a systematic, often technical, exploration of the category of the individual. David E. Cooper (1999: 8) argues that existentialism ‘is not a mood or a vocabulary, but a relatively systematic philosophy’. It is a coherent and distinctive ‘set of ideas and perspectives’ that are shared by a group of thinkers (Cooper 2012: 47). Thomas R. Flynn (2006: Preface) suggests that we should ‘treat existentialism as a philosophical movement with artistic implication rather than as (just) a literary movement with philosophical pretensions’. All the above-mentioned thinkers recognise the significant influence of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on the development of existentialism. Others, such as Mary Warnock (1970), argue that it is the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl that lays the groundwork of existentialism. Therefore, they tend to recognise Sartre and Martin Heidegger as the leading figures of existentialism. Even

---

1 The original German expression was first used in the following sentence: ‘Ist aber das Logische gar nichts Objekitives, dann wird mit dieser Behauptung jeder metaphysische oder empirische Existentialismus, der ein Abhängigkeitsverhältnis des Logischen vom Existentialen konstatieren möchte, selbst aufgehoben’. [But if the logical has no objective reality, then it follows that every metaphysical or empirical existentialism that aims to establish a relationship of dependency between the logical and the existential is itself sublated] (Moog 1919: 188).
though most of these scholars believe that existentialism is primarily a philosophy, they also acknowledge a literary dimension to existentialism.

The second camp views existentialism not just as a philosophy, but as a broader intellectual project. For example, William McBride (2012: 65-67) contends that existentialism is ‘a cultural movement’ which remains ‘evocative of a cultural mood that is not to be limited to the post-war period’. William Barrett (1961: 8) argues that existentialism was also ‘a literary movement’, represented mainly by the works of Sartre, Albert Camus and Simon de Beauvoir. Jeff Malpas emphasises the special relationship between existentialism and literature by claiming that existentialism represents a unique “literary” mode of philosophizing’ (2012: 291). He and others who tend to see existentialism as a literary movement will thus identify Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka as representative figures of existentialism.

Some scholars acknowledge the philosophical and literary dimensions of existentialism, but, at the same time, they reject the above-mentioned narrow definitions. Walter Kaufmann, for instance, states that ‘existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy’ (1991: 11). David S. Nivison declares that ‘existentialism is not some essential idea that gets realised or expressed here and there in the history of philosophy. It just is those expressions’ (1973: 122). Against the background of these difficulties in specifying the aspects that hold existentialism together conceptually, Richard Schacht (2012: 111-35) suggests the following breakdown of existentialism into three constituents: (i) existentialism, ‘the picture one gets from Sartre, Camus, and their literary and philosophical kindred spirits’; (ii) Existenz-philosophy, ‘the analysis or elucidation of human Existenz, conceived as an actual or possible dimension of human reality’; (iii) Existential philosophy, ‘the sort of approach, perspective, or way of proceeding that tends to be favored by Existenz-philosophers, but that can be used to analyse or elucidate realities in addition to human Existenz life’. Schacht’s approach is a satisfactory starting point towards a more nuanced comprehension of existentialism.

We can see that there are two major camps regarding the understanding of existentialism. The first camp sees existentialism as a philosophy consisting of a
systematic set of thoughts. The scholars in this camp tend to phenomenologise existentialism. They take Husserl’s phenomenology to be the fundamental source of existentialism and Heidegger and Karl Jaspers as the representative figures of it, as the two seem to have been strongly influenced by Husserl’s thought. Some of them, such as Cooper (1999: 8), emphatically refuse to count Camus as an existentialist, claiming that to do so would render existentialism too shallow. Applying Schacht’s terminology, the first camp of theorists understand existentialism primarily as *Existenz*-philosophy. The second camp, on the other hand, sees existentialism as an intellectual movement, covering the period from the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, spanning across diverse fields including literature, philosophy and art. They emphatically advocate for the *spirit* of existentialism, which arose from a revolt against the tradition of professional philosophers who had imprisoned themselves in the narrowness of their own discipline. The proponents of the second camp understand existentialism as a cultural mode derived from multiple intellectual traditions and influential to a deeply modern sensibility. They attempt to refine the literary mode of philosophizing using Sartre’s and Camus’s work as crucial aspects of existentialism. This understanding of existentialism has led scholars of the second camp to typically focus on novelists as the representative figures of existentialism, sometimes going as far as to label writers such as Samuel Beckett as existentialists (Malpas 2012: 310-16). In this context, we might think of existentialism as having a semantic scope that ranges from pure, speculative philosophy to imaginative prose fiction. Different authors will be positioned at different points within that scope depending on how much speculative philosophy or prose fiction they generate. Some authors, such as Sartre, will cover the whole scope due to their ability to produce influential existentialist works in both forms.²

The lack of agreement on what existentialism is suggests that none of the views mentioned above is sufficiently comprehensive. If we treat existentialism as a systematic, coherent philosophy whose main focus is (Sartrean) phenomenology, then existentialism seems to be a branch of phenomenology. However, among the thinkers who are typically categorised as existentialists only Sartre, Heidegger, and Jaspers do any phenomenology

² Not all scholars would agree with this point. For example, Barrett (1961: 11) argues that Sartre is not the centre of existentialism; ‘he does not even represent the deepest impulse’ of existentialism.
at all, so it is hard to see how this understanding could be correct. Seeing existentialism as *merely* a cultural movement is similarly implausible: existentialism could not have flourished as a cultural movement if not for the early existentialist philosophers mentioned above. As for dismissing existentialism as a diffuse label or expression, the suggestion of Kaufmann and others simply amounts to giving up on a deeper understanding of it.

Still, it feels reasonable to hope that there is something that holds the concept of existentialism together. Most scholarship on existentialism seems to target the same list of thinkers and authors. Different scholars will make a slightly different selection (of names as representative of existentialism) from that list but somehow and typically they won’t question the list itself as a good starting point. This raises the following questions: what underpins the agreement among scholars regarding the list? What is the overarching idea that scholars intuitively apply to identify an existentialist?

**The Shortlist of Existentialists Based on A Wittgensteinian Epistemology**

The epistemology of this thesis is strongly inspired by Wittgenstein’s idea of language games. Wittgenstein argues that the meaning of a concept is not given through a definition but constituted by the context generated through language games—that is, simply, by interactions with others using language—played by competent users of a language. Thus, we do not understand the notion of, for instance, a chair by virtue of knowing a definition of the notion. We are, according to Wittgenstein, competent users of the notion of a chair because we have, on numerous occasions, participated in a language exchange that involved the usage of the concept. Analogously, the concept of existentialism has to be approached as being semantically rooted in the narrative that has historically formed around it, and not as a concept whose meaning is given in the form of a definitive list.

If we play the Wittgensteinian language game with the term existentialism, we can begin to approach an understanding of the concept as it is used and constituted by

---

3 They target the same list in the broad sense of picking from that list. This involves selecting some names while dropping others. An important thing to notice is that it is usually considered important to explain and justify why one has dropped from her list a particular thinker (or thinkers) that other scholars might have selected as representative of existentialism.
competent users or scholars. I have, therefore, chosen a simple empirical approach—an approach designed to identify thinkers that are most commonly seen as existentialists. The thinkers thus identified form the target group that is scrutinised in search of the philosophical parameters that their thinking shares. In this thesis, I conceptualise the shared parameters and present them as a novel perspective on the phenomenon of existentialism. Admittedly, this is a somewhat unusual methodological approach. It might feel strangely inappropriate to ground an inquiry into the conceptual subtleties of existentialism in quantitative terms. I believe that no matter how strange or even ironic it might seem, this approach is methodologically innocent and does not commit the reader to any extravagant assumptions. The remaining suspicion will be dispersed by the list itself as it will not list any thinker that is not generally recognised as an existentialist.


I consider those figures that are directly acknowledged as existentialists by renowned scholars, or figures considered to be precursors of existentialism, as well as successors significantly influenced by existentialism, as candidates of this shortlist. When a figure is recognised by a representative study on existentialism as an existentialist, I will add one point to that figure. When recognised by two studies, the figure gets two points, etc. (For the *Cambridge Companion*, a collection of essays, two points are assigned for more than two recognitions and three points for more than five recognitions). In this way we get the following distribution of points across the generally

---

4 (Crowell 2012; Flynn 2006; Guignon and Pereboom 2001; Barrett 1961; Kaufmann 1991; Wahl 1949; Cooper 1999; Grimsley 1967; Breisach 1962; Warnock 1970; Appignanesi 2006; Molina 1962)
recognised proponents of existentialism: Sartre, Kierkegaard, Heidegger (14), Nietzsche (11), Jaspers (10), Gabriel Marcel (7), Dostoevsky, Kafka, Beauvoir, Camus (5), Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Nikolai Berdyaev, José Ortega y Gasset, Martin Buber (3), Lev Shestov, Beckett, Husserl, Vladimir Solovev (2), Frantz Fanon, Viktor Frankl, Paul Tillich, Hermann Hesse, Milan Kundera, Ernest Hemingway, Allen Ginsburg, Martin Buber, Colin Wilson, Miguel de Unamuno, Harlan Ellison, Norman Mailer, Rainer Maria Rilke (1). A We can see at a glance that, with the exception of Beauvoir, every existentialist writer in this list is a man.

Despite the somewhat unusual methodology behind this approach, it yields results that are more or less in line with the consensus on the existentialist list. We can see that the above listed figures seem to exhaust all the figures who have generally been considered serious candidates for the label of existentialist. The higher the score the less controversial it is to consider the figure an existentialist. The group of figures with 5 or more points covers the thinkers typically considered existentialists. The existentialist credentials of figures with less than 5 points are, on the other hand, often seen as somewhat controversial. Now, if we select the figures with 5 or more points—that is, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Marcel, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Beauvoir and Camus—who are less-controversial existentialists, we have a solid target group of thinkers to be scrutinised in search of a structural commonality. And that is what I will attempt to do in this thesis. I will be looking for such a structural commonality, a common denominator, that the thinkers and authors shortlisted above share. It has to be acknowledged that this approach, as mentioned above, is a reductive statistical method and as such possibly discriminates against less established thinkers, women and minorities (Sabaratnam and Kirby 2014). This is a rather regrettable aspect of the approach. Still, this measure reflects the consensus of the scholarship to date. The selection may be a relatively reasonable starting point of the inquiry.

Two caveats are in order here. First, due to the space constraints of a doctoral thesis, it is impossible to discuss all ten figures in depth. I will thus limit my discussion to Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus. Second, despite Heidegger and

---

5 Details see chart 1.
Jaspers having scored high on our target list, I shall not discuss them in this thesis. The main reason for this is the strong and irreducible phenomenological nature of their contribution to existentialist literature. To extricate their existentialism from within a conceptual matrix that is richly phenomenological would require a rather complex philosophical discussion, and that is something that would take us far beyond the limited scope of this thesis. Also, we have reasons to assume that all the figures on the target list have something theoretically robust in common—because how else can we explain the general agreement among scholars regarding the characterization of these figures as existentialists? This assumption then releases us from having to discuss all the members of the target group.

Methodology of Conceptual Personae

Some shortlisted candidates, such as Dostoevsky, are novelists while others are well-known also for their theoretical contributions. This fact seems to present an intriguing challenge: how can we bridge the gap between theory and fiction? What is the relation between a literary image and a philosophical concept? These questions bring us to an important methodological aspect of this thesis, an aspect which is deeply inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notion of a conceptual persona.

To understand the notion, we need to first briefly mention how Deleuze and Guattari define philosophy. These two thinkers see philosophy as ‘the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts’ (1994: 2). A philosophy is said to be successful if it is able to demonstrate a problem and provide concepts capable of resolving it. Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 76) believe that philosophy presents three elements: in ‘the prephilosophical plane it must lay out (immanence), the persona or personae it must invent and bring to life (insistence), and the philosophical concepts it must create (consistency)’. Simply put, philosophy is an act of setting philosophical problems from a prephilosophical plane, then inventing conceptual personae, and finally creating concepts to solve those problems.

For a philosophy, a philosophical problem is set up by ‘the plane of immanence presupposed by the concept’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 81). Deleuze and Guattari believe that ‘philosophical concepts are fragmentary wholes that are not aligned with
one another so that they fit together’. Concepts always ‘introduce a powerful Whole that, while remaining open, is not fragmented: an unlimited One-All, an “Omnitudo” that includes all of the concepts on one and the same plane’. They define this plane as the plane of immanence, which is ‘like a desert that concepts populate without dividing up’ (1994: 36). The plane of immanence is an unqualified immersion, or an infinite field or smooth space without substantial or constative division. This plane is ‘not a concept that is or can be thought but rather the image of thought, the image thought gives itself of what it means to think, to make use of thought, to find one’s bearings in thought’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 37). According to Deleuze and Guattari’s monistic epistemology, the plane of immanence contains all atomic concepts that dwell in human cognition and intuition. A philosophy is initially formed by territorializing its domain and setting its problem from the prephilosophical plane.

With the establishment of the philosophical problem, the second step of forming a philosophy is the invention of a conceptual persona. Deleuze and Guattari state that conceptual personae are ‘somewhat mysterious, […] a hazy existence halfway between concept and preconceptual plane’. They carry out ‘the movements that describe the author’s plane of immanence, and they play a part in the very creation of the author’s concepts’ (1994: 61-63). Deleuze and Guattari seem to understand philosophy as having a paradoxical nature, ‘because it uses sentences of a standard language to express something that does not belong to the other of opinion or even of the proposition’ (1994: 81). Therefore, ‘a concept like knowledge has meaning only in relation to an image of thought to which it refers and to a conceptual persona that it needs’ (1994: 79). And, ‘in philosophical enunciations we do not do something by saying it but produce movement by thinking it, through the intermediary of a conceptual persona’ (1994: 64). That is to say, thinking is a process that can be mostly represented and understood by an image that is an idiosyncratic form of imagination, recollection and perception. Conceptual personae are the intermediaries that help people to enunciate and think. They are not semantically equivalent to related concepts, but rather vehicles of pre-conceptual thought. Conceptual personae are idiosyncratic figures that help philosophers to enunciate complex ideas by laying out conceptual contexts without resorting to reductive definitions. For example, Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith or Nietzsche’s
Zarathustra function as conceptual personae. Through them, philosophers are able to express their idea in a non-reductive way.

Although conceptual personae have an illustrative relation to philosophical ideas, we cannot regard them simply as examples of a concept. As Deleuze and Guattari state:

*The role of conceptual personae is to show thought’s territories, its absolute deterritorializations and reterritorializations.* Conceptual personae are thinkers, solely thinkers, and their personalized features are closely linked to the diagrammatic features of thought and the intensive features of concepts. A particular conceptual persona, who perhaps did not exist before us, thinks in us (1994: 69).

If conceptual personae ‘show thought’s territories’, they are not merely an illustrative tool, but the actual subject of a philosophy. As Deleuze and Guattari argue (1994: 64), ‘the conceptual persona is the becoming or the subject of a philosophy, on a par with the philosopher’. That is to say, conceptual personae are not examples of given concepts, but they exist at the same level as concepts in the conceptual hierarchy.

In this thesis, I treat literary figures as conceptual personae. The personalised features of conceptual personae align with the diagrammatic features of thoughts and concepts. That is to say, one can analyse a literary character to arrive at a deeper and more subtle understanding of a related concept. A conceptual persona represents a methodological bridge between textual analysis and conceptual analysis.

This thesis seeks to identify the commonality of existentialism by analysing the ideas of five existentialist thinkers—Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus. This thesis begins by focusing on a group of early existentialists, including Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard. All three of these writers claim, in some way or another, that the *world is based upon a lie*. Chapter 1 thus starts by examining how this existential lie is understood by these early existentialist writers. An analytic examination of the general lie will uncover some of the important, semantically constitutive aspects of lying, especially the intention to deceive. The chapter then proceeds to examine the psychological aspects behind the origin of the existential lie. Against the background of this textual and conceptual analysis of the thoughts and arguments of the early existentialists, I argue that the existential lie is a self-deception which derives from a psychological need to project and ground the meaning of life in external existence. The
realisation of the existential lie is the first common aspect shared by the early existentialists.

The realisation of this existential lie leads to a scepticism regarding existing value systems. This scepticism eventually pushes one towards a full-blown nihilism. All the early existentialists embraced, to some extent, nihilistic positions. Chapter 2 then proceeds to analyse various nihilistic positions and compare their thematic differences and dynamic relations. This chapter firstly introduces five types of nihilism according to their thematic differences. It then focuses on the different classifications of nihilism according to their dynamic modules. With reference to Nietzsche’s theory of nihilism and Deleuze’s discussion of Nietzsche, I introduce a specific dynamic module: reactive nihilism. Reactive nihilism is a revolt against the lie that is existing moral systems. It is a revolt that clears the way for the advent of a new value. I will argue that the early existentialists all adopted this dynamic model of reactive nihilism. Having identified this dynamic model of reactive nihilism, we can answer a certain controversial question regarding the compatibility of religious and nihilistic currents in Dostoevsky’s work. By primarily focusing on the religious dimension of The Brothers Karamazov, as represented by its saintly characters and biblical intertextuality, I argue that the two currents do not, in fact, conflict at all—they should, rather, be seen as complementing constituents of a dynamic model of reactive nihilism.

In order to overcome the nihilistic desert, all the early existentialists formulate an ultimate demand that grounds the justification of existence in the inner self. The last section of Chapter 2 discusses the various ultimate demands formulated by the early existentialists and identifies those aspects that they share. This allows us then to conclude that the common paradigmatic structure that all these major existentialist works share consists of the following three constituents: (i) a realisation of the existential lie; (ii) a movement towards a transitional state of reactive nihilism; (iii) a presentation of ultimate demands.

The second part of my thesis shifts the focus from the synthetic to the comparative. If the first part locates commonality within early existentialism, the second part questions how the mid-century existentialists innovate upon and revise this
paradigmatic structure. In accordance with the three constituents of the existentialist paradigm, Chapter 3 proceeds in three steps to examine Sartre’s existentialism. The first section scrutinises Sartre’s concept of bad faith to establish whether or not bad faith is compatible with the existential lie. This section proceeds to discuss the psychological origins of bad faith. It does so by examining Sartre’s vignettes of the waiter and the woman. I will argue that bad faith is a form of self-deception which derives from a psychological drive to avoid uncertainty and suffering. The second section reads Sartre’s novel *Nausea* through the concept of contingency, a concept that reveals Sartre’s acceptance and endorsement of radical cosmic nihilism. The last section explores Sartre’s ultimate demand by focusing on his concepts of freedom and authenticity. I will argue that it is problematic to treat freedom as the key concept of Sartre’s ultimate demand. Instead, I will suggest that it is the notion of authenticity that underpins his ultimate demand. This section explores Sartre’s concept of authenticity by scrutinising two conceptual personae associated with it. Finally, Chapter 3 demonstrates that Sartre’s existentialism, despite being unique in some respects, conforms to the paradigmatic structure of existentialism I have identified.

Chapter 4 focuses on Camus. Its goal and structure are similar to that of Chapter 3. The first section of Chapter 4 argues that Camus’s thought assumes the fact of the existential lie. The second section focuses on Camus’s concept of absurdity and shows how it relates to Camus’s endorsement of nihilism and his call to transcend the nihilistic desert. The third section examines Camus’s conceptual persona of the absurd hero and the fictional character of Meursault to identify the key constituents of the concept of resistance in his ultimate demand. Having established that Camus’s thought involves the three constituents of the paradigmatic structure of existentialism, the chapter then discusses some criticisms of Camus.

The identification of a shared paradigm of existentialism opens the window for us to search for thinkers from non-Western contexts who might turn out to be existentialists. Chapter 5 then employs the paradigmatic structure of existentialism in the Chinese cultural context to identify influential contemporary writer Lu Xun as an existentialist thinker. Chapter 5 first outlines some of the historical and social context of China in order to understand the unique form of Lu Xun’s existentialist thought. This
chapter then proceeds to analyse Lu Xun’s literary work to demonstrate that his thinking as a whole is an anti-traditionalistic project that involves all three constituents of the existentialist paradigm. In the light of Lu Xun’s (Chinese) existentialism, Chapter 5 then shows how Lu Xun influenced Mao Zedong’s thinking and his socio-political experiment – the Cultural Revolution. I will conclude that the Cultural Revolution can be plausibly understood as a form of political-reactive nihilism.

The aim of this thesis is to uncover the common denominator of existentialism by viewing it as an interdisciplinary intellectual tradition. It employs a Deleuzian methodology of *conceptual personae* to facilitate an interdisciplinary dialogue between literature and philosophy. By treating literary figures as conceptual personae, it plausibly offers a methodological inspiration for other interdisciplinary projects. Furthermore, by way of conceptual and textual analysis of these conceptual personae, this thesis argues that all the major works labelled as existentialist share a common paradigmatic structure that contains three constitutive aspects. The identification of such an existentialist paradigm enhances our conceptual grasp of the term existentialism itself. More importantly, it offers us a reliable schema to identify existentialist thinking in other cultural contexts. The thesis applies this paradigm in the Chinese cultural context allowing us to identity Chinese existentialism and its so far unnoticed influence on Chinese contemporary cultural-political thinking.
Chapter 1: The Existential Lie

Early existentialists’ ideas are complex and they resist simple generalizations. Still, if we assume that existentialism is a paradigm constituted by shared thought patterns, philosophical problems, postulates, etc., then we can start by investigating what these thinkers have in common in terms of how they view the world.

Guignon and Pereboom suggest (2001: xiv) that ‘existentialism arises as a response to some of the major shifts [...] of what is called the modern worldview [...] as “the disenchantment of the world”’. Existentialism emerged in Europe against the backdrop of the industrial revolution, a period of prolonged scientific and technological development that altered the fabric of daily life. As industrial modernity profoundly shifted the socio-economic landscape of Europe, traditional value systems also began to lose their explanatory power.

There is a strong sense of disillusion in the worldview of all early existentialists. They all seem to assert, in some way or another, that the world is based upon a lie. Thus Nietzsche, for instance, sees the world in which he dwells as ‘the world invented by a lie’ (1968: 254). He states that ‘the “apparent” world is the only world: the “true world” is just a lie added on to it’ (2005c: 168). He claims that the moral and belief systems internalized by his fellow men are utterly corrupt and have made them sick and wretched. Nietzsche was fiercely critical of Christianity, ‘every word coming from the mouth of a “first Christian” is a lie, everything he does is an instinctive falsehood’ (2005a: 45). He repeatedly uses the phrase ‘the stink of lie’ to refer an accustomed value system which suppresses desire (2006: 28).

Another key figure of existentialism that sees the world as a lie is the Russian novelist Dostoevsky. One of the main characters in his The Karamazov Brothers, Ivan, furiously points to the all too common occurrence of children being tortured. He declares that ‘the world is founded on absurdities and perhaps without them nothing would come to pass in it’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 285). Dostoevsky’s other nihilistic character, Kirilov, is highly admired by many thinkers, including André Gide and Camus (Gide 1949: 16; Camus 1975). In explaining his messianic mission to create ‘man-god’ through
suicide, Kirilov states that ‘the whole planet is a lie and is based on a lie and a stupid mockery’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 614).

Similarly, Kierkegaard declares that ‘I had learned that lies and baseness and injustice ruled the world’ (1998: 63). In The Point of View, Kierkegaard argues that his contemporaries have turned away from an authentic life and live in a ‘dreadful illusion’ which he calls ‘Christendom’ (1998: 41). Kierkegaard says that

\[
\text{The crowd is untruth. [...] Do not say that truth, again by means of the press, can then run down the lies and the errors. O you who talk that way, ask yourself: Do you dare to maintain that people taken in a crowd are just as quick to grasp for truth, which is not always palatable – as for untruth, which is always delectably prepared – to say nothing of when, to boot, the truth is bound up with a confession that one has let oneself deceived! (1998: 110).}
\]

Although Kierkegaard primarily speaks about people living in untruth, he takes this to be in the same category as living in a lie. As he writes, ‘there is a great difference between lie and untruth, between lie and lie, and between untruth and untruth, I have always admitted, but the category is the same’ (2013a: 128).

Kafka, another recognised existentialist, is slightly trickier in the context discussed above. He inspired a variety of schools, and his works seem to resist a single coherent interpretation. One of Kafka’s existentialist novels, The Trial, contains a parable that is relevant to our purposes here (Kaufmann 1991). The parable captures the sense of disillusionment typical in many other existentialist texts. In the story, a priest tells the protagonist a parable meant to reveal the true essence of the law, the source of supreme authority or truth. After hearing this casuistic parable, the protagonist replies to the priest, ‘the world-order is based upon a lie’ (Kafka 1991: 142).

In the light of the above, it is plausible to claim that all the early existentialists saw the world as in some sense based upon a lie. Now, the question is: what does the lie refer to? My aim in this chapter is to uncover the origin and the meaning of the existential lie. The first section provides a *prima facie* interpretation of the lie based on the texts in which these existentialists mention this lie. For Nietzsche and Dostoevsky the lie refers to God and religion, while for Kierkegaard the lie refers to a “Christendom” in which people are only nominally Christians, having little or no awareness of their duty to God. Having acknowledged the tension between theistic and atheistic metaphysical propositions
among the early existentialists, the second section then seeks to uncover a deeper understanding of the lie. The existential lie, as a metaphysical notion, still has the same structure as a lie in the ordinary sense. An analytic examination of the general notion of lying can reveal that the existential lie, as a human self-deception, contains two referents: a form of deception and an unconscious drive. This suggests that the existential lie of the early existentialists may take a different form, but the drive behind it is the same. The chapter then transitions to a discussion of the metaphysical and psychological aspects of the existential lie in Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. The third section argues that, for Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, the existential lie derives from a psychological need to project and ground the meaning of life in the external. The final section focuses on Kierkegaard’s lie through a detailed analysis of his conceptual personae, including the aesthete, the philistine and the tragic hero. It argues that, for Kierkegaard, the existential lie is a self-deception deriving from the psychological need for justification.

1.1 The _prima facie_ interpretation of the lie

A lie is commonly understood as an intentionally false statement. Existentialists, typically, do not deviate much from this common understanding. Their original contribution comes from their application of the concept.

Nietzsche’s central concern is with religious narratives that imply or encourage a ‘hatred of body, the degradation and self-violation of humans through the concept of sin’ (2005a: 56). For Nietzsche then, _a lie_ is a religious and moral narrative that implies or promotes this self-abasement. This then explains why the main target of Nietzsche’s criticism is Christian religious dogma as a whole and why he dismisses it as _a lie_. Thus he says, ‘misshapen liars and idiots started claiming the ideas of “God”, “truth”, “light”, “spirit”, “love”, “wisdom”, “life” for themselves’ (2005a: 42). Nietzsche writes, ‘the gateway to Christian Paradise […] – assuming that a true statement can be placed above the gateway to a lie!’ (2006: 29). He calls the central Christian idea of ‘Jesus’ “resurrection”’ as ‘the _lie_’ (2005a: 39). He likewise labels various other sayings of Christianity as lies. As he states, ‘[Christ] falsified the history of Israel once again, to make it look like the prehistory of his own actions: all the prophets have talked about his “redeemer” … Later, the church even falsified the history of humanity into the
prehistory of Christianity’ (2005a: 38). It is worth noticing that Nietzsche’s reference to various religious concepts and ideas as lies is not limited to Christianity. He talks about ‘the “holy lie” - [which] is common to Confucius, the law book of Manu, Mohammed, and the Christian church: and it is not absent from Plato either. “The truth is there”: wherever you hear this, it means that the priest is lying…’ (2005a: 56).

Similarly, in the words of Dostoevsky’s nihilistic characters, the lie refers to religion. In *The Karamazov Brothers*, Ivan claims passionately that in the face of the existing torture of children, Christian ‘higher harmony’ is an ‘absurd and horrible business’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 283-86). Kirilov states that Jesus’ promise of a coming paradise ‘did not come true.’ And, ‘the laws of nature […] made even Him live in the midst of lies and die for a lie’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 614).

It seems that the lie in the early existentialists’ shared worldview refers to Christianity or God. Nietzsche’s critical attitude towards Christianity is well-known and hard to overstate. The general spirit of Dostoevsky’s works, on the other hand, appears to be rather religious, even though some, such as Nikolay Mikhailovsky (2003: xxvii), point to Dostoevsky’s nihilistic tendency as a ‘mutiny against God’. Emmanuel Levinas declares that the basis of Dostoevsky’s work is, ‘the question of God’s existence or non-existence’ (Quoted, Shankman 2015: 372). All in all it seems safe to interpret some of Dostoevsky’s famous characters (and through them Dostoevsky himself too) as taking God and religion as a (big) lie.

Regarding Kierkegaard (one of the central figures of early existentialism) and his understanding and application of the concept of a lie, things are slightly more subtle. He does not see God or Christianity as a lie. As Kierkegaard (1998: 80) says, ‘I have never broken with Christianity or given it up; to attack it has never entered my mind’. He self-identified as a true Christian. The lie he talks about is ‘Christendom’, the community of people who ‘call themselves Christians’ even though they are such only nominally and who have little or no awareness of their ‘duty to God’ (Kierkegaard 1998: 41). For him, the lie is not Christianity, but the social norms or the way of life guided by the institutional Church without true faith. On the face of it, Kierkegaard’s conception of a
lie conflicts with that of Nietzsche’s. Can we still assume that they both share the same worldview – the world is based upon a lie?

There is a plausible explanation of this apparent inconsistency between Nietzsche’s and Kierkegaard’s worldviews. Sartre (2007: 20) famously divides existentialism into atheistic existentialism and theistic existentialism. This distinction can then be applied to the above identified inconsistency, and we can say that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are (in their worldview) both existentialists to the extent to which they both agree that the world is based upon a lie. The two thinkers differ just with respect to what can be described as a lie; Nietzsche claims it is God and Christianity while Kierkegaard thinks it is only the way in which God and Christianity are approached and lived by his fellow (and only nominally) Christians. A tension remains though. Both theism and atheism are fundamental metaphysical positions, and it might not feel very convincing to claim that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard share (more or less) the same worldview while admitting, at the same time, that they disagree on this crucial metaphysical point. To mitigate the tension, we will need to examine more deeply the notion of a lie.
1.2 An analytic examination of the notion of a lie

This section aims to make a distinction between the different referents of the existential lie. The first step provides an analytic examination of the general notion of a lie, which reveals that a lie has two referents: the form of the deception and the intention to deceive. The second step demonstrates that the existential lie is a self-deception rather than a deception targeting others. Moreover, it holds that in terms of self-deception, the latter referent can only be an unconscious drive (a non-doxastic attitude towards a proposition). Thus, it argues that the existential lie as a human self-deception contains two referents: a form of deception and an unconscious drive.

1.2.1 the definition of the lie

The existential lie seems to be an essential aspect of the common denominator of early existentialism. In this section I will identify and discuss some of its important conceptual aspects. Although the existential lie, as understood in this thesis, is a specific and metaphysical concept, it still retains some similarity to the ordinary notion of a lie. A brief discussion of the ordinary notion is therefore a good starting point for understanding the existential lie.

A lie is ‘an act or instance of lying; a false statement made with intent to deceive’ (OED, "Lie"). A lie can thus refer to two things: an intentionally false statement (referent $x$) or the act of producing such a statement (referent $y$). However, the standard definition of a lie contains several problems. For example, the falsity of a statement is not a necessary condition for that statement to qualify as a lie. One can intend to deceive another with a statement that (unbeknownst to both) happens to be true. That is, a lie can be a true proposition as long as the subject believes it to be false. What matters is the truthfulness in making the statement, rather than the truth of it.

There are various objections to the ordinary definition of a lie. Sometimes the definition is criticised as too broad (Ekman 1985; Scott 2006), and at other times it is criticised as being too narrow (Carson 2006; Saul 2012). Philosophers who study lying can be divided into two camps: Deceptionism and Non-Deceptionism (Mahon 2014: 618-19). Here, I will take the Simple Deceptionist notion of a lie as the standard definition for discussing the ordinary notion of a lie. According to the Simple Deceptionist approach:
‘a lie is a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it’ (Isenberg 1973: 248). Crucially, this definition is explicit in its emphasis on the intention to deceive. A typical instance of lying would be when a subject (a person), with the intention to deceive, deliberately communicates a statement they believe to be false to an object (someone).

Still, it is worth reiterating that a lie can refer to any combination of the following three semantic referents: a believed-false statement (referent $x$), the action of making a believed-false statement (referent $y$), and the intention to deceive by making a believed-false statement (referent $z$). To explicate this, consider the following case of lying: I was supposed to have a meeting with my supervisor on Monday. However, I missed the meeting because I went to pub and forgot about it. Later in the week, I met my supervisor and lied to her regarding the reason I had missed the meeting: I had to go to hospital. Thus, I could not attend the meeting. However, my professor had actually seen me in the pub. She got angry with me and decided to challenge my lie on the spot, saying ‘‘your having to go to hospital’’ is a lie’. Here, her usage of a lie refers to the statement (referent $x$); But she might have also said: ‘What you are doing now is a lie’. In this case, the subject of the notion of a lie designates the action of making a believed-false statement (referent $y$). Or, she might have emphasised that ‘it is not important what exactly you have told me as long as your intention is to deceive me, to lie to me’. The last response emphasizes the intention to deceive, that is the intention to deceive by making a believed-false statement (referent $z$).

The three referents discussed above can all be derived from the ordinary understanding of a lie. Now, there is an obvious problem with understanding a lie as being about statements. A statement is ‘a formal written or oral account of facts, theories, opinions, events, etc’ (OED, "Statement"). However, it seems possible to lie through a gesture, a smile, or a look. One can lie without employing language. Something similar has been institutionally recognised. According to the California Evidence Code, even the ‘nonverbal conduct of a person intended by him as a substitute for oral or written verbal’ is to be understood as a legally consequential statement (Snape 2016: 3). We will follow suit here and treat nonverbal acts as semantically equivalent to statements. Another problem with the ordinary definition of a lie, as noticed by Marta Dynel (2011: 154), is
that it does not seem to cover the case of ‘lying by omission’ where one deceives by providing half-truths, withholding information or remaining silent. In lying by omission, the deception seems to be achieved not by stating something, but by not stating something. Some authors, such as David Smith (2007: 76), have thus broadened the notion of lying to cover ‘any form of behaviour the function of which is to provide others with false information or to deprive them of true information’.

However, the primary focus of this thesis is not to provide a conceptual analysis of lying. Therefore, I will not pursue such an analysis here. For our purposes, it is enough to acknowledge that a lie does not have to be realisable through language only. This assumption modifies the referential triad introduced above. A lie is one or more of the following: a form of deception (referent $x$), the action of employing a form of deception (referent $y$), and the intention to deceive through employing such a form (referent $z$). A typical instance of lying could thereby be broken into the intention to deceive ($z$), the generation of an action ($y$), and the employment of a particular form of deception ($x$).

We can see that lying is defined by the three constituents of $x$, $y$, $z$. Lying is the act of generating a lie. A lie is thus the (passive) object of such an act, i.e. the referent $y$ is not essential to it. In what follows I will thus ignore this referent when discussing a lie.

There are two points to carry over to the next section. First, a lie can be realised non-verbally. Second, an intention to deceive is essential to a lie.\(^6\)

### 1.2.2 The existential lie as self-deception

Let us return to the key tenet of existentialism: *the world is based upon a lie*. In general, a lie is an instrumental statement used intentionally for the purpose of deception. An act of lying involves two parties: the subject and the object. The subject is an individual generating a lie to serve their own interest. The object is an individual targeted for deception. Such an individual has to be cognitively capable of being deceived. Clearly, one cannot lie to an inorganic object or to a living organism that has no concept of truth and/or is unable to comprehend the coding system used to communicate the lie. For a lie to function, the practising parties must be beings with cognitive powers that,
generally speaking, only humans (and perhaps, to some extent, some primates) exhibit. Something analogous goes for the notion of the world. This notion does not refer here to the planet Earth as understood by the natural sciences. It is to be understood in its social, cultural and philosophical sense as encompassing the totality of interactions that are irreducibly human. In short, it refers to civilization. Both notions (the world and a lie) are thus built around humans as thinking and cognizing agents.

Now we can modify the key existentialist tenet in the following way: *all civilizations were and are based upon a lie*. Through their everyday interactions, humans generate and sustain their civilizations; that is they generate and sustain the lie. At the same time, since everyone involved in this civilization-generating interaction is being deceived, the lie can only be seen as a self-deception—that is, those lying are simultaneously the ones being deceived. Thus, the existential lie is not a false statement used by one person to deceive another, but it is a universal self-deception. If the nature of the civilizational lie is self-deception then we can conclude that *all the civilizations were and are based upon a universal self-deception*.

Some existentialists, such as Nietzsche, use the notion of self-deception. As Nietzsche (2005a: 55) claims, ‘[t]he most common lie is the one you tell yourself; lying to other people is a relatively exceptional case’. In Nietzsche’s usage, we often can see that he uses the word lie as self-deception. For example, in *Beyond Good and Evil* 180, Nietzsche writes, ‘There is an innocence in lying that is the sign of good faith in a cause’ (2002: 73). That is, sometimes we lie not to deceive others but to deceive ourselves through faith. And in *Beyond Good and Evil* 192, Nietzsche states,

[…] just as little do we see a tree precisely and completely, with respect to leaves, branches, colors, and shape. We find it so much easier to imagine an approximate tree instead. Even in the middle of the strangest experiences we do the same thing: we invent most of the experience and can barely be made not to regard ourselves as the “inventor” of some process. – What all this amounts to is: we are, from the bottom up and across the ages, used to lying (2002: 82).

One might respond to this claim by asking, ‘if deception is really that ubiquitous, is it not then natural to be deceived?’ Still, I feel that being universally deceived is something that does matter despite the fact that it can be, plausibly, described as a natural aspect of our existence. Just because something is natural that does not mean it is desirable. For instance, it is, arguably, quite natural for many adult males to (be driven to) impose their sexual desires onto adult females. It clearly is not good or desirable for an adult male to subject a women to his desires in this way.
Clearly, he does not use the notion of a lie in its ordinary sense but in the sense of (unconscious) self-deception.

Yann Wermuth notices the ‘oddity’ of Nietzsche’s usage of lying. He argues that ‘the major difference lies in the fact that Nietzsche likens things to lies that are going on unconsciously’ (2019: 153,65). By describing it as an oddity, he means that while the ordinary definition of a lie includes awareness on the part of the liar of an untruth being communicated as its necessary aspect, Nietzsche often uses the notion of a lie that lacks this aspect. Generally speaking, Nietzsche’s usage of the notion of a lie refers to unconscious self-deception rather than conscious deception. Besides, Peter Poellner (2004: 45,62) contends that the concept of self-deception plays a vital role in Nietzsche’s philosophy. It is, together with ressentiment, one of the key concepts of Nietzsche’s thought.

1.2.3 The problem of self-deception

The existential lie is structurally analogous to the ordinary lie. It also contains two vital constitutive referents: a form of deception (referent x) and an intention to deceive (referent z). We have previously argued that the existential lie is a human self-deception. The basic structure of lying is this: a subject generates a believed-false statement with the intention to deceive an object. In the case of self-deception, the subject overlaps with the object. There is a prima facie problem in this model: how can one deceive herself about something she already knows to be false?

Illustrating the peculiarity of self-deception helps to map out a more precise model of the existential lie. Element z, an intention to deceive, is problematic in the case of self-deception. For one to carry out the intention to deceive, one has to have a clear understanding of something being false. In order to be able to successfully deceive oneself, one must at the same time believe something is true. Because of this dynamic paradox, self-deception is either impossible to do successfully or requires multiple psychological strategies to manoeuvre the state of mind. Thus, self-deception cannot be motivated by a conscious intention but by an ongoing unconscious effort to resist the
thought of an unwelcome truth. To be more precise, this drive is a non-doxastic attitude towards the proposition. Doxastic (from the Greek doxa, meaning belief) attitudes are those attitudes that entail belief. A non-doxastic attitude itself does not hold any certain or conscious belief, but it has an impulse towards a proposition. As many scholars have argued, the non-doxastic attitude in self-deception can be made up of ‘hopes’, ‘suspicions’, ‘doubts’, ‘anxiety’, ‘desire’, ‘besires’, ‘pretense’, or ‘imagination’ (Johnston 1995; Mele 2001; Edwards 2013; Egan 2009; Lazar 1999). The model of self-deception can be described as a non-doxastic attitude towards a proposition driving people to mentally generate and believe in a form of deception. That is to say, the existential lie contains two constitutive referents: a form of deception (x) and a drive (non-doxastic attitude) towards a proposition (z).

---

8 There are some Intentionalist philosophers utilizing multiple layers of psychological and temporal partitions to compatibilise the intentional approach with the dynamic paradox. E.g., see (Bermudez 2003).
1.3 The metaphysical understanding of the existential lie in Nietzsche and Dostoevsky

Above we have concluded that the existential lie includes two referents: a form of deception (x) and a non-doxastic mental attitude towards a proposition (z). Below I shall explore the existential dynamics behind people's irresistible drive to deceive themselves as reflected upon by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. The first subsection discusses the origin of the drive for self-deception as identified by Nietzsche. The second subsection focuses on Dostoevsky's nihilist Kirilov to expose the origin of human self-deception as understood by Dostoyevsky. Then, a discussion of some criticism of Kirilov's suicide is supplemented to support the previous argument. The final part of this section briefly discusses the existential lie from the Freudian perspective.

1.3.1 The origin of the existential lie in Nietzsche's philosophy

For Nietzsche, God, ‘our oldest lie’, can be seen as a form of deception (2006: 113). In The Birth of Tragedy, he explains the origins of the idea of God. He points out that the ancient Greeks held a pessimistic world-view. They saw the Earth as being filled with constant suffering and misery – ‘the very best thing is utterly beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon’ (Nietzsche 1999: 23). Thus, as Nietzsche (1999: 23) claims, ‘in order to be able to live, the Greeks were obliged, by the most profound compulsion, to create these gods’. Nietzsche further argues that the early art of the Greeks was also born out of this ‘profound compulsion’. He explains that ‘beauty gains victory over the suffering inherent in life; in a certain sense, a lie is told which causes pain to disappear from the features of nature’ (1999: 80). That is to say, this drive towards self-deception stems from the effort to escape the chronic pain and suffering that defines our day-to-day life. Nietzsche has more to say about the nature of this drive in his On the Genealogy of Morality:

In order to rid the world of concealed, undiscovered, unseen suffering and deny it in all honesty, people were then practically obliged to invent gods and intermediate beings at every level, in short, something that also roamed round in obscurity, which could see in the dark and which would not miss out on an interesting spectacle of pain so easily. With the aid of such inventions, life then played the trick it has always known how to play, of justifying itself, justifying its ‘evil’; nowadays it might need rather different inventions to help it (for example, life as a riddle, life as a problem of knowledge). ‘All evil is justified if a god takes pleasure in it’: so ran the primitive logic of feeling – and was this logic really
restricted to primitive times? The gods viewed as the friends of cruel spectacles – how deeply this primeval concept still penetrates into our European civilization! (2006: 44)

Nietzsche sees this drive to invent God (a form of deception), to escape and justify suffering, as rooted in ‘the primitive logic of feeling’. For Nietzsche, humans are meaning-seeking creatures who need explanations and justifications to cope with distress, mistreatment and suffering in life. If the suffering can be justified by a telos (such as God), people are able to accept the suffering. Nietzsche goes on to claim that this ‘primitive logic of feeling’ drives the invention not only of gods but of our morality and ascetic ideals too:

His existence on earth had no purpose; ‘What is man for, actually?’ – was a question without an answer; there was no will for man and earth; behind every great human destiny sounded the even louder refrain ‘in vain!’ This is what the ascetic ideal meant: something was missing, there was an immense lacuna around man, – he himself could think of no justification or explanation or affirmation, he suffered from the problem of what he meant. Other things made him suffer too, in the main he was a sickly animal: but suffering itself was not his problem, instead, the fact that there was no answer to the question he screamed, ‘Suffering for what?’ Man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does not deny suffering as such: he wills it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering, was the curse that has so far blanketed mankind, – and the ascetic ideal offered man a meaning! Up to now it was the only meaning, but any meaning at all is better than no meaning at all; the ascetic ideal was, in every respect, the ultimate ‘faute de mieux’ par excellence. Within it, suffering was interpreted; the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door was shut on all suicidal nihilism (2006: 120).

In this passage, Nietzsche touches upon the origin of the existential lie. It is not suffering itself that is unbearable, it is the meaninglessness of suffering that makes it intolerable. In order to escape the anxiety caused by meaninglessness suffering, people strongly tend to invent a narrative to justify and mitigate their sufferings. Alongside criticising God and the ascetic ideal as lies, Nietzsche also calls morality a lie. In his explanation of the origins of the latter, he suggests that the invention of morality is driven by the same psychological tendency and absence of meaning as the need to mitigate anxiety (2006: 46). In other words, people compensate for a lack of meaning by inventing moral rules and tales that are supposed to make life bearable. Nietzsche’s notion of a lie is thus non-doxastic too; more specifically, it is built around the psychological need to project and ground the meaning of life in the transcendent.
1.3.2 The existential lie in Dostoevsky

The previous discussion of Nietzsche’s notion of a lie casts some helpful light on Dostoevsky’s notion of a lie. Nietzsche, who had read some of Dostoevsky’s novels, proclaimed that Dostoevsky was his ‘kinsman’ (Quoted, Stellino 2015: 25). Lev Shestov (1969: 147) discusses their ‘kinship’ at length and somewhat exaggeratedly declares that they are ‘brothers, even twins’. This declaration of Shestov has been accepted among some specialists on Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. Renate Müller-Buck (2002: 99) suggests that the influence of Dostoevsky on Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morality is so obvious that Nietzsche deliberately avoided mentioning Dostoevsky’s name. Paolo Stellino provides historical evidence to support this claim. For example, Stellino (2015: 49) points out that ‘the [following] passage from the third essay [in Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morality] “here nothing flourishes or grows any more, except, perhaps, for St Petersburg’s metapolitics and Tolstoi’s ‘compassion’” (GM, III, 26) originally appeared in the drafts titled as “Petersburg metaphysics and Dostoevsky”’. For many readers familiar with the texts of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, their kinship is rather obvious, especially, when read from an existentialist perspective.

Dostoevsky’s nihilistic characters emphatically question the existence of God. They see it as a big lie. In a letter to Apollon Maykov, even Dostoevsky himself seems to have doubts about God’s existence when he writes that the issue ‘… which I have been tormented, consciously or unconsciously all my life [about] – […] is the existence of God’ (Quoted, Dirscherl 1986: 59). It is popular to read Dostoevsky’s nihilistic characters as the literary embodiment of Dostoevsky’s own doubts. Many, such as Nikolay Mikhailovsky (2003: xxvii), see this nihilistic tendency of Dostoevsky’s as a ‘mutiny against God’. Emmanuel Levinas declares that the basis of Dostoevsky’s works is ‘the question of God’s existence or non-existence’ (Quoted, Shankman 2015: 372). However, it should be noticed here that the notion of God is somewhat heterogenous and is used quite broadly. It can refer to the monotheistic God of the Old Testament, or to various Christian doctrines, morality and religious institutions, or any combination of these. I would argue that the notion of God as it appears in Dostoevsky’s novels is not primarily about the monotheistic God of the Old Testament. As Ivan claims:
And to be sure, man has invented God. And what is so strange, and what would be so
marvellous, is not that God actually exists, but that such an idea – the idea of the necessity
of God – should have entered the head of such a savage and vicious animal as man – so
holy it is, ... (Dostoevsky 1958: 274)

Here Ivan seems to be puzzled not by God’s existence but rather by the idea of His
existence having entered people’s mind at all. Ivan can be understood as asking: what
are the origins of this idea? What caused it to pop up in people’s minds? Thus, Ivan is
asking, in other words, about the psychological and spiritual needs behind this idea.
Dostoevsky answers Ivan’s questions through Kirilov, another of his nihilistic characters.
Kirilov explains that ‘[m]an’s afraid of death because he loves life’. However, ‘life is pain,
life is fear, and man is unhappy’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 125-26). Thus, in order to mitigate
the suffering and fear of life, ‘all man did was invent God so as to live without killing
himself. That’s the essence of universal history till now’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 613). This
explanation from Kirilov is analogous to that of Nietzsche (see section 1.4.1). They both
see a lie as rising out of people’s urge to mitigate the suffering caused by an apparent
lack of meaning behind many of life’s tragic events. People mitigate their suffering by
inventing a transcendent authority: a God that restores meaning and purpose to people’s
existence.

The key point here is that Dostoevsky’s nihilistic characters are not concerned with
the question of the existence (or non-existence) of God, but rather by the strong suspicion
or conviction that at the heart of our invention of and relation to (the idea of) God is a
drive to escape the chronic pain of living by injecting meaning into it. As such, this drive
is essentially self-deceptive, a lie. Dostoevsky’s nihilists ask: can human societies still be
self-sustainable without the justification offered by a transcendent being? Ivan’s famous
statement—‘if there is no immortality of the soul, there is no virtue, which means that
everything is permitted’—is the paradigmatic summary of this concern (Dostoevsky
statement is ‘the starting point of existentialism’.

Parenthetically, this phrase is not exclusive to Dostoevsky. Nietzsche echoes the
famous statement of Ivan in The Will to Power declaring that ‘everything is false!
Everything is permitted!’ (1968: 326). In On the Genealogy of Morality, Nietzsche (2006:
111) states, ‘nothing is true, everything is permitted’.
There is, in this context, an important difference between Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. Dostoevsky formulates his view in the form of a conditional sentence expressing a hypothetical scenario: if there is no God, all is permitted. This, of course leaves open the question of whether or not God exists. Nietzsche, on the other hand, gives a factual statement, describing what he sees as an actual aspect of the world. Another difference between the two is that while Nietzsche believes that people have the power to live authentically without the justification associated with a transcendent being and that they must get rid of this lie once and for all, Dostoevsky seems in this respect somewhat sceptical.

1.3.3 The logic of Kirilov’s suicide

The previous argument about Dostoevsky is primarily based on his nihilistic character Kirilov. Camus (1975: 97) claims that Kirilov represents ‘the most admirable range and depth’ of Dostoevsky’s sensibility regarding existentialism. Gide (1949: 16) argues that through Kirilov Dostoevsky ‘builds up an entire system of metaphysics, containing Nietzsche in embryo, on the premise of self-destruction’. David Magarshack (2004: xii) regards Kirilov as ‘the most metaphysical character Dostoevsky created’. However, some scholars, such as Ronald Hingley (1962: 161), argue that Kirilov is a ‘most overrated character’, and his ‘philosophizing’ constitutes ‘some of the least interesting pages’ in Dostoevsky’s novels. Robert Belknap (2002: 139) contends that Kirilov is merely ‘a madman with a mad theory’ who has ‘lost most of the skills for living and [has] let his obsessions break down his contacts with reality’. I am in debt to Derek Allan’s recent study which provides a detailed literature review on the debate surrounding the significance of Kirilov. Allan argues that Kirilov is ‘one of the prime movers’ of the modern sensibility that places metaphysical concerns at the centre of literature, and he claims that Kirilov’s suicide is central to his character and ‘in no sense an optional extra […] or a mere intellectual embellishment’ (2014: 103,07).

Seeing Kirilov’s suicide as central to his character, Allan attempts to expose the logic behind it. He explains that ‘In Kirilov’s eyes, God […] is also answerable for the misfortune and misery that flow from his handiwork, and this is what counts most of all’. Kirilov is ‘no longer willing to tolerate an absentee deity’, his ‘aim is to settle the
matter once and for all, even if extreme measures are required’ (Allan 2014: 99,101). Allan seems to suggest that Kirilov’s suicide is an act of insubordination in protest against the silence of God and the injustice of life. Kirilov’s suicide is simply an ‘extreme measure’ of protest against God.

Allan’s argument is mostly convincing, but there are certain aspects of the explanation that require elaboration. It should be noticed that, for Kirilov, there is no omnipotent being, no God. Thus he complains that if ‘they made [Jesus] live in the midst of a lie and die for a lie, then the whole planet is a lie and is based on a lie and stupid mockery’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 614). The idea of God is just a lie invented by man ‘so as to live without killing himself’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 613). This lie provides justification for life. Without such justification, human life will be deprived of telos and meaning. Then, there is nothing ‘to live for’, and people will ‘refuse to go on living and die of despair’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 614,56). This is, of course, unbearable. At the same time, for most people, suicide is not an option. It is too frightening, too unnatural in some sense. And, this is when people invent the idea of God. They invent it to be able to continue living. Kirilov sees this as an ultimate deception: ‘Now all is pain and fear. Now man loves life. And that’s how they’ve done it. You’re given life now for pain and fear, and that’s where the whole deception lies’. Kirilov believes it is possible to break through the deception and encourages the reader to do so: ‘If you do realise it, you are a king and you will never kill yourself, but will live in the greatest glory’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 126). But, how can we break through the deception?

Kirilov answers: ‘[H]e who is the first to realise [the deception] is bound to kill himself, for otherwise who will begin and prove it? It is I who will most certainly kill myself to begin with and prove it’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 614). If he can kill himself with stoical indifference, without any psychological distress, his suicide will prove that humanity can ‘conquer pain and fear’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 126). He claims to be ‘the only man in universal history who for the first time refused to invent God. Let them know it once for all’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 613). More importantly, Kirilov believes that he has to

---

* It is worth noting that Nietzsche’s central argument in *On the Genealogy of Morality* is almost in the same vein as this inference of Dostoevsky.
put this logical conclusion into practice by actually committing suicide. ‘[B]ecause I am bound to express my self-will. All are unhappy, because all are afraid to express their self-will’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 614). It seems that Kirilov is influenced by an important current of thought in the Romantic period called ‘expressivism’. In order to achieve the fulfilment of life, man needs to ‘know himself by expressing and hence clarifying what he is and recognizing himself in this expression’ (Taylor 1975: 17). An expressivist needs to turn himself into an instrument for manifesting the essence of humanity. Kirilov is convinced he needs to open the path here. Committing suicide is a messianic mission, Kirilov believes, that will redeem mankind. ‘Then there will be a new life, a new man, everything will be new. Then history will be divided into two parts: from the gorilla to the annihilation of God, and from the annihilation of God […] to the physical transformation of the earth and man’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 126).

It should be noticed that Kirilov’s suicide is not some dramatic “madness”, nor are his explanations some sort of philosophical ravings. In Kirilov, Dostoevsky introduces an important existentialist theme: the disenchantment of the existential lie.

1.3.4 The psychological understanding of the existential lie

The existential lie rises out of a psychological need to inject meaning into the pain and suffering of our daily existence. Now, let’s have a closer look at the nature of this psychological need. Humans seek justification and compensation for, and understanding of, their lives and the situations they find themselves in. The more disruptive the situation one finds herself in, the more complex and powerful the story that somehow explains it will be. The function of the story is therapeutic: it is meant to restore the appearance of certainty which has been shattered by an event of overwhelming disruptive force. Consider the following example: There is a woman who works hard and treats people honestly and kindly. The woman has a 6-year-old daughter who is lovely, sweet and respectful. One day, the daughter has an accident and dies. Out of her pain and sorrow, the mother cries: ‘Why?’ But there is no answer. As Lao Tzu once said, ‘heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs’ (Lao: Chapter 5). For nature, there is no tragedy here. It just redistributes vast number of molecules from one place to another according to its own laws. However,
knowing those laws does not help with the pain. Therefore, people often look for consolation in a grand story. Typically, the story has to offer some sort of transcendent purpose the logic of which gives meaning to the experienced pain, or at least promise some future compensation. When such a story is available, those suffering unbearable pain will often wholeheartedly embrace it. This is commonly referred to as a religious conversion, a phenomenon that represents a well-known adaptive response to a major life tragedy.

As explained above, the existential lie contains two constitutive referents: referent \( x \) (a form of deception) and referent \( z \) (a drive to self-deception). In the context of our discussion of the existential lie, the drive is to be understood as grounded in the need to inject meaning into a life full of pain and suffering. The referent \( x \) (the form of deception) of the existential lie is a variable that can point to God, Catholicism, Christendom, slave morality, or social norms. However, the logic of the drive is the same.

Freud comes to the same conclusion via a different argument. For instance, in *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud (2008: 20) claims that ‘[i]n this way [a religious idea] is created, born of the need to make human helplessness bearable’. Religious ideas offer people ‘compensati[on] […] for the sufferings and privations imposed upon them by living together in a culture group’ (Freud 2008: 22,19). Furthermore, Freud asserts that religious ideas are an illusion. The illusion Freud refers to is a belief, in which ‘wish-fulfilment plays a prominent part in its motivation, and in the process we disregard its relationship to reality’ (2008: 38). This illusion, however, is crucial for the survival of a culture. A fictional interlocutor in the book (mentioned above) authored by Freud raises the following Dostoevskian concern:

If people are taught that there is no all-powerful, all-righteous God, no divine world order, and no life after death, they will feel under no obligation to obey the rules of culture. Everyone will follow his anti-social, egoistical drives without fear or inhibition (2008: 43).

Freud seems to be referring to the same constitutive and legitimizing role religious narratives play in sustaining social order and culture as do Dostoevsky and Nietzsche in their writings. When talking about the psychological mechanism behind the formation of religious ideas, Freud’s language gets more scientific. He explains that religious ideas are not constructed by wish-fulfilment alone but also by ‘historical reminiscences’ (2008:
In psychoanalytic terms, this is ‘the universal human obsessional neurosis’ (Freud 2008: 55). Freud believes this can be cured with ‘a non-religious education’ guided by ‘a scientific mind [generating] a specific way of approaching the things of this world’ (2008: 62,48). In this sense, he believes that religion is not essential to human nature, but an experiential relic of centuries-long human ignorance. Freud’s answer to the spiritual and cognitive malady called religion is science. Science, he argues, will allow man to extricate himself from the delusions of a religious narrative. Nietzsche would disagree as his attitude towards science is somewhat Kantian.

In On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense, Nietzsche profoundly articulates his epistemological perspectivism. He argues that ‘all we really know about [the laws of nature] is what we add to them: time and space, that is, relationships of succession and numbers.’ That is to say, we do not really have access to truth through science; science is only ‘an imitation of the temporal, spatial and numerical relations on the foundation of metaphors’ (2009: 261).

Thus, science, according to Nietzsche, will not help us to get rid of the self-deception. Embracing science only replaces one kind of self-deception (religion) with another (science), and both of them are robust and deep. As Nietzsche claims, ‘[o]ur faith in science is still based on a metaphysical faith, [and as such] [s]cience itself now needs a justification’ (2006: 108). Nietzsche’s understanding of science seems to be echoed by Adorno and Horkheimer. These two German thinkers see Enlightenment as paradigmatically constitutive of modern science. At the same time, modern science is not some objective and rational counterpart to the narrative world of myths because, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue (1997: 12), ‘myths already entail enlightenment, [and] with every step Enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology’.

Thus, it should be noticed that religion is not the only form of self-deception criticised by existentialists. In the context of breaking through the self-deception, most existentialists do not promote science as an alternative to religion. They identify science as just another deceptive narrative, a narrative that perpetuates our dwelling in a lie. We cannot, therefore, regard existentialism merely as a form of progressive thinking in an age of collapsing Christianity or as an attempt to promote rational thinking to replace
superstition. Most existentialists have respectively written critiques of the scientific paradigm. Thus, a rejection of scientific rationality can also be seen as one of the important features of existentialism.

Although for atheistic existentialists, such as Nietzsche, the most prominent form of deception is Christianity, atheism is not a necessary component of existentialism. As Sartre (2007: 53) declares, ‘[e]xistentialism is not so much an atheism in the sense that it would exhaust itself attempting to demonstrate the nonexistence of God; rather, it affirms that even if God were to exist, it would make no difference - that is our point of view’. In other words, one can choose to believe in God in an existentialist way, which is an authentic choice liberating one from the lie, releasing one from the craving for justification. This is the approach taken by another existentialist herald, Kierkegaard.
1.4 The existential lie in Kierkegaard

This section seeks to develop a better understanding of the existential lie in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. It will begin by introducing some of Kierkegaard’s philosophical propositions regarding human existence. The section then discusses various conceptual personae associated with the three stages of human existence, as identified by Kierkegaard, in order to explore what a lie is. These conceptual personae are the aesthete, the philistine and the tragic hero. By closely analysing these conceptual personae, this section concludes that Kierkegaard’s existential lie is a self-deceptive mind, originating from a fundamental need for justification derived from the external.

For Kierkegaard, as argued above, the form of deception is Christendom. Christendom, as understood by Kierkegaard, refers to the Christian society of the 19th Century, in which the majority of the European population claimed to be Christian. This majority goes to Church every Sunday, prays to God before every dinner, and generally lives a decent Christian life. However, they do not have an authentic relationship with God. Kierkegaard (1998: 43) states that ‘most people in Christendom are Christians only in imagination. They live in aesthetic or, at most, aesthetic-ethical categories’.

Christendom as a social and cultural realm is, according to Kierkegaard, a lie that generates fake Christians. A fake Christian is restricted to dwelling in what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic or aesthetic-ethical categories and is as such dwelling in an illusion. What is meant by the phrase dwelling ‘in categories’ will be explained further momentarily.

1.4.1 The aesthete and the stages of life

Kierkegaard believes that human life is not just something to live through, but rather a process that is irreducibly teleological. The individual needs to pass through three stages on the path to realising her true self. These three stages are the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.

The aesthetic stage is ‘the sphere of immediacy’ (Kierkegaard 2013b: 476). The aesthetic life is defined by a preoccupation with sensuous pleasure, fragmentation with immediate experience, egotism, and a full engagement with recreation. Its most sophisticated form is expressed by the aesthete, a conceptual persona in The Diary of a
Seducer. The aesthete’s tactics are those of Don Juan, the archetypal womanizer. Johannes, the seducer and the main protagonist of the novel, is attracted to a young girl, Cordelia, who he has bumped into on the street. Later he meets a young man who also desires Cordelia and offers the young man help in courting the girl. After Johannes obtains entry to Cordelia’s house, he wins the favour of her aunt, with whose help he successfully seduces Cordelia. Finally, he cunningly breaks off his engagement with Cordelia and makes her seem responsible for their separation.

The aesthete fully embraces both hedonistic pleasure and intellectual refinement. He does not allow himself to be burdened with repentance or obligation. At the same time, the aesthete does not pursue sensuous pleasure. As he states, ‘I do not care at all to possess the girl in the external sense but wish to enjoy her artistically’ (Kierkegaard 2013c: 99). The aesthete further explains,

To love one girl is too little; to love all is superficial; to know oneself and to love as many as possible, to let one’s soul conceal all the power of love inside itself so that each receives its specific nourishment while the consciousness nevertheless embraces the whole – that is enjoyment, that is living (Kierkegaard 2013c: 84).

The aesthetic way of life is devoted whole-heartedly to passion as a principle. It desires to experience immediate enjoyment which is intense, poetic, artistic, and intellectual. The aesthete does not find his pleasure in mere womanizing, but rather in planning and carrying out the subtle details of his seduction. Importantly, there is no room for ethical considerations in this project and in the thinking of the aesthete. The aesthete contends, ‘the curse of an engagement is always on its ethical side. The ethical is just as tiresome in philosophy and in life’ (Kierkegaard 2013c: 72). The ethical is completely purged from the aesthetic life. Thus, there is no moral regret or commitment in the aesthetic stage of existence.

Kierkegaard deliberately distances himself from his texts which are labelled as pseudonymous writings. He used pseudonyms to publish books with different and even contradictory views. It is difficult for us to be sure what Kierkegaard himself thought. Kierkegaard certainly describes the aesthetic sphere in a vibrant and pleasant manner without any obvious antipathy. One does not detect any critical undertones towards the main protagonist when reading The Diary of a Seducer. This suggests that we cannot consider the aesthetic stage as morally inferior and/or as a form of deception. In fact, for
Kierkegaard, one can live in the aesthetic stage as there is no moral argument against it. The necessity to move on to the next stage is not a normative progression, but rather it stems from the intrinsic fragility of the aesthetic stage. The aesthetic stage is intrinsically fragile in the following two ways.

First, an aesthetic person focuses only on spatio-temporal pleasures, that is, the pleasures that supervene on the external world. To the extent to which an aesthetic person is unable to control the external world, he or she is also unable to control the satisfaction of those supervening pleasures. For example, any attempt to become intimate with another person is always open to the possibility of rejection. Similarly, a lover of caviar might be prevented from enjoying this rather expensive delicacy by simply being unable to afford it. Clearly, no matter how intelligent and powerful an aesthetic person is, he or she can never control all the circumstances that his or her aesthetic living depends on. One’s aesthetic life can be crushed by an accident at any time. In this sense, the aesthetic life is fragile as it fundamentally involves ‘fortune’ (Kierkegaard 2009: 361-74).

Second, the aesthetic life is unsustainable. It eventually comes to a dead end in which there is no possible future. In Either/Or, another of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writings, Judge William demonstrates this point with the following analogy:

If you imagine a helmsman in his ship when it is just about to tack, then he may be able to say, “I can either do this or that”, but unless he is a pretty poor helmsman he will also be aware that the ship is still maintaining its normal headway, and so there is only an instant when it is immaterial whether he does this or that. Similarly with a human being: if he forgets to take that headway into account, the moment eventually comes when there is no longer any question of an either/or, not because he has chosen but because he has refrained from choice, which can also be expressed in another way: because others have chosen for him, because he has lost himself (Kierkegaard 1992: 420).

There is no space for regret or obligation when making choices in one’s aesthetic life, because an aesthetic person focuses only on temporal enjoyment. This does not mean that his or her life is devoid of alternative turns. But, he or she avoids making choices and leaves everything to chance. At the same time, the aesthetic person still needs to face the consequences of fate. Leaving one’s life to chance ultimately leads to a point with no acceptable alternatives at all. In the passage quoted above, Judge William refers to a crucial existentialist insight: human life is a process consisting of many
choices. Failing to make a choice counts as a choice too and as such comes with consequences. Choices are essential to human existence; thus avoiding them amounts to avoiding human existence. In this context, Kierkegaard stresses the importance of self-construction for human life. The fragility and ultimate unsustainability of the aesthetic stage together with the imperative to self-construct oneself dictate that people choose to transcend the aesthetic stage.

The necessity to transcend the aesthetic stage and progress to the next stage is not motivated by the aesthetic stage being intrinsically deceptive but rather by its fragility and unsustainability. However, those living in the aesthetic stage are typically not aware of its intrinsic unsustainability, and due to the lack of this awareness they won’t strive to transcend it. And why is it that they lack this awareness? According to Kierkegaard it is because of the deceptive nature of Christendom within which the aesthetic stage is embedded. That is to say, Christendom represents the existential lie that prevents people from becoming aware of the unsustainability of living in the aesthetic stage and of their own ability to transcend it.

Additionally, it might feel somewhat inappropriate to use the female pronoun to refer to the hypothetical individual in the above text because it is, in the context of Kierkegaard’s thought, strongly associated with the rather unsavoury character of the Seducer who is strongly coded as a male figure. One of the aspects that make the character unsavoury is his misogynistic attitude to women. It is safe to assume that this attitude to women overlaps at least partially with that of Kierkegaard’s. Thus, it should be acknowledged that there is a regrettable element of misogyny in Kierkegaard’s philosophy.10

1.4.2 Philistinism

Kierkegaard’s aesthete lives in and focuses on the immediate realm of exciting possibilities. The self of the aesthete becomes fragmented due to its attraction to numerous heterogeneous possibilities. The aesthete represents a highly intellectual and sophisticated conceptual persona of the aesthetic stage; he is the idiosyncratic expression

---

10 For more details see (León and Walsh 1997).
of this stage. The antipathetic counterpart to the aesthete as a conceptual persona is the philistine.

Who is the philistine? To answer this question, we first need to briefly introduce Kierkegaard’s metaphysical understanding of what people are. For Kierkegaard, people are ‘a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity’ (1941: 17). People inhabit the spectrum between the temporal and the eternal, and as such incorporate both. As a temporal being, they, like any other animal, pursue sensual pleasures and seek the satisfaction of bodily desires. In the pursuit of sensual pleasures, people as temporal beings face various inevitable limitations such as the ageing process and, ultimately, their own mortality. Kierkegaard sees these limitations that constrain the life of the temporal being as necessary. On the other hand, people as eternal beings are free of these constraints and are characterized by their creative powers of imagination and inventiveness, by their passionate pursuit of truth and knowledge, and the ability to give meaning to their lives. People as eternal beings are masters of the possible. Necessity and possibility are two equally essential constituents of the people as a metaphysical entity. Kierkegaard claims that there is a tension between these two essential constituents and that the tension is irresolvable. The irresolvability of the tension manifests itself in the fact of the existence of despair among the people. Despair can take on two forms depending on which of the two constituents dominate in one’s personality: (i) the despair of possibility, which is due to the lack of necessity, and (ii) the despair of necessity, which is due to the lack of possibility.

The first form of despair stems from the paralysing effects of having too many options available. When this is the case, ‘the self becomes an abstract possibility which tries itself out with floundering in the possibility, but does not budge from the spot’ (Kierkegaard 1941: 54). One is completely fascinated with the infinite possibilities of life and unable to commit to any of them. Each available possibility is considered just for an instant before a new one takes its place at the centre of one’s attention. This ‘phantasmagoria moves so rapidly that it is as if everything were possible’, and the individual becomes a ‘mirage’ (Kierkegaard 1941: 55). If a person faces too many possibilities, she inevitably gets detached from the reality of her body and the external world. This leads to a complete collapse of her character structure. In contrast, being
constrained by too much necessity can be similarly detrimental. Necessity presents itself to us in various forms. It can take the form of, for instance, the realisation of the inevitability of one’s death. This realisation brings into one’s awareness the temporality and ultimate futility of all the available possibilities. In this way, one’s fascination with the necessary closes off the realm of the possible. At that point everything seems to be necessary and inevitable. One becomes paralysed, unable to ‘breathe’ (Kierkegaard 1941: 59).

Apart from these two modes of despair that can affect one’s personality, there is, according to Kierkegaard, something else that can crush the human spirit. He calls that something philistinism, and he describes a philistine as ‘the slave of spiritlessness and the most pitiful of all things’ (1941: 65).

Like the despair of necessity, philistinism as a modal attitude to the world is characterized by the absence of the possible. However, unlike the fatalist who is crushed by the despair of heavy necessity, the philistine does not even have a sense of the existence of any possibility. Kierkegaard contends that a person ‘become[s] spirit by understanding that all things are possible’ (1941: 68). Thus, he regards the philistine as the worst form of human being. He explains,

Philistinism is spiritlessness, in the literal sense of the word; ...Devoid of imagination, as the Philistine always is, he lives in a certain trivial province of experience as to how things go, what is possible, what usually occurs ... imagination the Philistine does not possess, he does not want to have it, he abhors it (1941: 68-69).

People in the grip of the other two modes of attitude to the world still retain (at least) the awareness of the existence of possibility. Their despair stems from their inability to reconcile and balance the necessary and the possible. In contrast, the philistine does not have the courage to face the task of reconciling and balancing the two. Instead, he embraces the trivial to avoid it. The philistine abhors imagination and inventiveness and has no awareness of the existence of possibility. It is a mode of human existence that is devoid of any pursuit of the transcendent. The philistine trivially follows the customs and drifting of the crowd. The philistine fully embraces a self-deceiving way of life to avoid the anxiety of the human condition. It seems that what drives the philistine to self-deception is their intellectual laziness, cowardice, mediocre nature and a kind of animal instinct to avoid any discomfort.
1.4.3 The ethical sphere and teleological suspension of the ethical

Kierkegaard (2013b: 476) states, ‘[t]he ethical sphere is only a transition sphere […]’. The ethical is a limited sphere, a sphere that is transcended by the religious sphere. Mohan Parasain (2016: 66) argues that Kierkegaard uses the term ‘ethical’ as ‘synonymous with the customary mores and universal norms. In this sense “ethics” represents “the universal”, or more accurately the prevailing social norms’. That is, the ethical sphere is constituted by moral values, social norms and accepted ideologies. Thus the existence of those living in this sphere is dominated by these constituents. Kierkegaard (2013b: 476) claims that the ethical sphere will eventually ‘go bankrupt’. How so?

Kierkegaard believes that the religious sphere transcends the ethical one. This implies that the ethical sphere is intrinsically constrained, and this remains the case even if the ethics involved is of a religious variety. Consider what Kierkegaard says about faith:

Faith is precisely this paradox, that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal and is justified over against the latter not as subordinate but superior to it, yet in such a way, mind you, that it is the single individual who, after having been subordinate to the universal as the particular, now through the universal becomes the single individual who as the particular is superior to it; [faith is this paradox] that the single individual as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute (2010: 48).

First, let me clarify some of the terms used. The term ‘universal’ refers to an ethical system. The term ‘absolute’ refers to God or the highest truth, and the term ‘the particular’ refers to the irreducible uniqueness (of an individual). Kierkegaard adds the following:

The ethical as such is the universal, … It rests immanently in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its telos, but it itself is the telos for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has assimilated this into itself it goes no further (2010: 46).

According to Kierkegaard, the ethical system does not have any higher telos outside of itself. It is a closed system with certain structure and rules. And, its structure and rules exist only for its own sake, not for any higher and specific purpose. That is to say, the universal justifies itself from within itself. When the universal encounters a higher purpose outside itself, it will assimilate the higher purpose into its own realm.

Every individual is unique. The uniqueness of every individual translates into every individual’s subjective perspective being unique. One of Kierkegaard’s primary
claims is that truth is essentially subjective. That is to say, he believes that people can understand truth only through their unique subjective experience. Thus, one’s individuality and unique subjectivity plays a crucial role in one’s grasp of truth and relation to God. Now, the nature of the ethical leads to a problem. An ethical system that one has internalized tends to dissolve one’s unique individuality and subjectivity. This goes hand-in-hand with losing one’s ability to grasp truth and relate to God. Thus in order to establish a true relation to the absolute, one has to transcend the ethical (Kierkegaard 2010: 52).

Transcending the ethical does not imply negating it. Rather, one should suspend it when reaching towards the higher telos. Kierkegaard calls this ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ (2010: 39). The teleological suspension of the ethical is meant to be temporary. But, how long is this suspension supposed to last? The answer to this question brings into focus another crucial argument of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard (2010: 61) claims that man ‘determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal’. This claim entails that the absolute transcends the universal and has a normative priority. This means that it is one’s relation to God that determines the ethical system that one (should) adopt(s), and not the other way round. A true relationship to God requires faith. Faith, however, is not a given (unlike the ethical sphere into which one is born) and having it is always a result of hard work.

1.4.4 The tragic hero

Let us examine another conceptual persona the tragic hero related to Kierkegaard’s lies. Kierkegaard takes the mythological hero, Agamemnon, as an exemplary figure of a tragic hero. In Greek mythology, in order to obtain the wind needed to sail his fleet to join the Trojan War, Agamemnon has to appease Artemis. To do so he needs to sacrifice his beloved daughter, Iphigenia. Agamemnon initially rejects this, but he eventually succumbs to the pressure of his commanders. On the face of it, the story of Agamemnon seems to be analogous to that of Abraham—both protagonists are willing to sacrifice their beloved child for a God. Kierkegaard, however, points to a crucial difference here:

The difference between the tragic hero and Abraham is obvious. The tragic hero still remains within the ethical. He lets an expression of the ethical have its telos in a higher
expression of the ethical; he reduces the ethical relation between father and son or
daughter and father to a sentiment that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of the
ethical life (2010: 51-52)

Agamemnon sacrifices his child, but he does not do it to meet an ultimate demand
of the divine. He does so to benefit his community. The well-being or not of a community
is, however, an ethical issue, not a divine one. In his act of sacrificing his child,
Agamemnon thus stays fully within the sphere of the ethical. This can be contrasted with
the story of Abraham. Kierkegaard points out that Abraham is willing to sacrifice his
son, but not because of any desire to win a battle, ensure a rich harvest or appease the
gods. That is, Abraham is not motivated by any concern belonging to the ethical sphere.
He sacrifices his son solely for God’s sake. Thus, in this act, Abraham transcends the
ethical.

The problem with the tragic hero, according to Kierkegaard, is that the tragic hero’s
act is not genuinely his own. It rises out of the normative demand of the ethical sphere
and not from the autonomy of the tragic hero. Once the tragic hero’s actions are
scrutinised he turns out to be a coward hiding behind socially and culturally approved
norms and values. He is unable to make the leap of faith required to start acting from a
full commitment to the transcendent. The tragic hero is thus not the (real) knight of faith
but ‘the counterfeit knight, […] [who] attempt[s] to jump off the narrow way of the
paradox and become a tragic hero on the cheap’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 69). In other words,
the tragic hero is a fake. He makes a sacrifice expecting ‘tears of sympathy for [his] pain
and tears of admiration for [his] deed’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 51). And to get those ‘tears of
sympathy’ and ‘tears of admiration’, the tragic hero has to make his deeds
understandable to the average mind. He seeks public admiration and as such is ‘unable
to endure the martyrdom of unintelligibility’ that comes with committing a truly
genuine act that goes beyond the mere ethical (Kierkegaard 2010: 70). If the tragic hero
cannot be understood by others, he ‘[…] cries out confidently to his contemporaries:
“The outcome will indeed show that I was justified.”’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 55) That is, the
future will prove him and his actions justified. An ethical system is indeed necessary to
justify that what he is doing is not in vain. In contrast, the knight of faith ‘cannot make
himself intelligible to anyone’. He appears to people as being ‘mad’ (Kierkegaard 2010:
The knight of faith is completely isolated from the crowd. And, this has a liberating effect on the knight of faith.

The true knight makes the infinite movement and keeps ‘sleepless’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 68). On the contrary, the tragic hero ‘is soon finished and at peace; he makes the infinite movement and is now secure in the universal’, and then he can ‘collect his soul in the certainty’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 68,101). Making the sacrifice within the sphere of the ethical brings the tragic hero needed certainty and security. This is why Kierkegaard believes the true knight is superior to the tragic hero.

Although the knight and the tragic hero both make a sacrifice, the knight does not need any justification. He boldly embraces the ultimate paradox in which everything is completely absurd and unjustifiable. In contrast, the tragic hero needs to be compensated not by aesthetic pleasure, but by ethical justification. This need is deeply rooted in the all too common inability among people to tolerate the intrinsic meaninglessness and unjustifiability of the world. And, it is precisely this need for justification that prevents the tragic hero from being able to embrace the transcendent, that is, to become the knight of faith.

To sum up, in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, the existential lie is the self-deceptive mind that prevents one from transcending the stage in which one dwells. A philistine (dwelling in the aesthetic-ethical stage) is unable to go beyond the ethical due to his intellectual laziness and generally mediocre character, while the tragic hero (dwelling in the ethical stage) is constrained by his fundamental need for an ethical justification of his deeds. The tragic hero searches for and finds this justification out there in society’s shared ethical values and norms (the external). Kierkegaard identifies this as a lie and in this respect his diagnosis of the tragic hero echoes the views of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

In this chapter, I have done two things. First, I have discussed the concept of a lie as understood by these selected existentialists. The concept plays a key role in the thinking of these existentialist. They all argue, in one way or another, that the world always manifests itself as a lie and that underneath that lie the world turns out to be intrinsically
meaningless. Second, I have analysed the concept of a lie as understood by these existentialists to show that the existential lie essentially involves a self-deception that derives from the psychological need to project meaning and justification onto the external. In the next chapter, I shall talk about how this realisation that the world is (based on) a lie pushes those who realise it towards nihilism.
Chapter 2: The Transitional Stage of The Reactive Nihilism

In the previous chapter, we identified an important theoretical commonality among these selected existentialists. They all argue that the world is based upon a lie. This is a rather disturbing conclusion. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in response, the existentialists start searching for the truth behind the lie, because honesty is of paramount importance. As Dostoevsky (2018: 417) said, ‘[i]t is better to be unhappy and know the worst, than to be happy in a fool’s paradise!’ The existentialists’ search for the truth is, of course, theoretical: they ask questions and analyse the answers. This time, however, they are very cautious. They already know that the lie is ubiquitous and the truth extremely scarce. Thus, they question again; they double-check the answers and keep suspecting a lie has contaminated the answers. However, one cannot find the truth in this way; this approach is self-defeating. As Donald Crosby (2016: 2) explains, repeated questioning eventually leads to an ‘erosion of conviction and certitude and [a] collapse into despair’. The despair that Crosby talks about is the despair of a nihilist. If repeated questioning does not uncover the truth then it is almost impossible to sustain the belief that there is any truth, value or meaning about the world at all. All three of the early existentialists examined here engage with nihilism in some form. Among philosophers, it is Nietzsche who is most often associated with the term nihilism. And, the perceived modern sensibility of Dostoevsky is primarily manifested in his nihilistic characters. On the other hand, Kierkegaard ‘felt that nihilism was inevitable’, and his concern is one of ‘working out how best to cope with it’ (Carlisle 2006: 22). It seems that, for early existentialists, the logical conclusion of the realisation of the existential lie is nihilism.

In what follows I will analyse various nihilistic positions to identify other constitutive aspects of the existentialist paradigm. The chapter first introduces five types of nihilism according to their thematic differences. It then focuses on the different classifications of nihilism according to their dynamic modules. With reference to Nietzsche’s theory of nihilism and Deleuze’s discussion of Nietzsche, I introduce a specific dynamic module—a (positive) reactive nihilism which refers to a destructive impulse that targets conventional values to clear the way for the advent of a new value.
Having identified this dynamic model of reactive nihilism we can begin to answer a certain controversial question regarding Dostoevsky: What is it that holds together the religious and nihilistic currents in his world? The question shall be answered in the second section. I will argue that the two currents do not conflict at all—they should be seen as complementing constituents of a dynamic model of reactive nihilism. Early existentialists embrace a reactive nihilism that ultimately calls for an overcoming of the nihilistic desert. As a result, they formulate an ultimate demand that grounds the justification of existence in the inner self. The last section of this chapter discusses various ultimate demands as formulated by the early existentialists and identifies those aspects that they share by focusing on their key concepts.

2.1 Nihilistic finding

Chapter 2 focuses on nihilism in order to identify the various positions of nihilism in regard to their thematic and dynamic differences. The section begins with an introduction of five types of nihilism as distinguished by Donald A. Crosby. The second subsection discusses the origins of nihilism in Nietzsche. Against the background of Deleuze’s discussion of Nietzsche, the third subsection analyses the dynamic relations of various kinds of nihilism to flesh out a dynamic model of the (positive) reactive nihilism. The final part discusses Kierkegaard’s limited embrace of nihilism.

2.1.1 The basic definition of nihilism

Nihilism is a widely used term referring to a number of subjects and philosophical themes. It is often used in a loose and careless fashion. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify how it is going to be used in this thesis. As Michael Gillespie (1996: 65) reports, ‘the concept of nihilism first came into general usage as a political health of humanity. The first to use the term in print was apparently F. L. Goetzius in his *De nonismo et nihilismo in theologia* (1733)*. Afterwards, this concept primarily attracted the attention of litterateurs and became popular through literature. Ivan Turgenev used it in *Fathers and Sons*, and he defined a nihilist as ‘a man who does not bow down before any authority, who does not take any principle on faith, whatever reverence that principle may be enshrined in’ (2008: 26). The earliest philosophical positions associated with nihilism are those of the Sceptics. Grahma Parkes (1990: xx) suggests, there is a ‘stream of nihilism
[which] springs from the decline of Hegelian philosophy through Feuerbach, Stirner, and Schopenhauer to Nietzsche and Heidegger’.

The most systematic account of nihilism is probably given by Crosby in *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern*. Crosby sorts its different meanings into five types: political, moral, epistemological, cosmic, and existential.

*Political nihilism* does not have a clear political goal, except for the complete dismantling of all political institutions. This term is often associated with Russian intellectual history and as a pejorative for the outbreak of terrorist acts ‘toward the end of that decade that climaxed with the Czar’s assassination’ (Crosby 2016: 11).

*Moral nihilism* contains three sub-forms: amoralism, moral subjectivism, and egoism. Amoralism can be said ‘to be nihilistic in that it negates all the standards and constraints of a moral life’. And, moral subjectivism can be described ‘to be nihilistic in its denial of any rational way of deciding among conflicting moral claims’. Egoism ‘differs from amoralism mainly in that it purports to be a moral position in its own right, not a denial of all moral positions’ (Crosby 2016: 12-14).

*Epistemological nihilism* can be divided into two positions, the first position ‘makes claims to truth entirely relative to particular individuals or groups, while the second holds semantic intelligibility to be entirely relative to self-contained, incommensurable conceptual schemes’ (Crosby 2016: 18).

*Cosmic nihilism* ‘asserts the meaninglessness of the cosmos, either in the absolute sense of denying it any intelligibility or knowable structure at all, or in the relative sense of denying that it gives any place or support to the kinds of evaluative and existential meanings to which human beings aspire’ (Crosby 2016: 26).

*Existential nihilism* ‘judges human existence to be pointless and absurd. It leads nowhere and adds up to nothing. It is entirely gratuitous, in the sense that there is no justification for life, but also no reason not to live. Those who claim to find meaning in their lives are either dishonest or deluded’ (Crosby 2016: 30).

Crosby (2016: 8) argues that ‘moral, epistemological, and cosmic nihilisms, especially when considered together, tend to coalesce into and culminate in the last type
of nihilism [- existential nihilism]. Existential nihilism holds that human existence is intrinsically gratuitous, absurd and lacking in any meaning that could justify it. Crosby’s definition of existential nihilism as given above represents a good first approximation. However, for our purposes here, it is too broad to capture some of the conceptual nuances that are relevant for the discussion below. An examination of Nietzsche’s understanding of nihilism will help us to identify the relevant conceptual nuances of existential nihilism and arrive at a more subtle understanding of it.

2.1.2 The dynamic model of reactive nihilism

In the light of Crosby’s classification of nihilism, I will further discuss and elaborate on these various types of nihilism. I will relate the discussion to Nietzsche’s theory of nihilism and Deleuze’s discussion of Nietzsche.

At outset, where does nihilism come from? According to Nietzsche, Christian morality praises truth as one of its highest principles. Truthfulness has a normative impetus which pushes people to pursue a true, authentic, or prelapsarian understanding of the world. On the other hand, Christianity sees the world as a place filled with ‘falseness and mendaciousness’. Nietzsche believes that under the tremendous pressure of ‘truthfulness’, ‘the end of Christianity’ eventually ‘rebound[s] from “God is truth” to the fanatical faith “All is false”’ (1968: 7-8). Thus, Nietzsche believes that the roots of nihilism can be traced back to the Christian interpretation of the world as being permeated with distress. This interpretation goes hand-in-hand with a pursuit of truth (where God is seen as the fullest source and manifestation of truth). The pursuit of truth is a (moral) project that is ultimately self-defeating. Any genuine pursuit of truth inevitably generates a large number of interpretations. The very existence of such a large number of interpretations puts the normative aspect of the concept of truth under too much pressure: truth becomes relative and later obsolete. At this point, nihilism is inevitable. In this sense, nihilism is rooted in Christian morality. As Nietzsche claims, ‘the end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism’ (1968: 7). Importantly, this inflation of interpretations is never just partial. It inevitably leads to the collapse of truth as a real property existing in the world. Thus, according to Nietzsche, nihilism comes to
the fore once ‘the highest values devalue themselves’ (1968: 8). In The Brothers Karamazov, Ivan’s dialogue almost precisely dramatises Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism. After Ivan describes the various brutal tortures suffered by children, he poses a number of questions and concludes that there is no acceptable explanation as to why God would allow the suffering of innocent children. Then, he angrily declares, ‘if the sufferings of children go to make up the sum of sufferings which is necessary for the purchase of truth, then I say beforehand that the entire truth is not worth such a price’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 287).

Active nihilism

Nietzsche differentiates nihilism into at least two categories: active nihilism and passive nihilism. Active nihilism is ‘a violent force of destruction’, ‘a sign of increased power of the spirit’. As Nietzsche (1968: 17) explains, ‘the spirit may have grown so strong that previous goals (“convictions,” articles of faith) have become incommensurate (for a faith generally expresses the constraint of conditions of existence, submission to the authority of circumstances under which one flourishes, grows, gains power)’. In other words, active nihilism stems from the awakening of the human spiritual force that makes one realise the hollowness of conventional values and reject them as ‘incommensurate’.

Passive nihilism

Passive nihilism, on the other hand, is a ‘decline and recession of the power of the spirit’ and ‘a sign of weakness’. The strength of the spirit may be worn out, exhausted, so that previous goals and values have become incommensurate and no longer are believed’ (Nietzsche 1968: 17-18). Passive nihilism is an active nihilism that failed. It remains attached to the value system that is no longer substantiable. As Shane Weller (2011: 35-36) explains, passive nihilism is ‘a form of nihilism that cannot break free from the moral interpretation of phenomena. […] In the face of this sense of existence as punishment or error, passive nihilism seeks (reasonably enough, it might seem) to reduce suffering to zero’. It often leads to a form of Schopenhauerian pessimism.

Alenka Zupančič (2003: 66-67) argues that rather than being in some sense self-contained positions, these two kinds of nihilism—passive and active—coexist in a mutually constitutive way. They are both rooted in the same fundamental configuration
'wherein the will (or desire) is captured in the alternative between directly “willing Nothing(ness)” itself and “not willing.” In this sense, she claims, ‘[Nietzsche’s] nihilism is not a general category […] it refers to the very tension spanning the space between these two figures or “alternatives”’. I agree with Zupančič that the two kinds of nihilism have to be seen as co-dependent. At the same time, I do not think that Nietzsche’s notions of “willing Nothing(ness)” and “not willing” (as discussed in his On the Genealogy of Morality) can be conceptually mapped over the two kinds of nihilism. The ascetic ideal of ‘willing nothingness’ implies a desire for emptiness. Yet, clearly, active nihilism contains a positive dynamic that opposes something rather than retreating into emptiness. And, passive nihilism seems to be the unfortunate result of an active nihilism that has lost its destructive power.

In the light of Nietzsche’s classification of these two nihilisms, I shall now proceed to discuss some of Deleuze’s views on Nietzsche. Deleuze refines our understanding of nihilism by further delineating it into two types: negative nihilism and reactive nihilism.

**Negative nihilism**

In Latin, nihil means nothing. The English verb ‘annihilate’ derives from nihil and means ‘to bring to nothing’ (Pratt). Deleuze claims that ‘nihil does not signify not-being but primarily a value of nil’ (2006: 147). That is to say, a nihilism is not an “ism” of void, but an “ism” of annihilating values. Thus, for instance, existential nihilism refers to a system of thought which annihilates the meaning of existence, rather than a system aiming to make existence a void.

Furthermore, according to Deleuze, a philosophical (or religious) system can be nihilistic even if it does not annihilate meaning in an absolute sense. The nihilistic position is realised even if it just shifts the meaning from the world (as it is given to us) into the transcendent realm. Thus, for Nietzsche, Christianity is a ‘nihilistic religion’ (1968: 97). In this sense, Christianity not only contains the origins of nihilism, but is itself a form of nihilism. To assign human life (in a non-biological sense) the value of nil is to depreciate and deny it. Deleuze (2006: 147) explains, ‘[d]epreciation always presupposes a fiction: […] it is by means of fiction that something is opposed to life’. What Deleuze calls fiction is ‘the idea of another world, of a supersensible world in all its forms (God,
essence, the good, truth), the idea of values superior to life,’ which is ‘not one example
among many but the constitutive element of all fiction’ (2006: 147). Simply put, Deleuze’s
fiction refers to a supersensible belief system that depreciates life. This type of nihilism
is anti-life, and it removes any life sustaining force from it projecting it onto a fiction that
is religion. Deleuze refers to this type of nihilism as *negative* nihilism which is ‘not the
will that denies itself in higher values, it is higher values that are related to a will to deny,
to annihilate life’ (2006: 147).

Deleuze’s (active) reactive nihilism

There is another type of nihilism, *reactive* nihilism. For Nietzsche and Deleuze, the world
was already nihilistic. The nihilism that emerged in the 19th century was the second
phrase of it and a reaction to it. Deleuze defines reactive nihilism as being ‘no longer the
devaluation of life in the name of higher values but the devaluation of higher values
themselves’ (2006: 148). A *reactive* nihilist does not attack the will to strive for higher
values—that is something that a negative nihilist might be accused of doing—he,
instead, attacks the higher values themselves. That is to say, Deleuze’s notion of reactive
nihilism is close to the ordinary notion of nihilism—the notion that refers to a rejection
of high values. Below, I will discuss in more detail Deleuze’s notion of reactive nihilism.

Absolute nihilism

For authentic *reactive* nihilists, the disintegration of a high value generates the ultimate
move to devalue all values. The process of devaluation will lead them to an extreme
position: all is devoid of meaning. They treat the nihilist conclusion as the endpoint of
all inferences. I refer to this type of nihilism as *absolute* nihilism. In a sense, it is related
to Nietzsche’s concept of *passive* nihilism. For *absolute* nihilists, there is nothing but the
naked negativeness of existence, the hideous lonely emptiness. The cosmos appears to
be completely collapsed. There is nothing needed to strike for or to desire. Human life
seems to be a tiny flame flickering in an infinite void. This kind of *absolute* nihilism is the
most common association of the term nihilism, especially in the context of artistic works.
I suspect that no one can actually be an *absolute* nihilist or sustain the state of mind of an
*absolute* nihilist for a prolonged period of time. To judge something as meaningful or not
requires, at least to a minimal degree, an investment of value. To say ‘everything is
meaningless’ is itself a value judgement. The erosive logic of absolute nihilism eventually annihilates the base of this measurement, and then one cannot even make the judgement that something is meaningless. An absolute nihilist thus inevitably ends up being totally unable to navigate her life and the world as a whole. Absolute nihilism is then a sort of cul-de-sac in which people constantly rebound to a less-absolute position. Due to the inaccessibility of the absolute nihilistic position, a nihilist eventually arrives at one of the following two positions.

Cynical nihilism

The first position is that of a cynical nihilist. One can dwell in this less-absolute position without feeling the need to develop their nihilistic outlook any further — this kind of nihilism can be seen as analogous to Nietzsche’s passive nihilism.

A cynical nihilist recognises the nullity of higher values but has no intention to reject them. Instead, he adopts a cynical attitude towards them. This kind of nihilist position is best captured by Dostoevsky in Stepan Verkhovensky’s monologue,

The whole law of human existence consists merely of making it possible for every man to bow down before what is infinitely great. If man were to be deprived of the infinitely great, he would refuse to go on living, and die of despair. The infinite and the immeasurable is as necessary to man as the little plant which he inhabits (2004: 656).

A cynical nihilist understands that all higher values are hollow. At the same time, he knows that the consequences of discarding them would be too painful. His response to this is an adoption of a cynical attitude towards high values and, consequently, a return to the position of negative nihilism. In this type of nihilism, the disenchantment of a high value does not lead to reactive nihilism. Life takes on the value of nil insofar as it remains denied by embracing other higher values.

Positive-reactive nihilism

The second position is a positive-reactive nihilism. Positive-reactive nihilism constantly devalues higher values which are given by any outside authority and aims to find a

---

11 My usage of the term reactive nihilism is slightly different from that of Deleuze’s, whose reactive nihilism involves the previous type as a reaction towards negative nihilism. In this thesis, I use it only to refer to a positive-reactive nihilism.
solution to the dilemma that the former types of nihilism imply. It represents the final step before existentialism. Nietzsche advocates that we should ‘stop telling ourselves tales – lies – the old way’ in order to revalue *this* world as a delightful place and find meaning in the inner self of human beings. As he announces,

The world might be far more valuable than we used to believe; we must see through the naïveté of our ideals, and while we thought that we had accorded it the highest interpretation, we may not have given our human existence a moderately fair value (1968: 22).

Reactive nihilism is a revolt that calls for the overcoming of the nihilistic desert (the absolute nihilistic position). It is worth highlighting that we cannot equate reactive nihilism with a rejection of nihilism. A rejection of nihilism would entail a denial of the nihilistic perspective. For example, one can reject nihilism by claiming that all nihilistic positions (moral, epistemological, cosmic, etc.) are completely wrong. However, reactive nihilists actually accept the premise of nihilism. That is, they respond to the nihilistic perspective by taking it as the starting point of their philosophical investigation. To be a nihilist one has to accept nihilistic propositions. One may contend that Nietzsche and the other existentialists argued directly against nihilism. But, they were still nihilists to the extent that they accepted nihilistic propositions. To sum up, reactive nihilism is a form of nihilism.

Finally, as Nietzsche outlines, ‘nihilism represents a pathological transitional stage (what is pathological is the tremendous generalization, the inference that there is no meaning at all)’ (1968: 14). It is necessary to understand that reactive nihilism is essentially a transitional stage rather than a fixed philosophical position. People can embrace a *positive-reactive* nihilist position to
attack a moribund value in order to make room for the advent of a *new value*—it is this configuration that can be referred to as existentialist.
2.1.4 Kierkegaard’s temporary recruitment of nihilistic positions

I believe that reactive nihilism is an irreducible component of early existentialism. The early existentialists typically embrace moral, epistemological and cosmic nihilisms, which leads them, ultimately, to becoming existential nihilists. Existentialist nihilism contains a strong reactive element directed against itself that makes it intrinsically a transitory position. Thus the early existentialists see nihilism, somewhat paradoxically, as the only way out of nihilism.

The preceding quotes from Nietzsche demonstrate his acceptance of various nihilist positions. It is fairly uncontroversial to label Nietzsche as a reactive nihilist. However, the same cannot be said about Kierkegaard whose philosophy does not seem, at least on the face of it, to be describable as clearly and uncontroversially nihilistic. The main obstacle to describing it as such is the fact that Kierkegaard saw himself as a passionate and authentic Christian. This might be seen as inconsistent with describing him as a nihilist. Perhaps Kierkegaard is not a nihilist, it could be argued, but an ardent defender of a fixed set of values, norms and purposes. Still, I would argue that Kierkegaard is a nihilist. To make the claim plausible, it needs to be approached from the following two positions. First, nihilism does not entail a total absence of any values, norms, meanings or purposes. Second, nihilism is a position that is essentially critical. Now, once we recall Kierkegaard’s forceful critique of the value system of Christendom, which is (and can only be) launched against the background of values, norms and purposes that are seen as the authentic ones, we might begin to discern the nihilistic contours in Kierkegaard’s philosophy.

One of Kierkegaard’s famous claims is that ‘truth is subjectivity’ (2009: 159). For Kierkegaard, there are two ways to approach truth. One way is through objective reflection which leads to ‘the objective truth’ (2009: 262). Such objective knowledge is the domain of mathematics and natural sciences. The other way is by subjective reflection which ‘turns in towards subjectivity, wanting in this inner absorption to be truth’s reflection’ (2009: 165). This subjective knowledge is inwardly related to the human

\(^{12}\) Section 1.31 and 1.34

\(^{13}\) The notions of truth, the absolute, knowledge, or God are all conceptually interchangeable in his terminology.
experience and condition. Kierkegaard (2009: 163) argues that in order to preserve ‘objective validity’, objective reflection has to make the subject ‘indifferent’ and ‘accidental’ regarding the target of the reflection. In objective reflection, the individual intentionally keeps herself distant from the object of reflection. And because ‘truth is subjectivity’, according to Kierkegaard, objective reflection generates knowledge that cannot be but accidental to truth (2009: 226). Subjective reflection, on the other hand, grounds knowledge in the subject of the reflection and as such generates knowledge that is normatively relevant to human affairs. Only this knowledge can grasp the truth. And, it is in this sense that truth is essentially subjective. Understanding truth as being essentially subjective is not uncontroversial. For instance A. J. Rudd believes this understanding to be indistinguishable from epistemological scepticism which represents ‘the self-destruction of the objective reason, when pushed beyond its proper limits’ (1998: 71). Crosby would disagree because he sees Kierkegaard as an epistemological nihilist rather than as a sceptic (see section 2.1.1).

Recognising Kierkegaard as a nihilist also requires discussing his call to transcend the ethical sphere. Kierkegaard sees the ethical as merely a transitory stage; a stage dwelling within which needs to be (at least temporarily) suspended to reach the transcendent (see section 1.5.3). Being just a transitory stage, the ethical is essentially worthless, valueless and meaningless. Thus by describing the ethical as transitory, Kierkegaard embraces moral nihilism. Now, it could be objected that the transcendent is often best described using ethical and other value-laden concepts, which strongly suggests that the transcendent is intrinsically ethical. If that is the case then Kierkegaard cannot be seen as encouraging his readers to ditch the ethical, but rather as encouraging them to reach towards and embrace a—in some sense higher or more authentic—version of the ethical. That might, on the face of it, seem to be clearly incompatible with moral nihilism. However, it should be noticed that any revolt against something presupposes a referential value framework from within which that something is seen as intolerable. Thus, to be able to see an ethical system as intolerable or even vacuous and revolt against it, that is, to be a moral nihilist, presupposes the existence of an evaluative perspective that is often ethically normative in essence. As Neil Cooper (1973-1974: 76) neatly
concludes, ‘moral nihilism is a morality’. And, it is in this sense, that Kierkegaard can be plausibly described as a moral nihilist.
2.2 The Compatibility between the Religious and the Nihilistic Currents in Dostoevsky’s World

Dostoevsky can be seen as a nihilist due to the variety of nihilistic characters that populate his novels. He is, at the same time, often seen as a religious writer because of his fascination with some Christian themes. This has led to the formation of two major interpretative perspectives regarding Dostoyevsky’s works. Some scholars contend that Dostoevsky was primarily a religious writer, while others see him as a writer anticipating a nihilistic sensibility. Some authors refuse to reject either perspective, and they recognise Dostoyevsky’s world as irreducibly torn between the religious current and the nihilistic current. There is, I believe, something deeply unsatisfying in accepting that Dostoevsky’s world should be essentially schizophrenic. Something under its surface must hold it together. But what is it? This question is puzzling not only for those working on Dostoevsky. It is implicitly present in the thinking of theistic existentialists too. The dynamic model of *reactive* nihilism gives us a conceptual tool to solve this issue.

2.2.1 The debate between Two Camps

The views of the religious camp find their early expression in Nicholas Berdyaev’s study *Dostoevsky*. According to Berdyaev, a post-Siberian Dostoevsky finally embraces the faith of Christianity. As he states, ‘there is always light in [Dostoevsky’s] darkness, and it is the light of Christ’ (1957: 31). A typical religious reading of Dostoevsky views him as promoting religious faith by using his works to demonstrate the horror and dread of life without God (Barth 1933; Thurneysen 2010). Some Orthodox readers, such as Donald Nicholl (1997: 119-76), argue that Dostoevsky’s works set the stage for a religious debate in which the Orthodox tradition will eventually triumph; and without the understanding of this context, it is impossible to fully grasp the internal structure of Dostoevsky’s world. The religious reading of Dostoevsky has been endorsed in a collection of essays edited by George Pattison and Diane Thompson, published under the title *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*. Thompson seems to be one of the strongest proponents of the religious reading. As she states, Dostoevsky ‘never seals off the Biblical word from other words, from the life depicted in his works, but makes everyone, from deniers to affirmers, respond to that word […] Dostoevsky disseminates his
characters’ and his own deeply subjective responses to Christianity through every word he writes’ (2001: 94). Another recent advocate of the religious reading of Dostoevsky is Maïa Stepenberg, whose study examines Dostoevsky’s thought by comparing it with Nietzsche’s philosophy. She contends that Dostoevsky’s goal was to revolt against nihilism. Stepenberg (2019: 77) argues that, in contrast to Nietzsche who dethrones God by equating ‘life with power’, urging us to embrace ‘a return with gusto to the pagan model’, Dostoevsky ‘ultimately refutes it’ and defends Christianity. Overall, some scholars (e.g., Thompson) insist that Dostoevsky was obviously and mostly a Christian writer.

Alternatively, other scholars refuse to understand the world of Dostoevsky’s novels as one-dimensional in this way, even though they agree that the religious dimension is essential to his world. Dostoevsky has a talent, distinguishing him from other modern writers, that embeds multiple voices and ideological conflicts in his characters’ psychological struggles without offering an authoritative disposition. He always invites a polyphonic reading. His nihilist characters are persuasive and powerful, and some readers contend that Dostoevsky had an essential affinity with these characters to the extent that they signify what he really believed. For example, Camus, D H Lawrence, and Vasily Rozanov all come to the similar conclusion that ‘Dostoevsky is on Ivan’s side’ (Camus 1975: 101). Lev Shestov (1969: 169) argues that Dostoevsky speaks out his own mind through the mouth of The Underground Man, a nihilist character. Shestov’s essay initially introduced an existential reading of Dostoevsky. Later on, Kaufmann (1991) labelled Dostoevsky as one of the predecessors of existentialism. The above-mentioned thinkers primarily focus on Dostoevsky’s critique of rationalist thought and his cultural legacy that gave rise to existentialism as a movement. Recently, Bilal Siddiqi has provided an existential-phenomenological reading of some of Dostoevsky’s characters. Siddiqi (2019) suggests that Dostoevsky’s existentialism is rooted not only in ethics, but in immanent existential-ontology too. Generally speaking, most existential readers of Dostoevsky seem to be reluctant or indifferent when it comes to recognizing the significance of a religious dimension in Dostoevsky’s novels, despite the fact that most of them in some sense acknowledge such a dimension.
Some scholars agree that there are at least two philosophical currents running through the world of Dostoevsky. For example, Stewart Sutherland contends that Dostoevsky was a divided writer. The believer and the unbeliever exist irreconcilably and equally in his works. It is, therefore, for Sutherland, impossible to reach a definitive position in regard to what Dostoevsky actually believed (1984: 26). The above claims implicitly support the dominating Bakhtinian view that Dostoevsky’s world consists of an uneasy interaction of two equally strong currents, and that his world cannot be reduced to just one foundational current. It is ultimately the reader’s task to reconcile the two currents by way of deep engagement with the world of Dostoevsky’s characters. Mikhail Bakhtin’s (2009) theory explains that the world of Dostoevsky’s novels is a polyphonic project which constructs a fictional world in which its characters follow independent philosophical paths and as such do not gravitate towards any systematically monologic worldview. However, as a description Bakhtin’s theory is beautifully satisfactory, but it does not offer a reply to the question it asks: what is the overarching philosophy of Dostoevsky’s world?

In *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience*, Malcolm Jones identifies a similar issue and offers a possible explanation. He argues that the common denominator is the ‘silence’ that characterises the fullness of the godhead in apophatic theology, but this is experienced as ‘absence’ in nihilism. Apophaticism is, according to Jones, ‘the suppression of theology itself, with its emphasis on the inexpressibility of God, and the source of Russia’s ancient, enduring and centuries-long intellectual silence’ (2005: 66-67). Jones argues that the consistent dynamic of Dostoevsky’s world parallels a cultural phenomenon termed by Mikhail Epstein as ‘minimal religion’; the apophatic tradition leads to Russian nihilism and atheism, in which negative theology becomes the negation of theism itself (2005: 103). Jones’s study implies that it is the Orthodox theological tradition that forms the ground of Dostoevsky’s world. Dostoevsky’s anticipation of a proto-postmodern sensibility, which many existentialist writers were in debt to, intrinsically is ‘unplanned and unforeseen’ (2005: xii). In this section, I am going to provide an alternative explanation of the issue (introduced above) by applying Nietzsche’s theory of nihilism to an analysis of both types of Dostoevsky’s characters. My approach draws inspiration from Jones’s study. This section is not intended as a
critique, and neither does it aim to establish an authoritative reading, but it simply attempts to offer a plausible interpretation, by reading Dostoevsky existentially, to explain the common denominator of these two currents.

2.2.2 The semantic scopes of the religious and the nihilistic

It is necessary to define, at the outset, what the two currents are before we can discuss how exactly they relate to each other. The scholars mentioned above refer to them as: ‘religious sensibility’ vs. ‘post-modernist sensibility’; ‘belief’ vs. ‘unbelief’; ‘secular dream’ vs. ‘religious vision’; ‘hosanna’ vs. ‘furnace of doubt’, etc.\textsuperscript{14} However, these conceptual pairs are somewhat metaphorical and vague, and as such do not tell us much about their mutual relationship. It is not that those celebrated scholars are incapable of finding precise terms for these two currents, it is rather that the intrinsic vagueness of the terms protects them to some extent from potential objections. For example, ‘religious/Christian/Orthodox’ have both doctrinal and institutional connotations. It is difficult to tie Dostoevsky to a particular doctrine on the basis of his texts. Even seemingly clear evidence of doctrinal allegiance turns out, under closer scrutiny, to be inconclusive. Take for instance the motif of resurrection that can be found in Dostoevsky’s novels and that seems to support the religious interpretation of Dostoevsky. However, resurrection, like many other seemingly exclusive Christian motifs, is also a vital motif for many other religions. For instance, Bodhidharma came back from death in Buddhism. In fact, some scholars attempt to read Dostoevsky in the light of Buddhist or Islamic religious traditions, not with the purpose of showing that he was closer to either than to the Christian tradition, but to argue that Dostoevsky’s religious experience was more universal (e.g., Menefee 2011). There is a similar problem related to another trend. Neither ‘atheism/nihilism/existentialism’ can perfectly include all the worldviews encapsulated in Dostoevsky’s ‘furnace of doubt’. Overall, many scholars have preserved the tension, widely adopting Dostoevsky’s own terms of ‘hosanna’ and ‘furnace of doubt’ to refer to these two currents. However, the use of metaphorical terms cannot help us to explore the dynamics underlying these two trends. For the sake of the analysis, I will refer to these two trends as ‘religious’ (hosanna) and ‘nihilistic’ (furnace of doubt).

\textsuperscript{14} See in: (Jones 2005: ix, x, 39, 45, 49, 50, 168); (Pattison and Thompson 2001: 103-04); (Berdyaev 1957: 31).
First, what does ‘religious’ mean? A good way to approach the question is to look at how the target term is used and understood by the scholars endorsing the religious reading of Dostoevsky. For Pattison and Thompson, the religious dimension of Dostoevsky is a powerful ‘Christian vision’ embedded in his dialogues. It is manifested through ‘the prominence of biblical motifs and of references to doctrinal, liturgical and devotional elements in the Christian tradition’ (2001: 1-2). For them, the religiosity of Dostoevsky’s world refers explicitly to Christianity. And, it refers to not only an emotional dimension, but also includes Gospel motifs, doctrines, and liturgies. Yet, as Jones points out, Pattison and Thompson’s claim provokes further questions. Jones applies Ninian Smart’s seven aspects of religion to an examination of Dostoevsky’s treatment of the Christian subject. These seven dimensions are: the practical and ritual, the experiential and emotional, the narrative or mythic, the doctrinal and philosophical, the ethical and legal, the social and institutional, and the material dimension (Smart 1998: 10-21). Applying experimental and textual analysis, Jones concludes that,

Many of the most visible and distinctive features of the institutional and doctrinal life of Eastern Orthodoxy, the sacramental, the material, the ritual, the institutional, are either peripheral or flicker fitfully in Dostoevsky’s mature art. We may be convinced for historical and cultural reasons, or for reasons of personal religious faith, that they are present somewhere in the novels’ subtext, but it is nevertheless significant that they are not thrust upon the reader’s attention, … (2003: 44)

In short, if we roughly divide the various dimensions of religion into two categories, namely, the ritual and doctrinal dimension on one side and the spiritual and experiential dimension on the other, Dostoevsky’s religious side is clearly the latter one rather than the former one. In fact, Dostoevsky rarely even places elements of sacrament and liturgy into his descriptions of saintly characters.

Jones has grasped a crucial aspect of Dostoevsky’s religious dimension. But, it seems that he has not attempted to formulate a more precise definition of this spiritual and experiential religiosity. However, a more precise definition can be extracted from his explanation of ‘minimal religion’. As he states, ‘the reappearance of religious experience’ can be found in ‘Protestant and Catholic traditions, and [in] Christian socialism’, and also in ‘the values of a shallow modern secularism’ (2005: 69). Jones explains in what sense modern secularism is religious in the following way,
One important feature of the spiritual map (both ours and Dostoevsky’s) that Epstein does not mention is what Philip Goodchild has recently called ‘the dominant contemporary global piety’ whose organizing principle is ‘the self-regulating market’, in other words, the substitution for religious piety of a piety directed towards the transcendent principle of money, financial speculation (gambling) and its accumulation (2005: 69).

For Jones, as we can see, the naked core of religiosity is passion. It is a kind of religious piety towards some transcendent principle(s). I agree with Jones’s idea that Dostoevsky’s religiosity is more experiential and spiritual than it is confined to doctrine and institution. And, this spiritual religiosity is more like a human drive for transcendent value or meaningfulness which is itself manifested in, and resonates with, religious teaching. Below, I will make use of Jones’s ideas and define the religious current of Dostoevsky’s world as a passionate search for transcendent meaningfulness.

Admittedly, the above definition is somewhat deflationary. The use of religiosity in the search for transcendent meaningfulness is not exclusive to Christianity: it is a transcultural human drive. It exists in different religions—e.g., Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrism, etc. This drive has been around much longer than Christianity, and we can even notice it in some non-religious ideological movements in our contemporary age. Jones skilfully argues that ‘minimal religion’ is a distorted form whose essence derives from the apophatic tradition of the Orthodox faith. But, as he has noted, this religiosity exists in secularism, such as the cult of money. This kind of secularism can exist in non-Orthodox cultures, or in primitive religions that precede Orthodox. It implies that, at least, this kind of religiosity is not originally derived from the Orthodox tradition, but traces back to something more universal. Overall, the previous definition inevitably deflates Dostoevsky’s religious dimension to such an extent that it is no longer even religious. For this reason, it is better to reinforce this definition. Many scholars have emphasised the intertextuality between Dostoevsky and the Gospels by supplementing it with the conditions of the Orthodox semiosphere, including Orthodox colouring, cultural overtone, intertextuality with the Bible, and a few of core teachings of Christianity, such as the love of Christ and the existence of God, etc.

Furthermore, what is meant by the phrase ‘furnace of doubt’? This metaphorical term immediately signifies that the essential aspect of this current is doubting. However, doubting could also be seen as one of the vital themes of Christianity. At the apex of the
New Testament, when Jesus is on the cross, he cries loudly, ‘My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Matthew 27:46 [NIV]). It is clear that doubting is not the unique essence of this current. Still, it captures a crucial aspect of this trend, that is, its unrestrained questioning and criticism. As we know, the endless process of questioning eventually leads to the rise of nihilism. Many scholars have identified atheism and nihilism as essential aspects of Dostoevsky’s ‘furnace of doubt’.

So, what is atheism? It can be simply defined as a ‘disbelief in, or denial of, the existence of a God.’ (OED, "Atheism"). On the other hand, nihilism is a richer and more perplexing concept; I have demonstrated its multiple types in the previous section. For the world of Dostoevsky, it mainly refers to existential nihilism, which means that human existence is gratuitous and absurd in the sense that it has no pregiven justification.

Many scholars have discussed the nihilist current in Dostoevsky by treating atheism and nihilism more or less interchangeably.\(^{15}\) I would like, however, to point out that nihilism and atheism are not semantically equivalent concepts. According to OED’s definition, a simple atheist is a person who denies the existence of God. We might expand its meaning to also encompass a person who also denies the value of God. An atheist denies the high value of God, but she does not necessarily reject other high values. She can fully accept as valuable various other phenomena, such as science, historical materialism, or even aliens. That is to say, atheism’s revolt against God’s value is perfectly compatible with valuing other things. On the contrary, nihilism is a position that rejects all values. Furthermore, atheism is a denial of the existence of God. In contrast, the existence of God is not the sole subject matter of nihilism. A nihilist can even accept the existence of God.

In The Brothers Karamazov\(^{16}\), Ivan makes this point very clear. Although he previously declares that God does not exist, when he and Alyosha have a heartfelt conversation, he explains, ‘I said that on purpose to tease you...’ Afterwards, Ivan

---

\(^{15}\) For instance, when Jones discusses the ‘furnace of doubt’, he previously refers to it as ‘atheism’. And a few pages later, he also refers it as ‘nihilism’. See in: (2005, 59,69).

\(^{16}\) Henceforth, it is abbreviated as TBK.
bluntly states that ‘I declare that I accept God plainly and simply’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 273-74). He goes on to assert,

And I advise you too, Alyosha, my friend, never to think about it, and least of all about whether there is a God or not. […] Please understand, it is not God that I do not accept, but the world he has created. I do not accept God’s world and I refuse to accept it. […] [the moment of eternal harmony] will suffice not for the forgiveness but also for the justification of everything that has ever happened to men. Well, let it, let it all be and come to pass, but I do not accept it and I won’t accept it! Let even the parallel lines meet and let me see them meet, myself – I shall see and I shall say that they’ve met, but I still won’t accept it. That is the heart of the matter, so far as I’m concerned (Dostoevsky 1958: 274-75).

That is to say, the nihilist Ivan does not attempt to deny the existence of God, but rejects the cosmos and the high value of God. Even if there were Yahweh in the sky showing his furious face to humanity and threatening unbelievers with flood and plague, Ivan would not give a damn. Ivan’s goal is not to question the existence of God, but to ‘return him the ticket’ that He has issued (Dostoevsky 1958: 287). As a nihilist, Ivan refuses to believe in a meaning given by an object, regardless whether the object exists or not.

Thus, the conflicting impetus of the two currents comes from the tension between atheism (non-existence of God) and religion (the existence of God) and not from a tension between nihilism and religion. Dostoevsky’s nihilist characters are not simple atheists who deny the existence of god. In other words, Dostoevsky’s nihilist current does not directly contradict the other current. Nevertheless, the logical consequence of nihilism can give rise to atheism, that is to say, atheism can present as a form of nihilism. But, this nihilistic atheism differs from the simple atheism. For example, Kirilov can also be seen as a nihilistic atheist, since he denies the existence of God. Still, from Dostoevsky’s description, we can see that Kirilov is actually very religious. He feverishly places the icon of the Redeemer with a burning lamp in his room. He believes in Jesus and refers to Him as ‘the highest on all the earth’. Even his messianic mission, which is to bring out the ‘man-god’ by suicide, is by temperament deeply religious (Dostoevsky 2004: 613-14).

In this section, I mostly focus on Ivan, Zosima and Alyosha in *TBK*. The reason for choosing *TBK* as the representative for this discussion of these two currents is this: the two currents discussed here are most strongly and clearly present in the novels that
Dostoevsky wrote in his post-Siberian period, that is, the period after he wrote *Notes from Underground* (2006 [1864]). Berdyaev (2002) recognises this mark of division and claims that from this point ‘begins the real Dostoevsky’. Dostoevsky’s major works from this period include: *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *The Devils* (1871), and *TBK* (1880). Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* is neither an atheist nor an existential nihilist. He is not even a moral nihilist because he believes that killing the pawnbroker is for ‘the service of humanity and the good of all’ (Dostoevsky 2000: 59). That is to say, he does not reject morality as such, he merely subjects an individual to the dictate of collective ethics. Moreover, it is not convincing to treat the prostitute Sonia as a typical figure representing a saintly character. In *The Idiot* (Dostoevsky 2018), Dostoevsky devotes little space to the nihilist character Ippolit, insofar as his ideas are barely articulated. Similarly, the dim light of the religious character Shatov in *The Devils* is almost overshadowed by the other nihilist characters. *TBK*, which is Dostoevsky’s final novel, presents the two currents in a relatively clear and developed manner. Thus, I believe that *TBK* is most important to our issue.

The above discussion clarifies what the two currents are. I shall now proceed to show how these two seemingly incompatible currents can be reconciled. I believe that Dostoevsky’s religious dimension is compatible with his nihilistic dimension within the dynamic model of reactive nihilism. First, Dostoevsky’s nihilist characters are precisely these reactive types. In contrast to Christianity, which projects ultimate meaning and value onto the supra-world, Dostoevsky’s nihilist characters generally have a rather positive view of the natural world. For example, Ivan passionately says, ‘I love the sticky little leaves of spring and the blue sky – yes, I do! It’s not a matter of intellect or logic. You love it all with your inside, with your belly’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 269). Furthermore, Ivan does not see the destructive force of nihilism as inevitably leading to the abyss of despair, but rather a brave new era. As he states in his prose, *The Geological Upheaval*,

There are new men, [...] who propose to destroy everything and start with cannibalism. The fools! They never asked my advice! In my opinion, there’s no need to destroy everything. All that must be destroyed is the idea of God in mankind. That’s what we ought to start with! [...] the blind fools! They understand nothing! Once humanity to a man renounces God (and I believe that period, analogous with the geological periods, will come to pass) the whole of the old outlook on life will collapse by itself without cannibalism and, above all, the old morality, too, and a new era will dawn. Men will unite
to get everything life can give, but only for joy and happiness in this world alone. Man will be exalted with a spirit of divine, titanic pride, and the man-god will make his appearance. [...] and he will love his brother without expecting any reward.... (Dostoevsky 1958: 765)

Ivan acknowledges the destructive negativity of nihilism—some ‘fools’ will start cannibalism. But, he believes this pathological transitional stage ‘will come to pass’. In the end, people (man-gods) will come to a new era, in which they will not need an old value granted by a super-sensible being, but only one stemming from themselves. And, they will enjoy eternal joy and harmony as a result. There are many critics who affirm that Nietzsche himself repeats ‘Ivan’s idea “without any skepticism and false shame”’ (Quoted, Stellino 2015: 145).

2.2.3 The Religious Dimension Expressed in the Model of Reactive Nihilism

At the outset, how is Dostoevsky’s religious trend represented? It is manifested by his saintly characters and interconnection with the Gospel. In TBK, the religious figures are Zosima and Alyosha. On the other hand, the intertextuality with Gospel is mainly demonstrated through reference to biblical motifs and texts. Specifically, a quotation from the Gospel is placed in the novel’s epigraph by Dostoevsky.

Let us firstly look at the character of Father Zosima. Zosima is an Elder and Alyosha’s teacher in the town monastery. He is a kind of local celebrity known for his mystical, prophetic and healing abilities. Supposedly, he is the antithesis of the nihilist Ivan. And, his preaching should represent the Orthodox religiosity that Dostoevsky advocated. However, Father Sergei Hackel, a celebrated theologian and academic, through his substantial analysis, argues that Dostoevsky’s understanding of the Orthodox faith, represented by Zosima and Alyosha, is actually defective. As Hackel states, ‘[d]espite the Christian cosmetics, which Dostoevsky has partially applied, they speak of little more than nature mysticism’ (1983: 164). Jones argues that it is unfair to charge Dostoevsky with heresy simply because his religious experience is an inwardly persuasive discourse, though Jones too notices a heretic element in Dostoevsky:

Dostoevsky […] suppresses the role of sacraments and liturgy, even in the case of Zosima who is a priest. He introduces religious motifs with no strong tradition in Orthodoxy, for example bowing down and kissing the ground, […] mystical experiences with no distinctly Orthodox or even Christian content, for example Alesh’a’s. He introduces
emphases that are contrary to Orthodox doctrine (for example, the establishment by
personal will-power of heaven on earth) (2005: 60).

In fact, the heresy of Zosima is even confirmed by other priests in the book. For
example, the mad monk claims to have seen Zosima’s room covered with demons. And,
another monk cries, ‘His teachings were false. He taught that life was a great joy and not
tearful self-abasement’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 390). This world-view seems to coincide with
reactive nihilism.

Nevertheless, the primary teaching of Zosima is inwardly Christian. In Zosima’s
last words, he encourages his fellows to persevere in the pursuit of the love of Christ:
‘Love man even in his sin’, and ‘love all God’s creation’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 375). On the
contrary, Ivan postulates that this love of Christ is an impossibility in this world, a
‘miracle’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 277). In reality, people suffer in this brutal world. Despite
this, we rarely seek to understand or address the suffering of others. How does Zosima
respond to Ivan’s argument? In a conversation between Zosima and a lady, who claims
that she is incapable of loving others, Zosima first acknowledges that this is common
and tells her a story of a doctor who proclaims, ‘the more I love humanity in general, the
less I love men in particular’. The lady then persistently asks him what to do. Zosima
does not seem to have a clear answer, and instead he advises her to, ‘above all, run from
lies, any lies, and especially from self-deception’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 62-63). Zosima
repeats the same admonition, ‘above all, do not lie to yourself’, at the meeting with the
Karamazov family. He sees straight through Ivan’s mind, as Ivan confesses to his own
thoughts that there is no such thing as immortality. Zosima makes absolutely no attempt
to criticize Ivan, but instead comments on him with great sympathy. He says, ‘If that is
what you believe you are either blessed or most unhappy!’ And he goes on to explain,
‘If you can’t answer it in the affirmative, you will never be able to answer it in the
negative. You know that peculiarity of your heart yourself – and all its agony is due to
that alone ...’[italics are mine] (Dostoevsky 1958: 47, 78-79). It is clear that although
Zosima’s religious goal (to pursue the love of Christ) is different from Ivan’s mission. He
highly praises the Christian principle of truthfulness, which is the genesis of nihilism.
Moreover, he does not attempt to repudiate Ivan’s ideas, but instead he is sympathetic
towards Ivan’s agony caused by the search for answers; he even encourages Ivan to stay
faithful to the principle of truthfulness.
Along with this examination of the religious manifestations of Zosima, let us start to interpret the crucial biblical quotation, from the Gospel of John, in the epigraph of TBK: ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 2; John 12:24). This line is obviously about the Christian motif of death and resurrection: something old must die before something new can rise. So how can we understand this statement? I suggest that there are at least three ways to interpret it.

First, we can interpret it literally as referring directly to the death and resurrection of Jesus. But what does it mean for Jesus to be resurrected in TBK? In the novel’s most rebellious chapter, ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, Jesus does come back to life for a short visit to earth. He is arrested by The Grand Inquisitor and sentenced to be burnt to death. The Grand Inquisitor visits him in the cell and challenges him with ‘powerful and indeed unanswerable’ questions (Wasiolek 1964: 167). Jesus remains silent and finally goes to ‘the dark streets and lanes of the city’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 308). It would be unproductive to expand upon this famous chapter further, as it has already been voluminously interpreted. But, I would point out that if one interprets this statement literally, it clearly alludes to Ivan’s rebellious ideas. As such, the Gospel quote refers directly to the nihilism of the book.

Secondly, we can interpret this line from an intra-textual perspective. Zosima’s autobiography, which illuminates his conversion to Christianity, also quotes this line. The death of Zosima’s brother, at a young age, was the impetus for his turn towards Christianity. He explains that Alyosha is very like his own brother, as if God has sent his brother to him at the moment of his own death. Thus, we can read the verse as alluding to the physical death of Zosima and a kind of spiritual resurrection of Alyosha. In the novel’s structure, Zosima dies in the middle of the book and Alyosha continues to carry the religious dimension, further supporting this reading. If this is the correct interpretation, then what is the nature of the spiritual resurrection represented by Alyosha?

When Zosima is about to die people expect miracles to take place. For instance, they expect his corpse to resist decay. However, Zosima’s body starts rotting and
stinking in less than a day. In fact, it becomes so rotten that it seems like ‘a violation of the laws of nature’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 389). Zosima’s rotting corpse causes a mental collapse in Alyosha. It is not correct to say that Alyosha’s shock is caused by ‘a demystification’ (Smith 1996: 78), because, as Dostoevsky explains, ‘it was not miracles that [Alyosha] needed, but only ‘high justice’’. Alyosha angrily questions, ‘why should this disgrace have been permitted, why this premature decomposition which was “a violation of the laws of nature”’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 398)? What he experiences is precisely the dread of being confronted with existential absurdity—the world appears as something totally irrational, contingent, without any justification. Finally, Alyosha calmly declares, ‘I haven’t taken up arms against God, […] I simply “do not accept his world”’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 400); we can recognize Ivan’s words in this declaration. Furthermore, in Alyosha’s dream, in which he arrives at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, Zosima sits next to Jesus and speaks to Alyosha, ‘do you see our Sun, do you see him?’ Alyosha whispers, ‘I’m afraid – I dare not look’, before he wakes up (Dostoevsky 1958: 425). What is he afraid of? As we know, Dostoevsky died before he could finish TBK. However, Dostoevsky ‘told an unimpeachable witness, Alesha Karamazov would become a revolutionary,’ one who ‘actually arrives at the idea of assassinating the Tsar’ (Rice 2006: 45). Nevertheless, we can never know the real ending of the novel. Still, this Dostoevskian ending is rather plausible. In the book, Alyosha leaves the monastery and gradually adopts Ivan’s ideas. If this is the case, then the Gospel line refers to the death of Zosima (the old religion) and the resurrection of nihilism. That is to say, Dostoevsky’s religious dimension entails the rise of nihilism.

The third interpretation is provided by Jones from the position of a religious reading of Dostoevsky. He argues that Dostoevsky’s text is telling us that a situation has arisen out of the conflict between belief and unbelief in the modern age in which the richness of that Tradition has to be put aside in order that personal faith may be allowed to blossom again. To put it more graphically, the richness of the Orthodox tradition has to die in order that the shoots of a new faith be born, at first in minimal forms, in a semiotic space that is quite different from that in which Orthodoxy itself originally developed and thrived, but which preserves the image of Christ to guide it (Jones 2005: 45).

Jones further quotes Simone Weil’s requirement for integrity in religious thought to explain this further:
For religious feeling to emanate from the spirit of truth, one should be absolutely prepared to abandon one’s religion, even if that should mean losing all motive for living, if it should turn out to be anything other than the truth. In this state of mind alone it is possible to discern whether there is truth in it (Jones 2005: 51).

I would agree with Jones’s reading and argue that it is the most persuasive reading. In short, the imperative of Dostoevsky’s religious dimension is to put the old ‘Orthodox tradition’ to death, totally, in order to make room for the birth of a new ‘personal faith’. If it is true, we can see that Dostoevsky’s religious current shares a similar dynamic model to his nihilist current (when understood as a reactive nihilist current). They both revolve around the principle of truthfulness and make use of the destructive force of nihilism to dismantle fading values, thereby bringing forth new values. For Zosima, the goal is to establish a heaven on earth where people can fully embrace the love of Christ while Ivan aims to create a new era in which man-god can joyfully stand along in a world where people are capable of loving each other without rewards. However, it is not important whether Dostoevsky himself was on the side of religion, by ‘preserving the image of Christ’, or took sides with his nihilist characters, as in Camus’s reading.

The radical removal of the existing form of religion will inevitably force its essence to retreat, at least temporally, from the world. There will be a dreadful ‘pathological transitional stage’ during which ‘some fools will begin cannibalism’. This agony regarding the destructive force was so powerful that Dostoevsky was not even sure if the transcendence will ever return. Kierkegaard suffered a similar agony. Kierkegaard argues that to reach faith it is necessary to perform the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ and adopt ‘the movement of infinite resignation’, which requires one to absolutely renounce everything (2010: 39,48). Dostoevsky foresaw this dread, but he was not as determined as Nietzsche—he hesitated. It must be pointed out, however, that under the principle of truthfulness, sincere doubt cannot be suppressed by dread. That is, the pursuit of philosophical and/or religious authenticity gives rise to reactive nihilism (as Nietzsche argued). Thus, I believe that reading Dostoevsky as if he was a preacher, who uses his nihilist characters to demonstrate the horror of a world without God, is tantamount to saying that his faith is a kind of cynicism. Kierkegaard explicitly clarifies this type of cynicism, which he calls ‘the counterfeit knight’ (2010: 69).
I am now in a position to give an answer to the question of what holds the fictional world of Dostoevsky together. The common denominator between Dostoevsky’s two currents is the dynamic model of reactive nihilism. It derives from the high principle of truthfulness, which initiates the process of devaluation regarding high values, by which it makes use of its destructive force to dethrone moribund value in order to make room for the advent of a new value. From the textual evidence, we can see that Dostoevsky’s religious characters do not really conflict with his nihilist characters. They in fact show great sympathy towards the agony of nihilists because they share the same agony. If my interpretation is correct, Dostoevsky’s two trends do not conflict at all, but are contingent upon a mutual acceptance. The alleged conflict exists only between simple religious faith (belief in the existence of God, Yahweh in Old Testament) and simple atheism (denying the existence of God). But, Dostoevsky’s religious and philosophical thought was never that shallow.
2.3 The ultimate demand to overcome the nihilistic desert

The preceding chapters show that the second constituent of the paradigmatic structure of existentialism is reactive nihilism. Reactive nihilism prescribes rejection of old values to make room for the advent of a new value. In order to usher in a new value it is necessary to generate an aspiration regarding what people ought to do. I term this aspiration as an ultimate demand, that is, a demand which prescribes what should be done in response to the realisation that the world is based upon a lie underneath which is the nihilistic desert. Hence, generating an ultimate demand, which is the third constituent of the existentialist paradigm, is the logical consequence of the second constituent. In fact, all early existentialist thinkers formulate an ultimate demand. The formulation of each ultimate demand is built around a key concept. This section will discuss various dimensions of their ultimate demands by focusing on a related key concept. For early existentialist thinkers, their key concepts are primarily enunciated through their conceptual personae. The first subsection discusses Nietzsche’s sovereign individual to explain his concept of power/freedom. The second subsection discusses some of Dostoevsky’s nihilistic characters to introduce his understanding of the concept of freedom. The third subsection explains Kierkegaard’s notion of faith through an analysis of his (conceptual persona of the) knight of faith. Once the ultimate demands formulated by these three existentialists have been identified, we will compare them and see what they have in common and where they differ. A caveat: the preceding discussions contain textual evidence related to the ultimate demands of the targeted existentialists. I will not present this evidence again in what follows. I shall just provide a brief summary of the conceptual dimensions associated with the individual ultimate demands.

2.3.1 Nietzsche’s concept of freedom/power

The key concept of Nietzsche’s ultimate demand is freedom. In his early work *The Birth of Tragedy*, he strongly advocates what he terms ‘Dionysiac drive’. As he explains, the Dionysiac drive is ‘an orgiastic feeling of freedom’ (1999: 100). Later in his life Nietzsche became unsatisfied with talking about freedom in terms of a ‘Dionysiac drive’ as he considered the term to be philosophically contaminated by Romanticism. He decided to replace the term ‘Dionysiac drive’ with the term ‘power’. Nietzsche regards (the will to)
power as the most fundamental drive of human beings. It is worth noting that for Nietzsche power and freedom are conceptual equivalents. This can be seen in the following fragment: ‘[the] very instinct for freedom (put in my language: the will to power)’ (2006: 59).

From his early notion of Dionysiac drive, as John Richardson (2009: 132) argues, Nietzsche’s freedom is ‘a collection of drives’. It is ‘a capacity that reaches down into our animality’. Thus, we can understand that Nietzsche’s freedom contains a conceptual dimension, that is a drive to unleash suppressed sensuality and cruelty dormant deep down in the animalistic core of people.

The main motivation behind Nietzsche’s critical philosophy and his adoption of nihilism is to completely dismantle the existing cultural paradigm which he blames for ‘breed[ing] a tame and civilized animal, a household pet, out of the beast of prey “man”’ (2006: 11). He wants to replace this deeply corrupted cultural paradigm with a paradigm that will give rise to sovereign individuals. A sovereign individual is a conceptual persona conceived by Nietzsche to capture the logic behind the ultimate demand for freedom. We can grasp the various dimensions of this ultimate demand by scrutinizing the conceptual persona of the sovereign individual.

First of all, a sovereign individual is characterized by the possession of heroic courage. As Nietzsche (2007: 161) explains and recommends: ‘the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is – to live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas!’ This is a trait of almost all of Nietzsche’s conceptual personae, including Dionysus and the Übermensch. He always encourages people to live resolutely and bravely.

Second, being courageous is not the only important trait of a sovereign individual. He is also truly free to make a promise; a sovereign individual is:

a man with his own, independent, enduring will, whose prerogative it is to promise –and in him a proud consciousness quivering in every muscle of what he has finally achieved and incorporated, an actual awareness of power and freedom, a feeling that man in general has reached completion. This man who is now free, who actually has the prerogative to promise, this master of the free will, this sovereign (Nietzsche 2006: 37).
Nietzsche understands freedom as the power to extricate oneself from the shackles of the slave morality. The slave morality keeps us from fulfilling our own desires and from rising above ourselves. The slave morality imposes on us a mortifying asceticism that tames our drive to expand. It not only castrates our will but also gives us a phony justification for this spiritual atrocity—it presents it as something good and noble. Correspondingly, the logic of the slave morality identifies the traits of those who have liberated themselves from the shackles of the slave morality as bad and corrupted. Nietzsche believes that the slave morality is the ultimate enemy of human freedom. That is to say, Nietzsche’s power is an ability to counter the slavery morality that allows people to achieve self-overcoming and self-construct.

Third, elaborating on the conceptual persona of the sovereign individual, Nietzsche (2006: 69) points to Goethe as an exemplary sovereign individual. Nietzsche argues that Goethe was capable of ‘self-overcoming’ and of choosing freely from among a range of values rather than just passively dwelling within the disempowering value system of Christianity. The values that Goethe seems to have freely adopted for himself as existentially regulative include ‘sensibility, nature-idolatry, anti-historicism, idealism, as well as its unreality and revolutionary tendency’ (2005c: 222). Thus, power/freedom can be seen as the ability to choose and embrace values that empower one to expand.

Furthermore, Nietzsche goes on to argue that Goethe, as a sovereign individual, ‘adapted himself to resolutely closed horizons; he did not remove himself from life, he put himself squarely in the middle of it; he did not despair, and he took as much as he could on himself, to himself, in himself’ (2005c: 222). By ‘adapting to closed horizons’, Nietzsche means a total rejection of the existential lie, specifically, a complete acceptance of the idea that we have only this world and this life, and that there is no afterlife to justify or compensate our suffering in this life. That is to say, to embrace freedom amounts to saying yes to this life and not falling into Schopenhauerian pessimism. Clearly, embracing freedom, as understood in this sense, is only for the strong as suffering is the price that the free are bound to pay. In the previous chapter, I have shown that to totally overcome the psychological need to project and ground the meaning of life in the transcendent is in itself painful. In this context, Robert Pippin (2009: 85-86) notices that, for Nietzsche, the ‘problem of freedom’ is also ‘a “psychological” problem’. The process
of self-overcoming involves a lot of psychological stress. Thus only a strong character can be free because only a strong character is ‘capable of bearing the burden of such self-overcoming and of affirming under its condition’.

In sum, based on what has been discussed above, we can distinguish the following five key aspects as being constitutive of Nietzsche’s ultimate demand (freedom/power): (1) a capacity to reach down into one’s animality; (2) a heroic courage; (3) self-constructing and self-overcoming; (4) an ability to choose and embrace values that empower one to expand; (5) an ability to bear psychological stress and suffering.

It is worth acknowledging that Nietzsche’s formulation and discussion of the conceptual persona of a sovereign individual is contaminated by toxic masculinity. His thinking implies endorsement of the patriarchal order which legitimises oppression of women and sexual minorities.

2.3.2 Dostoevsky’s concept of freedom

For Dostoevsky’s nihilists, freedom is the fundamental concept of their ultimate demand. As Kirilov announces, his suicide will ‘prove [his] independence and [his] new terrible freedom’ (Dostoevsky 2004: 618). This subsection illustrates Dostoevsky’s ultimate dimension through an examination of his concept of freedom.

First, in his analysis of The House of the Dead, Robert L. Jackson (1984: 11) argues that for Dostoevsky freedom is ‘an experience of integrity communion, harmony and symbolic liberation’. In Dostoevsky’s early works, his concept of freedom is mainly an experience of solidarity and communal harmony. Although, Dostoevsky modified his conception of freedom in his later works, the conceptual dimension of solidarity was still preserved in his later understanding of freedom.

Second, Kirilov describes the freedom obtained by breaking through the existential lie as ‘terrible’. In the prose poem, The Grand Inquisitor, Dostoevsky lays out the problem of the relationship between freedom and deception. The Inquisitor explains that he deceives ‘in order to make men happy’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 294). For that he needs to take away their freedom because freedom is ‘unrest, confusion, and unhappiness’
And again, to be able to withstand such unrest, confusion and unhappiness requires a heroic courage.

Third, Dostoevsky’s freedom requires the ability to endure suffering. In TBK, the Inquisitor declares that embracing freedom is inseparable from the ‘agonizing anxiety’ which prevents people from being able to ‘set their conscience at ease’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 298). Only three forces can rescue people from that anxiety: miracle, mystery, and authority. Miracles are evidence of heaven and the afterlife. They prove that a lifetime of suffering is not in vain. They provide justification and certainty that eases anxiety. Mystery is a promise of meaning and a transcendent purpose. It points beyond itself towards fulfilment, unity and peace. Authority calms down anxiety by imposing law and order onto society and its members. It hides the chaos of the world and its intrinsic absurdity behind the structure of musts and must nots. What these three forces provide is justification for people in the face of a meaningless and chaotic reality. They all deprive people of freedom. That is to say, to embrace freedom one must suffer the mental anguish of fully accepting the nihilistic position. Additionally, the Inquisitor compares freedom to ‘bread from heaven’, and conversely he describes human material needs as being ‘the earthly bread’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 297). He describes people who have chosen freedom as those who ‘had endured scores of years of the hungry and barren wilderness, feeding on locusts and roots’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 301). This implies that those who embrace freedom must also expect material suffering, including the deprivation of their basic material needs. Overall, for Dostoevsky, freedom is the ability to endure mental suffering and material hardship.

Fourth, there is, however, a reward awaiting those who overcome their fears and embrace freedom. They will be, as Ivan claims, ‘exalted with a spirit of divine, titanic pride, and the man-god will make his appearance’ (Dostoevsky 1958: 765). The concept of the ‘man-god’ refers to a person who can self-glorify and self-orientate himself without any need for the transcendent divine (Dostoevsky 2004: 613-14). This again confirms that freedom entails self-constructing and self-glorification.

17 I have explained this anguish in the chapter one.
18 See section 2.2.2
Last, from Ivan’s bold statement about returning God’s ticket, we can also infer that freedom involves an insubordination towards any authoritative interpretation of the world.\textsuperscript{19}

In conclusion, we can summarise the various dimensions of Dostoevsky’s ultimate demand (freedom) as following: (1) an experience of solidarity and harmony (2) a heroic courage; (3) an ability to endure mental suffering and material hardship; (4) a lucid awareness of the unjustifiability of the world; (5) self-construction and self-glorification; (6) insubordination towards any authoritative convention.

2.3.3 Kierkegaard’s concept of faith

For Kierkegaard, the primary concept of his ultimate demand is faith. As he remarks, ‘[f]aith is the highest passion in a human being’ (2010: 108). One should not see faith as an emotional passion, because it is not an ‘aesthetic emotion but something much higher’ (2010: 40). It is a form of spiritual energy necessary for reaching the religious stage.

According to Kierkegaard, one needs to go through two steps to obtain faith. The first step is the infinite movement of resignation, and the second is the movement of faith. Correspondingly, he conceives and makes use of the following two conceptual personae to explicate these movements—the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith. The knight of infinite resignation draws its fundamental purpose from being a transitory stage towards the knight of faith.\textsuperscript{20}

Let us examine these two conceptual personae in order to discover the multiple dimensions of faith. First, Kierkegaard describes both knights as spiritually strong with ‘their gait airy, bold’ (2010: 31). The most prominent aspect of the knights is their ‘deep[…] disdain [for] bourgeois philistinism’ (2010: 32). As discussed above, the philistine is a mediocre person dwelling in the trivial province of customs. He is drowning in a self-deceiving way of life in order to avoid the anxiety inseparable from the human condition. This condition has roots in the irreconcilable ontological tension

\textsuperscript{19} See section 2.2.2
\textsuperscript{20} Notably, Kierkegaard refers to his conceptual persona of faith as a “knight”, which was an honorary title that traditionally was only granted to males. This excludes women from the possibility of transcending to the final religious stage.
between necessity and possibility (section 1.5.2). Thus, the knights represent an ideal of a spiritually strong individual, an individual capable of withstanding the suffering and anxiety intrinsic to human existence.

Second, another important aspect of these knights is their ability to initiate the infinite movement of resignation. This movement is to be understood as a radical rejection of everything that seems to define and constitute one’s life. This act of rejection is extremely painful and is followed by a mourning through which the knight ‘empties the deep sadness of existence in infinite resignation’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 34). In short, the movement of infinite resignation is the act of giving up everything including one’s earnest love and reconciling oneself with the pain of that loss. In this way, the knight achieves a total detachment from the world.

However, as Robert Adams (1990: 387) argues, this total detachment from the world does not imply ‘indifference’ towards it. On the contrary and somewhat paradoxically, the knight of infinite resignation grows more passionate for the finite world. The knight ‘enjoys and takes parts in everything, … , [his decisions are] carried out with a persistence that characterizes the worldly person whose heart is attached to such things’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 33). The knight participates in the events of the world with a whole-hearted concentration. At the same time he does not impose any prescriptive perspective on them. Rather, ‘he lets things take their course with a freedom from care as if he were a reckless good-for-nothing and yet buys every moment he lives at the opportune time for the dearest price, for he does not do even the slightest thing except by virtue of the absurd’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 34). The knight treats all that happens to him equally. It makes no difference to him if it is fortune or misfortune that befalls him; ‘it is all the same to him’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 33). Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the act of the infinite movement of resignation involves fully embracing all finite things while, at the same time, ‘concentrat[ing] all of [one’s] desire into one single finite [thing]’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 36). And when the desire for the finite thing reaches its maximum, the knight keeps it on while, simultaneously, giving up the finite thing.

From what has been said above we can abstract the following three constitutive aspects of the knight: (i) an ability to withstand suffering. (ii) an ability to be fully open
to all things without any discrimination. (iii) an ability to maximize one’s desire for finite things and simultaneously giving up those very finite things one desires so much including one’s earnest love.

However, there is something the knight will not give up: oneself. Those that become a knight ‘never forget themselves and never become anything other then what they are’ (Kierkegaard 2010: 36). Now, to be truly oneself it is necessary, according to Kierkegaard, to bring into a holistic equilibrium the possible and the necessary that one’s self is always torn in between. Kierkegaard rejects Hegel’s idea that this can be done by employing reason. He insists one has to go beyond the rational in, what he calls, a leap of faith. Some scholars see this as evidence that Kierkegaard was an irrationalist (Blanshard 1969). But, this is not a consensus. For instance, C. S. Evans (1989: 349,61) argues that Kierkegaard does not ‘maintain that Christianity is unreasonable’, but rather that he argues for ‘the impossibility of neutrality’. The tension between reason and the paradox (or faith) is ‘not a necessary opposition’.

Now, let us take a look at the conceptual persona, the knight of faith. Kierkegaard sees Abraham as the paradigmatic figure of this conceptual persona. He interprets the story of Abraham and Isaac as an act of the movement of faith. Abraham deeply loves his son and yet he intends to sacrifice him. He enacts a movement of infinite resignation. Abraham grabs the knife and is about to sacrifice Isaac when an angel interferes. Through divine intervention Isaac is swapped for a ram, and Abraham proceeds to kill it. In Kierkegaard’s interpretation, the story finishes with Abraham accepting his son back from the realm of the sacrificial. The story of Abraham and Isaac thus combines the three constituents of the movement of faith - intensification, resignation and acceptance.

This whole movement of faith seems quite unintelligible. How shall we understand the absolute aspiration of Kierkegaard? He argues that the tension between the temporal and the eternal for the synthesis of being is an eternal paradox, which is the fundamental human condition. Guignon and Pereboom point out that Kierkegaard has been influenced by expressivism (2001: 6). 21 Kierkegaard often uses the term ‘expression’ to refer to a particular achievement that reveals the essential human

---

21 See in section 1.4.3
condition. As Kierkegaard contends, ‘the subjective thinker’s task is to transform himself into an instrument that clearly and definitely expresses the human in existence’ (2009: 299). Kierkegaard therefore argues that people need not only recognise but also to express their condition, which manifests an honesty to faith. The movement of faith is an expression that instrumentally expresses the structural condition of faith. Thus, we can say that the knight possesses an ability to express the ultimate paradox of the essential human condition.

Finally, it should be noticed here that, as Kierkegaard argues, the duty to God (that Abraham fulfils) cannot be understood through the prism of the ethical. The duty is not rooted in a system of social norms and as such cannot be justified by an appeal to them. In fact, the ethical is something that needs to be transcended if one wants to hope to be able to recognise and fulfil the duty to God. Transcending the ethical is inseparable from embracing a higher telos. It is an imperative to arrive at an authentic faith-oriented ethics.

Now we are able to summarise the various dimensions of the concept of faith as follows: (1) an ability to withstand suffering and anxiety; (2) an ability to embrace and express the ultimate paradox of human condition; (3) an ability to be fully open to all things without any discrimination; (4) self-construction through establishing holistic equilibrium between the necessary and the possible; (5) an ability to embrace an authentic faith-oriented ethics.

2.3.4 Commonalities and Differences among existentialists’ ultimate demands

At this point we are able to see that the ultimate demands of the early existentialists share some commonalities while also preserving their distinctive aspects. Regarding the commonalities, I want to briefly discuss four of them. The first commonality is heroic courage. Possessing heroic courage does not just mean being brave or capable of taking risks. It is primarily about being able to challenge convention and stay insubordinate to social norms.

---

22 See in section 1.5.3
Importantly, this insubordination is not merely a kind of immature rebellion or intellectual discontent with bourgeois mediocrity. It involves being sceptical regarding any conventional discourses and (moral) agendas. All societies are built around a narrative. The logic of the narrative determines what can be discussed and how. Only a hero is able to withstand the pain associated with breaking out of the normative constraints of the accepted and socially constitutive narrative. Standing outside of the narrative, the hero becomes a pariah facing loneliness, abuse and frequent attacks from others.

The second commonality regarding these ultimate demands is the awareness of the lack of meaning and intrinsic unjustifiability of human existence. The third commonality is the call to withstand psychological pain and suffering. This involves an ability to endure loneliness, intellectual rejection by others and, above all, the agony caused by revolting against the psychological need to project and ground the meaning of life in the transcendent.

Fourthly, all the early existentialists prescribe self-construction. This demand involves: (i) self-affirmation, (ii) self-love (an ability to be proud of one’s own capabilities, desires, and potential), (iii) building one’s own value system. The early existentialists differ, to some extent, in their understanding of the self in regards to self-construction. For Nietzsche, the self is essentially a raw animalistic force (the will to power). For Dostoevsky, the self is an intuitive, trans-rational life energy. It is something deep inside of ‘your belly’ (1958: 269). Kierkegaard’s self rises out of the ontological tension between the possible and the necessary.

Apart from the above four aspects, there are some other commonalities. These commonalities are not to be found in their key concepts but in some less important ones. For example, Kierkegaard’s concept of faith refers to, among others, an ability to be fully open to all things without discrimination. Nietzsche talks about an “Eternal Recurrence” which makes us reflect on our responsibility to approach our life from the cosmic

---

23 This force is to be understood as metaphysically foundational. It drives star dust to converge into planets, directs drops of water to gather into ocean, pushes saplings to grow upwardly. There are voluminous and controversial interpretations on this idea of Nietzsche. Here, my understanding is mainly based on Deleuze’s interpretation.
perspective of a necessary reality.\textsuperscript{24} He encourages us to embrace the idea of amor fati. As Nietzsche (2005b: 99) explains, ‘you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just to tolerate necessity, still less to conceal it - all idealism is hypocrisy towards necessity –, but to love it …’ Nietzsche (2007: 157) advocates a full acceptance of life’s encounters without discrimination or regret—‘I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. […] I wish to be only a Yes-sayer’. Nietzsche’s idea of amor fati seems to overlap in this respect with Kierkegaard’s faith.

Lastly, the ultimate demands as proposed by the early existentialists each have some unique aspect(s) that differentiate(s) them from the others. Nietzsche’s and Dostoevsky’s ultimate demands are quite compatible due to the general kinship of their respective metaphysics. Still, Dostoevsky seems to be less of a value relativist than Nietzsche is. Also, unlike Nietzsche, Dostoevsky understands freedom as involving an experience of solidarity and harmony. As Ivan says, ‘[man-god] will love his brother without expecting any reward …. ’ (Dostoevsky 1958, 765). One might argue that Dostoevsky’s reference to harmony represents his return to the Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{25}

I would suggest that the harmony that Dostoevsky talks about tends to be more of a populist variety than of a religious one. In Dostoevsky’s Pushkin Speech, he highly praised ‘a true Russian’ who would ‘reconcile the contradictions of Europe, […], won not by the sword, but by the strength of brotherhood and our fraternal aspiration to reunite mankind’. By ‘true Russian’ he did not mean a Russian national identity. A ‘true Russian’ is ‘the brother of all men’, ‘a universal man’ (1960: 57-58). Here Dostoevsky seems to be promoting an ideal man as someone who is less-critical, simplistic, and provincial; who wears ‘the garb of a serf’; has ‘the naïve grandeur of faith’; and who has a genuine empathy for others without being contaminated by any ideology or education

\textsuperscript{24}Briefly, all that exists, including the Earth, mankind, our past and our future choices, etc., is all just a spatio-temporal combination and re-combination of elementary particles. If the purely material universe is utterly sealed, all probabilities would be exhausted and repeated in infinite time. Thus, every occurrence (real or/and possible) in one’s life has already happened and will happen again. So, ‘this life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it’ (Nietzsche 2007: 194).

\textsuperscript{25} See details in section 2.2.1
It is safe to say that Dostoevsky’s ultimate demand appeals, among others, to an experience of reaching solidarity and harmony through a less-critical and folkish faith.

Compared to Nietzsche and (nihilistic) Dostoevsky, whose ultimate demands have a relatively loose relation to religion, Kierkegaard’s prescriptions persistently revolve around a telos, namely, around the demand to establish an authentic relation with God. His demands of self-construction and of adopting a higher value system are therefore fundamentally related to faith. However, we should not rush and conclude that Kierkegaard encourages us to embrace the old lie of religion. Anthony J. Rudd (1998: 86) argues that,

[Kierkegaard] is not appealing to some immediate, non-rational intuition, which would tell us that God exists, or that we should live in such and such way. Nor is he telling us that we can, with enough will-power, force ourselves to believe whatever we like [...]

What Kierkegaard does is that he incites in each of us a desire for authentic selfhood, for a coherent and meaningful life.

I believe that Kierkegaard’s ultimate demand is paradigmatically compatible with that of others. The main difference between Kierkegaard and others can be traced back to the following metaphysical assumption: for Nietzsche and (nihilistic) Dostoevsky, the world is immanent. There is nothing outside this material world. On the contrary, Kierkegaard postulates the axiom of the existence of a transcendent being, by which he inevitably infuses his ontology with theology.

At this point, we are able to conclude that the shared paradigmatic structure of existentialism consists of the following three constituents:

(i) a realisation of the existential lie. The existential lie is a form of self-deception. It derives from peoples’ psychological need to project and ground the meaning of life in the transcendent. The disenchantment of the existential lie leads to scepticism regarding the universally propagated truths. The scepticism often turns into full-blown nihilism.

(ii) a movement towards a transitional state of reactive nihilism. Since absolute nihilism (“everything is meaningless”) is self-defeating, a sort of cul-de-sac, its proponents inevitably rebound back to a less-absolute position. The impossibility of absolute nihilism leads to a reaction. This reactive dynamic model is what I call reactive
nihilism. It is a destructive force annihilating moribund values in order to make room for the advent of a new value system. Therefore, existentialism essentially contains an impetus to react to and overcome the nihilistic desert.

(iii) a presentation of ultimate demands. The early existentialists’ ultimate concepts all contain the following conceptual dimensions: (a) a heroic courage to challenge social norms and moral convention; (b) lucid awareness of the unjustifiability of the world and human existence; (c) an ability to bear psychological sufferings and burden; (d) self-construction, including affirmation of the self, self-love, and creating one’s own value system. At the same time, each thinker contributes some unique ideas into the mix.

Now, I would like to point out that this list of conceptual dimensions that I have presented above as constitutive of the existentialist paradigm should not be understood as in some sense fixed or definitive. The list has been compiled with a particular epistemology in mind: Deleuzian monism.

According to Deleuzian monism, there is no real progress in knowledge and all knowledge is intertwined and interconnected. Any new discourse is just a recombination of the same old conceptual atoms. Thus, any new discourse is always and only a mere deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of the old discourse.26

Existentialism as a territory is a helpful metaphor. Out there in the world a territory can be staked out in various ways resulting in different sizes and shapes. Yet, in some sense, it is still the same territory. Analogously, different existentialists stake out the territory of existentialism in different ways and yet they all are surveying the same territory.

Now, we are ready to examine the mid-century existentialists. I will examine their works according to this paradigmatic structure asking the following questions: Do they still share the same paradigmatic structure? And, what are their innovative contributions or revisions to this paradigmatic structure?

26 See details in (Deleuze 2004b)
Chapter 3: The Ripe Fruit of a Century-Long Campaign: Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a leading figure of post-war French philosophy and Marxism. On 29 October 1945, Sartre gave a public lecture titled *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. The lecture provided the public with an accessible introduction to his difficult philosophical treatise *Being and Nothingness*. And, it has since remained ‘a popular starting-point in discussions of existentialist thought’ (Warnock 2003: xvii). Sartre, who initially accepted the label of existentialism and facilitated its spread, was undoubtedly the central figure of French existentialism as a movement. At the same time, Sartre became well known not only for his contributions to theoretical philosophy but also for some of his celebrated novels including *Nausea* and *The Wall*. He founded the magazine *Les Temps Modernes* which promoted various forms of political protest and action. Sartre held an open relationship with his lifelong companion, Simone de Beauvoir. Together, they challenged cultural and social assumptions and laid the ground for the rise of feminist thinking. Sartre’s engagement with a variety of intellectual and political movements inspired many of his younger followers. Deleuze dedicates an essay titled “He Was my Teacher” to Sartre. Deleuze recalls: ‘In the disorder and the hope of the Liberation, we discovered, we re-discovered everything: Kafka, the American novel, Husserl and Heidegger, incessant renegotiations with Marxism, enthusiasm for a nouveau roman... It was all channelled through Sartre’. For Deleuze’s generation, ‘[Sartre’s works and lectures] were events: they were how [they] learned, after long nights, the identity of thought and liberty’ (2004a: 77). Moreover, Sartre’s resolute anti-colonial attitudes and actions during the Algerian War of Independence along with his striking preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) shown an intellectual conscience that won him the hearts of readers in the Global South.

However, after a few decades, Sartre stopped being the dominant intellectual force he had been. The heavy phenomenological-ontological jargon that he used to explain some of his existentialist ideas made his thinking rather inaccessible to many a reader. Michel Foucault once said that Sartre’s later work was the ‘magnificent and pathetic attempt of a man of the nineteenth century to think the twentieth century’ (Quoted, Flynn 2005: 2). Many critics have revisited Sartre by opening up new perspectives. Some
criticise Sartre’s thought as preserving a patriarchal residue (Doeuff 1991: 127-33; Moi 1994: 127-33). Others declare that Sartre’s philosophy manifests a homophobic line of thinking that is related to ‘the problematic nature of an “othering” of fascism’ (Fraunhofer 2007: 3). Some, such as Kate Kirkpatrick (2017), have discovered the unnoticed religious roots of Sartre’s atheistic existentialism. Regarding Sartre’s political enthusiasm about Marxism, some claim that Sartre was not a Marxist at all (Betschart 2019). All in all, contemporary scholars working on Sartre hold varying and often incompatible views of Sartre’s philosophical legacy.

In this chapter I shall discuss Sartre’s version of existentialism to establish to what extent it conforms to the paradigmatic structure that we have identified in early existentialism. In accordance with the three constituents of the existentialist paradigm, this chapter proceeds in three steps. The first section looks at Sartre’s concept of bad faith to find out whether or not there is any conceptual overlap with the existential lie. The section then proceeds to discuss the psychological origins of bad faith. It does so by examining Sartre’s vignettes of the waiter and the woman. The second section employs the concept of contingency to analyse some relevant parts of Sartre’s novel Nausea. This employment of the concept of contingency will reveal Sartre’s acceptance and endorsement of radical cosmic nihilism. The last section discusses Sartre’s concepts of freedom and authenticity and shows in what sense they are constitutive of Sartre’s ultimate demand. I will argue that it is somewhat controversial to see freedom as the key concept of Sartre’s ultimate demand. I will suggest that it is the notion of authenticity that underpins his ultimate demand. The section then goes on to explore Sartre’s concept of authenticity by scrutinising two conceptual personae associated with it.

3.1 The notion of bad faith

At the outset, it is clear that Sartre’s protagonists often are aware of a lie immersed in their surroundings. For instance, in The Wall, when the protagonist is waiting for his execution, he painfully recalls his whole life and then exclaims ‘[i]t’s a damned lie’ (Sartre 1969: 11). In Nausea, Roquentin comments on the people whom he is observing, ‘they will have to find something else to conceal the enormous absurdity of their existence’ (Sartre 2000: 161). Roquentin states that their lives are based on a ‘deliberate
optimism’ which is a ‘sort of lie’ (Sartre 2000: 162). At the climax of the novel, he says, ‘[…] that is Nausea; […] [that is what those people] try to hide from themselves with their idea of rights. But what a poor lie…’ (Sartre 2000: 188). Sartre conceptualises the lie captured by his literature as the notion of *bad faith* which is the starting point for his philosophical investigation. He explains that ‘*bad faith* is a lie to oneself, on condition that we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general’ (2003: 17). Thus, the notion of bad faith and the existential lie share common ground in that they both are self-deception.

The aim of this section is to uncover the psychological dimension of bad faith through the lens of the existentialist paradigm. It holds that one of the many promising ways to approach this task is to release bad faith from the burden of heavy ontological terminology and approach it through an examination of Sartre’s examples. The section is organised in three parts. First, an overview of Sartre’s ontology is provided. Here, key concepts of Sartre’s ontology are introduced, most importantly the concepts of being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Further, his critique of Freudian psychoanalysis is discussed, as well as why Sartre’s rejection of Freudian terminology is potentially self-defeating; his explanation of the origin of bad faith can be understood only through the Freudian notion of drive. The last part focuses on two examples, the waiter and the woman, given by Sartre. We thus sketch out a psychological understanding of bad faith by endeavouring to situate bad faith in the existentialist paradigm.

### 3.1.1 Sartre’s ontological account of human existence

So, what is bad faith? According to the glossary in *Being and Nothingness*, it is ‘a lie to oneself within the unity of a single consciousness. Bad faith rests on a vacillation between transcendence and facticity which refuses to recognise either one for what it really is or to synthesize them’ (Sartre 2003: 650). In order to understand this somewhat cryptic definition, we first need to introduce some of the concepts of Sartre’s ontology.
Sartre claims that, ontologically speaking, man as a being exists in two modes: being-in-itself (facticity) and being-for-itself (transcendence).\(^{27}\)

**Being-in-itself**

Being-in-itself is a mode of existence in which the existing is fully turned towards itself. It is simple, self-contained and self-sufficient. For non-human forms of existence, being-in-itself is the only available mode of being. As for humans, their being-in-itself (facticity) is constituted by the “givenness” of their situation. This includes attributes, traits and experiences such as their height, language, identity, environment, occupation or past choices. Simply put, one’s being-in-itself is what one factually is.

**Being-for-itself**

Being-for-itself is the mode of existence of consciousness. The for-itself is the nihilation of the in-itself, as a lack of being, a desire for being.\(^{28}\) Let me briefly introduce Sartre’s conception of consciousness.

Sartre accepts Husserl’s claim that consciousness is to be understood as necessarily and irreducibly *intentional*. To say that consciousness is necessarily and irreducibly intentional is to say that it is always *about* something.\(^{29}\) This essential *aboutness* of consciousness is what keeps it directed always towards the external. And through this constant direction towards the external, man keeps projecting meaning onto it. Thus, whenever one perceives and becomes conscious of an object, he will, simultaneously, affirm that this is this and that is that.

Sartre argues to affirm something requires affirming that it is not something else. Thus, such an act of conscious affirmation introduces a “not” or “non-being” into the midst of being. If there was no human consciousness, there would not be any

---

\(^{27}\) In Sartre’s terminology, the terms facticity and transcendence are not directly interchangeable with the terms of being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Yet, when it comes to the explanation of bad faith, we can regard the two pairs of terms as equivalent.

\(^{28}\) Nihilate. (*néantir*). A word coined by Sartre. To nihilate is to wrap it up with non-being. In English, the term ‘nihilate’ was first used by Helmut Kuhn in his *Encounter with Nothingness* (Sartre 2003: 653).

\(^{29}\) There are voluminous studies exposing Husserl’s influence on Sartre. For recent studies, see (Stawarska 2014; Levy 2016; Gusman 2018). However, some argue that Sartre’ adoption of Husserl’s ontology deviates rather significantly from Husserl’s theoretical intentions. For more, see for examples, (Alweiss 2013; Smith 2013).
differentiation or distinction in being, but only being-in-itself. Being-in-itself is undifferentiated. It is a plenum, a bloated overflow, a superfluous totality extending everywhere and filling up everything. Non-being has entered into reality only through human beings. Nature cannot introduce it. Take a storm, for instance. A storm cannot really annihilate anything or introduce non-being because it cannot destroy even a single molecule. Nothing is added or reduced. It just reshuffles the matter and particles that exist. Without consciousness there is no way a house can be destroyed by a storm. Only for consciousness can the causal impact of a storm can bring about the destruction of a house. In this way, consciousness makes nothingness to be apprehended within being-in-itself (Sartre 2003: 32).

Sartre further argues that consciousness itself is nothingness and that it has a self-nihilating structure. Consciousness constantly negates the past, by which it annihilates the past as not being the self at present, and then projects its past to freely interpret the future. Thus, human consciousness perpetually introduces a ‘not’ into being-in-itself, like ‘cutting up’ a fissure into our being. This ‘cutting up’ makes our being always more than our mere being-in-itself, to such an extent that our existence contains infinite possibilities that makes it become something for us (Sartre 2003: 130-72).

For human beings, being-for-itself is a mode of existence of the nihilation of being-in-itself. It is the incomplete, undefined, and non-determined being of our possibilities. Being-for-itself guarantees that human existence is always more than her own in-itself. Simply put, my being-for-itself is what I am not just what I am. Thus, we can see being-for-itself (transcendence) as one’s future being or becoming.

Finally, according to Sartre, the dual structure of human existence—its facticity and transcendence—contains an impulse to become either the complete in-itself or the complete for-itself. These two fundamental ontological poles always tend to nihilate each other in their strive to become perfect within themselves. Ontologically speaking, man is intrinsically self-conflicted and torn between becoming either the full being-in-itself or the full being-for-itself. Sartre describes this self-conflicting dynamism (that is constitutive of man) as being ‘metastable’ (Sartre 2003: 73). This metastability of the human condition is what, according to Sartre, is conducive for bad faith. In Sartre’s view, one
can never merely be anything. To be a certain something is inseparable from an identity and therefore there is always a not in the gap between our facticity and transcendence. Our conducts and contingency make what we are as our in-itself, but they cannot determine our future being containing a range of possibilities as our for-itself.

Thus, simply put, bad faith is a case of self-deception in which one denies either one’s being-in-itself or one’s being-for-itself.

3.1.2 Psychological understanding of bad faith

Sartre’s explanation of human self-deception (bad faith) is ontological, not psychological. Sartre rejects Freudian explanations of self-deception because he sees these explanations as undermining individual responsibility. At the same time, it is rather difficult for a reader unfamiliar with the ontological assumptions behind Sartre’s discussion of bad faith to really understand it if she cannot resort to Freudian terminology. Below, I shall employ bits of Freudian theory to shed some light on the concept of bad faith.

In his critique of Freud, Sartre raises the question of how a person knowing the truth can genuinely self-deceive herself. He argues that the Freudian hypothesis is plausible only if it is assumed that the mind is split between the conscious and the unconscious. If so, there must be a ‘censor’ that is able to recognise something ‘as to be repressed’ from consciousness and driven into unconsciousness. This implies that ‘the censor is conscious (of) itself’ (Sartre 2003: 76). Sartre argues that the unconscious cannot be entirely divorced from consciousness, since the mind must be simultaneously in contact with the forbidden material of the unconscious while the consciousness judges this material to be unacceptable. Sartre (2003:76) criticises the Freudian approach as a kind of descriptive explanation which simply categorizes the phenomenon into different terms, or as ‘a mere verbal terminology’.

So, how does Sartre explain the origin of bad faith? He claims that ‘the essential problem of bad faith is a problem of belief’, which is a particular consciousness of the meaning of something (2003: 91). Such belief appears to the subject as ‘pure subjective determination without external correlative’ (2003: 92). Thus, to believe is to know that one believes. He further argues that due to the self-nihilating structure of consciousness,
to know that one believes is no longer to believe. Therefore, ‘[e]very belief is a belief that falls short; one never wholly believes what one believes’ (2003: 93). Because a belief is perpetually uncertain and self-destructive, bad faith ‘stands forth in the firm resolution not to demand too much, to count itself satisfied when it is barely persuaded, to force itself in decisions to adhere to uncertain truths’ (2003: 91).

Sartre’s rejection of the unconscious implies that lying to oneself involves a conscious decision to accept partial evidence as sufficient and conclusive. However, Ronald Santoni (1978: 397-98) argues that we cannot, therefore, suggest that Sartre’s bad faith is equivalent to a ‘cynical lie’. It is correct to say that Sartre’s bad faith is not a cynical choice born of a lack of evidence. Because even if one had sufficient evidence to uphold one’s belief—a good faith—a belief in anything will always be reducible to bad faith. Sartre declares that ‘it is indifferent whether one is in good faith or in bad faith, because bad faith reapprehends good faiths and creeps to the very origin of the project of good faith’ (2003: 94). This ‘very origin’ is a will to bad faith, which is not ‘a reflective, voluntary decision’ but ‘a spontaneous determination of our being’ (2003: 91).

Here, we can see that Sartre’s own explanation ultimately invites a Freudian perspective. This will to bad faith is not ‘reflective’ and not ‘voluntary’, which means there is no conscious agency that governs it.30 Also, being a ‘spontaneous determination’, it is not determined by reflective consciousness. In short, bad faith originates in an objective internal drive that by-passes our autonomy and is independent of conscious reflection.

In fact, Sartre himself admits that his explanation echoes some of Freud’s ideas. He emphasised that, in order to distance his notion of consciousness from that of Freud’s, Sartre had, in his later work, conceptually re-dressed it as ‘lived experience’ [le vécu] (1974: 39). Some scholars, such as Flynn (2005: 7-10), have argued convincingly that this

---

30 Sartre offers the notions of reflective awareness and pre-reflective awareness as substitutes in his “existential psychoanalysis”. The reflective is a positional, thetic consciousness. About the pre-reflective, for the hard view, we can see it ‘as a deeply submerged domain of awareness, accessible only with great difficulty to reflective consciousness.’ And, ‘the soft view will see it as a sort of peripheral awareness’ (Gordon 1985: 258).
distancing did not work. Freud’s unconsciousness was incorporated into the notion of ‘lived experience’, and Sartre was thus able to ‘reject [psychoanalysis] in name’ only.

In sum, bad faith is a form of self-deception, that derives from a psychological drive to avoid uncertainty in one’s beliefs. I suggest that an understanding of the origin of bad faith in terms of a psychological drive is plausible and compatible with the overall logic of Sartre’s existentialism.

3.1.3 The origin of bad faith

In order to arrive at a better understanding of bad faith as a psychological drive, let’s have a closer look at some of the examples of bad faith as given by Sartre. Below, I will discuss two of them: a waiter and a woman.

**Waiter**

One of the key aspects of bad faith is the denial one’s being-for-itself. Sartre uses a waiter as a psycho-social type to explore and illustrate this aspect. Let me first briefly mention a broader theoretical context regarding Sartre’s usage of the waiter as a psycho-social type. Although many scholars regard the waiter as the ‘best-known’ example (Webber 2008: 180), some critics argue that Sartre’s discussion of this example is distorted by prejudice. D. Z. Phillips (1981: 29) criticizes Sartre as being unfair to waiters by oversimplifying their attitudes to their occupations and implies being a waiter is ‘a degrading occupation’. Phillips’ criticism of Sartre’s waiter has led to a series of discussions on it.31 Here, I simply agree with James Marks’ who argues that we have to see Sartre’s waiter in the context ‘of the view of the world that he is intended to illustrate: the context in which the illustration is relevant’ (Mark 1983: 387).

Now, what can be extracted from Sartre’s description of a waiter as a psycho-social type? There is something excessive in his demeanour. His actions seem ‘too precise’, ‘too rapid’, ‘too eagerly’ and ‘too solicitous’. A waiter overly behaves in accordance with the social demands of his occupation; ‘his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms’. He constantly degrades himself down to the level of a machine. At the same time, the waiter ‘is playing, he is amusing himself’. That is to say, there is certain

element of self-amusement in his actions. A waiter is ‘play[ing] with his condition in order to realise it’, and this is to be interpreted as a form of self-recognition through playing the role of one’s given identity (Sartre 2003: 82). If we treat the waiter as a conceptual persona (of bad faith) we can distinguish the following aspects of it: (i) striving to meet social expectations (associated with one’s occupation); (ii) self-degradation; (iii) self-amusement; (iv) self-recognition through playing the given role. Let’s have a look at how distinguishing these aspects helps with understanding of the origins of bad faith.

First, conforming to a social demand always comes at the cost of diminishing one’s unique individuality. Such a conforming individual will eventually suppress all those aspects of her personality that are redundant with respect to the social demand. A conformist will thus inevitably degrade herself as a whole.

Second, self-amusement is a process of making oneself feel good without relying on an external stimulus. It implies that enclosing oneself within a confined identity is enjoyable. That is to say, to reject one’s possibilities and to resign oneself to ‘a contingent block of identity’ is self-gratifying (Sartre 2003: 107). By adopting a socially demanded identity, one not only makes oneself feel good, but she ultimately fully recognises herself as being that identity.

A crucial thing to notice here is that being free, in the sense of accepting one’s infinite possibilities, is a rather scary and stressful state. Sartre uses the term ‘anguish’ to describe this psychological state. He gives the example of standing on the edge of a cliff. Fear is the response to the possibility of one’s falling off the cliff due to some external factors. In contrast, anguish is caused by the realisation that one is capable of throwing herself over the edge. As Sartre (2003: 56) explains, ‘[a]nguish is precisely my consciousness of being my own future, […] [and my awareness of] other forms of conduct (in particular that which consists in throwing myself over the precipice) as my possible possibilities’. Thus the radical freedom that comes with the full realisation that one has responsibility for one’s future is inseparable from anguish. Because of freedom being such a burden, Sartre (2007: 29) states that people are ‘condemned to be free’. The fact that freedom is burdensome in the sense discussed above explains why people often
fall into bad faith: they do so because it allows them to escape the anguish associated with embracing freedom and the uncertainty of one’s becoming.

**Woman**

Now, let us examine another aspect of bad faith (denying being-for-itself), an aspect that Sartre believes is best illustrated by considering an example of a woman who avoids facing the sexual implication of her companion’s conduct (placing his hand on her hand), by suppressing any awareness of the conduct.

First, in what sense is this woman deceiving herself? She ‘knows very well the intentions’ of the man; she is aware of the implications of the man’s behaviour. At the same time, ‘she is profoundly aware of the desire which she inspires’, and ‘she knows also that it will be necessary sooner or later for her to make a decision’. That is to say, she realises that their sexual desires would be put into practice at some point, if she decides to begin a relationship with the man (Sartre 2007: 78-79). Thus, she does not deceive herself about the implication of the man’s behaviour nor about, the consequences of her actions.

And then, when her companion’s warm hand grips her hand, the woman falls into bad faith. ‘[The] young woman leaves her hand there, but she *does not notice* that she is leaving it’ (Sartre 2003: 79). Sartre stresses the fact that she does not notice that she has not removed her hand. At the same time, it is somewhat implausible to understand the woman as really having no idea that her hand has remained in the grip of her companion’s hand. So what is going on here? The context seems to suggest that Sartre takes the woman as, in some sense, *pretending* unawareness of what’s happening with her hand. However, pretending is not self-deception. So, in what sense does she lie to herself? Sartre replies, ‘she is at this moment all intellect. […] [S]he speaks of Life, of her life, she shows herself in her essential aspect – a personality, a consciousness’ (2003: 79). That is to say, she has divorced her soul from her body in order to deny her desire. And, denying her desire amounts to falling into bad faith.

An interesting thing to notice here is what drives her to deny her desire. Sartre tells us that the woman ‘is profoundly aware of the desire which she inspires, but the desire cruel and naked would humiliate and horrify her’. This is to be understood as her being
terrified of embracing the state of being-in-itself (facticity). To withdraw her hand ‘is to break the troubled and unstable harmony which gives the hour its charm’ (Sartre 2003: 78-79). That is to say, the motivation behind her self-deception is that she is reluctant to discard the pleasure stemming from being-for-itself (transcendence).

In sum, the woman commits bad faith because being-for-itself grants pleasures while being-in-itself brings horror and humiliation. The waiter, on the other hand, evades being-for-itself by playing the socially demanded role because being-in-itself ensures him certainty and enjoyment. Thus, people seek to escape from being-in-itself or being-for-itself in accord with the negative or positive consequences entailed. We may therefore be inclined to infer that the origin of bad faith is a psychological drive to seek pleasure and avoid anguish and uncertainty.

Now there is an issue that needs to be addressed. Sartre’s discussion of a woman has provoked several critical responses from feminist thinkers. These critical responses are, on the whole, credible and justified. Sartre’s treatment of the example of a woman relies on certain gender stereotypes, such as that women enjoy pretending to be reserved to accommodate men. That is to say, the illustrative impetus of this vignette relies entirely on sexist thinking. Moreover, this vignette is violently ignorant of the reality for women that they are treated as sexual objects by men who have the power to humiliate or physically overwhelm them. Sartre does not seem to be willing to entertain the idea that women might be reserved out of politeness or fear of men’s aggressive behaviour. Thus, it is legitimate to criticise Sartre’s example as being a mere patriarchal fantasy (Doeuff 1991: 72-73; Moi 1994: 127-33). Similarly, Sartre’s example of a non-heterosexual person (another example for illustrating bad faith) also entails a phobic abjection of the ‘feminized Other’ (Fraunhofer 2007: 13).
3.2 Nausea and the notion of Contingency

This section discusses Sartre’s Nausea with a particular attention paid to the notion of contingency, a notion that reflects Sartre’s acceptance of a cosmic nihilism that eventually leads to a full-blown (existentialist) reactive nihilism. First, a review of the literature discussing Nausea is provided. Several interpretative camps are briefly discussed, especially the one that looks at the novel from an existentialist perspective. Second, a general interpretation of the novel is given with particular focus directed onto the notions of nausea and absurdity. Third, I shall interpret the main protagonist’s decision to give up his research on Rollebon as an example of a reactive overcoming of the nihilistic position. Finally, I shall say something in defence of Sartre’s radical cosmic nihilism.

3.2.1 Various readings of Nausea

The fluctuation in Sartre’s writings between philosophical investigation and literary exploration bears witness to the scope of his project. Nausea as a successful praxis of the philosophical novel remains at the centre of his work. Sartre himself believes that it is ‘the best thing I have done’ (1977: 24). The novel was originally titled ‘Melancholia’. After its initial rejection, Gallimard suggested its title be changed to ‘Nausea’. The publication of Nausea became a life-defining point for Sartre. It received a favourable reception from both critics and readers. Henceforth, Sartre’s literary career was launched (Drake 2005).

Many scholars have contributed various interpretations of Nausea.32 There are at least three popular readings of this novel. The first camp considers it a phenomenological novel (Flynn 2014: 138). It can be seen as ‘an extended critique of Husserl’s “phenomenological reduction”’ (Detmer 2008: 57) or a ‘phenomenological project’ (Zalloua 2014: 89). Some scholars also notice the influence of Descartes in this novel (Quoted, Zalloua 2014: 88).

The second camp reads this novel from a cultural perspective. For example, David Pole (1981: 34) treats this novel as an ‘anti-bourgeois satire’ or ‘anti-bourgeois polemic’.

---

32 Not everyone agrees that Nausea is the best work of Sartre. Anthony Manser bluntly refers to Nausea as the ‘negative part’ of Sartre’s philosophy (Manser 1966: 118).
Lawrence R. Schehr (2006: 51) contends that *Nausea* is Sartre’s exploration of autoeroticism and homosexuality. Andrew Leak (1989: 65) argues that *Nausea* is concerned with ‘the jeopardizing of the masculine attitude, the loss of gender identity and, ultimately, castration’. Ian H. Birchall pays attention to the political aspects of the novel, arguing that treating it as ‘passive and apolitical’ is a common misreading (1989: 22-23). Angela Kershaw (2001: 688,92) argues that ‘[In *Nausea*] the motif of the criminal autodidact signifies a crisis of the individual, but both texts suggest that the solution to the crisis must be political as well as ontological’.

The third camp reads *Nausea* from an existentialist perspective. Chris Falzon argues that *Nausea* invites us to ‘shake off our ordinary, taken-for-granted presuppositions about the world’ (2005: 105) – it manifests a ‘vision of the world as meaningless […] the world as it really is, stripped of a deceptive veneer of forms that we try to impose on it’ (2005: 120). Falzon captures the central theme of *Nausea*, which is that the world is random and unpredictable.

Before Sartre wrote *Nausea*, he frequently discussed his thoughts on contingency with Beauvoir. It was Beauvoir who initially convinced Sartre to transform his thoughts into a novel (Flynn 2014: 138). Later, in a letter to Beauvoir, Sartre writes ‘I’ve decided to put into my “factum” on Contingency. It’s true, everything really is contingent there, even the sky, which by any measure of meteorological likelihood should be the same over the whole of Le Havre: but it isn’t’ (Quoted, Leak 2006: 25). It is clear that the central theme of *Nausea* is the notion of contingency.

### 3.2.2 Nausea as the awareness of the absurdity of the world.

Now I shall proceed to examine the text. The story of *Nausea* is presented in the form of a diary. The protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, is a historian living in Bouville, France. He begins writing a diary to clear up some strange sensations that constantly haunt him. Eventually he becomes so overwhelmed with the feeling he calls nausea that he starts recording every detail, feeling, impression, no matter how insignificant, occurring both

---

33 “Factum” is the name Sartre gave to his philosophical-literary project. Andrew Leak reports that a “factum” is ‘a polemical pamphlet’ (see ibid). And, as Michel Contact observes, ‘Sartre and Nizan used to call *factums* [sic] the literary works that they were considering writing and publishing’ (Quoted, Flynn 2014: 137).
inside himself and in the external world. After a series of philosophical reflections on the contingency of existence he realises that this contingency can be overcome through submersion in the temporality of art. In the end, Roquentin decides to abandon his research on the dead aristocrat he is studying and leave Bouville.

The novel begins with the sentence: ‘Something has happened to me’ (Sartre 2000: 13). Roquentin does not explain what exactly has happened. It seems to be an overwhelming miasma that envelops him and suspends him from his daily life. It alters his perception of the world to the point that he feels physically sick—he ‘wanted to vomit’ (Sartre 2000: 33). Later on, Roquentin refers to this sickening feeling as nausea. It often comes and takes over Roquentin during rather ordinary and uneventful situations, such as when he is looking at the sky, benches or watching ants and pigeons in the park (Sartre 2000: 33,89). It feels as if it is the world itself that is nauseating him. Sartre does not really explain nausea. Instead, he describes it to the reader through the powerful images that he generates in the novel. As Zalloua (2014: 89) claims, the novel ‘stages nausea rather than communicates its meaning’, and ‘the drama of Roquentin’s nausea [is narrated] in a manner that accommodates and exceeds Sartre’s existentialist philosophy’. Sartre’s literary treatment of nausea is meant to evoke in the reader the essentially existentialist feeling of disgust about the world. Nausea, in the sense of an urge to vomit, is not a revulsion or antipathy towards something potentially poisonous or offensive. As Philip Thody (2001: 19) points out, it is ‘the product of excess’. Nausea is that feeling one gets after having eaten too many sweets.

Nausea is also a result of an encounter with the absurdity of the world. As Roquentin writes,

The word Absurdity is now born beneath my pen; a little while ago, in the park, I didn’t find it, but then I wasn’t looking for it either, I didn’t need it: I was thinking without words, about things, with things. Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the sound of a voice, but that long dead snake at my feet, that wooden snake. […] And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nausea, to my own life (Sartre 2000: 185).

How shall we understand absurdity here? In the novel, there is a little scene that sheds some light on it. Sitting in a café, Roquentin unintentionally eavesdrops on the tender conversation of a young couple sitting at the next table. He thinks to himself,
They are going to sleep together. They know it. Each of them knows that the other knows it. But as they are young, chaste, and decent, as each wants to keep his self-respect and that of the other, and as love is a great poetic thing which mustn’t be shocked, they go several times a week to dances and restaurants, to present the spectacle of their ritualistic, mechanical dances. [...] Once they have been to bed together, they will have to find something else to conceal the enormous absurdity of their existence. All the same … is it absolutely necessary to lie to each other? (Sartre 2000: 161)

In this little fragment of a story, Roquentin notices that the young couple is deeply engaged in a subtle and sophisticated pretend game the goal of which is to satisfy a particular desire without having to acknowledge the very desire and some of the unpalatable aspects of its satisfaction. The pretend game the couple is playing is meant to generate a substitute symbolic framework which makes it possible for the couple to proceed towards satisfying the desire while pretending that what they are doing has nothing to do with the desire and its satisfaction. However, the pretend game together with the symbolic framework it generates is, ultimately, doomed to collapse. The very act of the satisfaction of the desire—its animalistic baseness and ridiculous mechanics—generates a new reality, a reality that makes it impossible to keep up the pretense. Once the couple ‘have been to bed together’, the pretend game is over. They will, however, strive to find something else, some new pretend game. At this point, Roquentin mentions the absurdity (of their existence) that, in some sense, drives the couple to initiate a new pretend game once the previous one has collapsed. The logic of this drive seems to be this. Something is absurd when it is utterly meaningless, purposeless and nonsensical. Roquentin describes the couple’s existence (and this description is meant to apply to human existence as a whole) as absurd. That is, he describes their (and humans’) existence as meaningless, purposeless and nonsensical. This, of course, is an extremely disturbing fact about our existence. It is a fact that has to be concealed, a fact that has to be prevented from entering our consciousness. How can the fact be concealed and prevented from entering our consciousness? We resort to playing elaborate pretend games that are meant to generate meaning, purpose and sense where there is none. As such, the pretend games insulate us from the absurd and the existential disturbance caused by us being confronted with it. The deep existential disturbance caused by one’s realisation of the absurdity of the human existence is, as is perhaps needless to say at this point, what Sartre calls *nausea*. The above reconstructed relation between absurdity
and nausea is confirmed by Falzon who explains nausea as ‘the rationalist’s sickness in the face of the conceptual indigestibility of the world’ (2005: 115).

Roquentin’s spiritual tour de force starts when he cannot figure out what exactly makes him want to vomit. Then he realises it has something to do with this conceptual indigestibility of the world, which is something he is ultimately able to come to terms with and even whole-heartedly embrace. Nausea provides a setting that exposes a philosophical insight that everything is inescapably superfluous. Roquentin realises this at the end of the novel,

We were a heap of existents inconvenienced, embarrassed by ourselves, we hadn’t the slightest reason for being there, any of us, each existent, embarrassed, vaguely ill at ease, felt superfluous in relation to the others. Superfluous: that was the only connexion I could establish between those trees, those gates, those pebbles. It was in vain that I tried to count the chestnut trees, to situate them in relation to the Velleda, to compare their height of the planes trees: each of them escaped from the relationship in which I tried to enclose it, isolated itself, overflowed. I was aware of the arbitrary nature of these relationships, which I insisted on maintaining in order to delay the collapse of the human world of measures, of quantities, of bearings [...] And I – weak, languid, obscene, digesting, tossing about dismal thoughts – I too was superfluous. [...] I dreamed vaguely of killing myself, to destroy at least one of these superfluous existences. But my death itself would have been superfluous. Superfluous, my corpse, my blood on these pebbles, between these plants, in the depths of this charming park. [...] I was superfluous for all time. (Sartre 2000: 184-85)

It is all clear now to Roquentin: all existence is intrinsically gratuitous, contingent and unjustified. The world is absurd in the sense that it cannot be rationalized. There is no purpose outside of it, no meaning or justification. Detmer (2008: 57) argues that this perception of existence is formed in the theory of what Sartre later called the “transphenomenality” of things.

However, I believe that the philosophical insight that this novel revolves around is best referred to as cosmic nihilism. According to Crosby, cosmic nihilism ‘asserts the meaninglessness of the cosmos, either in the absolute sense of denying it any intelligibility or knowable structure at all, or in the relative sense of denying that it gives any place or support to the kind of valuative and existential meanings to which human beings aspire’ (2016: 26). It is clear that the account given by Sartre fits the definition of cosmic nihilism. As I have previously discussed, nihilism is not an ‘-ism’ of void, but a philosophical idea that brings something to nihil. What does Roquentin’s philosophical insight attempt to annihilate? It targets the conventional, deductive cosmology,
according to which the world is intrinsically ordered and meaningful and that as such it can be rationalized. Sartre elaborates,

The essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence is not necessity. To exist is simply to be there, what exists appears, lets itself be encountered, but you can never deduce it […] Only they have tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not an illusion, an appearance which can be dissipated; it is absolute, and consequently perfect gratuitousness (2000: 188).

This strongly suggests that Sartre is a cosmic nihilist urging the reader to confront and rediscover the world as it factually is. The aspect of the world that often has been neglected, and that for Sartre is one of the world’s “essential dimensions”, is its contingency. Sartre’s cosmic nihilism leads to an existential nihilism in which human existence intrinsically lacks any given order and meaning.

3.2.4 Nihilistic finding as the starting point for overcoming

After the climax of Roquentin’s meditation on contingency, his life is shattered by this new finding. His acceptance of the contingency of the world leads to two immediate results: (1) ‘I am free: I do not have a single reason for living left’; (2) ‘My past is dead, Monsieur de Rollebon is dead’—here, he considers giving up his research project on Monsieur de Rollebon (Sartre 2000: 223). So, how exactly does this new philosophical realisation affect his freedom and his attitude to his research?

First, we need to briefly discuss one of the characters in the novel, Monsieur de Rollebon. Rollebon can be seen as a symbol of a pregiven and ordered purpose. In the novel, Rollebon is not a character per se, but the subject of Roquentin’s research. Rollebon was a French aristocrat who originally came from Bouville. That is the reason behind Roquentin’s decision to move to and live in Bouville. Roquentin’s life and identity as a historian is closely tied up with the figure of Rollebon. Rollebon and his world provide meaning and justification to Roquentin’s life. The research and its completion is what constitutes Roquentin’s identity and gives purpose to his life. In this sense, Rollebon justifies the existence of Roquentin and provides a safe space for Roquentin to escape the contingency of the world and his own existence. As Roquentin writes, ‘Monsieur de Rollebon was my partner: he needed me in order to be and I needed him in order not to feel my being’ (Sartre 2000: 142). That is to say, Rollebon represents an external telos that
justifies Roquentin’s own being. Roquentin views his identity and project as being directed towards achieving a certain goal, and he sees this goal as the definition of his being. Directing oneself towards a goal is a very common strategy for coping with existential anxieties. One’s life has to have this teleological aspect to be bearable.

However, realising and embracing the contingency of one’s existence comes hand in hand with the collapse of the teleological perspective. Roquentin realises that both his and Rollebon’s existence have no purpose or justification and are, as such, *superfluous* [de trop]. Even if Rollebon’s existence had somehow escaped the contingency and was purposeful and justified, it would still have no bearing on Roquentin’s life of because, as he realises, ‘an existent can never justify the existence of another existent’ (Sartre 2000: 252). That is to say that Roquentin’s life, as a historian researching a particular historical figure who gives a purpose to his life, was a lie. Once Roquentin realises this, he has to refuse to perpetuate this lie and let Monsieur de Rollebon go.

This letting go of Rollebon represents the rejection of a teleological perspective and the acceptance of the contingency of one’s existence. Once people accept the contingency of the world and their existence, they free themselves from the constraints of a grand cosmic narrative. This realisation forces people to understand that there is no underlying teleology to life that is often granted by their identity or given situations. And then they are able to accept their own life as it is, as superfluous, and, at the same time, free from any craving for teleological justification.

In conclusion, *Nausea*, as the central work of Sartre’s literary-philosophical project, clearly shows that Sartre holds a nihilist position. At the end of the novel, Roquentin decides to leave Bouville to begin a new life—“It was on that day, at that moment that it all started” (Sartre 2000: 253). This decision opens a window towards something without explicitly stating what it is. As Sartre himself states, ‘I began *Nausea* with [a] belief but by the end no longer held it’ (Beauvoir 1981: 266; Cited, Flynn 2014: 151). We can also see that, for Sartre, the affirmation of cosmic nihilism calls for the overcoming of the nihilistic desert.
3.2.5 Contingency as the necessity for human beings

Above I have shown that Sartre embraces cosmic nihilism. Sartre believes that contingency is an irreducible aspect of our existence. However, this particular belief and cosmic nihilism is generally quite rare among philosophers (Crosby 2016: 26).

People typically believe that the world and our existence is subjected to certain objective laws and necessities. In most areas of our research, we presuppose and study these laws and necessities. Natural science bases its explanations on the laws of the physical world. Social science observes and identifies the law-like connections that govern the life of a society. Even in our daily life, we act under the assumption that the causal relations that hold the world together are real and nomological. So, in what sense is Sartre right that contingency is an essential dimension of our life?

Our life has two basic dimensions: a biological one and an experiential one. The biological existence lacks consciousness and self-awareness. The experiential dimension of our life refers to being conscious and aware of oneself. Now, arguably, the experiential dimension of our life depends on the biological one in the sense that the termination of biological existence comes hand in hand with the termination of experiential existence.

Does the end of experiential existence have the same effect while biological existence continues? Consider a hypothetical scenario in which a man is kidnapped by a psychopath. The psychopath ties the man to an iron chair and administers nutrition intravenously to keep him alive. The man has been blindfolded, and his mouth and ears have been blocked. The man cannot see, hear, speak or move. And, he is convinced that there is no chance he will ever escape his ordeal. Now, let’s assume that the man’s physical health has not been compromised. Still, can we call this mode of existence that he finds himself in a life? The man is conscious but not really experiencing anything as his senses are blocked. The only thing he experiences is a state of sensory deprivation that makes his existence close to indistinguishable from death. This lack of experiencing is what makes it a non-life. Once we shut down the experiential dimension of our life, we shut down life itself.

To experience is an essential aspect of the existence of human beings. But does the richness and diversity of our experiencing determine the quality, or even the quantity,
of our existence? For instance, does an explorer travelling around the world have in some sense “more” existence than someone who spends her every day taking care of her sick mother? We might be inclined to see the explorer’s life as obviously richer than the life of someone whose daily routine is built around taking care of an ill person. However, a bit of scrutiny reveals that the issue here might be slightly more complicated. It could be argued that the two lives cannot be really compared as they seem to be grounded in very different assumptions about life. The traveller accumulates fleeing experiences, chasing them across various countries and cultures. He lives in the now and his life does not seem to be motivated by any (robust) ethical concerns. The caregiver, on the other hand, experiences life and its rewards as essentially ethical. The traveller and the caregiver differ substantially both in how they navigate their respective lives and in what they expect and receive from them. Because of this substantial difference, the relative quality and richness of their lives cannot be mutually compared. Their respective lives are simply grounded in different evaluative schemes and are, as such, incommensurable.

We know at this point that experience is essential to our lives. But what exactly does it mean to experience something? We can start answering this question by first looking briefly at the etymology of the target expression. The word “experience” derives from the Latin experiential, “attempt, test, practice, experiment”; present participle of experīrī, “to try, test”. It is formed from ex “out of” + peritus “experienced, tested”. This word is related to the Latin periculum “trial, risk, danger,” and from the same vast root *per- (3), which means ‘to try, risk’, an extended sense from root *per- (1) “go forward, penetrate”. It shares the same linguistic family with Old English, fær, “calamity, sudden danger, peril, sudden attack”, or German, Gefahr, “danger” (Cléro 2004: 329; “Experience”). As a verb, the expression means, among other things, “to take risk or to try something dangerous”. To experience thus refers to a certain openness to the risky, the unknown and the uncertain.

When people talk about their experiences, such as a journey or an event, they often tend to talk about the accidental, contingent, or even dangerous aspects of that experience. From the subjective perspective, an experience can be beneficial or detrimental, enjoyable or deplorable. At the same time, experiencing is always and irreducibly an experience of the contingent. Consider the following thought experiment:
A man is having a particularly enjoyable day. In the morning he goes for a relaxing walk in the park. Later he gets invited to dinner at an excellent restaurant. After the dinner he goes to a charity concert where his favourite band is supposed to play. And in the evening, he goes on a date with a lovely woman. In short, he experienced all sorts of surprises, joys, things he longed for, ate delicious food, met someone he loves, got a promotion, etc. And then something magical happens and the man finds himself trapped in a time loop. Every day is a repetition of the that particularly enjoyable day that started with a walk in the park. The man is rather astonished to find out that he is, rather inexplicably, bound to go through all the events that happened on that enjoyable day. He knows what is going to happen at each particular moment of the day unable to change anything about it. He becomes just a helpless witness to the unfolding of a familiar script—an unfolding that will be taking place over and over until the end of time. Now, can we describe the man living through the repeated unfolding of this script as experiencing? The little thought experiment seems to be showing that there is no experiencing without contingency. Once the contingency in the experience is completely removed, the existence of a man is no different from the one in the dungeon. What he is going through is no longer a life but a repetition of death.
3.3 Freedom and authenticity

The aim of this section is to identify Sartre’s ultimate demands by way of analysing his notions of freedom and authenticity. The first step is to distinguish the two dimensions of freedom as described by Sartre. Thus we shall discuss the distinction between ontological freedom and practical freedom. Afterwards, I will argue that treating freedom as an ultimate demand of Sartre’s existentialism is problematic. In the case of ontological freedom, it is problematic because this kind of freedom is better understood as a state rather than as a demand. And, in case of practical freedom it turns out that this kind of freedom derives its normativity from Marxism rather than from existentialism. The final part of the section discusses the notion of authenticity and examines its various conceptual dimensions against the background of the conceptual personae of an authentic Jew and an inauthentic Jew.

3.3.1 Ontological freedom and practical freedom

Sartre’s ontological account of human existence explains how people are almost inevitably driven to adopt an ethics that will enable them to escape or conceal the absurdity of their existence. He claims that once we realise our existence is fundamentally contingent, we (the ontological being of ‘for-itself’) will desire to wrench ourselves away from the original contingency. That’s because we will want to exist ‘by right’, but not, as we factually do, by chance (Sartre 2003: 485). Sartre refers to this desire as a desire to become God, ens causa sui (2003: 84-91, 506, 99, 625-28). However, this desire and project to become God is intrinsically valueless and as such is ‘doomed to failure’ (2003: 615).

Since the project to become God is bound to fail, it remains an open question how one can prevent ending up in absolute nihilism. Sartre briefly suggests a pure reflection as an alternative way. Later on, in Notebooks for an Ethics, he entertains the idea that one’s pre-reflective consciousness of freedom motivates one to carry out a pure reflection, which results in a ‘refus[al] to “go along with” the God project’: a ‘pure reflection is a

34 Sartre claims that this desire ‘to become God’ is not a conscious choice, but a desire that comes from ‘the very structure of being-in-the-world’ (Sartre 2003: 575-95). Therefore, I describe the project to become God as (in Sartre’s words) a pre-reflective project, that is, a project that is not a choice deriving from one’s reflective and rational decision.
rupture with this projection and the constitution of a freedom that takes itself as its end’ (1992: 559). Thomas Anderson (1993: 27-64) argues convincingly that Sartre’s earlier ethics represents an ontological conversion: a conversion from the God project to the project of pursuing freedom. Anderson has provided an explicit textual and theoretical argument to support this widely accepted interpretation of Sartre’s ethics.35

In many places, Sartre puts the concept of freedom at the top of his normative hierarchy36. For example, in Existentialism Is a Humanism, Sartre (2007: 51) advocates the idea that people should consider the ultimate goal of human beings to be the ‘quest of freedom itself as such’. In Notebooks of an Ethic, Sartre (1992: 470) states that all values have to lead to freedom. And in What is Literature?, Sartre (1988: 192) concludes that the ultimate goal is to ‘put the human person in possession of his freedom’. This section will analyse Sartre’s concept of freedom against the background of his ethical turn from the God project to freedom.

The first thing to notice about Sartre’s treatment of the concept of freedom is that it is, in places, rather inconsistent and even self-contradictory. On one hand, Sartre argues (2003: 509, 20, 31, 49, 55) that man possesses an ‘absolute’, ‘unlimited’ freedom, and ‘the only limits which freedom bumps up against at each moment are those which it imposes on itself’. In Being and Nothingness, he bluntly claims that humans are always free, that is, they always possess a range of possibilities regarding the future self they can become (2003: 130-46, 503-77). In Notebooks for an Ethics, Sartre (1992: 333) claims that even the oppressed maintain their freedom; freedom is something that their oppressors cannot take away from them. In Anti-Semitism and Jew, Sartre (1995: 137) states that if Jews accepted their identity, their freedom would not be ‘touch[ed]’ by anti-Semites. According to Sartre, the ontological structure of man is such that it guarantees him freedom to transcend his facticity.

On the other hand, Sartre holds a view of human freedom that seems to clash with the one discussed above. He explicitly rejects the ideas which his early view leads to:

---

35 There are a few criticisms of Anderson’s reading. For example, Yiwei Zheng argues that Sartre’s earlier ethics does not abandon the project of trying to become God. See (Zheng 2002: 127-38).
36 Anderson notices that sometimes it is the concept of generosity that Sartre places at the top of his normative hierarchy. See (Anderson 1993: 60).
Stoical freedom, Christian freedom, Bergsonian freedom, in hiding his chains from him have only reinforced them. All of these can be reduced to a certain inner freedom that man could retain in any situation. This inner freedom is a pure idealist hoax; care is taken never to present it as the necessary condition of the act. It is really pure enjoyment of itself. If Epictetus, in chains, does not rebel, it is because he feels free, because he enjoys his freedom. On that basis, one state is as good as another, the slave’s situation is as good as the master’s; why should anyone want to change it? This freedom is fundamentally reducible to a more or less clear affirmation of the autonomy of thought. But in conferring independence upon thought, this affirmation separates it from the situation… (1962: 236-37)

At this point, Sartre accepts a Marxist perspective on human condition. He states that a worker is not free in the same way as a bourgeois is (1988: 264). And, he says that those who advise workers whose lives have been crushed by the monotony of working at the assembly line to embrace inner freedom are either ‘childish or hateful’ (1962: 238).

Sartre seems to be rather careless in his usage of the concept of ‘freedom’ in various texts. Later he reflects on this carelessness and gets rather appalled by it, ‘I reread a prefatory note of mine to a collection of these plays – Les Mouches, Huis Clos and others – and was truly scandalized. I had written “Whatever the circumstances, and wherever the site, a man is always free to choose to be a traitor or not …” When I read this, I said to myself: it’s incredible, I actually believed that!’ (2011: 186). Anderson argues that there is a conceptual break in Sartre’s ethics. Sartre’s early ethics are an ‘idealistic’ and based on an existential ontology. His late ethics are ‘realistic’ and ‘materialistic’, revolving around a need for ‘integral humanity’ (Anderson 1993: 1, 82-86, 148-49). However, in many of Sartre’s works, he mixes the two ethical positions into an inconsistent whole which hinders a clearer understanding of his concept of freedom.

David Detmer’s study provides, perhaps, the most lucid analysis of Sartre’s concept of freedom. In Freedom as a Value, Detmer (2013: 62) reports that there are two senses of freedom in Sartre’s work: ‘ontological’ and ‘practical’. Detmer argues that ontological freedom refers to the kind of freedom to choose an attitude towards and interpretation of a situation that one finds herself in. Practical freedom is the freedom to satisfy ‘human needs’, including the most basic physical needs and the needs of being spared of torture and oppression (2013: 64-67). Detmer argues that these two conceptions of freedom are consistent. He also explains that ‘ontological freedom, while not identical with practical freedom, is foundational to it’ (2013: 109). The distinction between these
two freedoms, as explained by Detmer, is very useful for those trying to get a clear understanding of Sartre’s concept of freedom.

3.3.2 The problem of freedom as an ultimate demand

Sartre’s claim that people are always ontologically free is open to various objections. Anderson points out that Sartre’s early view of freedom leads to ‘a quietistic or Stoical ethics’ which dissipates the power of fighting oppression (1993: 25-26). Some critics argue that Sartre’s ontological freedom leads to ethical subjectivism. For example, Alisdair MacIntyre (2007: 26, 204-55) claims that early Sartre endorses a self that is detached from one’s social particularity and whose evaluations rely on subjective directions given to sentiment and feelings. On the other hand, T. Storm Heter defends Sartre by pointing out that Sartre does take into account social roles in his analysis. Heter (2006: 17-20) argues that some of the implications of Sartre’s ethics point to Sartre’s ‘resistance to ethical subjectivism’ and as such is best understood as fundamentally Hegelian due to its emphasis on ‘intersubjective recognition’. I think that Heter’s defence is quite compelling and shields Sartre’s ethics from at least some of these objections. It should be noticed though that Sartre himself didn’t think his ethics needed to be reinforced by any Hegelian axioms.

Now, why would it not be correct to characterise Sartre’s ontological freedom as an ultimate demand? As Sartre (2007: 48) advocates, people are ‘obligated to will the freedom of others’. But if freedom is ontological, how can I will other’s freedom which already and always exists in the very structure of their being? And, if the freedom is ontological, that is, absolute and irreducible, then it is always present, always available. Thus there is no need and no imperative to pursue it or realise it. In this sense, ontological freedom is a *state* and not a *demand*. As a state, it is best described in terms of containing the infinite possibilities of one’s becoming. Ontological freedom exists as prior to and independent of any moral values and norms. However, if not complemented by a moral perspective, ontological freedom will ultimately lead to ethical subjectivism. The only way to see ontological freedom as having some prescriptive force is this: people do not have their practical freedom in social reality, but they do have ontological freedom as their state of being. Because of the asymmetry
between practical and ontological dimensions, people need to pursue their practical freedom as a demand. In this sense, however, Sartre’s demand to ‘will the freedom of others’ can only be interpreted as a will for the practical freedom of others.

But how is practical freedom pursued and realised? In many places, Sartre claims that the ‘era of freedom’ can only be achieved by overthrowing the oppressive power structure, that is, by the dismantling of capitalism. In terms of practical freedom, Sartre’s ultimate demand is not an existentialist one but a Marxist one. Before we continue, a brief mention of Sartre’s Marxism is in order.

Was Sartre a Marxist?

Since the 90s, the neo-liberal narrative has completely taken over Marxist-leftist ideology (which was the dominant ideology among western intellectuals at the time of Sartre’s productive life). Thus, since the 90s, Sartre’s radical Marxist standpoint has been seen as intellectually extreme. Bernard-Henri Lévy (2003: 170-80) bluntly claims that there are two Sartres, a good Sartre who is an existentialist and individualist and a bad Sartre who embraces socialist or even Maoist humanism. Reading through the texts of various Sartrean scholars, one can’t but notice that they often make considerable effort to purge Marxism out of Sartre’s writings in order to “save” him from being called ‘the Commie [or] the Maoist’ (Betschart 2019: 78). However, this purge often employs a somewhat shallow and caricatured understanding of Marxism. Alfred Betschart, in his recent study, argues, by relying on quantitative historical data, that Sartre was not a Marxist. The quantitative data that Betschart relies on is somewhat dubious. For example, Betschart finds it relevant that Sartre at some point gives a quote from one of Engels’s works when this particular quote can be traced to Marx. Betschart goes on to claim on the basis of this that Sartre’s knowledge of Marx was ‘relatively superficial’ (2019: 81). Another dubious move by Betschart is his assessment of Sartre’s claim that ‘a successful revolution can only be made by a party’ as being incompatible with Marxism (2019: 79). Betschart does not seem to be aware of the fact that the claim that he sees as incompatible with Marxism is attributable to Lenin. And of course, it would be rather eccentric to

37 See in: (Sartre 1992: 10-11, 49, 88-89, 102-3, 40-41, 61-70, 407, 14, 18, 70-71, 99-500, 05-09); (Sartre 1988: 140, 218-23); (Sartre 1995: 148-50); (Sartre 1962: 253-54) Anderson has summed up the previous references in (Anderson 1993: 66)
suggest that Marxism and Leninism are incompatible theories. Whether or not Sartre was a Marxist is not important in the context of this thesis. Still, I would like to point out that if we disconnect Sartre’s concept of practical freedom from its Marxist assumptions, it will collapse into a mere humanitarian appeal against oppression.

In conclusion, ontological freedom is a *state* that lacks normativity. Practical freedom manifests its normativity only when complemented by Marxist axioms. Thus, I believe that the notion of freedom is not an ultimate demand for Sartre’s existentialism. The attempt to ground ethics in the concept of freedom failed as Sartre himself realised.38

### 3.3.3 The concept of authenticity

The preceding discussion shows that Sartre’s notion of freedom is insufficient to introduce normativity into his existentialism. However, there is another notion to be found in Sartre’s texts that can do what the notion of freedom could not: that is, generate an ultimate demand. At the end of the chapter on bad faith in his *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre says,

[… that does not mean that we cannot radically escape bad faith. But this supposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted. This self-recovery we shall call authenticity (2003: 70).

The passage introduces into our discussion here the notion of authenticity and Sartre’s claim that authenticity makes it possible to escape bad faith. Sartre (1999: 258) adds that ‘[i]nauthenticity, as we know, consists in seeking out a foundation in order to “lift” the absurd irrationality of facticity’. In other words, authenticity is also the way to lucidly confront absurdity without deceiving oneself.

Some scholars discuss Sartre’s concepts of freedom and authenticity as if they were interchangeable (e.g., Heter 2006). Although Sartre’s concepts of freedom and authenticity are contingent upon a mutual acceptance, they are far from semantically equivalent. In *War Diaries*, where he introduces the concept of authenticity, Sartre claims that ‘[m]etaphysical value of the person who assumes his life or authenticity. It’s the only absolute [sic].’ And, he even states that ‘I can’t really see anything but a moral code based

38 ‘Sartre made it clear in some of the interviews later in his life that he considered the notebooks to be a “failed attempt” to develop a viable ethics and thus he ceased working on them’, see in (Quoted, Anderson 1993: 43)
on authenticity’ (1999: 94-96). It is clear that Sartre treats the concept of authenticity as an independent notion with its own conceptual logic. Thus, I do not think that authenticity is merely a conceptual accessory to Sartre’s freedom but is rather on the same theoretical level as freedom in Sartre’s conceptual hierarchy. Besides, Sartre’s authenticity has been criticised by many for being contaminated by moral subjectivism, or for being close to vacuous. Anderson (1993: 53, 60) argues that authenticity is merely a means for an end (freedom) in Sartre’s ethics. And he criticises the notion of authenticity as licensing authentic racists and murderers. Heter has succeeded in his excellent paper in pointing out that Anderson’s understanding of Sartre’s authenticity is rather oversimplified (Heter 2006: 27-28). I agree with Heter’s defence. I shall now proceed to discuss Sartre’s ultimate demands by focusing on the concept of authenticity.

The notion of authenticity has been popularized by existentialists. It was extensively discussed by Heidegger in his Sein u. Zeit (OED, "Authenticity": 3d). Later, it was examined by Sartre and his partner Beauvoir. However, the very origins of the insight behind the concept of authenticity can be traced back to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard criticised the conforming pressure of modern societies that forces man to adopt and internalize a social role sacrificing his individual identity in the process. Kierkegaard (1992: 130) appeals to his readers to strive to ‘become what one is’, that is, to become authentic. As a pre-theoretical expression, authenticity refers to something that is faithful to an original or that accurately reflects a model. This pre-theoretical understanding of authenticity does not apply easily to man. In the context of philosophizing about man, authenticity refers to the quality of truthful consistency between the inner self and outward expression (OED, "Authenticity": 3a, 3b, 3c). Guignon (2004) states that when the term authenticity is used to characterize a person, it entails: (1) that the actions of the person are in accord with her inner desires, beliefs and, ideals; and (2) that the person’s actions truly express who she really is. Moreover, authenticity involves a critical dimension. The demand for people to be true to themselves suggests a need to question given social values and the dominant discourse. It implies that a given social order or authority always deviates from truth.

Let us now proceed to elucidate Sartre’s understanding of authenticity. In Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre’s Early Philosophy, Santoni identifies
authenticity as one of Sartre’s central concepts. He provides a detailed literature review and explains how Sartre’s authenticity developed out of the earlier idea of ‘self-recovery’. Santoni (1995: 89-110) argues that, as with many of Sartre’s other concepts, Sartre holds a formative view of the concept of authenticity. In War Diaries, Sartre (1999: 53-54) claims that human existence is best described as a ‘condition of being thrown into a situation.’ Therefore, to be authentic is ‘to realise fully one’s being-in-situation, whatever this situation may happen to be’. Sartre adds, ‘the desire to acquire authenticity, ultimately, is only a desire to see things more clearly and not lose it’ (1999: 221). Authenticity is thus a full awareness of being in a situation. Later, in Anti-Semite and Jew, Sartre gives the following definition,

Authenticity, it is almost needless to say, consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate (1995: 90).

According to Sartre, the concept of authenticity contains two dimensions: (i) lucid consciousness of the situation (one’s being-in-a-situation); (ii) taking the responsibilities and risks associated with the situation. When Sartre discusses authenticity in ASJ, the condition of awareness of being-in-a-situation refers not just to a metaphysical situation (being thrown into the world), but it is also something that includes the socio-political dimension of the situation, which is constructed by the collective cultural, historical, and social structures that one has been born into. In ASJ, Sartre (1995: 72) argues that to be an authentic Jew, one has to be aware of and accept the social role of a ‘Jew’. It is plausible to say that Sartre’s concept of authenticity involves the acceptance of one’s given identity. However, as I have previously discussed, imprisoning oneself within a socially demanded identity leads to bad faith. We seem to have a tension here. We are encouraged to accept our given identity as a key step towards being authentic. At the same time, we already know at this point that embracing socially demanded identity leads to bad faith. This contradiction merits an explanation.

First it should be noticed that Sartre rejects the idea of human nature. He states that ‘man is defined first of all as “being in a situation”’ (1995: 59). An ethnic group is then defined as being in a shared situation. What constitutes the identity of Jewish

---

39 Henceforth, it is abbreviated as ASJ
people is then, roughly, the shared situation they find themselves in. But what is a situation?

The situation that a group of people share is constituted by a set of constraints and circumstances. Broadly speaking, these are circumstances of a ‘biological, economic, political [and] cultural’ kind (Sartre 1995: 59-60). For Jewish people, Sartre singles out another circumstance that is co-constitutive of their situation—‘damned’ (1995: 136). By ‘damned’, Sartre refers to the historical fact that Jews have repeatedly faced discrimination from other social groups. At the same time, the notion of a situation as used by Sartre includes aspects that go beyond the constraints and circumstances mentioned above. The notion also and importantly refers to ‘an atmosphere, a subtle sense of faces and of words, a menace that is concealed in things, an abstract bond that unites [one] to [his group that] in all other respects [is] very different from [oneself]’ (1995: 91). In summary, the situation that defines one’s identity is constituted by: (i) biological characteristics; (ii) economic and political conditions; (iii) cultural and historical backgrounds (or/and realities); (iv) an abstract atmosphere which captures and conveys the reactive attitudes of others (malevolence, discrimination, etc.).

Additionally, Sartre (1995: 100) emphasises that the factor that ‘establishes among all Jews a solidarity […] is not one of action or interest, but of situation’. That is to say, a mutual action or a disposition shared by a people cannot define the identity of a people. People’s actions and interests are manifested through active conducts. These four dimensions of the situation are passive or given realities. Thus, a situation is not an autonomous creation or manifestation, but something that people are thrown into. Discussing Jews, Sartre insists that the authenticity of a Jew is not grounded in some Jewish characteristics that she possesses but in the way she responds to the situation she has been thrown into. Thus inauthentic Jews are those ‘who have decided to run away from [an] insupportable situation’ (1995: 93). In sum, the Jewish identity is the Jewish situation that is constituted by biological, historical and cultural determinants, and most importantly, by living in a malicious and discriminatory society that takes her for a Jew.
In *ASJ*, Sartre introduces two conceptual personae to enunciate the concept of authenticity, a sympathetic conceptual persona, the authentic Jew, and an antipathetic conceptual persona, the inauthentic Jew.

**Inauthentic Jew**

Now, let us start with listing the aspects of the conceptual personae of an inauthentic Jew as they can be extracted from Sartre’s discussion of it. First, an inauthentic Jew possesses ‘an almost continuously reflective attitude’ directed both towards himself and other Jews. He behaves in a way that is ‘over-determined from the inside’. Sartre refers to this disposition as an ‘inferiority complex’ (1995: 94, 95). The society of the majority projects on Jews its stereotypical views of them. This pushes an inauthentic Jew to undergo an introspection in order to know himself and ‘in order to deny’ himself (1995: 97). Second, an inauthentic Jew performs ‘a doubling of personality by which they escape a sense of guilt through becoming judges’ (1995: 105). Through self-judging, an inauthentic Jew is able to ‘detach’ from himself, thereby becoming ‘a pure witness’ (1995: 97). The third aspect is that an inauthentic Jew is ashamed of his body and ethnic characteristics. By ethnic characteristics, Sartre (1995: 101) refers to the ‘biological and hereditary’ features of the Jews living in France. The fourth aspect is that an inauthentic Jew has ‘a taste for pure intelligence’. They attach ‘an absolute and unconditioned value to rationalism’ (1995: 112-13). Sartre concludes that the life of an inauthentic Jew ‘is nothing but a long flight from others and from himself. He has been alienated even from his own body; his emotional life has been cut in two; he has been reduced to pursuing the impossible dream of universal brotherhood in a world that rejects him’ (1995: 134-35). The fifth aspect of an inauthentic Jew is that he tends towards masochism. Sartre explains that ‘masochism is the desire to have oneself treated as an object’. This intrinsic masochism of an inauthentic Jew makes him attracted towards thinking of himself as a passive object. This thinking then allows him to reject his freedom and associated responsibilities (1995: 107-09). Lastly, all these aspects that characterize an inauthentic Jew can be understood as symptoms of his ‘search for security’ in a discriminatory society (1995: 99). In sum, the defining aspects of an inauthentic Jew are: (i) introspection in order to deny himself; (ii) self-judging in order to be able to detach from himself; (iii)
a sense of shame surrounding biological characteristics; (iv) rationalism; (v) masochism; (vi) and a search for security.

We can treat those aspects of the conceptual persona of an inauthentic Jew as the conceptual constituents of inauthenticity and proceed to discuss some implications of this treatment. The first thing to notice is that self-denial and self-judging serve the same function—they are both a mechanism for detaching one from oneself. Thus, the first dimensional unit is the detachment of the self through self-denial and self-judging.

Second, one can deny some of one’s habits, character traits, dispositions, etc., but one cannot deny one’s biological characteristics. Thus when it comes to the biological characteristics that ethnic Jews share and for which they feel shame, an inauthentic Jew does not have the option of detaching himself from these. Still, Sartre records an example of a Jewish mother who had denied that her son looks like a typical (French) Jew (1995: 102). This represents perhaps the only way of detaching oneself from one’s ethnic determinants. Pursing rationalism is another detachment strategy. By rationalism, Sartre refers to all those intellectual activities that fundamentally rely on logic and/or mathematics. For an inauthentic Jew, rationalism represents ‘an absolute and unconditioned value’ (1995: 113). It is universal. Emotions, passions, and cultural tastes are sensibilities that cannot be logically grounded. Embracing rationalism signals to others that there is a ‘universal man’. As Sartre (1995: 97) states, an inauthentic Jew ‘hopes to become “a man”, nothing but a man’. And he hopes to become such because then he can be, he believes, accepted into the ‘universal brotherhood of man’. That is to say, pursuing rationalism is motivated by the desire to transcend oneself and become an abstract being. To be ashamed of one’s body and detach oneself from it is similarly motivated—an inauthentic Jew wishes to abandon the particularities of his biological existence to be able to able to become the universal man. Moreover, to be a Jew is to live within the Jewish situation. Those situations are concrete realities. An inauthentic Jew attempts to escape these concrete realities by either embracing the ‘universal man’ or by reducing himself masochistically to an object. Thus the masochistic aspect of an inauthentic Jew rises out of the same desire to escape the concrete reality that a Jew was born into. Thus, the second dimensional unit is a desire to become an abstract being in order to escape reality.
Third, a search for security is the ultimate drive that explains the existence of all these aspects that characterize an inauthentic Jew. Interestingly, Sartre (1995: 99) considers this search for security to be a kind of ‘snobbism’ and argues that it stems from cowardice. Therefore, the third dimensional unit is a search for security out of cowardice.

In sum, the notion of inauthenticity entails three dimensional units: (1) the detachment of self through self-denial and self-judging; (2) a desire to become an abstract being in order to escape the reality; (3) a search for security out of cowardice.

**Authentic Jew**

Now, we shall examine the conceptual persona of an authentic Jew. First, Sartre claims that to be an authentic Jew is to live as ‘a martyr’ (1995: 91). In the context of this claim, he emphasizes that authenticity ‘demands much courage and more than courage’ (1995: 90). Sartre’s authenticity thus essentially involves heroic courage which is an aspect that plays an important role in the thinking of other early existentialists too.

Second, ‘the authentic Jew abandons the myth of the universal man’. The authentic Jew rejects the pursuit of the abstract man. On the contrary, he fully accepts both himself as he is and the concrete reality of the situation that he has been born into.

Third, Sartre (1995: 136-37) states that an authentic Jew ‘ceases to run away from himself and to be ashamed of his own kind’. In short, the authentic Jew does not feel shame for himself and his peers. Karen Barret’s study shows that ‘shame is a social emotion, it is socially constructed, invariably connected with social interaction, associated with appreciations (appraisals) regarding others, as well as the self’ (Tangney and Fischer 1995: 25). To feel shame involves acceptance of conventional values. Only when one gets rid of the feelings of shame can one liberate oneself from the diktat of social norms and fully accept and affirm oneself.

Fourth, Sartre (1995: 137) says that an authentic Jew ‘understands that society is bad’; and ‘he sees that the world is fragmented by irrational divisions, and in accepting this fragmentation and in accepting this fragmentation — at least in what concerns him — in proclaiming himself a Jew, he makes some of these values and these divisions his’. In the light of the discussion in the previous section, I take it as plausible to interpret the quote that ‘the world is fragmented by irrational divisions’ as a reference to cosmic
nihilism, that is, as a reminder that the world is absurd and contingent. If that is so then we can conclude that the notion of authenticity is predicated on the assumption of cosmic nihilism. Consequently, this call to connect authenticity with the adoption of these ‘irrational divisions’ as one’s own should be read as an encouragement to give meaning to those divisions and the world as a whole.

The last aspect is that an authentic Jew ‘chooses his brothers and his peers; they are the other Jews’ (Sartre 1995: 137). In other words, an authentic Jew accepts solidarity with other Jews. This solidarity is confirmed by the Jewish identity, which is constituted by the Jewish situation. That is to say, to be authentic is to be in solidarity with other people who find themselves in the same situation. She needs to strive not only for her own freedom, but also to will the freedom of others. Thus, to be authentic implies a moral imperative to fight for justice for others.

In sum, the conceptual persona of authenticity consists of the following dimensions: (i) heroic courage; (ii) a rejection of the transcendent and a full affirmation of the concrete self and its associated reality; (iii) an insubordination to social norms; (iv) the acceptance of cosmic nihilism (being aware of the lack of pregiven justifiability for human existence and the world); (v) the will to fight for collective justice.

At this point we should be able to clearly see the difference between the ultimate demand of Sartre’s and that of the early existentialists’. Sartre’s ultimate demand includes an appeal to strive for collective justice, which is something that is absent from the ultimate demands of the early existentialists. Another difference is that it does not call for self-construction which the early existentialists consider to be crucial.

Regarding self-construction and its absence in Sartre’s theory, it’s worth mentioning Sartre’s reasons for this. The notion of self-construction assumes an autonomy that is capable of choosing from among competing realities. That’s something that (later) Sartre believes to be an illusion. We cannot really choose from among alternative realities. The only thing we can do is become fully aware of the situation that one finds oneself in and then act within the constraints of that situation. According to Sartre, we are autonomous but in a weaker sense—it is not an autonomy to choose a situation but an autonomy to ‘mak[e] […] choices within it and by it’ (Sartre 1995: 60).
Instead of self-construction, Sartre talks about ‘self-recovery’. But, what is it that one is to recover if there is no ‘human nature’? ‘Self-recovery’ refers to an existential step by which one retreats from the contingent world and grounds himself in the centre of himself, that is, in his inner self. Sartre’s idea of authenticity thus presupposes an inner self. Unfortunately, Sartre does not elaborate on the notion of this inner self leaving us to speculate about what exactly he means by it.

The last constitutive aspect of authenticity that needs to be mentioned is the ability to accept and reconcile oneself with the situation that one finds oneself thrown into. For instance, if one happens to be born a Jew, it is authentic for him to accept this fact together with all the associated implications. This particular example of acceptance could perhaps be seen as a plausible case of an authentic response to one’s situation. But, what if one is thrown into a life of white, Christian, male privilege? In what sense, if at all, can accepting this life be seen as being authentic? Sartre does not consider this kind of scenario. I believe that Sartre’s account of authenticity has the conceptual resources necessary to answer this question/objection. One way could be to ground it, as suggested by Heter, in the Hegelian ethics of mutual recognition.

In sum, individual sections of this chapter examine, respectively, Sartre’s notions of bad faith and contingency and authenticity in accordance with three aspects of the existentialist paradigm. It turns out that Sartre’s existentialism, despite being unique in some respects, conforms to the paradigmatic structure of existentialism as identified in the previous chapters. In the next chapter, we will examine the thoughts of another important French existentialist, Albert Camus.
Chapter 4: On Camus

Albert Camus was a novelist, a playwright, a journalist, a moralist, a philosopher, and a political activist. He was born in 1913 in a working-class family in French Algeria. His father died in 1914 during World War I. As a Pied-Noir (or "blackfeet", a person of European origin living in French Algeria), from a very young age, Camus experienced hardships and poverty on the beaches of Alegria. His childhood shaped his unique worldview and artistic style. His works include novels—*The Outsider*, *The Plague*, *The Fall*—and philosophical works, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. They all are preoccupied with the immanent personal experience and the absurdity of our finite existence and the world as a whole. Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957. He died in an automobile accident in 1960 at the age of 46. Like many other thinkers labelled as existentialists, Camus rejected this label and deliberately distanced himself from existentialism. Despite this, Camus is commonly recognised as one of the leading voices of the French existentialist movement along with Sartre. The intellectually stimulating friendship between Camus and Sartre, along with their political-philosophical separation during the Cold War, has had a profound influence on 20th-century French existentialist thinking. (Todd 1998)

This chapter argues that Camus’s thoughts conform to the paradigmatic structure of existentialism that has been identified in previous chapters. The first section shows that despite there being no explicit disenchantment with a lie in Camus’s texts, the idea of the existential lie is present in his thinking implicitly and axiomatically. The second section argues that Camus’s key concept of absurdity is to be understood as an affirmation of nihilism, including epistemological, cosmic, and existential nihilism. The concept also implies, as will be argued, a call to assume a reactive response towards the nihilistic desert. The third section discusses Camus’s central notion of resistance which involves his ultimate demand. The final section of this chapter discusses some important criticisms that are implicitly related to this thesis.

4.1 The implicit step of an existential lie

The existentialists discussed above arrive at the nihilistic position in response to their deep realisation of an existential lie. Camus, on the other hand, assumes the nihilistic
position from the very start of his philosophical inquiry, that is, without the intermediary step of first developing a critique of an existential lie. This section aims to show that although there is no explicit step of realisation in his philosophy, there is a lie that is implicitly assumed.

Many scholars have noticed that Camus’s style, topics and ideas are reminiscent of Nietzsche (e.g., Aronson 2017). Nietzsche’s phrase ‘God is dead’ appears to be foundational to Camus’s thought. I suspect that after a century of the existentialist movement, for Camus, the critique of old values and religion, which were lies deriving from the human desire for justification, had become established knowledge that did not need to be dwelt upon. Nietzsche’s influence on Camus thinking is demonstrated in one of his earliest writings, the lyrical essay ‘Nuptials’ which was first published in 1938. This essay introduces some of the philosophical sensibilities that would substantially inform his later works. In the essay, Camus reflects on sensuous experiences in the midst of nature and ponders the question of the meaning of an individual life in the face of its inevitable end.

In ‘Nuptials’, Camus expresses a rather critical attitude towards Christianity, which is somewhat reminiscent of Nietzsche’s position. They both see religion as a negative nihilism that is directed against life itself. Camus refers to Christianity and other religious ideas that promote a search for transcendent justification as ‘the delusions of hope’ (1968: 74). He believes that this kind of hope is strongly detrimental to life. As he says, ‘hope, contrary to popular belief, is tantamount to resignation’ (1968: 92). Hope is a crucial element of any religious thought which leads Camus to call religion ‘a sin against life’. He sees it as a form of despair to ‘hop[e] for another life and evad[e] the implacable grandeur of the one we have’. Camus utterly rejects any attempt to ground the meaning of our life in the transcendental as ‘there is no superhuman happiness, no eternity outside the curve of the days’ (1968: 90). Instead, he advocates seeing this world and this life as intrinsically and robustly meaningful. In this respect he agrees with Nietzsche’s observation that ‘the world is beautiful, and outside it, there is no salvation’ (Camus 1968: 100).
It seems clear that already the Camus of *Nuptials* is fully aware of the world being based on a lie. Camus regards those people who can be ‘stripped of all hope’ as ‘men [who] have not cheated’ (1968: 91). He highly praises the pagan and passionate way of life which he sees as consisting of an intense love for this life. For Camus, harbouring hopes for a better life after one’s death or searching for meaning and justification from a transcendental being is a ‘lie’ and ‘cheat[ing]’ (1968: 91).

These views of Camus are developed in more detail in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*. There he argues that people often deceive themselves by employing ‘bad reasons’ (Camus 1975: 13). Camus does not really explain what these ‘bad reasons’ are. However, if we take into consideration Nietzsche’s influence on Camus’ thinking, we can make an educated and plausible guess that ‘bad reasons’ are all those reasons grounded in narratives of the transcendent along with its meaning and justification providing functions. Camus seems to have no doubts about this transcendental narrative being a lie, which strongly suggests that the disenchantment of a lie is an integral part of his thinking.
4.2 The absurd

Many Camusian scholars agree that the notion of absurdity is the ‘starting point’ of Camus’s philosophical system (Foley 2008: 33). In this section, I will examine the notion of absurdity and the related notion of the feeling of absurdity. By way of examining these notions, I shall argue that Camus’s philosophy contains the dynamic model of reactive nihilism, which is premised on the acceptance of a nihilistic position to overcome the nihilistic desert. The section is organized in three parts. The first part introduces the notion of the feeling of the absurd and discusses the three sources that give rise to the feeling. The second part discusses the meaning of Camus’s absurdity, and the third part discusses Camus’s rejection of any form of suicide as a response to the absurdity of life.

4.2.1 The feeling of the absurd

For Camus, the feeling of the absurd is inescapable. As he states, ‘all great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning.’ It can strike people in the face ‘at any street corner’ (1975: 17-18). It’s a feeling that is not only common but also life-threatening. It can become so strong and overwhelming that it pushes one to ask whether it wouldn’t be better to terminate one’s own life. A good way to start the discussion of the concept of absurdity, as understood and used by Camus, is to examine where exactly this sense of the absurd comes from. Bob Plant (2009: 116-19) argues that the origin of the absurd has to do (in the sense explained below) with the following three sources: (i) knowledge; (ii) repetition; (iii) finitude. In what follows in the rest of this section, I shall discuss the three sources to the extent to which they give rise to the sense of the absurd. In connection with this discussion, I will also argue that the affirmation of absurdity entails an acceptance of the nihilistic position.

Regarding knowledge, Camus argues that the feeling of the absurd derives from its epistemological inaccessibility. He argues that any chain of rational inference ultimately leads to an irrational point and to the realisation that the world is essentially irrational. As he claims, ‘[t]he mind’s first step is to distinguish what is true from what is false. However, as soon as thought reflects itself, what it first discovers is a contradiction’ (1975: 22). The contradiction that Camus talks about is intrinsic not only to philosophical thinking but to natural sciences as well.
Camus (1975: 51) argues that our knowledge is inevitably constrained by our language. Our understanding can be realised ‘only in human terms’. All sorts of human knowledge has been inescapably contaminated by human subjectivity. Thus, to truly know something is ‘impossible’ (Camus 1975: 33). At this point, Camus’s argument is reminiscent of Nietzsche. Camus’s reference to ‘the truism “All thought is anthropomorphic”’ directly refers to Nietzsche’s argument for epistemological nihilism (Camus 1975: 23). It is clear that Camus’s critique of rationality and knowledge is aligned with Nietzsche’s epistemological relativism (perspectivism). That is to say, the recognition of the absurd entails the affirmation of epistemological nihilism.

Regarding repetition, Camus claims that the feeling of the absurd also rises out of our daily routine. As he states, ‘it happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram […] But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement’ (1975: 19). Camus seems to be suggesting that our mundane life is something intrinsically alienated, a mere puppet show following a script. But there comes a moment when we realise that it is a mere puppet show and start questioning the meaning of life.

Camus retells the story of Sisyphus. A figure of Greek myth, Sisyphus was punished by being forced to roll a rock up a hill only for it to always roll down: he is doomed to repeat this task for eternity. Camus conceptualises the figure of Sisyphus as one of the conceptual personae of the absurd hero. He sees this repetition as the most ‘dreadful’ and ‘hopeless labour’ (1975: 107). Moreover, Camus parallels the fate of Sisyphus with that of the working class. ‘The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks and this fate is no less absurd’ (1975: 109). I suggest that the work referred to here by Camus is the kind of uncreative and repetitive labour found on the assembly-line.

Camus uses the metaphor of ‘the stage-sets collaps[ing]’ to refer to the absurd feeling that rises out of our daily routine. How exactly does this happen? Routine life is grounded in certain necessities. For example, going to bed every day at approximately the same time is what is required by the biology of our sleep cycle. Working at an

---

40 See section 1.4.4
assembly line and following prescribed steps that repeat themselves is necessary for production and capital accumulation. There is a sense in which these realities cannot collapse as they are objectively present. They can, however, collapse in terms of us realising that there is nothing intrinsically necessary about them. Realising that our daily routine is not intrinsically necessary gives rise to a feeling of absurdity. We suddenly see the world as essentially contingent and devoid of any meaning. This essential contingency of the world means that the world has no (nomological) structure. And without a structure the world cannot be called cosmos. In this sense, Camus’ concept of the absurd entails cosmic nihilism.

Regarding finitude, Camus claims that the sense of the absurd also rises out of the recognition of one’s inescapable mortality. We have been exiled into this life and condemned to bear it without any justification. The ‘absence of any profound reason for living’ gives a ‘ridiculous character’ to human life: it turns it into a prolonged process of dying. There is no meaning available to us to take comfort in and we cannot avoid realising ‘the uselessness of [our] suffering’. Without the assurances of a religious narrative, one feels like being ‘an alien, a stranger’ in the face of the grotesque world. More importantly, Camus (1975: 13) asserts that this feeling of being alienated makes people to ‘opt for death’. Life becomes a prolonged ‘agitation’ which eventually becomes emotionally so erosive that one starts pondering suicide (1975: 12). In short, Camus views human existence as intrinsically lacking in any justification and meaning. Thus, it is clear that Camus’s affirmation of the absurd presupposes the position of existential nihilism.

In conclusion, the preceding analysis of the feeling of the absurd and its origins shows that Camus’ thought is predicated on an acceptance of epistemological, cosmic and existential nihilism.

4.2.2 The absurd as an aspect of the relationship between people and the world

According to Camus, ‘the feeling of the absurd is not [...] the notion of the absurd. It lays the foundations for it, and that is all’ (1975: 32). So, what does the concept of absurdity mean?
Camus’s absurdity seems to resonate with that of Sartre’s. They both see it as essentially related to the intrinsic irrationality of the world. For Sartre, absurdity refers to the fact that existence both lacks any justification and has no rational explanation. Sartre’s absurdity is grounded in the notion of contingency. As Sartre (2003: 649) states, ‘man’s existence is absurd because his contingency finds no external justification’. The world and human beings are ontologically contingent and any attempt to rationalise this fact will give rise to the feeling of the absurd. However, for Camus, absurdity is not an ontological property of existence. It is, instead, an aspect of the relationship between human beings and the world. As he says, ‘[m]an stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world’ (Camus 1975: 31-32). In short, for Sartre, the ontological structure of existence determines its absurdity. For Camus, on the contrary, absurdity rises out of the confrontation between people and the world. As such, this absurdity is to be seen as an aspect of the relationship between people and the world. Camus adds, ‘I said that the world is absurd but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart’ (1975: 26). Camus does not see the world as irrational, but merely a place that cannot satisfy our ‘wild longing for clarity’. Likewise, he does not think repetition is absurd or tragic by itself. He states that ‘it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious’ (1975: 109). It is only when repetition collides with consciousness that the absurdity arises. Furthermore, Camus contends that absurdity arises from the conflict between our ‘insistence upon familiarity’ and the world that resists any familiarization (1975: 22-23). Richard Kamber (2002: 52) explains that this longing for familiarity, for Camus, is to be understood as a desire for ‘the world to be intelligible in the full and familiar ways that religious and philosophical systems have portrayed it’. Thus, ‘we want the world to make sense, but it does not make sense. To see this conflict is to see the absurd’.

The above reveals one of Camus’s important philosophical assumptions. Camus (1975: 22,31) believes that human beings have an ‘unconscious’ drive for ‘clarity’, for ‘familiarity’, ‘for happiness and for reason’. Kamber (2002: 44, 52) argues that this drive
is the human need for ‘cosmic unity and intelligibility’. It contains two aspects: ‘it purports to be comprehensive. To explain the world as a whole and not just a part of the world’ and ‘it is intelligible in terms that human beings care about; it makes sense with respect to human values’. Kamber is right about the first aspect, which is the human need to comprehend and to explain the world.

However, I think that it is not precisely accurate to treat the second aspect, that is a longing for ‘familiarity’, as a sub-dimension belonging within the scope of ‘intelligibility’. Regarding the need for ‘familiarity’, what Camus means is not that human values, religions, and philosophies can be intelligible for human beings, but that those systems comprehended by human beings can be justified by the world. For Camus, man lives a familiar way of life when he ‘lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification’ (1975: 56). So familiarity has something to do with aims, planning and securing the future and with justification. Thus, the human need that Camus presupposes is not merely the need for intelligibility, containing two dimensions, but two needs, one is for intelligibility and the other is for justification.

In sum, Camus’s absurdity refers to the tension between human needs and the world that cannot satisfy those needs. John Foley (2008: 8) defines Camus’s absurdity as ‘an epistemological claim addressing an ontological need; that is, a claim regarding the knowledge we can have of the world’. David Carroll (2007: 57) describes absurdity as ‘[t]he feeling of radical divorce, of living in a once familiar but now suddenly radically alien homeland, of being adrift between past and future and unable to rely on either to give meaning to the present, of being a stranger to the world and to oneself’, a feeling that ‘might appear to be cause for despair, especially since the exile from self, world and others is described as “without remedy”’. Plant (2009: 132) describes the experience of absurdity in a rather concise way, as the collision between ‘epic (subjective) importance and simultaneously […] trivial (objective) significance’. In short, absurdity derives from the tension of the radical separation between people and the world. For Camus, this tension causes unease, is unbearable and leads to despair. It is thus in the context of this radical divorce that the question of suicide arises. In order to eliminate the feeling of the absurd, one is tempted to put an end to this relationship, either by committing (physical)
suicide, or by attempting a metaphysical escape, which he terms ‘the philosophical suicide’ (Camus 1975:43).

4.2.4 The absurd as the reactive start

I have shown that Camus’s philosophy entails an implicit acceptance of the existential lie and affirms the nihilistic position. I shall now proceed to examine whether his nihilistic position contains a reactive impulse involving an ultimate demand to overcome the nihilistic desert.

In the preface to The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus states that,

[…] amidst the French and European disaster, this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism. In all the books I have written since, I have attempted to pursue this direction. Although The Myth of Sisyphus poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert (1975: 7).

It is clear that Camus’s philosophical ambition is to overcome or transcend the nihilistic ‘desert’, not merely to affirm it. For Camus, ‘living is keeping the absurd alive’, and ‘the absurd dies only when we turn away from it’. That is to say, as long as humanity lives, the desert of nihilism is inevitable. The only way to transcend it is by radical disconnection. In the face of this inescapable state, ‘one of the only coherent philosophical positions is [to] revolt’ (1975: 53). At this point, a suicide (physical or philosophical) becomes a seemingly acceptable way of revolting against the absurd. However, Camus argues that ‘it may be thought that suicide follows revolt - but wrongly. For it does not represent the logical outcome of revolt. It is just the contrary by the consent it presupposes. Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance at its extreme’ (1975: 54).

When confronting an overwhelmingly powerful enemy, self-termination amounts to capitulation. When facing the absurdity of the nihilistic desert, one must not, Camus advises, succumb to it out of either hope or despair. Since the nihilistic reality is unavoidable, the only way to revolt is persistent scorn or defiance. Here we have then Camus’s prescription regarding how one should behave when facing the absurd. One is not to commit suicide or even as much as despair. One should rather respond in an active way and laugh in the face of the absurd and scorn it. Camus invites his reader to see the absurd as a springboard towards a new life. In Camus’s earlier review of Sartre’s Nausea,
he declares that ‘realisation that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself but only a
beginning’ (1979: 169).

In conclusion, we can see that Camus’s notion of absurdity is an affirmation of the
nihilistic position. He rejects the desperation of absolute nihilism and the hope of cynical
nihilism. Instead, he advocates a positive response to the nihilistic desert. That is to say,
Camus’s philosophy contains the crucial step of adopting the reactive nihilistic position.
4.3 Resistance

Camus’s reflections on nihilism culminate in a rejection of any form of suicide. He argues that the only rational response to the absurd is to revolt. He states,

Having started from an anguished awareness of the inhuman, the meditation on the absurd returns at the end of its itinerary to the very heart of the passionate flames of human revolt. Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences which are my revolt, my freedom and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness, I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death - and I refuse suicide (1975: 62).

Camus’s ultimate demand, regarding overcoming the nihilistic desert, thus seems to be to revolt. Camus understands the notion of revolt in two ways. The first way can be found in some of his early works, such as The Myth of Sisyphus and The Outsider. There Camus takes the notion to refer to a kind of scorn or defiance towards nihilism that is realised on the level of an individual (1975: 55). The second way of understanding the notion of revolt is as a collective resistance that involves socio-political criticism. The rest of this section will discuss in more detail these two readings of the notion of revolt and its related implications. First, I shall discuss the conceptual persona of the absurd hero in The Outsider in order to explain the notion of (individual) resistance from an existentialist perspective. The second part introduces some unique aspects of Camus’s later conceptualization of resistance.

4.3.1 Resistance (defiance) in Camus’s early works

Camus enunciates the notion of resistance through a conceptual persona in The Myth of Sisyphus and through literary images in The Outsider. Let us start by examining the conceptual persona of the absurd hero in order to identify the ultimate demand of Camus’s. In The Myth of Sisyphus, he treats Sisyphus as an exemplary figure of the absurd hero. He describes Sisyphus in the following way:

Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing. [...] | Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition; it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn (1975: 108-09).

The first thing that Camus tells us in the passage quoted above is that Sisyphus is a hero. What exactly makes him a hero? Arguably, being a hero has something to do
with, among other things, a willingness to take action despite the low chances of that action being successfully completed. If one knows that it is highly likely he will not succeed in achieving something and yet one decides to act towards achieving it anyway, we will be inclined to admire the decision and the associated action. There is something heroic in acting against the odds. The ancient Greeks seem to have understood the notion of a hero in some such way. In their myths the hero nearly always meets a tragic end. This aspect of being a hero might be conceptually constitutive of it, and if that is the case then we could argue that the more a task is improbable, the more heroic it is to take action towards accomplishing it. Going back to Sisyphus, the completion of his task is impossible, he knows that and yet he attempts, again and again, to complete it. That’s what makes him a hero. And the fact that the task is not just highly unlikely to be completed but outright impossible (together with Sisyphus’s awareness of it) is what makes Sisyphus an archetypal hero. Now, the revolt against the absurd cannot be successful in some ordinary sense of removing or neutralizing the absurd. The revolt can do nothing against the absurd as it is, in a sense, itself absurd. This means that any act of revolting against the absurd is intrinsically heroic. Thus resistance entails heroic courage.

Second, Sisyphus’s defiance involves a lucid awareness of ‘the whole extent of his wretched condition’ (Camus 1975:109). Foley (2008: 10) describes this awareness as ‘an acceptance of the fact of the absurd (this, after all, is only to acknowledge the character of the human condition), but it is not a meek acceptance. Instead, it is an acceptance filled with scorn, defiance and suffering’. Foley points out that this acceptance does not involve a disposition to agree. Rather, it involves a rejection to escape one’s unfortunate destiny or to resort to self-deception.

Third, Camus supplements his explanation of the notion of defiance with a discussion of three archetypical figures: Don Juan, the actor and the conqueror. Below, I will discuss the three figures to shed some light on an interesting aspect of defiance—the ‘ethic of quantity’ (Camus 1975: 69).
Don Juan

Camus does not treat Don Juan as a morally corrupt womanizer. On the contrary, ‘If [Don Juan] leaves a woman it is not absolutely because he has ceased to desire her. […] But he desires another, and no, this is not the same thing’ (1975: 68). Camus explains that ‘Don Juan does not think of “collecting” women. He exhausts their number and with them his chances of life’. For Camus, “Collecting” amounts to being capable of living off one’s past. It also comes from ‘the spirit of nostalgia’, as ‘[an]other form of hope’. ‘What Don Juan realises in action is an ethic of quantity, whereas the saint, on the contrary, tends towards quality’ (1975: 69). Don Juanism is a way of confronting the absurd by devoting oneself fully to experiencing immediate passion.

The actor

Camus sees the life of the actor as a way of defiance in the face of absurdity. In devoting oneself as fully as possible to imitating the lives of others, one can experience a tremendous number of lives in a finite lifetime: ‘The greater number of different lives he has lived the more aloof he can be from them’ (1975: 79). Through acting, the actor is able to overcome the absurd with this ethic of quantity.

The conqueror

Camus states that conquerors ‘know that action is in itself useless. There is but one useful action, that of remaking man and the earth. I shall never remake men. But one must do “as if”. For the path of struggle leads me to the flesh. Even humiliated, the flesh is my only certainty. I can live only on it. The creature is my native land. This is why I have chosen this absurd and ineffectual effort’ (1975: 81). In order to overcome the absurd, which is an aspect of the relationship between people and the world, one either chooses self-termination or attempts to remake the earth. However, it is impossible to remake the world (not in the socio-political sense, at least). The conqueror attempts to challenge the impossible while knowing his action is doomed to fail. Moreover, this heroic attempt is fuelled by the ‘love of [the] body’, which is a self-love in the sense that “I do not have a body, but I am my body”. The passion of our immediate flesh itself is strong enough to protect us against the feeling of the absurd.
In sum, this defiance entails the conceptual dimension of the “ethic of quantity”. This ethics demands that in the face of the absurd one should be “living more rather than living better”. In order to live more, one must become more open to various experiences without discrimination. It might, on the face of it, seem that Camus advocates a “do-whatever-you-want” lifestyle, which may disregard our common moral intuitions. However, Camus (1975: 66) states those figures are mere ‘illustrations’ of the idea rather than ‘role models’ to be followed. The ethic of quantity entails two things: the rejection of ascetic morality and the praise of sensuous desire and bodily passion. At the same time, it is not a renunciation of any value judgement.

More light can be cast on Camus’ concept of revolt by way of an examination of one of his other important works, The Outsider. The main protagonist of The Outsider, ‘Meursault is the absurd hero par excellence’ (Foley 2008: 14). The idea of the defiance, as represented by Meursault in the novel, resonates with the conceptual dimensions Camus articulates in The Myth of Sisyphus. Still, there are a few unique aspects of defiance present in the story of Meursault. These include an insubordination towards social conformism and a rejection of traditional (religious) values. In order to elaborate on these aspects, we need to introduce the dilemma that Meursault faces in the book.

The novel begins with the funeral of Meursault’s mother. He attends the funeral with unusual calm and detachment. A few weeks later, Meursault and his friends, one of whom is a violent misogynist who has beaten the sister of an Arab person, are confronted by two Arabs on a beach. In the fight, Meursault kills one of the Arabs. In his trial, the court is more concerned about his lack of emotion during his mother’s funeral than his actual crime. In the end, the court sentences Meursault to death and it does so, in fact, because it believes Meursault to be a non-conformist and generally an unsympathetic person.

Officially, Mersault is charged with a murder. The trial, however, quickly becomes about something else, namely about Meursault’s unacceptable honesty and his insubordination to social norms. Already, shortly after the arrest, Meursault notices that ‘nobody seemed very interested in my case’ (Camus 1987: 63). Only after journalists have ‘blown [his] case up a bit’ by reporting his emotionally detached attitude at his mother’s
funeral do people start ‘crowding in to see [him]’ at the trial (Camus 1987: 81). Almost everyone involved in Meursault’s trial seems not care about the actual crime. Instead, they focus on his personality, his attitude, and his compliance with social norms.

For instance, the examining magistrate does not want to know Meursault’s motive. He tells Meursault, ‘What interests me is you’ (Camus 1987: 66). The magistrate is eager to know why Meursault fired four more shots at the lifeless body. After that, he takes out a crucifix and attempts to persuade Meursault to show regret, to ‘[weep] at the sight of this symbol of suffering’. The pre-investigation starts looking more and more like a religious trial. After Meursault refuses to go through with the performance, the prosecutor indifferently declares him an atheist. The magistrate comments, ‘I have never seen a soul as hardened as yours’, and he calls him ‘Mr Antichrist’ (Camus 1987: 69). Likewise, the state prosecutor keeps asking witnesses whether Meursault had cried at his mother’s funeral. For the prosecutor, Meursault’s behaviour at the funeral ‘might seem foreign to [the] case’, but ‘could, in fact, be highly relevant to it’ (Camus 1987: 85). Ultimately, the prosecutor accuses Meursault of being ‘morally responsible for his mother’s death’. Even Meursault’s lawyer shares the same view with the prosecutor. The lawyer asks Meursault if he felt any grief at the funeral and informs him that this question ‘matters a great deal’ (Camus 1987: 64).

In the face of these accusations, Meursault stays honest and true to himself. His replies are dry and unembellished. What matters is only their truth. With each of his replies he moves closer to a death sentence. His explanation that he did not intend to kill the Arab and that it happened ‘because of the sun’ (Camus 1987: 99), provokes laughter at the court. And in response to a question about his mother, he states that he ‘probably loved mother quite a lot, but that didn’t mean anything’, and he explains that physical circumstances explain his ‘tired and sleepy’ demeanour on the day of the funeral.

If we treat Meursault as a conceptual persona of resistance, we will be able to identify some additional conceptual aspects of the notion of resistance. First of all, what does he revolt against? There is no doubt, Meursault is guilty of killing of an Arab. But, what concerns everyone at Meursault’s trial is whether he cried at his mother’s funeral and whether he has demonstrated enough penance. That is to say, he is supposed to act
like a grieving son at the funeral and as a repenting criminal at the trial. He needs to play the role that society expects him to, which is, in Sartre’s terms, a bad faith. Meursault is sentenced to death not due to his actual crime but because he fails to play the game that social conformism imposes on him. The trial that follows Meursault’s arrest ‘seemed like a game’ (Camus 1987: 63). Mersault is fully aware of what is really going on. He knows it is not about the murder, it is all about his unwillingness to play the social role expected of him. In his final monologue, he notices that he is going to be ‘executed for not crying at his mother’s funeral’ (Camus 1987: 116). This knowledge of the consequences of his insubordination to social norms and expectations amounts to a deliberate act of resistance.

But why does Meursault refuse to play the game even though, as he knows, it will cost him his life? What motivates this refusal? There must be some prescriptive principle behind it otherwise the refusal is reduced to the mere stubbornness of teenage rebellion. Reflecting on the story of Meursault, Camus says: ‘Lying is not only saying what isn’t true. It is also, in fact especially, saying more than is true and, in the case of the human heart, saying more than one feels’ (1987: 118). To say ‘more than one feels’ is not just compliance to social norms and expectations, it is also a lie. Meursault’s defiance is thus not an act of stubbornness or indifference to his own life, but martyrdom for honesty. He is a rebel who rises up against social conformism and dishonesty.

Last, Meursault’s resistance is also directed against religious values (Christianity). For example, when the chaplain insists that one can recognise ‘a divine face emerging from the darkness’ in the cell, Meursault firmly replies there is no divine face; ‘the face he sees [is] the colour of the sun and burning with desire: it was Marie’s\(^\text{41}\) face’. In his mind, he mocks the chaplain: ‘[N]one of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman’s head. He couldn’t even be sure he was alive because he was living like a dead man’ (Camus 1987: 113-15). Meursault’s revolt against religion manifests itself in, among others, his pursuit of bodily pleasures. This rebellion against religion and the pursuit of sensory pleasures appears in most works of Camus’s.

\(^{41}\) Meursault’s lover
At this point we are able to list the following conceptual aspects of resistance as the ultimate demand in Camus’ existentialism: (i) a heroic courage; (ii) a lucid awareness of the human condition, where the human condition refers to nihilistic reality which includes epistemological, cosmic, and existential dimensions (iii) the ethic of quantity that contains the renunciation of ascetic morality and the praise of bodily desire and passion. (iv) insubordination to social and religious norms and expectations.

There is an important issue that needs to be addressed here. It has been pointed out that Camus’s work seems, as Edward Said (1993: 169-85) has criticised, to be a “complicit text” which endorses colonialism and imperialism. Conor Cruise O’Brien (1970: 23) argues that The Outsider ‘denies the colonial reality and sustains the colonial fiction [about Algeria]’ and ‘legitimates French domination [of the country]. Other scholars, such as Henri Kréa (1961), Pierre Nora (1961), and Anthony Rizzuto (1981), have exposed the imperialist assumptions of Camus’s works from various perspectives. If we take this critical dimension into account, seeing Meursault as a martyr is true only in the context Camus has created for us. This context, however, totally disregards the unnamed Arab and the significance of his unique human perspective. If we replace the never-named Arab with a white European who not only has a name but is given a sympathetic description, then Meursault’s martyred sensibility immediately collapses. Suddenly, it becomes hard to sympathise with a man who kills one’s own family simply ‘because of the sun’.

4.3.2 The rebel in Camus’s later works

In this section I shall discuss Camus’s later understanding of the notion of resistance (rebellion). As many scholars have pointed out after the publication of The Rebel in 1951, Camus understands ‘revolt as a means of transforming individual resistance into collective solidarity’ (Forsdick 2007: 121). The subject matter of resistance is no longer confined to the metaphysical dilemma, but extends to the political. Camus encourages his readers to revolt against a form of Marxist ideology which ‘adopts an increasingly totalitarian direction – and is transformed into violence and oppression’ (Forsdick 2007: 121). In what follows I shall briefly introduce a few notable aspects of Camus’s later notion of resistance and talk about how it differs from the early one. First, Camus goes
beyond a mere metaphysical appeal and into the realm of the political. The later notion includes the demand to revolt against violence, against totalitarianism and against communism, among other things, by which his ethical turn parallels the historical trends of the 20th century.

Second, Camus’s later notion of resistance acquires ontological relevance. As he states in The Rebel, ‘I rebel, therefore we exist’ (2000: 104). James E. Caraway (1992: 133) notes that Camus’s resistance ‘plays the same role in our everyday human trials as does the "cogito" in the realm of thought’.

Third, Camus abandons the individualistic tendency of his early resistance and imbues it instead with the ethic of collective solidarity. In The Plague, Camus describes a group of people revolting against collective conditions rather than against individual ones. He explains that The Plague can be read in three ways: as ‘a tale about an epidemic, a symbol of Nazi occupation, […] and, thirdly, the concrete illustration of a metaphysical problem, that of evil’ (1979: 221). We can see that the metaphysical dilemma is no longer simply an outsider’s confrontation with society, but becomes ‘the affair of us all’ (Camus 2013: 53). As Camus himself explains, ‘[i]f there is an evolution from The Stranger to The Plague, it is towards solidarity and participation’ (1979: 220).

Those aspects of Camus’s later resistance substantially relate to his political philosophy. Camus’s political advocacy is not substantially relevant to the central argument of this thesis. Thus, I do not discuss them here in depth. Jeffrey C. Issac’s (1992) study and the recent studies of Aronson (2005) and Sean Derek Illing (2017) provide excellent accounts of Camus’s political views in the context of various historical and philosophical details. Still, the publication of The Rebel was historically important for the mid-century existentialist movement, especially regarding Camus’s break with Sartre. In The Rebel, Camus openly attacks various ideologies, including Marxism, which, of course, was an implicit attack against Sartre. In order for an ideological critique to exert power, it must either be well argued or consistent with people’s moral expectations. I do not think that Camus’s critique of Sartre is successful in either.

First, readers might notice that The Rebel was written in an impressionistic, non-rigorous, rambling style. As Aronson (2017) points out, this essay is ‘punctuated with
emphatic words of conclusion [...] which are rarely followed by consequences of what comes before and often introduce further assertions, without any evidence or analysis. [...] The going gets even muddier as we near the end and the text verges on incoherence’. I have had the same impression when reading the book: Camus is preaching. And of course, where there is no argument, no reasoning, there cannot be any real discussion of the proposed views.

Second, while Camus’s critique seems to be predicated on a rejection of violence, it preserves a notable colonialist overtone. For example, when discussing the concept of metaphysical rebellion, he claims that rebellions in the West, from ‘a Greek slave’ to ‘a Parisian bourgeois’, are ‘legitimate’. But, the rebellions in India or ‘primitive societies’ do not have any significance. Thus, ‘the problem of rebellion […] has no meaning except within our own Western society’ (2000: 20). This is, surely, an extreme claim, a claim that has distanced Camus from a non-western reader. Also, and importantly, the claim exposes Camus’s intrinsically racist attitude to non-western societies and cultures. They are, he seems to imply, inferior and unsophisticated and as such cannot revolt in the (higher and metaphysical) sense in which a Westerner can. This, of course, is an aspect of Camus’s thinking that significantly weakens its overall appeal as a moralist criticism.
4.4 Comments on criticisms of Camus

There are some criticisms of Camus that are relevant to our discussion here. In this section, I will have a look at two of them. The first concerns Camus’s critique of other existentialists, a critique that describes the ultimate demands of other existentialists as “philosophical suicide”. Some scholars take this critique as evidence that Camus cannot be described as an existentialist. The first subsection discusses whether this critique of Camus is enough to support the view that he was not an existentialist after all. It scrutinises the logic of the critique to show that it is, ultimately, grounded in a self-defeating argument. The second subsection concerns the critical view of Camus according to which his philosophical problems and assertions are but pointless dramatics. This criticism dismisses Camus’s thoughts on the meaning of life as mere dramatic intellectualization. I will offer a defence against this criticism of Camus.

4.4.1 Absence of hope as a hope

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus deliberately criticises other existentialists, including Kierkegaard, Shestov and Jaspers. According to Camus, the philosophy of each existentialist author ultimately turns into a ‘philosophical suicide’. According to Camus, the prescriptive appeal those (other) existentialists present is just a disguised ‘escape’. He states that ‘through odd reasoning, starting out from the absurd over the ruins of reason, in a closed universe limited to the human, they deify what crushes them and find a reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them’ (1975: 35). Some scholars take Camus’s harsh criticism of existentialism as evidence to support the view that Camus was not himself an existentialist (Foley 2008: 5). In this section I will evaluate whether this view is plausible.

Let us first say a bit more about Camus’s critique of those existentialists. According to Camus, those existentialists all realised that traditional values and religions were lies. This realisation lead all of them to the nihilistic position. However, they could not ‘maintain the equilibrium’ in the face of the dread of absurdity. Thus, they ‘deified what crush[ed] them’ trying to, in this way, restore meaning and justification back into the external (1975: 40).
For example, Camus (1975: 36) accuses Jaspers of ‘suddenly assert[ing] all at once the transcendent, the essence of the experience and the super-human significance of life. [...] Thus, the absurd becomes god (in the broadest meaning of this word) and that inability to understand becomes the existence that illuminates everything’. Likewise, Camus claims, Shestov already ‘discovers the fundamental absurdity of all existence’ and ‘even hints that this God is, perhaps, full of hatred and hateful’. But instead of trying to rebel against the absurdity and God, Shestov ‘spring[s] into [God] and by this leap free[s] oneself from rational illusions’ (1975: 37). Furthermore, he accuses Kierkegaard of escaping the problem of the absurd by rejecting clarity and coherence. For Kierkegaard, the absurdity, ‘the very thing that led to despair of the meaning and depth of this life’ becomes ‘its truth and its clarity’. Kierkegaard ‘substitutes for his cry of revolt a frantic adherence, at once he is led to blind himself to the absurd which hitherto enlightened him and to deify the only certainty he henceforth possesses, the irrational’ (1975: 40). The leap of faith, for Kierkegaard, is to achieve an authentic and faith-oriented self-constitution, but for Camus, this leap expresses an ‘escape’ from the very human condition of the absurd. Thus, Kierkegaard ‘ultimately returns to [Christianity’s] harshest aspect. For him, too, antinomy and paradox become criteria of the religious’ (1975: 40).

According to Camus, the other existentialists have ultimately chosen a ‘hope’ (1975: 35). To escape the absurd, an aspect of the relationship between people and the world, choosing hope is a form of suicide—a ‘philosophical suicide’ (1975: 44). Hope itself is a deception for it is rooted in the desire to escape nihilistic reality. To hope is to return to the lie. Although the hope is not the same thing as the lie it has replaced, it serves the same function: it deceives. Camus charges the other existentialists with having failed to overcome nihilistic reality. The reality crushed them, and their response was to ‘deify’ irrationality to create hope, that is, a new deception.

To sum up using the terms employed by this thesis, Camus claims that the other existentialists end up becoming cynical nihilists, not positive-reactive nihilists. Initially, their project was to disenchant the existential lie. But in the face of absurdity (of nihilistic

---

42 We do not know which works by Jaspers, Shestov and Kierkegaard Camus is talking about since he does not offer any reference.
reality), they could not bear the agony and had to escape it. They did so by creating a new lie. As Camus (1975: 43) states, they ‘start[ed] from a philosophy of the world’s lack of meaning, [they] end[ed] up by finding a meaning and depth in it’.

Now, what shall we think about Camus’s criticism of the other existentialists? I would argue that the criticism is not very convincing. It is not convincing because Camus can be interpreted as doing the same thing he objects to, regarding the prescriptions of the other existentialists. The reader will remember that Camus sees any hope as a lie. The response to the absurd, that Camus advocates, must be completely devoid of any hope. The problem with the response to the absurd that Camus advocates is that it itself can be plausibly interpreted as being or involving a kind of hope. Camus’s criticism of the other existentialists targets the element of hope in their prescriptions, but the alternative he offers involves hope too. How so? An attentive reader of The Myth of Sisyphus will notice that the language of the descriptions of Sisyphus—the absurd hero—is far from neutral. It reveals Camus’s strong sympathy for Sisyphus and his heroic struggle with his destiny. At the end of the book, Camus (1975: 111) instructs the reader that ‘one must imagine Sisyphus happy’. Thus after having embraced the struggle and its absurdity, Sisyphus reaches happiness. Surely, this a promise of a hope.

Foley notices the same problem with Camus’s criticism of the other existentialists. In response, he attempts to defend Camus by distinguishing two kinds of hope. Foley (2008: 26-27) explains that the Kierkegaardian hope that Camus criticised is a kind of ‘infinite hope’ that is, in effect, ‘an attempt to recapture God’, and, as such, ‘permitting an escape from the absurd confrontation’. Camus, on the other hand, advocates a ‘finite hope’, which is ‘a mundane hope in an unsponsored universe’, ‘a hope tempered by an awareness of the limits to human comprehension and by a stubborn refusal to transgress the limits discerned through conscious awareness’. Foley’s distinguishing of the two hopes might be seen as a promising step towards saving Camus’s criticism from the problem identified above. However, I believe that Foley’s defence runs into its own problems.

First, Foley does not really tell us much about the difference between finite hope and infinite hope. He seems to suggest that the main difference between the two derives
from the difference between mundane reasoning and religious inspiration. If that is the case, then Foley’s distinction can at best distinguish Camus from theistic existentialists but cannot support the claim that Camus is not an existentialist at all.

Second, Camus’s criticism is not directed against theistic (infinite) hope only. It covers all varieties of hope, including those generated by secular ideologies or any meaning creating discourses. Many scholars, such as Carroll (2007: 59), point out that Camus’s criticises ‘all forms of revolution for being teleological and messianic and believing in the promise of an end of history that would justify any means used to achieve that end’. Camus’s hope is not confined to religion (infinite hope) but includes any ideology, mass movement, grand narrative or value system that can offer meaning to human beings and teleology to this world. That is to say, Camus’s finite hope is still a hope and as such subject to his own criticism.

To sum up, the demand to revolt that Camus advocates can be plausibly interpreted as involving hope, which then means that Camus’s criticism of the other existentialists applies to his own thought too. Thus, we can suggest that Camus’s attempt to distance himself from the other existentialists was not successful.

4.4.2 Dramatics, a pointless lament

Some scholars dismiss Camus’s demand to revolt as a ‘pointless lament’ (Ayer 1946: 159). Others, such as Nagel and Plant, describe Camus’s problems and assertions as dramatics. They point out that the problems Camus addresses do not require such fantastic solutions and fierce resistance. Arguably, the logic of this criticism applies not only to Camus but to existentialism as a whole. The criticism has some appeal. The statements of the existentialists do, indeed, sometimes feel rather dramatic. Although I believe a defence would be possible, I do not intend to defend existentialism as a whole against this charge here. Instead, let me just gesture towards a possible defence against their specific criticism of Camus.

Nagel, examining Camus’s notion of the absurd, suggests that ‘it would be wise to consider carefully whether the absurdity of our existence truly presents us with a problem, to which some solution must be found - [as] a way of dealing with prima facie disaster’ (2013: 22). He contends that the awareness of absurdity is but ‘the capacity for
epistemological skepticism’: ‘It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so’. Thus, he thinks that Camus’s questions and assertions after all are ‘dramatics’. Nagel (2013: 23) recommends that we ‘approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair’.

Plant agrees with Nagel’s argument and adds that the absurd derives from the conflict between the perspectives of subjective importance and objective triviality: ‘The friction between objective and subjective perspectives, and the experience of absurdity that often ensues, is part of what it means to be human; it is simply “the way we are put together”. Camus’s resistance is thus ‘fundamentally misplaced’ (2009: 122). It is misplaced because the experience of absurdity is not ‘due to some epistemic failing or contingent ontological rupture between us and the external world - which would then, in principle, justify lamentation or revolt. Rather, the experience of absurdity is what makes us the kind of creatures we are’ (Plant 2009: 133).

Moreover, Plant argues, Camus’s resistance is not only dramatic but also harmful. As he states,

Shaking one’s fist at the world (metaphorically or otherwise) may have some cathartic value, but it will misfire if such dramatics aspire to anything more than a mere emotional outburst. In this sense, Camus’s existential scorn is not unlike (literally) punching one’s pillow in rage, kicking one’s chair in frustration, or cursing the rain. The crucial difference, of course, is that none of us thinks that pillows, chairs or rain are strictly blameworthy (2009: 131).

In short, Plant acknowledges the existence of the absurd. However, he does not think that it is a problem that should be taken as seriously as Camus does. Even if there is a problem, Camus’s solution to it—resistance—is too dramatic and even harmful. Finally, Plant (2009: 133) contends that although ‘questions such as ”What is the meaning of life?” and ”Does life matter?” are both irresistible and futile, [they should] be met with comic laughter rather than existential bemoaning or revolt’. Plant advocates a kind of humorous, ironic, and relaxing laughter in the face of absurdity.

Regarding the criticisms of Nagel and Plant, I would like to point out that being “dramatic” is not problematic in itself. Also, I do not think that treating questions such as “What is the meaning of life?” too seriously amounts to being too dramatic? Instead, whether one finds it dramatic or not is, to a great extent, a matter of individual
preferences and taste. An English football fan might see the loss of his team in the finals of an important tournament as a world collapsing event and react accordingly, while a hungry Sudanese mother will see the fan’s emotional meltdown as unbearable theatrics. There simply is no neutral perspective from which something can be labelled as (objectively) dramatic.

Second, even if Camus’s assertions are indeed dramatic, it does not mean they are problematic. Plant’s argument implies that being dramatic is somehow inappropriate. It might be seen as such in the context of Anglo-Saxon culture (in which one is instructed to ‘keep calm and carry on’). But, there are some cultures in which people do not see drama as a problem. They are used to expressing their feelings and can be, from our perspective, rather dramatic. Our lives consist of important moments (serious accidents, illnesses, deaths of relatives and friends) and uneventful daily routines. In general, people intuitively assume that those important moments are more meaningful than uneventful daily routines. To be dramatic is often a way to emphasize one’s point. Seeing dramatics as inappropriate or problematic depends on individual taste rather than philosophical reasoning. Moreover, Plant argues that to feel a sense of absurdity is not a problem, because it is a unique human capacity and something that is constitutive of what we are. But so is being dramatic. This too is what we are as human beings.

In conclusion, this chapter primarily focuses on Camus’s notions of hope, absurdity and resistance and their associated conceptual personae in order to illustrate that his thoughts conform to the paradigmatic structure of existentialism. This chapter and the chapter on Sartre together show that the mid-century existentialists, despite preserving their unique aspects, share a paradigmatic structure with the early existentialists. Thus, we can conclude that this existentialist paradigm is the common denominator that holds existentialism together. The identification of the existentialist paradigm conceptual tool enriches our conceptual understanding of existentialism. More importantly, it is a that enables us to search for thinkers in non-Western cultures who might turn out to be existentialists. This application of the existentialist paradigm may allow us to identify some unnoticed sources of certain sociocultural phenomena in
non-Western contexts. In the next chapter, I will employ the paradigmatic structure of existentialism into the Chinese cultural context to demonstrate its heuristic potential.
Chapter 5: Chinese Existentialism

The paradigmatic structure identified in this thesis can be used to search for existentialist works across non-Western cultures. Here, I will look at China to see whether there might be a Chinese thinker describable (but so far unrecognised) as an existentialist. Guignon and Pereboom (2001: xiv) explain that existentialism ‘arises as a response to some of the major shifts’ in ‘the modern worldview’. In the West, existentialism originally emerged as a response to the advent of modernity along with the collapse of Christianity. China, as a part of the human world, has an utterly different experience of encountering modernity from the West. First of all, Chinese culture is not rooted in a monotheistic religion. Thus, if existentialism does exist in China, we should expect it to be in some important respects different from its western counterpart as its development has not been shaped by its opposition to the values and demands of a monotheistic religion.

It might surprise the reader to hear that existentialism is quite popular in China. Young people are still talking about existentialism in intellectual cafés. Sartre’s and Camus’s books are still placed in the recommended section of bookshops. Why is existentialism still popular in China? I suspect that there are some social and historical peculiarities about China that broadly make people attracted to existentialist ideas. The West has arrived at a modern worldview through the Enlightenment and industrialisation. This process has taken nearly four hundred years in the West. In China, however, this whole process was packed into less than a century.

After the Opium Wars, British gun boats introduced modernity to China. China was plunged into a traumatic and chaotic process of modernisation. During this process, China went through several violent revolutions. After the abdication of the Qing Emperor, China entered the Warlord Era. This was a period of civil war accompanied by assassinations and other acts of political terrorism and by the restoration of a conservative party. Before the end of the civil war, China entered the Sino-Japanese war (World War II) that lasted 14 years. The Nanking Massacre was one of the worst atrocities committed during the World War II. 43

43 See more in (Chang 2012).
After the Second World War, another civil war broke out, this time between the KMT party and the Chinese Communist Party. It was not until the founding of New China in 1949 that a period of relative stability came to China. From this brief history of modern China we can see that all those critical upheavals that the West experienced over 400 years, such as the collapse of traditional values, the acceptance of enlightenment and scientific rationality, political nihilism, genocide, Communist revolution, etc., have happened in China over a much shorter time span.

When China became communist, it led to massive socio-political changes, including rapid industrialization, the Great Chinese Famine and the Great Cultural Revolution. Thirty years ago, a rich farmer could be sent to a labour farm because he had a few more cows and a few more acres of land than his fellow villagers. When my parents were young, they sincerely believed that it was an honourable thing to be a manual worker. In China, a worker’s life was very stable, with free housing, free health care, and other benefits of socialism. Thirty years later, the state started introducing into the economy some neo-liberal elements, promoting slogans such as ‘to get rich is glorious’. That’s when China started its rapid economic development (Schell 1984). Parents would warn their children that: “if you do not study hard, you will end up as a worker at an assembly line.” What people once believed was glorious and meaningful suddenly became inferior and alienating. In short, the experience of a modern Chinese person is shot through with a sense of disillusion, a kind of collective anomie, and the shock caused by collapse of given values. It is no wonder that existentialism seems so attractive in such a socio-economic environment.

So, are there any existentialist thinkers in China? I believe that we should focus on the figures who live(d) in the age of the collapse of traditional values in order to be able to answer such a question. After having researched quite a few thinkers that lived and worked through the periods of societal and cultural upheaval, I came across a writer whose thinking, on the face of it, seems to involve some existentialist aspects. The name of the writer is Lu Xun and his name is far from unknown in modern China. This chapter proceeds to analyse Lu Xun’s literary work to demonstrate that his thinking as a whole is an anti-traditionalistic project that involves all three constituents of the existentialist paradigm. Later in the chapter, I will show how Lu Xun influenced Mao Zedong’s
thinking and his socio-political experiment—the Cultural Revolution. I will conclude that the Cultural Revolution can be plausibly understood as a form of political-reactive nihilism.

5.1 Introducing Lu Xun

First, let me give you a brief account of Lu Xun’s life. Lu Xun was the pseudonym of Zhou Shuren (1881-1936). He was a writer, essayist, translator and literary critic. Lu Xun was born in Zhejiang province into the family of an imperial bureaucrat. When he was 13 years old, his grandfather was sentenced to death for imperial examination fraud. In order to save the grandfather’s life, his family used most of their money to bribe officials. Around the same time, his father became ill. The father received an incorrect diagnosis and died three years later. Lu Xun was 16 at the time of his father’s death. His clan relatives then seized his family’s land through various means. Lu Xun’s experiences as a teenager led to his disillusionment with China’s imperial system and the Confucian clan tradition. As Lu Xun (2014h: 153) recalls, ‘I might see the true face of the world from this way’.

In 1902, Lu Xun went to Japan on a government scholarship to study Western medicine. In contrast to the backward China, Japan was in the middle of rapid westernization and modernization. While in Japan, Lu Xun learnt Japanese, German, Russian and some English, which allowed him to read a great deal of Western literature and philosophy. During his medical studies, a propaganda video of Japanese soldiers beheading Chinese rebels in the newly conquered territories in China was shown during a lecture he attended. What shocked Lu Xun most, apart from the cruel execution of his countrymen, was the apparent indifference of the Chinese crowd watching the execution. This particular fact had a profound effect on Lu Xun. He decided to leave medical school and devote himself to literature. He came to believe that medicine is not that important. If the Chinese people were ‘spiritually’ cauterized and indifferent, then, no matter how ‘physically’ strong and healthy, they were ‘merely meaningless material for public display and spectators’ (Lu 2014h: 154).

Lu Xun returned to China in 1909 and took up a position as a lecturer in physiology. In 1918, he published A Madman’s Diary, a fiction written in vernacular
Chinese. He went on to publish other works of fiction and even founded his own magazine. Lu Xun was then invited to teach literature at Peking University. His literary reputation grew and he became a famous writer. As the leading figure of the movement of vernacular Chinese, (which has now become the standard written form of Chinese), Lu Xun had a strong influence on the Chinese language. Many of the words and expressions he coined have been adopted in the ordinary Chinese language.⁴⁴

Later in his life, Lu Xun’s political views started approximating towards communism. Although he never formally joined the Communist Party of China, his articles were openly critical of the KMT government and were implicitly in favour of the Communist Party. Mao Zedong was a great admirer of Lu Xun’s writings. More than once, Mao claimed that ‘Lu Xun was China’s first sage. The first sage in China was not Confucius, nor me. I might be a worthy, a mere student of the sage’ (Feng and Jin 2011: 2577). With the establishment of Communist China and the literary and philosophical preferences of its political leader, Lu Xun became a household name. Many of his writings have become compulsory reading in Chinese schools, which means that virtually all adult Chinese have read at least some of Lu Xun’s works. In this sense, Lu Xun could be described as the most influential modern writer in China.

However, the official enthusiasm for Lu Xun has also, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, limited the study of Lu Xun’s works. After 1949, there was but one approved reading of Lu Xun for decades. The approved reading was the one undertaken from the Marxist perspective. Of course, such an intellectual environment is not very conducive to discovering other, non-Marxist aspects of a work. However, Lu Xun’s thinking does have important non-Marxist aspects. Some of his contemporaries, such as Liu Bannong, argued that the source of Lu Xun’s ideas can be traced to ‘the doctrines of Tolstoy and Nietzsche’ (Tang 1979: 27). The influence of Nietzsche on Lu Xun is undeniable. Lu Xun often quotes and refers to Nietzsche in his works and letters. Also, he was the first to translate some of Nietzsche’s works into Chinese (Lu 2014g: 199-212). However, before 1978 (the beginning of the Chinese economic reform), the official assessment of Nietzsche took him for ‘a reactionary bourgeois idealist philosopher’

⁴⁴ See more about Lu Xun’s biography in (Xu 2018).
For Chinese scholars, it was a career killer to work on Nietzsche or his influence on Lu Xun.

The Chinese economic reform has changed this. Some scholars started to pay attention to Nietzsche and his influence on Lu Xun’s works (e.g., Lu 1978; Yue 1980). At the same time, their research was relatively shallow as it focused mostly on cataloguing Lu Xun’s comments on and references to Nietzsche while mostly avoiding any comparison of their theoretical thinking. It was only in the late 90s that some scholars started looking at the deeper theoretical connections between Lu Xun and Nietzsche. For example, Wang Furen (2007: 6) reports that Liu Xiaobo ‘strongly advocated a Nietzschean reading [of Lu Xun]’.

Some scholars, such as Wang Hui, not only recognised the affinity between Lu Xun and Nietzsche but went as far as reading Lu Xun as an existentialist. Examining Lu Xun’s notions of loneliness, anxiety and despair, Wang argues that the central theme of Lu Xun’s thought is ‘despair’ and our revolt against it. Wang goes on to claim that Lu Xun’s revolt against despair comes from the consciousness of his own historical ‘vocation’, which is for him to be the ‘historical intermediary’ (lishi de zhongjian wu, 历史的中间物) (2000: 32). The historical intermediary is someone who functions as the ‘transitional stage’ between the ‘demise of the old world’, with ‘desperate self-denial’, and ‘the birth of the new world’ with lucid revolt (2000: 105-10). Wang’s study is important as it brings into focus some hitherto ignored aspects of Lu Xun’s works. However, in many respects, his study is just an introduction into reading Lu Xun as an existentialist and as such it stays, most of the time, on the surface of the matter.

Some Nietzschean scholars recognise the considerable influence of Nietzsche on Lu Xun. One of these, James Luchte, has recently re-examined the relationship between Nietzsche and Lu Xun. Using various textual and historical evidence, Luchte shows that

---

45 Wang Hui later shifted his academic interests to political theory. He became a political advisory to the Chinese government and “the leader of Chinese new left”. Liu Xiaobo, on the other hand, is behind significant political tension between China and the West as a result of his political activities. The two scholars, who epitomise the political changes in contemporary China, were to a great extent responsible for introducing existentialism into literary criticism as practiced in China. This suggests that it was not only specialists who were attracted to existentialism.

46 See in (Kelly 1991). For a recent account from a conservative Chinese perspective, see in (Yue 1990).
Nietzsche and Lu Xun shared a theoretical motivation. I agree with Luchte when he says that ‘there remains a core agreement between Lu Xun and Nietzsche as to principles, a shared understanding as to the inherent strife and tension of human existence, and of their strategic and perspectival approach to cultural revolution’ (2016: 7;8,25).

In a relatively recent study, *Lu Xun in an Existentialist Perspective*, Peng Xiaoyan provides detailed historical, biographical and textual evidence to support the existentialist reading of Lu. She claims that Lu Xun’s works as a totality meet the existentialist scheme, which she summarises as ‘encountering nothingness and transcending nothingness’ (2007: 157-59). Peng’s study is comprehensive and insightful. Still, her existentialist scheme is rather simple. Her central concept of “nothingness” (xuwu, 虚无) seems to cover a variety of notions—such as despair, distress, and nothingness—from both a phenomenological and a nihilistic perspective, which makes the concept unhelpfully vague.47

Also, some non-Chinese scholars endorse an existentialist reading of Lu Xun. For example, Keizo Yamada contends that China’s authoritative reading of Lu Xun as a Marxist writer amounts to a serious misinterpretation. Yamada (2009: 104) argues that although Lu Xun cannot be categorized into the ‘systematized lineage of existentialism in the West’, the overarching idea of Lu Xun’s world is a case of ‘an existentialist way of thinking’.

Overall, some scholars have noticed that Lu Xun’s thinking contains existentialist aspects. However, none of them have tried to explore these aspects in more depth.

---

47 In Chinese, the terms of nothing, nothingness, emptiness, and nil all share the same translation: “xuwu”. The semantic limitation of translation invites such confusing equivalence.
5.2 Literature as an anti-traditionalistic project to dispel the existential lie

This section is an examination of the presence of the realisation of an existential lie in Lu Xun’s thought. The first part focuses on Lu Xun’s characters of Madman and Ah Q and his parodic work, *Old Tales Retold*, to show three different patterns of Lu Xun’s writing. All these patterns target and criticise the deceptive nature of the Chinese cultural paradigm. The second part discusses Lu Xun’s essay *Toward a Refutation of Malevolent Voices*. I will show that Lu Xun’s critique of deceptive thinking is not confined to traditional values and norms, but extends to a mode of deception that deprives people of the awareness of the authentic self.

5.2.1 Lu Xun’s anti-traditionalism

Lu Xun was always very politically conscious. When he was in Japan, he joined the Chinese Revive the Light Society, which was a political terrorist group that aimed to overthrow the Qing dynasty through a series of assassinations and bombings (Zhu 2013). However, Lu Xun never fully committed himself to political activism. While studying in Japan, he witnessed the hypocrisy and shallowness of his revolutionary comrades. This made him doubt the prospects of changing China solely through a political revolution. His doubts were reinforced when after the 1911 revolution nothing much changed. Instead of profound and progressive changes in society, he saw the restoration of Yuan Shikai and warlord politics. He started to suspect that this revolutionary failure was fundamentally due to some essential aspects of the Chinese cultural paradigm and the rather deplorable mentality of the Chinese people. He had earlier identified the deep sickness of China as the ‘lack of sincerity and love; in other words, the Chinese had been deeply infected by hypocrisy, shamelessness, and suspicion’ (Xu 1952: 18-19). In response, Lu Xun decided to cure the Chinese collective psyche through his literary project of anti-traditionalism and iconoclasm.

Lu Xun’s works as a whole can be seen as radical anti-traditionalism. Lu Xun’s hostility to traditional values has been widely recognised by his readers (e.g., Lin 1985). He shared with some of his contemporaries a cultural-intellectual mode of thinking that was hostile towards Chinese traditions. Still, his rejection of tradition was more radical and pessimistic than that of his contemporaries. In his attack on traditional values, we
can distinguish three approaches. The first one is the explicit critique of Chinese tradition that Lu Xun sees as hypocritical, self-deceptive and oppressive. The second approach is the creation of a series of deplorable figures representing the Chinese people. By presenting them to Chinese readers, he provokes them to reflect on the traditional values that they have internalized. The third approach attacks the traditional value system by producing a parodic version of various Chinese legends and myths.

*Madman*

The first approach exposes the oppressive nature of tradition through literary satire. Amongst the other writers of the May Fourth Movement, Lu Xun provided the most pessimistic and dark accounts of Chinese society. In his *A Madman's Diary*, Lu Xun employs the modern psychological notion of paranoia to delineate the protagonist’s mind. Madman is grotesquely paranoid. He suspects that everyone around him is a potential cannibal and fears that he himself will eventually be eaten by one. Madman hears that there is a famine in a village. A notorious character was beaten to death; then some people took out his heart and liver and ate them to boost their courage. Madman is immediately worried: ‘they eat human beings, so they may eat me’ (Lu 1980c: 41). Madman tries to confirm his worries making some inquiries. But people only take him as being insane. He therefore attempts to find evidence in a history book:

> I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology and scrawled all over each page are the words. “Confucian Virtue and Morality.” Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night until I began to see words between the lines. The whole book was filled with the two words – “Eat people” (Lu 1980c: 42).

Madman’s view of history can be seen as an allegory of the Chinese tradition as understood by Lu Xun. Confucian virtue and morality, the cornerstone of Chinese culture, is juxtaposed with cannibalism. This strongly suggests that Lu Xun sees these traditional values as, in some sense, man-consuming. Lu Xun’s Madman is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s Madman. They both announce the collapse of a traditional value. However, Nietzsche’s Madman rushes into the crowd to announce joyfully, ‘God is dead’, which he sees as implying that from now on man is free. Lu Xun’s Madman, on the other hand, sees Confucianism as a form of spiritual cannibalism, which is a finding that leads to great despair. Lu Xun’s Madman has come to the realisation that everyone
in Chinese society, unconsciously or consciously, is a cannibal. This means that Madman himself has been deeply involved in this spiritual and cultural cannibalism.

I have been living in a place where for four thousand years human flesh has been eaten. [...] I may have eaten several pieces of my sister’s flesh unwittingly, and now it is my turn. How can a man like myself, after four thousand years of man-eating history – even though I knew nothing about it at first – ever hope to face real men? ’ (Lu 1980c: 51)

Madman’s monologue quoted above implies that Lu Xun, as the creator of the fictional character of Madman, is aware of the Chinese people being deeply spiritually and culturally sick. Now, of course, this begs the question as to how the Chinese people can be made aware of their condition and, ultimately, be liberated from this condition. Lu Xun’s answer is short and surprising. They have to become mad.

It worth noticing that the original Chinese expression ‘kuangren, 狂人’, that has been translated as ‘madman’, does not refer to a person that is psychologically insane. It refers to a person that is mad in the sense of being audacious and wild. As such, the word ‘madman’ implies a trespassing of given limits and norms. A Madman’s diary was not only Lu Xun’s first vernacular fiction, but also, and more importantly, his first radical attack against the pathology of the traditional value system. In this and other works he strives—employing a brave, brutal and sarcastic style—to spiritually liberate Chinese people from the cultural poison they have been fed.

Ah Q

Lu Xun’s second approach is meant to confront the readers with the deplorable figure of “the Chinese” to make them reflect on themselves. “The Chinese” as a socio-cultural type overlaps to some extent with Nietzsche’s conceptual persona of ‘The last man’. Nietzsche introduces the notion of the last man as the antithesis to his concept of a superior being—the Übermensch. Lu Xun translated Nietzsche’s concept of the last man into Chinese as “moren, 末人” and used it in his criticism of the Chinese intellectuals who ‘boast of each other’ but are ‘internally shallow’. Lu Xun accuses them of ‘cover[ing] the ears of the youth, making them dumb from deaf, drained and minor, become “The last man”’. And he admits that ‘its appearance can be seen in Nietzsche’s description’ (1980d: 104).
Nietzsche’s last man pursues trivial pleasures and has no ambition to grow spiritually or intellectually. The last man as a concept does not play a very big role in Nietzsche’s thinking. Nietzsche seems to refer to this concept only to explain, by way of contrast, his concept of Übermensch. Lu Xun, on the other hand, is much more interested in the concept of the last man than in the Übermensch. The reason for this preference is that Lu Xun (2014f: 135) believes that the Übermensch as a developmental stage is simply too ‘distant’ (miaomang, 渺茫) and advanced for the ordinary Chinese people to reach. Lu Xun thought that the spiritual evolution from man to the Übermensch is not available to the collective Chinese people because his existence is so wretched that he first needs to be lifted up to the level of “Mensch”.

Lu Xun exposes the mental and spiritual condition of “the Chinese” (the last man) by way of creating several literary characters or types. They all are spiritually degraded, mediocre, indifferent, self-deceptive and without any purpose in their life. Perhaps the best embodiment of “the Chinese” as understood by Lu Xun is Ah Q, the protagonist of The True Story of Ah Q. There are two essential characteristics that compose the mental and spiritual domain of Ah Q.

The first one is the habit of self-deception. An important thing to notice is that although Lu Xun titles the fiction as a biography, its protagonist does not have a specific name. ‘Ah Q’ is not a Chinese name, but a pictographic symbol for a vague human figure with a queue hairstyle. In fact, we do not really know what the name of the protagonist is. In the story, when milord Zhao’s son passes the country examination, Ah Q, who gets drunk, complacently boasts to others that he and milord Zhao belong to the same clan and by an exact reckoning is three generations senior to Zhao’s son. Milord Zhao hears about this and summons Ah Q. He slaps Ah Q in the face and angrily asks, “‘How could you be named Zhao? Are you worthy of the name Zhao?’” Facing the humiliation of milord Zhao, ‘Ah Q made no attempt to defend his right to the name Zhao but rubbing his left cheek went out with the bailiff’ (Lu 1980d: 104).

A person’s name is his basic identifier in society. It is what people call him. It is what he responds to. It is a part of his identity and constitutive of how he understands himself. We can never know whether or not Ah Q’s surname is Zhao from the story. If
his true name is not Zhao, he simply tries to take credit from other’s success by falsely claiming his own identity. If Ah Q’s name is Zhao, he does not even attempt to defend his right to his name. The fact that the name of Ah Q is uncertain and that he refuses to confirm it suggests, on a symbolic level, that Ah Q is deeply detached from his self, and perhaps even unaware of it.

This lack of self-awareness is behind Ah Q’s habit of rationalizing humiliation and self-deception. After having been beaten by some random people, ‘Ah Q would stand there for a second thinking to himself, “It’s as if I were beaten by my son. What the world is coming to nowadays!” [...] Thereupon he [...] would walk away, satisfied at having won’ (Lu 1980d: 109). If Ah Q is as totally submissive as an animal, he would probably just take those abuses for granted. Yet, Ah Q unconsciously does not accept his wretchedness. Through self-deception, which Lu Xun terms as ‘psychological victory’ (Lu 1980d: 109), he tranquillizes himself to be satisfied with the status quo. This kind of reflection allows Ah Q to escape the awareness of his own wretchedness. It tranquillizes him and makes him content with the reality of his existence. This habit of self-deception ultimately leads Ah Q to completely lose his selfhood.

The second characteristic that composes Ah Q’s mental and spiritual domain is a complete lack of any ambition. Ah Q’s will is extremely weak and he seems to have no goal in his life. His lifestyle is passive and idle, and he is deeply suspicious of any changes to it. When the revolution happened, ‘it had occurred to him that the revolutionaries were rebels and that a rebellion would make things difficult for him, he had always detested and kept away from them’ (Lu 1980d: 136).

He does not know that the revolution is meant to liberate people like him. Although he lives at the bottom of Chinese society and his life is rather miserable, his first association regarding the revolution is that it ‘would make things difficult for him’. His association is not rational but instinctual, and it is rooted in the ethics of Confucianism that he has internalized. He hates the revolution for no rational reason, but simply because of his Chinese socialisation.

However, when the revolutionaries come to his region, especially, when he finds out that they could ‘strike such fear into’ those lords, he suddenly ‘could not help feeling
rather fascinated’ by the revolution (Lu 1980d: 136). At the same time, Ah Q’s act of joining the revolution is rather pathetic. He does not know what the program of the revolution is, or what it involves to become a revolutionary. Simply, when the revolutionary procession is passing him, and people shout at him ‘“Ah Q! Come along with us!”’, he ‘go[es] with them…”

The inquisitor who later catches Ah Q describes the manifestations of this internalized Confucianism in the following way:

[Ah Q] knew that this man must be someone important. At once his knee-joints relaxed of their own accord, and he sank to his knees. “Stand up to speak! Do not kneel!” shouted all the men in the long coats. Although Ah Q understood, he felt quite incapable of standing up. He had involuntarily started squatting, improving on this finally to kneel down. “[Servility]” exclaimed the long-coated men… (Lu 1980d: 149)

Ah Q cannot take charge of his own existence as he has no control of his knees. He is driven by a socially constructed intuition which has enslaved him. Ah Q’s conduct is an example of Sartre’s bad faith, which is characterised by a lack of awareness of the authentic self and by acting entirely according to the socially constructed intuition. Even on his way to execution, Ah Q still keeps subjecting himself to this bad faith. In the Qing Dynasty, the execution of a culprit was a public entertainment. Bailiffs would escort the culprit through the streets before executing them in front of the assembled crowd. The culprits themselves would then usually sing lines from an opera to show their heroism or grievance. Ah Q tries to sing an opera to play the role that is expected of him. But he is unable to recall the lines of any opera and ‘became ashamed of his lack of spirit, because he had not sung any lines from an opera’ (Lu 1980d: 152).

However, Lu Xun does not intend to concentrate his critical impetus on the portrayal of an immiserated figure, but rather on presenting a panoramic view of a self-deceptive society. At the end of story, when Ah Q is being paraded before the crowd he seems to begin to realise his self for the first time. The pain of the experience brings him back to himself.

So Ah Q took another look at the shouting crowd. At that instant his thoughts revolved again like a whirlwind. Four years before, at the foot of the mountain, he had met a hungry wolf which had followed him at a set distance. […] He had never forgotten that wolf’s eyes, fierce, yet cowardly, gleaming like two will-o’-the-wisps, as if boring into him from a distance. Now he saw eyes more terrible even than the wolf’s dull yet penetrating eyes that having devoured his words still seemed eager to devour something
beyond his flesh and blood. And these eyes kept following him at a set distance. These eyes seemed to have merged into one, biting into his soul. “Help, help!” But Ah Q never uttered these words… (Lu 1980d: 153).

We know Ah Q himself was once in the crowd watching an execution as he admits that ‘when they execute the revolutionaries […] Ah, that’s a fine sight’ (Lu 1980d: 131). But during the final moments of his life, he suddenly becomes aware that he is an individual, thus divorcing himself from the herd. Soon, he realises the cannibalistic nature of the crowd and its psychology. He becomes paralysed, unable to utter a word. Those in the crowd are dissatisfied, because the culprit has ‘pass[ed] through so many streets without singing a single line from an opera. They had followed him for nothing’ (Lu 1980d: 154).

Ah Q is just one of the fictional characters (the others being, for instance, Kong Yiji, Run Tu and Xiang’s wife) that Lu Xun created to expose the collective psyche of “the Chinese”. The collective Chinese live in self-deception and shamelessness, completely lacking any sense of self. It should be noticed, however, that even though Lu Xun’s characters often belong to the lowest social classes, it is not really this class that he targets. As Louis Althusser (1977: 1), among many other readers, notices, the real enemies of Lu Xun are “fonctionnaires idéologiques”. They tame the masses and make them docile. ‘Les adversaires de luxun montent la garde devant cette docilité qui se réclame de toute une histoire, des empereurs, des rites, et d’un sage nommé Confucius.’ [Lu Xun’s opponents, who rely on a whole history, the emperors, the rites and a sage called Confucius, stand guard over the docility]. The tragedy of those wretched figures results from their submission to an intuition that prevents them from recognising their inner self. This intuition is constructed through the process of socialization. These ideologues can be seen as embodying traditional Chinese culture and society. Analogously, the fictional characters of Lu Xun are essentially an expression of the Chinese traditional paradigm, and that is what Lu Xun really fights against.

Old Tales Retold

Lu Xun’s iconoclastic project is not confined just to the society of the Qing dynasty or to Confucianism. He also attempts to expose and neutralize some other elements of Chinese culture. In the last year of his life, Lu Xun published a collection of stories titled
Old Tales Retold, which consists of a collection of reworked Chinese myths and legends. This volume demonstrates his third approach where he works to dismantle the solemnity of traditional narratives through parody.

These reworked stories are satirical parodies aimed at ridiculing the seriousness and authority of some of the foundational myths of Chinese culture. The first story, Mending Heaven, is a retelling of the ancient Chinese myth of Nüwa. In Chinese mythology, Nüwa was the mother goddess who created the humanity from yellow clay. This was followed by a great battle between the gods which resulted in one of the pillars holding Heaven getting broken. Nüwa sacrificed herself to block the holes in the heaven so that humanity would be spared from a catastrophic flood.

Nüwa, the creator of humanity, is one of the most important characters in Chinese literature. Lu Xun’s parodic rendering of the myth of Nüwa is an attack on the very connection to the divine that the Chinese see as constitutive of their cultural identity. In Lu Xun’s retelling, Nüwa’s creation of humanity is not motivated by any grand teleology but takes place just because she is bored. Afterwards, human beings create language, civilization and morality. But all these are merely ‘nonsense’ to Nüwa. Of particular amusement is that, as Nüwa is mending the heavens, the humans send her the following message:

“Your wanton nakedness demonstrates a failure of morality, contempt for the rites, and breach of the rules,” the creature recited fluently, pointing at the tablet. “Such conduct is for birds and beasts only. The laws of the land expressly prohibit it!”’ In response, Nüwa ‘smiled at her own foolishness. Dialogue with these creatures, experience had taught her, was quite impossible (Lu 2014b: 249-54).

The quote is a good example of Lu Xun’s method of criticising traditional morality by employing sarcasm and parody.

According to Linda Hutcheon, parody is a work of imitation modelled on an original but ‘so turned as to produce a ridiculous effect’. ‘Parody, then, in its ironic “trans-contextualization” and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony’ (2000: 32). Lu Xun’s retellings of mythology
are a good example of a parody. His stories are repetitions of the original, but with differences that signal irony and create a ridiculous effect.

We can see that Lu Xun deliberately uses some humorous elements to create an ironic and ridiculous effect. For example, in *Flight to the Moon*, Lu Xun does not depict Yi’s saga, but narrates a story of a man suffering from a mid-life crisis. Yi is unable to catch enough prey to feed his family. He has no choice but hunt crows every day. Thus, his wife, Chang’e, has to eat ‘crow and fried-bean noodles’, which is a rather hilarious food (Lu 2014b: 257). In the end, Chang’e leaves home not because she wants to protect the elixirs, but out of dissatisfaction with the living conditions in her house.

In Lu Xun’s parodic works, all those solemn, grand, traditional narratives become ridiculous. Confucius is a snobbish hypocrite. Laozi is forced to record his teaching by himself because his accent is too strange for others to understand. Zhuangzi, as Wilt L. Idema (2014: 256) senses, ‘become[s] the butt of satire, depicted as a vainglorious intellectual who, for all his fine language, is motivated primarily by self-interest. Laozi and Zhuangzi are the founders of Taoism, which is, together with Confucianism, one of the pillars of the Chinese cultural paradigm. Still, Lu Xun’s parodic reworking of legends is not meant just to entertain. As Robert Burden (1979: 136) claims, parody ‘defines a particular form of historical consciousness, whereby form is created to interrogate itself against significant precedents; it is a serious mode’. Hutcheon (2000: 101) argues that ‘it is this “historical consciousness” of parody that gives it the potential power both to bury the dead, so to speak, and also to give it new life’. In other words, Lu Xun’s parodies reveal a historical consciousness, which aims to disenchant Chinese traditional narratives, moralities and teleology.

Overall, these three approaches of Lu Xun’s literary creations constitute his project as a consummated whole, which is a satire of anti-traditionalism. According to Lu Xun, satire is ‘us[ing] concise or even rather exaggerated language […] to tell the truth about certain aspects of some group of people’ (2014f: 155). What is the truth that Lu Xun

---

48 The original myth is about Yi and his wife Chang’e. Yi was a god of archery who descended from heaven to help mankind. Yi shot down nine suns, leaving one behind to prevent mankind from suffering drought. Later, he was given two elixirs as a reward. Afterwards, his wife, Chang’e, ate the elixirs and flew into the moon to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands.
wanted to reveal? He seems to want his readers to know that the Chinese paradigm—including culture, traditions, social norms, moralities, religions, and teleology—is a ‘nonsense’, a nonsense that is intrinsically deceptive and oppressive.

5.2.2 The existential lie in Lu Xun’s world

It is clear that Lu Xun, like European existentialists, aims to reveal the deceptive nature of traditional values and social norms. Lu Xun’s works can be seen as a project to disenchant traditional narratives and the given social telos. Is this enough to see Lu Xun as a thinker whose primary target is the existential lie?

We have seen that Lu Xun strives to dismantle the traditional value system in order to create space for the introduction of a new and better one. This might be seen as being merely progressive and not as being an existentialist. The existential lie refers to any value system that is being imposed onto an individual from the outside. The value system imposed from the outside is always and irreducibly deceptive. So, in this context, is Lu Xun an existentialist or a mere progressive?

In *Toward a Refutation of Malevolent Voices*, Lu Xun clearly articulates his ideas and critical targets. He believes that there are malevolent ‘voices’ casting a shadow upon his culture. These voices are ‘rash doctrines [that] have deluded the minds of the people’. He refers to them as ‘deceptions’. What deceptions exactly does he have in mind? The context of the essay is clear. He does not talk about traditional values or religions but about modern theories and doctrines, particularly about political ideologies and scientism (2011: 39).

Regarding political ideologies, Lu Xun claims that ‘[t]he propositions being advanced by men of the present may, after some analysis and investigation, be divided into two major categories. The first suggests that one should think of oneself as a citizen of a particular nation, while the second conceives of the individual as a member of the world community’ (2011: 46). The first one refers to nationalism as a political trend, while the second one refers to the ideas of cosmopolitanism and anarchism. Lu Xun (2011: 46) argues that ‘the common goal of both camps, although not spelled out in an organized agenda, is the elimination of all human individuality, so that in their mixed-up state none dare differ from the next, and all dissolve into one great mass’. 
The essay was written at the time when it was popular among the Chinese intelligentsia to argue for replacing traditional values with modern ideas and norms. Lu Xun, on the other hand, believed that the problem is not the traditionality of values but their deceptive nature, which is something that, according to Lu Xun, applies to all the modern ideologies as well. And, these modern ideologies are deceptive because they are, along with traditional values, voices that come from the outside. The truth comes out ‘[o]nly when one speaks from the heart, becoming master of one’s own soul’, only then ‘can one begin to have an individual identity’ and ‘only when each person possesses an individual identity will the public approach a total awakening’. ‘When each person realises his or her own identity and no longer merely drifts with the tide […] [t]hey can speak from the depth of their hearts in clear and sonorous tones with their spirits running high and will, in time, no longer be subjugated through the powers of force and deception’ (2011: 46). That is to say, Lu Xun believes that the crucial problem of the ideas of his time, whether in traditional or modern thoughts, is that they distance people from their self.49

It seems to be clear now that Lu Xun’s project of anti-traditionalism is not a mere progressivism, but rather a revolt against the deceptive thinking that deprives people of their awareness of their own selves. For Lu Xun, the modern ideas of his time continue to deceive people in this sense. They tend to destroy the unique individuality of a person through the imposition of a grand, generalizing narrative. At places, Lu Xun even seems to suggest that the homogenizing tendency of modern ideologies is stronger than that of the traditional narratives. As he says, ‘[i]n the older days, autocrats ruled over the majority, but the masses sometimes had opportunities to rebel or flee. Today, when individuals who stand up alone are made to suffer at the hands of the crowd, they are denied the option of resistance or dissent’ (2011: 47).

The notion of the self plays a crucial role in Lu Xun’s thinking. Lu Xun (2011: 40) believes that the self ‘can provide deliverance from falsehood and chicanery’. His

49 In Lu Xun's essay, written in classical Chinese, the original word he used for ‘self’ is ‘我’, which literally means the first-person pronoun, ‘I’ or ‘myself’. Jon Eugene von Kowallis translates ‘我’ as ‘individual identity’, or ‘identity’. In Chinese, however, ‘我’ can also refer to the self or one’s particularity, not merely to individual identity. Thus, I translate the word ‘我’ as ‘self’ here.
theorizing about selfhood and individuality is consistent with that of the European existentialists. We can see that Lu Xun’s idea of the deprivation of the individual by the crowd echoes Nietzsche’s idea of herd instinct and Kierkegaard’s appeal to human individuality. However, Lu Xun is not a theoretician in the sense in that the majority of European philosophers are, and he does not provide conceptual/logical arguments to support his claims about the self and individuality. He prefers to rely on the poetic and artistic force of his formulations to communicate his ideas. As he says of ‘the voices of the heart’, ‘this inner light can break through darkness and silence’ (2011: 40). This quote supports the view of Lu Xun as a writer who encourages his reader to become authentic in the sense of grounding her life and its meaning in her innermost self.

Regarding Lu Xun’s criticism of science, it does not, from the contemporary perspective, seem to be particularly radical. He argues that scientific explanations are reductive and ‘unable to provide deeper answers, and its tenets do not satisfy the needs of the greater public’. Lu Xun suggests that the needs of public can be described as ‘metaphysical’. He declares that the origin of religion can be traced back to ‘the desires of people who sought to improve themselves by means of transcending a wholly relative and limiting reality in order to enter the lofty realm of unlimited absolutes’ (2011: 49). He believes that this need is not going to cease to exist with the disappearance of religion. Against the background of this, he sees scientists as ‘present[ing] themselves as men of aspiration who are smashing superstition’ and as ‘mere henchmen for the establishment of a new orthodoxy’ (2011: 56). In this context, Lu Xun mentions Nietzsche, saying about his ideas that ‘though based on science, [they] were still tainted with distinctly religious and fantastical elements, and thus implied an alteration in, but obviously not the elimination of, faith’ (2011: 52). He then goes on to argue that the best path for China is not modernization in the sense of destroying its traditional religious and moral values and fully embracing the scientific paradigm, but rather the elimination of those cultural and spiritual modes of being that distance people from their true selves. In other words, Lu Xun argues against any narrative that is deceptive in the sense that it prevents people from realising their unique individuality. As the previous section has demonstrated, his literary project was that of anti-traditionalism. Here, he primarily articulates that his goal
is not meant to promote an anti-traditionalistic progressivism, but to fight against any and all deceptive narratives.

In this section, I have argued that the ultimate target of Lu Xun’s critical thinking seems to overlap to a great extent with what I have called in this thesis an existential lie. At the same time, the concept of an existential lie as targeted by the European existentialists is importantly and perhaps even essentially informed by its development and usage in a religious framework. That is an aspect that is totally missing in the broader context of Lu Xun’s thinking. Does this prevent us from describing Lu Xun as an existentialist?

5.3 Holistic tradition and nihilism

Lu Xun, like the European existentialists, criticises those discourses (traditions, social norms, modern ideologies, etc.) that deceive us and distance us from ourselves. There is a difference here between the European existentialists and Lu Xun. The European existentialists conceive of the existential lie as having to do with a transcendent being. Lu Xun’s understanding, however, of that which deceives us is not built around the notion of a transcendent being. Due to this difference, Lu Xun does not sensu stricto belong to the existentialist tradition as it has developed in Europe. However, I still believe that he can be seen as an existentialist: an existentialist of a Chinese variety. What do I mean by a ‘Chinese variety’ of existentialism here? And how would that differ from the European one? European and Chinese thinking differ regarding their respective metaphysical assumptions. This difference in metaphysical assumptions has generated different conceptual frameworks within which existentialist ideas have taken on a different form. The first subsection introduces the Chinese holistic philosophical presuppositions to explain why Lu Xun’s lie is independent of the concept of transcendence. The second subsection discusses the specifics of Lu Xun’s nihilism against the background of these holistic philosophical presuppositions. It identifies some differences but concludes that it still conforms to the dynamic model of reactive nihilism.

5.3.1 Chinese holistic presupposition

It seems fairly uncontroversial to say that to the extent to which Western thinking has risen out of the religious paradigm of Christianity, it could be described as
fundamentally oriented towards the transcendent. The pre-secular West openly positioned the transcendent—the Christian God—as the ultimate regulative idea guiding the totality of the civilizational life. The secular West has continued to subject itself to the regulative power of the transcendent even after the death of (the Christian) God as announced by Nietzsche. In the secular West, the transcendent has metamorphosed into several overarching postulates about the world that guide scientific (i.e. paradigmatic) thinking in the West as a whole. Some of these guiding metaphysical postulates about the world are its law-likeness, ultimate explicability and causal closure. The referents of these postulates are the transcendent in the strong sense of somehow keeping the world together while, at the same time, being beyond the world.

Chinese thinking, on the other hand, is not metaphysically grounded in the idea of the transcendence. As Ge Zhaoguang (2014: 124) explains,

the ancient Chinese believed that the cosmos was an interrelated holistic entity. For them, “Heaven, Earth and the Human,” had a profoundly mysterious mutual interconnection or correspondence. They believed that not only did Heaven in astronomical terms, Earth in geographical terms, “human beings” in physiological terms and even “the state” (guo) in political terms mutually influence each other, but that “Heaven, Earth and the Human” were also mutually connected spiritually, mutually manifest in phenomenal appearances, and interactive in the sphere of concrete reality.

There are many scholars, such as David Hall and Roger Ames (1987: 11-25), who support Ge’s claim that the Chinese see the world as ‘an immanental cosmos’. Benjamin Schwartz argues that ‘the presuppositions of the various schools of thought in ancient China had three common points: (1) a central concept that kingship dominates everything, (2) a concept of universal order embracing both Man and Heaven, and (3) an holistic concept of immanent order’ (1985: Chapter 1; Quoted, Ge 2014: 28). The studies of the above scholars all adequately explain the fact that Chinese thought sees the world as self-contained and immanent.

Li Zehou argues that the key to Chinese thought is the assumption of the ‘unity of Heaven and man’ (tianren heyi, 天人合一). This assumption plays a pivotal role in Chinese holistic cosmology, in which the high reality is immanent in the cosmos of which human beings are a part. As Li claims, the Chinese hold ‘the one world view’ (yi ge shijie guan, 一个世界观). There is only one world, from both a material and a spiritual perspective, and that is this world. On the other hand, the fundamental presupposition
of Western thinking is, according to Li, ‘the two worlds view’ (liangge shijiegua, 两个世界观). The Western conception of reality assumes the existence of the transcendent and the material world. Li claims that this assumption underpins the dualistic thinking that is prevalent in Western philosophy (1994: 460).

In short, the Chinese cultural paradigm does not contain the idea of the transcendent. For the European existentialists, their project was to find a solution for a world in which “God is dead”. In such a world, it is not necessarily the case that people are less religious but rather that they are exposed to the utter meaninglessness of the world for the first time because the meaning-giving transcendence has collapsed. European existentialism was a reaction to this collapse. Chinese existentialism cannot be understood as a reaction to such a collapse because there is no transcendent reality in the Chinese mind that could collapse.

Lin Yü-sheng, who also notices the strong existentialist aspects in Lu Xun’s works, argues that ‘Lu Xun’s agonized tension between hope and despair led him to emphasize will – the will to strive to answer the call of life’. He goes on to observe that Lu Xun ‘placed an existentialist stress on the meaning of human will, a stress that was, however, inspired not by the European notion that God is dead but the Chinese notion that one can find meaning in life here and now’ (1985: 113). Lin does not read Lu Xun from the perspective of existentialism. He discusses him to merely defend a certain existentialist perspective. Lin believes that the unity of Heaven and man ‘entails that transcendent meaning is immanent in human life and is to be found by human effort rather than created by human will and thinking’ (1985: 115). That is to say, the Chinese cultural paradigm, as Lin understands it, contains a philosophical presupposition that can be found also in European existentialist thinking. According to Lin, European existentialism dethrones the traditional cosmology (in which meaning in some sense comes ultimately from the transcendent) to liberate the self and ground the meaning of the world and human existence in the self. The Chinese cultural paradigm, on the other hand, has no conception of the transcendent world. One is thus always supposed to ‘find’ meaning in one’s inner self. Lin (1985: 116) argues that Lu Xun ‘still moved within a cultural orbit in which it was impossible for a genuine European-style crisis of existential identity to arise’. In short, Lin believes that Lu Xun’s thinking is best understood as an expression
of the Chinese paradigm of the unity of Heaven and man. Lin admits that Lu Xun’s works might seem to contain some existentialist aspects but when considered as a whole Lu Xun’s thinking cannot be seen as genuinely existentialist.

I agree with Lin’s view of Lu Xun’s works as being essentially anti-traditionalist. However, my assessment of the existentialist aspects found in Lu Xun’s thinking somewhat differs from that of Lin’s. Lin claims that Lu Xun’s thinking is not motivated by the realisation that “God is dead”, but rather by certain traditional metaphysical presuppositions. Lin suggests that the main evidence for this influence is that ‘Lu Xun received a rigorous and excellent classical Chinese education […] he could not help being profoundly influenced by it’ (1985: 115-16). This, however, is not very convincing evidence. We know that Lu Xun was also strongly influenced by the teachings of Nietzsche’s which could then be taken as ‘evidence’ that he was, in fact, an existentialist. That is, of course, far from a compelling argument.

The paradigm of the unity of Heaven and man might indeed be seen to contain some existentialist aspects, such as the promotion of the self-perfection of humanity to realise the self-value of life. However, the paradigm contains other aspects too. Zhaohe Chen, discussing the paradigm, distinguishes four dimensions of it: ‘man and Nature, man and man, man and himself, man and State’ (2016: 282). Lin’s interpretation of the unity of Heaven and man primarily focuses on the third dimension. Let us look at the other three dimensions. Regarding the first dimension, man and Nature, Chinese traditional thinking considers Nature to be part of Heaven. Nature exists in a harmonious, balanced, and stable way, and it is cyclical. The first dimension comes with the instruction that man should follow the ways of nature and avoid any extremes in thinking and behaviour. Regarding the second dimension, man and man, it comes with a set of social rules, including Confucian filial piety, the benevolence shown by the strong to the weak, etc. In fact, Lu Xun was strongly against those social norms and supported a radical and destructive way of thinking and behaviour. As for the last dimension, man and State, it promotes the monarchy as the centre of man’s socio-political life. ‘The emperor is given orders by Heaven, the world is given orders by the emperor, the country is given orders by the king’. Thus, the common people are just ‘subjects’ (Chen 2016: 285; Quoted, Dong 2001: 406). We can say that Lu Xun’s greatest
enemy in both his literary and political life (he joined a group that assassinated members of the royal family in his early years) is the institution of imperial power. These four dimensions of the idea of the unity of Heaven and man are holistic and inseparable. Thus, the dimension that calls upon man to search for meaning in the immanent self essentially needs to be complemented by the other three dimensions. Lin views Lu Xun’s existentialist aspects as an expression of the idea of the unity of Heaven and man. But, Lu Xun only conformed to one dimension of this unity and at the same time was clearly opposed to the other three. Thus, we cannot regard Lu Xun’s existentialist aspects as an expression of the traditional paradigm. His existentialism is genuine even though it is not of the European variety.

5.3.2 Lu Xun’s nihilism

Many scholars notice that Lu Xun’s thinking contains strong nihilistic elements. Zhou Zuoren, Lu Xun’s brother and intellectual peer, believed that the core of Lu Xun’s world is nihilism (Leys 1979: 10). Lu Xun’s contemporaries, such as Lin Gongchao and Su Xuelin, also identified him as a nihilist (Li 1986: 234-38). Lu Xun himself was aware of the nihilistic leanings in his work. As he said, ‘my works are too dark because I often feel that only “darkness and emptiness” are “reality.” I am determined, however, to launch a war of resistance in despair against them’ (Lu 2014g: 6; Quoted and Translated, Lin 1985: 112). Wang Hui (2000: 105-10) claims that it is evident Lu Xun was a nihilist. Peng Xiaoyan (2007: 157-218) declares that Lu Xun was a nihilist who strived hard to overcome nihilism. Lin Yü-sheng (1985: 112) likewise recognises Lu Xun’s as a nihilist although he insists that ‘Lu Xun [as a nihilist] must be carefully distinguished from […] the Russian nihilist, who lives without any beliefs, feels no obligations or restrictions of any kind’.

The above scholars all point out that Lu Xun’s nihilism is rather different from European nihilism.

At the same time, some scholars, such as Harmala Kaur Gupta (1982: 70-71), argue that there are no nihilistic elements worth mentioning in Lu Xun’s works. Gupta claims that nowhere in his writings does Lu Xun see the world or existence as meaningless. Indeed, it cannot be denied that Lu Xun’s project to save the Chinese collective soul assumes the existence of meaning. That is to say, before we investigate whether Lu Xun’s
thinking involves the dynamic model of reactive nihilism, it is necessary to ascertain whether Lu Xun was a nihilist or not.

In this thesis, we have worked with the definition of nihilism as formulated by Crosby. The definition recognises five types of nihilism: political, moral, epistemological, cosmic, and existential. If we apply this definition to Lu Xun’s works to establish whether or not Lu Xun was a nihilist, we get a mixed result. Lu Xun does not seem, at least on the face of it, to be a nihilist in the epistemological nor the cosmological sense. At the same time, I believe that Lu Xun’s thinking could be seen as nihilistic in regard to the other three types of nihilism. Admittedly however, these aspects might not be immediately obvious due to the different metaphysical assumptions that European and Chinese thinking are respectively grounded in.

Jana Rošker (2014) points out that due to the holistic presuppositions of Chinese thinking, ‘knowledge [in China] has been understood in a much broader sense, namely as something which also (or primarily) stems from moral contents and which cannot be separated from (social) practice’. She argues that Chinese epistemology assumes the external world to be ordered as a network of relations, forming a dynamic structure (2012). Chinese epistemology thus cannot be separated from moral practice and cosmology. To see in what sense epistemology is, for the Chinese, inseparable from morality and cosmology, consider benevolence (ren, 仁) which is the principal virtue of Confucian morality. It is a multi-dimensional concept. It provides normative guidance regarding our behaviour towards others. It prescribes striving for mutual understanding and help. It encourages people to control their desires in order to achieve harmony with others. Only a person who is morally accomplished in the way implied by the concept of benevolence is capable of gaining true knowledge of herself and the world. Benevolence also has a political dimension. Confucianism believes that if the ruler lacks benevolence, it will be difficult for his subjects to behave humanely. An inhumane ruler risks losing the Mandate of Heaven. Heaven will warn him by natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods. Thus, benevolence is also essentially connected with cosmology.

The moral practices of Confucianism, including filial piety (xiao, 孝) and ritual propriety (li, 礼), are importantly related to epistemology and cosmology. They are often
the targets of Lu Xun’s criticism. In ‘How to be a Father?’, Lu Xun explicitly criticises the ethical basis of filial piety, which he sees as being ‘extremely patriarchal’. He argues that becoming and being a parent is ultimately the result of a natural drive. If that is so then children are not morally indebted to their parents. Thus filial piety is, Lu Xun concludes, a ‘deceptive idea’ (2014a: 64-72). Another frequent target of Lu Xun’s criticism is ritual propriety. About Confucian rituals he says that ‘the people behaved in a ridiculous and deplorable manner’ (2005: 187 [March 2, 1914]).

Lu Xun conflates Confucian morality with morality as a whole. Therefore, his criticism of Confucian morality is to be understood as a criticism of morality as a whole. Refusing Confucian morality amounts to refusing moral values. In this sense, Lu Xun has to be seen as a moral nihilist. The moral, epistemological, and cosmic types of nihilism are deeply intertwined in Lu Xun’s thinking. They happen to be so intertwined because of the specifics of the Chinese paradigm and the conceptual matrix intrinsic to it. That is to say, Lu Xun iconoclastic project cannot simply oppose a specific aspect of the tradition without carrying the destructive impetus towards the holistic paradigm. As the previous section has argued, Lu Xun’s anti-traditionalism is not motivated by progressivism (i.e. by the intention to destroy value system A in order to create space for the introduction of value system B). It is rather a full-fledged nihilistic project.

Lu Xun’s nihilism extends to the spiritual realm too. Wild Grass, a collection of prose poems, opens a window into Lu Xun’s mind. In one of the poems, Lu Xun states,

There is something I dislike in heaven; I do not want to go there. There is something I dislike in hell; I do not want to go there. There is something I dislike in your future golden world; I do not want to go there. […] I am going to enter darkness to wander in nothingness. […] If you insist, you shall have the same darkness and nothingness (1974: 17).

Lu Xun seems to be aware of his inner darkness and emptiness. Lin Yü-sheng (1985: 113) argues that in the poem Lu Xun metaphorically expresses his distrust of ‘the vision of a future good society painted by any one of the ideologies then current in China’. In the light of the previous analysis of Toward a Refutation of Malevolent Voices, we can say that Lu Xun’s nihilism is consistent with his scepticism regarding political ideologies. In “Hope”, another poem from Wild Grass, he writes, ‘Hope, hope – I took this shield of hope to withstand the invasion of the dark night in the emptiness, although
behind this shield there was still dark night and emptiness.’ Then, he quotes Sándor Petőfi’s line, ‘Despair, like hope, is but vanity’ (1974: 39-41). Here, he endorses the rejection of both total pessimism and ‘deluded hope’. Lu Xun seems to advocate a Nietzschean will towards *amor fati*—‘my heart is very tranquil, void of love and hate, joy and sadness, colour and sound’ (Lu 1974: 39). Lu Xun rejects hope because it interferes with the will to destroy the cultural paradigm. At the same time, he spiritually suffers from the darkness, emptiness and despair that come hand in hand with nihilism. As I have previously argued, nihilism cannot be sustained as a final position. The self-destructive logic of nihilism will always force one to either adopt cynicism or *positive-reactive* nihilism, a response to nihilism that strives to annihilate the given value system to clear the way for the advent of a new one. I would argue that Lu Xun’s refusal to give in to despair indicates that he has chosen to embrace a positive-reactive nihilism rather than the passive version of it that is irreducibly pessimistic.

Some scholars discussing Lu Xun’s nihilism do not think that his version of nihilism contains some such positive agency as implied in our characterization of it as positive-reactive. Wang Hui, for instance, claims that the structure of Lu Xun’s nihilism is rather ambivalent. The ambivalence of Lu Xun’s nihilism, according to Wang, stems from the fact that he lived in a ‘transitional stage’ between the ‘demise of the old world’ with its ‘desperate self-denial’ and ‘the birth of the new world’ with its lucid revolt (2000: 108). Lin Yü-sheng (1985: 112) identifies as a special feature of Lu Xun’s nihilism ‘his inner struggle to keep alive his avowed commitment to the cause of China’s rejuvenation and to finding meaning in life amidst his dark sense of nihilism’. I believe that they all capture in different ways an important aspect of Lu Xun’s thinking: Lu Xun embraces nihilism only to overcome it by introducing a new meaning. In this context, Luchte (2016: 10) confirms that ‘for both Nietzsche and Lu Xun, the official culture of their respective *topoi* must undergo a cultural revolution, one that would involve the destruction of nihilistic forms which not only no longer serve life, but actively threaten it. […] Cultural vitality must be provoked, the dominant forms must be subverted and displaced by new or suppressed forms and values – this is the destruction that is necessary as a prelude to cultural transfiguration’. In conclusion, Lu Xun’s thinking conforms to the dynamic model of reactive nihilism.
5.4 Lu Xun’s ultimate demands

Like European existentialists, Lu Xun formulates an ultimate demand to overcome the nihilistic desert. Lu Xun’s ultimate demand comes in two versions: an individual one and a political one. The first part of this section focuses on Lu Xun’s conceptual persona, the fighter. We will see that the individual version of Lu Xun’s ultimate demand is reminiscent of Nietzsche. The second part discusses the political version of Lu Xun’s ultimate demand. This version combines Marxism and political-reactive nihilism, and its ultimate goal is to destroy the traditional Chinese paradigm in order to create spiritual space for the birth of a “new man”.

5.4.1 Nietzschean ultimate demand

Lu Xun’s ultimate demand for overcoming the nihilistic desert comes in two versions. The first version targets an individual. Lu Xun was rather impressed with the Nietzschean notion of the will to power. He saw it as a way to withstand the agony of finding yourself in between hope and despair. He creates the conceptual persona of the “fighter” to capture and develop the notion of the will to power in his works. In the poem Such a Fighter, Lu Xun describes the fighter in the following way,

He has nothing but himself, and for weapon nothing but the javelin hurled by barbarians. He walks into the lines of nothingness, where all that meet him nod to him in the same manner. [...] Beneath are all sorts of surcoats, embroidered with all manner of fine names: scholarship, morality, national culture, public opinion, logic, justice, oriental civilization…. But he raises his javelin (1974: 127).

Lu Xun’s fighter is a hero. He has placed himself beyond the reach of social norms and values. In Amid Pale Bloodstains, Lu Xun tells us more about the fighter,

A rebellious fighter has arisen from mankind, who, standing erect, sees through all the deserted ruins and lonely tombs of the past and the present. He remembers all the intense and unending agony; he faces squarely the whole welter of clotted blood; he understands all that is dead and all that is living, as well as all yet unborn. He sees through the creator’s game. And he will arise to resuscitate or else destroy mankind, these loyal subjects of the creator. The creator, the weakling, hides himself in shame. Then heaven and earth change colour in the eyes of the fighter’ (1974: 141).

Now what does this tell us about the conceptual persona of the fighter? ‘See[ing] through all the deserted ruins and lonely tombs of the past and the present’ can be interpreted as embracing the destructive force of nihilism that dismantles existing norms and values. ‘Remember[ing] all the intense and unending agony’ refers to the capacity
to withstand mental suffering. The fighter ‘arising from mankind’ points to his spiritual superiority. His arising ‘to resuscitate or else destroy mankind’ refers to the uncompromising nature of his destructive project. He will destroy the established order and with it the ‘loyal subjects’—the corrupted mankind—if need be. Along with the collapse of the old paradigm, the ‘new man’ will arise (2014f: 22). We may sense that Lu Xun’s fighter is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. In the essay *On the Power of Māra Poetry*, he champions a ‘satanic power’, which he defines as ‘defiant strength and iconoclastic challenge’, taking Byron’s poetry as a representative (2014a: 32). In the essay, he directly quotes the following lines from Nietzsche: ‘Whoever has gained wisdom concerning ancient origins will eventually look for wells of the future and for new origins. O my brothers, it will not be overlong before new peoples originate and new wells roar down into new depth’ (Nietzsche 1976: 323). He urges that a writer should be initiated into a wild, barbaric and criminal aesthetic. In this respect, Lu Xun thinking overlaps to a great extent with that of Nietzsche’s. They both demand self-overcoming, heroic courage, withstanding mental agony, rebellion against herd instinct, and grounding in the authentic self.

### 5.4.2 Political reactive nihilism

The other version of Lu Xun’s ultimate demand is the political one. The holistic tradition of Chinese metaphysics determines that Lu Xun’s reactive nihilistic mission (to destroy to create) extends into the political realm.

First of all, was Lu Xun a political nihilist? As a young man, Lu Xun joined the Revive the Light Society which was a radical organization promoting assassinations as a legitimate method of political struggle. In the context of this fact about Lu Xun, one could conclude that he was indeed a political nihilist. At the same time, his life-long distrust of various political ideologies and authorities suggests that he was a political sceptic.

Around Lu Xun’s time, a popular political vision among intelligentsia was to overthrow the monarch and found a republic. Lu Xun supported this vision. At the same time, his attitude towards a potential republican revolution was rather reserved. One of his fictional characters, Ah Q, joins the revolution out of herd instinct and resentment.
The revolution does not bring Ah Q any awakening of the self. For Lu Xun, China’s republican revolution was ‘an Ah Q-like revolution’ (2014c: 209). In a letter to his wife, Lu Xun writes: ‘the most important thing for now is to reform the national character. Otherwise, whether it is dictatorship, republic, or whatever, it is just old wine in a new bottle. Everything will remain the same, nothing will work’ (2014g: 9 [March 31, 1926]). Lu Xun never fully committed to any political agenda. For him, the only legitimate political goal is a revolution that destroys the traditional cultural paradigm. Only such a revolution can also be a spiritual revolution which will lead to the rebirth of the individual self and its authentic voice. He states that China must ‘discard the material and elevate the spirit, rely on the individual and exclude the mass […] then the country will be strengthened and arise. Why should we be engrossed in such trivialities as gold, iron, congresses, and constitutions?’ (Quoted and Translated, Mills 1977: 194). Harriet C. Mills (1977: 194) points out that Lu Xun was implicitly ‘criticizing not only constitutional monarchists, but also the self-strengtheners and the republicans. In his view, all of these overemphasized the material and under emphasized creative, individual and spiritual values.

Now, there is a point that merits closer scrutiny. In China, Lu Xun is generally seen as a Marxist. If he was really a Marxist, can I still claim he was a political-reactive nihilist? There is considerable evidence to support classifying Lu Xun as a Marxist. First, Lu Xun was closely associated with the Communists. For example, Lu Xun’s literary career began with the publication of his fiction in the New Youth magazine. The magazine’s editor-in-chief, Chen Duxiu, was the co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party. Lu Xun also once sent a telegram to Mao Zedong, who was fighting a guerrilla war in the mountains, to congratulate him on his successful break out of an encirclement (Feng 1952: 190). Second, Lu Xun was a passionate supporter of the Soviet Union. In 1932, he publicly defended the Soviet Union against accusations of manufacturing famine. He said, ‘we are against any attack on the Soviet Union. And, we ought to fight the devils who attack it.’ And later, he openly declared, ‘this [Bolshevism] is our way to survive too!’ (2014e: 11) Moreover, Lu Xun sometimes adopts a Marxist perspective and its related conceptual tools to discuss different issues. For example, he claims that ‘in most other parts of the world class antagonism is now intense, and the masses of peasants and
workers are coming into increasing prominence. If we want to save ourselves, we should go over to them’ (1980b: 17). All this reveals Lu Xun’s considerable sympathy towards Marxism.

However, there is also some evidence that Lu Xun’s Marxism is overstated. Leo Ou-Fan Lee’s study shows that apart from some general ideological declarations, Lu Xun made no attempt to form an active alliance with the proletariat. He even declined an offer to write a novel about the Long March. More importantly, Lu Xun’s knowledge of Marxism seems to have been rather limited, and his usage of Marxist concepts is often misplaced and incoherent (Lee 1976: 322). In one of his letters, he admitted about *Das Kapital* that he ‘not only hadn’t read it, [he] had not even touched it’ (Quoted, Yamada 2009: 104, [November 15, 1933]). This letter was written three years before his death, so it seems reasonable to conclude that Lu Xun had never made a serious effort to study Marxism. Also, Lu Xun never self-identified as a Marxist.

At the same time, Marxism and Lu Xun’s political version of the ultimate demand share some common ground, and Lu Xun was probably aware of that. As we already know, Lu Xun’s goal was to destroy the Chinese cultural paradigm. For Lu Xun, ‘Chinese culture, all of which is for serving the master, was at the expense of the suffering of many people’ (2014g: 283). Lu Xun saw the Chinese cultural paradigm as reinforcing the servant-master mentality that had for thousands of years enslaved the Chinese collective soul. Taking the example of the notion of benevolence again, a disciple once asked Confucius if he should rule through imposing strict laws and hard discipline. Confucius advised him that he should be a benevolent ruler. He explained, ‘Let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good. The relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it’ (Confucius: XII. 19. (312)). Confucius instructs the monarch to be benevolent and a good moral example for the people to follow. However, Confucius’ exhortation to the monarch reinforces the existing power structure and denies the subjectivity of the lower classes. Moreover, the paradigm of the unity of Heaven and man asserts that imperial power comes from Heaven. When a ruler is unkind, he loses the Mandate of Heaven. Then, the people can rise up against him. The logic of this paradigm preserves the servant-master power structure and the related mental
enslavement. The paradigm does not sanction the destruction of the Imperial institution. It only permits replacing one emperor with another. For Lu Xun, concrete political proposals (structural or material changes) were just old wine in new bottles. What he was striving for was the destruction of the old paradigm. He believed that only by letting the lower classes express themselves, only with their power, is it possible to destroy the paradigm. As Lu Xun said, ‘the future belongs to the rising proletariat’ (2014d: 108). Lu Xun saw the possibility of achieving the goal of his political reactive nihilism by way of conjoining it with the dynamics of a Marxist revolution. He even tied his own fate as a writer and thinker with such a revolution,

“In a time of great social change, no writer can be an onlooker.” [...] Then I realised that all revolutionary poets who had illusions or ideals before the revolution were likely to be driven to death by the reality which they themselves had longed for and sung. And if the actual revolution does not destroy the illusions and ideals of such poets, then it is no better than an empty announcement. [...] And with their own destruction they proved the advance of the revolutions (1980a: 375).

The quote seems to support the view that for Lu Xun the communist revolution will and should unleash the destructive power of reactive nihilism. And he (and his class) must also be destroyed in this revolution. The revolutionary poets need ‘to be driven to death by the reality which they themselves had longed for’. Only such destruction can manifest the success of the revolution. Still, Lu Xun’s ultimate demand on the political level is essentially a reactive nihilistic one, rather than a Marxist revolution. In Althusser’s terms, Lu Xun’s iconoclastic project, which aims to spiritually elevate the “national character”, is, fundamentally, an ‘ideological practice’ (Althusser 1970: 27,58; 2005: 166, 229). For Marx, ideology is a false representation of people and the world. It is an illusion that is fully determined by specific socio-economic relations. The so-called “national character” or “spiritual servility” are just contingent conceptual illusions whose function is to self-legitimise the material reality that they arise from. From an orthodox Marxist perspective, the only viable way to fix a broadly societal problem is to change the material structure that the life of the society supervenes on. Lu Xun, on the other hand, did not believe in a revolution that would be materialist in this sense. For him, the real revolution is a revolution of the spirit.

Lu Xun died in 1936. At that time, Mao was still leading a small peasant army fighting a guerilla war in the mountains. Nothing suggested at that point that his fight
and the Communist revolution would end in success. Lu Xun even doubted that China would survive from the threat of the Japanese imperialism. For him, Marxism was only a fantasy that was to some extent compatible with his political nihilism.
5.5 Chinese Cultural Revolution as a political reactive nihilism

The identification of the political-reactive nihilism as proposed in Lu Xun’s existentialism can help us to understand some hitherto unnoticed aspects of contemporary Chinese thought. Arguably, the most formative event with respect to contemporary Chinese thought was and continues to be the Cultural Revolution. The CR was launched by Mao Zedong whose thinking was substantially influenced by Lu Xun. In this chapter, I will shed some new light on the intellectual origins of the CR. I will argue that the origins involve important existentialist aspects. I will proceed in the following way. First, I will expose the insufficiency of the available theories that explain the origins of the Cultural Revolution. Next, I will discuss Lu Xun’s influence on Mao’s thought. Finally, I will argue that the strong anti-traditionalist impetus of the CR can be seen as a form of political-reactive nihilism.

5.5.1 Explanatory insufficiency of the available theories regarding the origins of the Cultural Revolution

The impact of the CR on China was unprecedented in both its scale, its disruptiveness, and its radical intensity. However, the Chinese authorities (after Deng Xiaoping came to power) have gradually generated an implicit understanding among scholars and the general public that the CR as a research topic is a taboo. The contemporary Chinese intelligentsia has largely remained silent on the topic of the CR. On the other hand, the Western research on this subject is quite patchy due to the lack of access to relevant historical documents. Moreover, the Western research can be rather ideologically biased. Consequently, the explanations of its origins and the understanding of its spiritual impact on the Chinese people lack diversity and seem to be somewhat superficial. It is no wonder that some hidden aspects of its origin might have been overlooked.

Why did Mao Zedong have to launch the CR? There are, generally speaking, several (kinds of) replies to this question. The first one is the least interesting as it attempts to explain a complex historical process as the result of the actions of a single, morally corrupted individual. According to this reply, Mao was an ambitious

---

50 Henceforth, it is abbreviated as the CR.
psychopath who took pleasure in making people suffer on an industrial scale. He started the CR solely for the purpose of imposing as much suffering on the people as possible. Even though this interpretation does not have many advocates among decent scholars, it should be noted that it enjoys some popularity among the Western public. Some people even compare the atrocities committed during the height of the CR to those of the Nazi Holocaust (e.g., Schwarcz 1996). This interpretation is not only wrong in its comprehension of Mao’s motives, but also wrong in the sense of assuming rather distorted historical facts. Mobo Gao’s very well argued and documented study shows that the events and consequences of the CR were nowhere as violent, cruel and destructive as is commonly believed and claimed. Gao (2007: 311) argues that what we discuss here as the first reply is essentially a complex lie which was ‘manufactured by the Chinese authorities and the intellectual elite’.

The second reply is that the CR was an attempt by Mao to cover the failure of his project of the Great Leap Forward (GLF). This project was supposed to imitate the rapid industrialization as it had happened in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. The failure of the GLF project weakened Mao’s political power within the party. This political conspiracy theory explains that Mao attempted to clear up his political rivals through the CR. However, as Roderick MacFarquhar (1997b: 473) argues, Mao’s political power had never really weakened so much that he would need to take to such dramatic measures to re-consolidate it. The scope and radicality of the CR simply far exceeds the needs of political conspiracy.

The third reply is that Mao launched the CR for the pragmatic purpose of solving social and economical problems caused by the failure of the GLF. The sending-down movement was an essential part of the CR. It was a project to relocate the urban youth to the countryside. The goal was to awaken a robust proletarian class consciousness among the urban youth by way of involving them in basic agricultural production. With the failure of the GLF, the nation faced serious food shortage and high unemployment. Relocating the excess urban population to the countryside for agricultural production had, in fact, solved the problem of recurring famines. This interpretation may be partly

51 For details see (MacFarquhar 1997a)
correct, but it is incomplete. A larger sending-down movement was launched already in 1956 which is before the CR started. This means that, at least partly, the CR must have been motivated by something else (i.e. other than just the need to address the problems caused by the failure of the GLF) because some of the pressing social and economical problems had already been addressed through the sending-down movement. Moreover, Breaking the Four Olds and the struggle sessions (which are the central aspects of the CR) cannot be explained within this interpretation.52

The fourth reply is a Maoist-Marxist one. As Mao warned, ‘[a] country like ours can still move toward its opposite’ (1974b: 188-96). Despite the fact that ‘the exploiting classes have been disarmed and deprived of their authority by the people, their reactionary ideas remain rooted in their minds. We have overthrown their rule and confiscated their property, but this does not mean that we have rid their minds of reactionary ideas as well’ ("RenminRibao"editorial June 3, 1966). In the quote, Mao touches on an issue that turned out to be of a critical importance after he took power in China. Mao soon realised that merely transforming property and production relations would not suffice to turn China into a communist society. He needed to change the Chinese collective mind. That is why he decided to transform the Chinese culture and with it to create a new Chinese man. In other words, Mao launched the CR to prevent the failure of the communist revolution as a whole. Maurice Meisner (1999: 273) provides detailed evidence to show that Mao’s motivation for the CR was primarily ‘to restore collectivism in the rural areas by reestablishing the communes as functioning socioeconomic units and to cleanse the Party of corruption and bureaucratic elitism’. Meisner (1999: 275-76) explains that Mao’s ideas are essentially ‘populist’. His ‘faith in the Party as the repository of “proletarian consciousness” always had been mitigated by an equally strong faith that the true sources of revolutionary creativity resided in the masses themselves, and particularly in the peasantry’. Mao therefore attempted to

---

52 The Cultural Revolution is a social-political movement consisting of a series of campaigns. Among them, the most important parts were three campaigns, namely, Breaking the Four Olds, struggle sessions and Sending-down movement. Breaking the Four Olds is a movement aiming to destroy pre-communist elements of Chinese culture. The Four Olds were: Old Ideas, Old Culture, Old Customs, and Old Habits. The struggle sessions allegedly aimed to demythologize authority and to dismantle the related privileges. It took the form of public humiliations and the torture of its victims who were generally cadres and intellectuals.
achieve his aim of saving the rural collectivism and fighting against the cadre corruption by mobilizing the force of the peasantry. MacFarquhar also supports this interpretation. He argues that ‘the evidence suggests that “Mao’s ultimate dread—the image of extinction that stalk[ed] him—[was] the death of the revolution”’ (1997b: 469). However, by the mid-1960s, Mao had witnessed the consequences of Khrushchev’s internal policies. He was running out of options if he wanted to avoid the elimination of the revolutionary spirit that took place in the USSR under Khrushchev. Thus, as MacFarquhar (1997b: 470) argues,

> With the disintegration of the Sino-Soviet bloc, China was the last bastion of world revolution, and the Chairman had to find a way to implant his people with an ideological inner compass, ever pointing to magnetic Mao. If revolution from above was now impossible, it would have to be revolution from below. If the party could not change society, then Mao would unleash society to change the party.

The works of the two renowned scholars quoted above provide a relatively well-balanced and comprehensive understanding of Mao’s motives. However, there are some aspects regarding the origins of the CR which have not yet been fully articulated, or at least, cannot be properly explained from a Marxist perspective. For example, as MacFarquhar notices, ‘Mao genuinely believed in spiritual rebirth’ (1997b: 473). Where does this belief of Mao’s ‘in spiritual rebirth’ come from? Meisner (1999: 284) crucially points out that ‘the Marxist proposition that “[the material] being determines consciousness” [is] opposed to the voluntaristic Maoist emphasis on the decisive role of consciousness in transforming historical and social reality’. From an orthodox Marxist point of view, Meisner’s is correct—‘In brief, [Mao] had violated the dictates of the objective laws of historical development’ (1999: 284). More importantly, Maoists allegedly claimed that the aim of the CR was supposedly to fight against the “bourgeois ideology”. However, in *Sweep Away All Monsters*, the initial manifesto of the CR, Maoists explicitly stated that the fundamental goal of the CR was ‘demolishing all the old ideology and culture and all the old customs and habits, which, fostered by the exploiting classes, have poisoned the minds of the people for thousands of years’ (“RenminRibao” editorial June 3, 1966). In Mao’s time, China was essentially an agrarian country which did not even have a robust “bourgeois class”. These Four Olds (Old Ideas, Old Culture, Old Customs, and Old Habits) lasting for ‘thousands of years’, apparently
cannot all be blamed on the bourgeoisie. In fact, these Four Olds are, in essence, the Chinese cultural paradigm.

Is it possible that the Chinese Marxists worked with a wrong interpretation of Marx’s historical materialism? Before the CR was launched, there had already been a lively discussion among Chinese Marxists regarding the claim that “the subjective can create the objective”. Many important Party scholars did not consider it to be compatible with Marxist historical materialism. However, Mao and his followers believed that this objection of some of the Party scholars ultimately stemmed from the inertia of traditional Chinese values as internalized by the scholars (Meisner 1999: 283-87). Still, we (should) conclude that, the CR possesses an important aspect of anti-traditionalism which is not compatible with the logic of (at least) the orthodox reading of Marxism.

5.5.2 Lu Xun’s influence on Mao’s thinking

I believe that the radical anti-traditionalistic feature of the CR did not derive from Mao’s own interpretation of Marxism, but that it was inspired by Lu Xun’s demand for political reactive nihilism. I will argue that Mao saw his political actions as being (at least partly) a realisation of Lu Xun’s ideas that he had formulated thirty years earlier.

There is plenty of historical evidence showing Lu Xun’s impact on Mao. More than once Mao claimed something along the following lines: ‘Lu Xun was China’s first sage. The first sage in China was not Confucius, nor was me. I might be a worthy, a mere student of the sage’ (Feng and Jin 2011: 2577). Mao’s self-identification as a student of Lu Xun illustrates his own literary affection for Lu Xun and, to some extent, the influence of Lu Xun on his thinking. Mao had been a devoted reader of Lu Xun from a young age. The young Mao visited Beijing in 1920, and he took the initiative to visit Lu Xun after his arrival. Unfortunately, Lu Xun was not at home that day (Zhou 1996: 47, [April 7, 1920]). Mao always carried Lu Xun’s books with him, be it during the Long March or during his visits to the Soviet Union. During the period of the CR, Mao wrote in a letter to his wife: ‘My heart and Lu Xun’s are connected’ (1966a). All of the above shows how much Mao admired Lu Xun and his writings.
We can start discerning the contours of Lu Xun’s political influence on Mao from the following. In the first “Chinese National Conference of Literary and Artistic Workers”, Mao presented the guiding instructions for the cultural development of the new nation. He proposed the design of the badge of the conference, on which we can see Mao’s and Lu Xun’s faces aligned and looking in the same direction. The design was politically significant and generally understood as a recognition of ideological affinity and mentorship. Before the CR, when discussing the future of the Chinese culture, Mao (1991: 698) stated, ‘Lu Xun was the commander of China’s cultural revolution. He was not only a great writer, but also a great thinker and a great revolutionary. […] He, representing the majority of the nation, was the most righteous, brave, determined, loyal and enthusiastic national hero who was charging against enemies on the cultural front. The direction of Lu Xun is the direction of the new culture of the Chinese people’. Here Mao explicitly endorses the idea that Lu Xun’s goals are the goals of the Chinese cultural revolution.

What were Lu Xun’s goals? Lu Xun sought to completely destroy the traditional Chinese cultural paradigm through a radical reactive nihilism in order to give birth to a “new man”. I believe that Mao’s reference to Lu Xun as ‘the commander of China’s cultural revolution’ was not merely a political statement, but also a reference to the ideological origins of the CR.

Arguably, the best known and most important movement of the CR was what has come to be known as “Breaking the Four Olds”. The movement was, a radical anti-traditionalistic project. It systematically destroyed most of the religious (Confucian) and clan temples. Even historical monuments, former residences of historically relevant figures, and many archaeological sites were not spared systematic destruction. Ancestral tablets, religious statues and other antiques in private possession had to be discarded. Traditional marriage (i.e. the arranged marriage) was abolished. Some traditional festivals and rituals were also eliminated from the social life. Even certain aspects of the traditional social etiquette and customs were banned. In short, virtually all representations, manifestations and symbols of the traditional culture were destroyed.⁵³

⁵³ A brief account can be found in (Macfarquhar and Fairbank 1991: 107-200)
Due to the current Chinese leadership’s tabooization of any serious discussion of the CR, there is not much research and available historical evidence about the “Breaking the Four Olds” movement. There are many testimonies related to that movement however. The witnesses all agree that the movement was unprecedented as to the extent to which it was thorough and radical. (e.g., Gao 2013: 130-50). My father still remembers vividly that during the period of “Breaking the Four Olds”, my grandfather would take him out at night to the Huai River to salvage wooden ancestral tablets, statues of Buddha and other antiques that could be found floating in high numbers in the river, and bring them home to be used as firewood for cooking. They were all made of fine wood that would burn much better than common firewood. The magnificent scene of these antiques floating all over the river stayed imprinted in my father’s memory for the rest of his life.

It is worth noting that the “Sending-down” and the struggle sessions were movements that affected mainly the urban population who, at that time, accounted for only a small proportion of the Chinese population. “Breaking the Four Olds”, on the other hand, was a nationwide movement in which almost everyone took part. The other two movements caused a lot of distress to a relatively small group of people, but the memory of the trauma would gradually fade away with each passing generation. “Breaking the Four Olds”, on the other hand, has substantially and permanently changed Chinese culture, both on the material level (a large number of cultural relics, historical sites, artefacts have been destroyed) and on the ideological level (customs, habits, and attitudes towards Confucianism, etc.). Neither Marxist theory nor the power struggle theory can fully explain the logic of and the motivation behind the “Breaking the Four Olds” movement.

The last and climactic movement of the CR is the anti-Confucian campaign (1973-1976), which can be seen as the continuation and consolidation of the previous anti-traditionalist efforts. A number of scholarly articles attacking Confucianism appeared before the campaign started (Gregor and Chang 1979: 1076). However, later, after the campaign had been launched, the attacks against Confucianism became primarily about stigmatizing and destroying the existing historical pictures and holy images of Confucius from public space and consciousness. For example, there was a graphic novel which, at that time, was very popular. The title of the novel was, The Sinful Life of Kong
Lao'er (Xiao 1974). “Kong Lao’er” is a derogatory nickname for Confucius. Lao’er (老二) originally means the second son of the family. At the same time, it is a slang word for “penis”.

James Gregor and Maria Hsia Chang (1979: 1073) notice that this campaign was ‘rampant with references to historical figures in the past, and veiled allusions to analogues in the present. All of which has prompted writers to describe the campaign as “esoteric”, activated by motives “difficult to fathom”’. Their research critically targets Merle Goldman’s view that sees the campaign as ‘a deliberate retreat from the radical policies of the CR’ (1979: 1078-79). It also refutes the prevailing theory of power struggle. Regarding the question of what really motivated the campaign against Confucius, they suggest that it might have been Confucius’ support for slavery which was, of course, an anathema to the communist ideology. Slavery was seen, by the communists, as one of the most despicable reactionary ideologies. Attacking Confucius and Confucianism then represented an attack on all reactionary ideologies.

The anti-Confucian campaign identified both Confucius and Mencius as ‘the reactionary ideologues of slavery’ (“RenminRibao”editorial February 2, 1974). Gregor and Chang may be right but their reading seems to be too literal. I believe that the Maoist’s critique of Confucius does not refer specifically to his endorsement of slavery 2500 years ago, but rather to Confucianism as a form of spiritual slavery. Lu Xun harshly criticises ‘Confucian Virtue and Morality’ as a form of ‘cannibalism’. And he goes on to claim that the ‘Chinese culture, all of which is for serving the master, [exists] at the expense of the suffering of many people’ (2014g: 283). If we take Lu Xun’s critique of Confucianism and his influence on Mao into account then the motivation behind the anti-Confucian campaign becomes clearer. Non-Marxist scholars have usually interpreted the CR in terms of the power struggle theory. However, this theory does not explain why the anti-traditionalistic movement was so widespread and radical. At the same time, the attempts of some Maoist-Marxists to explain the logic of the CR fully in terms of Marxist theory have turned out to be rather implausible, as these explanation contradicts some of the key tenets of Marxism.
In fact, if we comprehend what Mao really meant when he called Lu Xun ‘the commander of China’s cultural revolution’, we will be able to see that the CR was, in fact, motivated by the idea of political reactive nihilism. Identifying this idea as the core motivation explains the strong anti-traditionalism of the CR. If the CR itself initially contains the goal to totally dismantle the Chinese paradigm, how can it not be necessary to launch a campaign against Confucianism, which was the cornerstone of the Chinese cultural paradigm? The motive behind the attack on Confucianism is not “mysterious”.

Furthermore, another important part of the CR was the struggle sessions of cadres and intellectuals. The original aim of the struggle sessions allegedly was to demythologize authority and to dismantle its related privileges. Its motives can be conveniently explained either from the Marxist perspective or from the perspective of the power struggle theory (to remove political rivals). The main victims of the struggle sessions were the cadres. They were not the old bureaucrats, but the old communist revolutionaries, some of them even party leaders. They had clean backgrounds and, supposedly, they were the mainstay of the establishment of the new nation. However, Mao never had the Leninist faith in the ideological infallibility of the Party. As early as during the Yan’an Rectification Movement (usually seen as the prototypical form of the struggle sessions), Mao (February 8, 1942) had repeatedly mentioned Lu Xun in his political speeches. He criticised other party members by quoting a line from Lu Xun: ‘Hurling insults and threats is certainly not fighting’. During the CR, Mao claimed that many Party members and cadres had become ‘the Right opportunists’. ‘The revisionists, the Right opportunists, pay lip service to Marxism; they too attack “dogmatism”. However, what they are really attacking is the quintessence of Marxism’ (1966b: 56-57). If these opportunists cannot be purged from the party, then the revolution will die. Mao’s vigilance against opportunists resonates with Lu Xun’s following comments on revolution,

revolutions have rarely been stopped by displaying heads. A revolution probably ends only when opportunists join the ranks and undermine it from within. I refer not merely to Bolshevism, but to revolutions of every conceivable “ism”. Still, is it not precisely because men are in darkness and have no way out that they want to revolt? If you have to guarantee them “a bright future” and a “way out” before they dare to join you, far from being revolutionaries, they are not even opportunists (Lu 1980b: 46-47).
Lu Xun seems to be arguing here that the integrity and strength of a real revolutionary rises out of her accepting the hopelessness of her situation. Thus only opportunists hope for victory and a happy future in which they enjoy the fruits of their successful struggle. The continuation of the revolution has to be fuelled by the Sisyphean self-sacrifice of the revolutionaries.

Another group of victims of the struggle sessions were the intellectuals. Mao harboured some resentment toward intellectuals. It was not until the CR that he expressed this resentment publicly. Mao (1974a: 203-11) claimed that the history of China clearly shows that ‘when the intellectuals had power, things were in a bad state [and] the country was in disorder’. Mao’s view of intellectuals echoes that of Lu Xun. Lu Xun (2011: 51) contends that ‘on the basis of historical evidence, it is apparent that the most damage to the fabric of society, to the nation, […] has been caused not by the rural peasantry and little people, but by our faithless gentry [shi, 士, the classical term for intellectuals]’.

Lu Xun even demands that should the revolution be successfully accomplished, it must ‘destroy the illusions and ideals of [revolutionary] poets’. And, if it does not then such a revolution is ‘no better than an empty announcement’. Revolutionary poets ‘were likely to be driven to death by the reality which they themselves had longed for and sung’, and ‘with their own destruction they proved the advance of the revolutions’ (1980a: 375). Lu Xun clearly supports a self-destructive and self-critical revolution. And, that is how things unravelled in the end, most of the victims of the struggle sessions were communists and revolutionary intellectuals.

Lu Xun’s radical anti-traditionalism had been inspired by Nietzsche’s philosophy of history. Nietzsche (1997: 76) contends that ‘[i]f he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it’. More importantly, Nietzsche points out that any authentic anti-traditionalistic project is dangerous and extremely difficult to successfully accomplish. Since ‘we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as
free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them’ (1997: 76). According to Nietzsche, to criticise a tradition does not imply we have stopped being the product of the tradition and the past that gave rise to it. The dismantling of the past and the related tradition is thus always and necessarily to be an act of self-destruction. A successfully complete revolution would inevitably eat its own children. Yet Nietzsche advocates that people should not escape the danger of self-destruction, but rather people should apply ‘a new, stern discipline’ to combat their ‘inborn heritage’ in order to build up a ‘second nature’ (1997: 75-76).

In sum, there are many competing accounts of the origins of the CR. However, none of those accounts captures all the relevant aspects of what motivated the radical anti-traditionalism of the CR. I argue that the core inspiration of Mao’s and his followers’ anti-traditionalism can be traced back to Lu Xun and his ideas. Lu Xun’s ideas (especially those of reactive nihilism) were, in turn, shaped by Nietzsche’s existentialism. There is no evidence I know of suggesting that Mao’s ideas implemented in the CR were directly influenced by Nietzsche’s philosophy. However, as Mao (1968: 62-71) stated, the aim of the CR was to completely destroy the old ideology and culture and all their old customs and habits thereby giving birth to the ‘new man’ (a phrase used by both Nietzsche and Lu Xun). The radical anti-traditionalism of the CR is consistent with the schema of reactive nihilism in both its logical structure and its goals. Thus the CR can be plausibly seen as a large scale attempt to implement the ideas of political reactive nihilism. This implies that we might have just identified a hitherto unnoticed and yet significant intellectual influence on the CR: existentialism. If this suggestion is correct, then it explains the historical fact of China having undergone (as a result of the CR) the traumatic experience of the collapse of the traditional value system followed by the socially engineered project to reconstruct the ‘second nature’ (Nietzsche 1997: 76). At this point it should be noticed that the project in China to reconstruct the second nature has not been accomplished yet. The value vacuum caused by the destructive force of the CR has still not been completely filled up with a new collective consciousness. Thus, it’s still too early to pass the final judgement on the radical and unprecedented social and spiritual experiment of the CR.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have worked to identify the paradigmatic structure of existentialism. The structure as identified here has the following three constituents: (a realisation of) the existential lie, a movement towards a transitional state of reactive nihilism, and a presentation of ultimate demands. To build up my argument, I have created a list of five representative existentialist thinkers. Three of the thinkers belong to early existentialists while the other two are mid-century existentialists.

First, this thesis, as an interdisciplinary project, has been inspired by Deleuze’s and Guattari’s idea of conceptual personae. I have employed conceptual personae as an innovative method to facilitate a dialogue between literature and philosophy. The conceptual persona (as a concept) is a theoretical tool that has the potential to be developed into a powerful methodological approach allowing us to expose philosophically deeper layers of a literary text. For this theoretical tool to be effectively used, it is important to be able to distinguish between fictional characters that are merely aesthetic figures and those fictional characters that are, in fact, conceptual personae. This task comes with some problems that I have not attempted to resolve in this thesis. I did not attempt to resolve them as my choice of the conceptual personae in this thesis is rather uncontroversial. That is, I considered as a conceptual persona only those fictional characters whose philosophical robustness goes clearly way beyond that of a merely aesthetic figure.

Chapters 1 and 2 have mostly focused on the group of early existentialists. I have started by examining their shared assumption, that the world is based upon a lie, to identify the first constituent of the existentialist paradigm—the existential lie. Through analytic examination and psychological interpretation, I have shown that the existential lie can take the form of any grand narrative that offers purpose and meaning. At the same time, such a narrative is essentially deceptive, and its internalization always derives from the psychological need to project meaning and justification onto the external. With the identification of the first constituent, I have contended that the disenchantment of grand narratives leads to the second aspect: a movement towards a transitional state of nihilism. And then, I have classified various types of nihilism in accordance with their
dynamic relations and introduced a special type of nihilism: reactive nihilism. Reactive nihilism harnesses the nihilistic destructive force to attack a moribund value in order to make room for the advent of a new value. A movement towards a transitional state of reactive nihilism, as the second constituent of the existentialist paradigm, calls for the overcoming of the nihilistic desert. At this point, I was able to identify the third constituent of the existentialist paradigm, namely, offering an ultimate demand. Through textual and conceptual analysis of several conceptual personae, I finally pinpointed the various conceptual aspects of the early existentialists’ ultimate demands. I have presented these three constituents in a particular order which might raise the question as to whether that order is supposed to be understood as fixed in the real world. Initially, I thought it should be understood as such. However, later I started to consider whether perhaps the three constituents might be realised in a different (perhaps any) order than the one in which they were discussed in this thesis. This, I find to be an intriguing question. Is it, for instance, conceivable that one first becomes a nihilist and only then comes to the realisation that the world is a lie? I see this as an interesting topic for future research.

In Chapter 3 and 4, the thesis has shifted in focus from the synthetic to the comparative. I have taken the paradigmatic structure that I have identified when discussing the early existentialists and employed it in the discussion of the mid-century existentialists, that is, in the discussion of Sartre’s and Camus’s thoughts. I have demonstrated that the mid-century existentialism can be satisfactorily explained in terms of the paradigmatic structure identified in the thinking of the early existentialists. I have also responded to some intriguing criticisms of Sartre and Camus which has allowed me to expose some distinctive features of their respective philosophies. Unlike the other four existentialists, Sartre’s thinking had been strongly influenced by phenomenology. But once we have peeled off the phenomenological layer from Sartre’s thought, we were able to see clearly that his ideas conform to the logic of the paradigmatic structure of existentialism. Despite the fact that the thinking of the mid-century existentialists was often strongly shaped by the ideas and assumptions of phenomenology, their existentialism can be reconstructed as logically self-contained and self-supporting. At the same time, the fact that some key existentialist thinkers
(including Sartre and Heidegger) were also deeply fascinated by phenomenology suggests that there must be some conceptual affinity between existentialism and phenomenology. This is an intriguing suggestion, and I hope I will be able to address it in one of my future research projects.

At this point, I have confirmed the paradigmatic structure of existentialism by examining five European existentialists. In conclusion one might argue that what the paradigmatic structure of existentialism allows us to see is that, whilst the exact commonality of existentialism it discovers, and the interdisciplinary approach of studying them, i.e. the way in which it identifies existentialism, might be novel, a new perspective on the identification of existentialism does not break any new ground that is able to give existentialism the force it needs to return to life. In Chapter 5, I have employed this paradigmatic structure as a conceptual tool into the Chinese context to identify Lu Xun as an existentialist. This allowed me to demonstrate the heuristic utility of the paradigmatic structure. Moreover, the identification of Lu Xun as an existentialist and his impact on Mao’s thinking has revealed some hitherto unrecognised influences on the most consequential social-cultural movement in contemporary China, the Cultural Revolution. This finding contributes not only to a more complete understanding of contemporary Chinese thinking, but also shows that existentialism is not an exclusively Western project.

I would like to finish the conclusion by briefly mentioning an important aspect of the research that this thesis has presented. The philosophical and cultural movement of existentialism has been mostly discussed and analysed from a perspective that is strongly masculine. Even in this thesis, all the selected thinkers are males as are the discussed conceptual personae. This might create an impression that existentialism is somehow intrinsically and irremediably a masculine-centric philosophy. I believe that existentialism should be a universal project in the sense that it allows for a rich feminist reinterpretation, and I think that such a feminist interpretation could become a topic of an exciting future research project.
## Appendix

### Chart 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism</th>
<th><em>recognised by more than 5 scholars</em></th>
<th><em>recognised by more than 2 scholars</em></th>
<th><em>recognised by 1</em></th>
<th>Irrational Man</th>
<th><em>recognised by 1</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Søren Kierkegaard</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-Paul Sartre</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Heidegger</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friedrich Nietzsche</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franz Kafka</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert Camus</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simón de Beauvoir</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maurice Merleau-Ponty</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikolai Berdyaev</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José Ortega y Gasset</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Buber</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev Shestov</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Beckett</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmund Husserl</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vladimir Solovev</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frantz Fanon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viktor Frankl</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Tillich</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermann Hesse</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milan Kundera</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernest Hemingway</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allen Ginsburg</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Buber</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin Wilson</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel de Unamuno</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harlan Ellison</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman Mailer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rainer Maria Rilke</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography

“RenminRibao” editorial. February 2, 1974. 'Bringing the Struggle against Lin and Confucius to An End', Renmin Ribao [People’s daily].
———. June 3, 1966. 'Sweep Away All Monsters', Renmin Ribao [People’s daily].
Allan, Derek. 2014. 'A logical redeemer: Kirillov in Dostoevskii’s Demons', Journal of European Studies, 44: 97-111.
Barth, Karl. 1933. The Epistle to the Romans (Oxford University Press: Oxford).


"Experience." In. *Online Etymology Dictionary*.


Pratt, Alan. "Nihilism." In Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

Rice, James L. 2006. 'Dostoevsky’s Endgame: The Projected Sequel to The Brothers Karamazov', Russian History/Histoire Russe, 33: 45-62.


202

Siddiqi, Bilal. 2019. 'Existentialism, Epiphany, and Polyphony in Dostoevsky’s Post-Siberian Novels', Religions, 10: 59.


