

Myth and Human Agency: Psychoanalysis, Alienation, and Responsibility in Camus, Sartre, and Russell

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Abstract: This article explores the intersection of myth, psychoanalysis, and existential philosophy through the figures of Sisyphus, Orestes, and Prometheus as interpreted by Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Bertrand Russell. By foregrounding the theme of alienation, the analysis examines how these mythic characters embody estrangement from divine authority, social order, and meaning itself, while simultaneously dramatizing the tension between freedom and responsibility. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, the analysis situates existentialist notions of agency within the dynamics of repression, guilt, and the superego, highlighting the unconscious dimensions of responsibility. At the same time, the myths are read as cultural texts that reflect modern anxieties about autonomy, moral obligation, and the limits of human freedom. By placing Camus's absurd hero, Sartre's radical freedom, and Russell's rational humanism in dialogue with psychoanalytic perspectives, the article argues that myth provides a symbolic framework for negotiating the paradox of human agency in conditions of alienation. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how psychoanalysis and existentialism converge in their attempt to articulate responsibility in a fractured cultural landscape.

Keywords: Myth, Human agency, Psychoanalysis, Alienation, Responsibility, Freedom, Camus, Sartre, Russell, Existentialism, Culture, Unconscious, Guilt

Introduction: The human condition in the modern era is fundamentally defined by the experience of alienation, a profound estrangement from the self, from society, and from any objective source of cosmic meaning. In the mid-twentieth century, as the traditional foundations of religious and social certainty fractured under the weight of global conflict and rapid modernization, thinkers turned to both philosophy and depth psychology to make sense of this crisis. At the forefront of this intellectual landscape stood Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Bertrand Russell. Though they emerged from different philosophical traditions, the Absurd, existentialism, and rational humanism, respectively, each centralizes the necessity of human agency and moral responsibility in a world devoid of divine scripts.

However, the conscious striving for freedom and autonomy does not occur in a vacuum. It takes place within the complex architecture of the human psyche, a domain where conscious intention is perpetually in dialogue with unconscious forces. To understand the psychological depth of alienation and responsibility, this article places these existentialist and humanist frameworks in direct conversation with psychoanalytic theory. Specifically, it examines how the burden of choice is inextricably linked to the dynamics of repression, unconscious guilt, and the tyrannical demands of the internal superego. Crucially, this psychological exploration is mediated through the active reinterpretation of classical antiquity; as (Hardwick, L. 2003) demonstrates in her framework of reception studies, the rewriting of ancient myths is not a passive inheritance but a dynamic dialogue where the past is weaponized to interrogate and reshape contemporary cultural and psychological crises.

To ground this intersection of philosophy and psychoanalysis, one ought to look to myth. Myths are not mere relics of antiquity; they are living cultural texts that externalize internal psychological conflicts. As Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung demonstrated, myth provides a symbolic grammar for the unconscious, projecting inward psychic struggles onto an outward, narrative stage. By reinterpreting classical myths, modern thinkers found a mirror for twentieth-century anxieties, rejecting historical classifications of myth as primitive science and treating it instead as a sophisticated psychological narrative that illuminates hidden facets of human nature (Segal, R.A. 2019).

By and large, this study focuses on three primary mythic archetypes as reimagined by the chosen thinkers: Sisyphus (Albert Camus): Reimagined in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1991), he represents the absurd hero. Condemned to roll a

boulder up a hill for eternity, Sisyphus embodies the psychological defiance against a meaningless universe. His struggle highlights how agency is reclaimed when the individual confronts the absurdity of existence without turning to illusions.

Orestes (Jean-Paul Sartre): In his play *The Flies* (*Les Mouches*, 1943), Sartre uses the myth of Orestes to dramatize radical freedom. Orestes breaks free from the crushing weight of collective guilt and divine authority (symbolized by Zeus and the Furies/Flies), demonstrating that true autonomy requires the painful acceptance of responsibility for one's actions, free from the constraints of an internalized moral authority.

Prometheus (Bertrand Russell): Throughout his essays, most notably 'A Free Man's Worship', Russell invokes the Promethean spirit of rational defiance (Russell, B. 2009). Prometheus, who steals fire from the Gods to empower humanity, symbolizes the rational mind refusing to bow to blind cosmic power or tyrannical dogma, forging human meaning through intellect and ethical solidarity.

By analyzing these intellectuals, this article explores how the transition from mythic alienation to human agency is mediated by psychic realities. When Orestes rejects Zeus, or when Prometheus defies the Gods, they are not just rebelling against external tyrants; psychoanalytically, they are dismantling the oppressive authority of the archaic superego. The existential demand for absolute responsibility often triggers intense anxiety and guilt, not because the individual has sinned against a real deity, but because they have violated the internalized structures of authority that psychoanalysis seeks to uncover.

Ultimately, this article argues that the convergence of psychoanalysis and existential philosophy provides a vital framework for contemporary culture. By reading Camus's absurd defiance, Sartre's radical freedom, and Russell's rational humanism through a psychoanalytic lens, we can better understand how modern individuals negotiate the paradox of agency. We are caught between the unconscious patterns that constrain us and the ethical obligation to act responsibly within a fractured cultural landscape.

Methodology: The author applies a comparative hermeneutic approach, combining psychoanalytic interpretation with existential and cultural analysis. Mythic figures such as Sisyphus, Orestes, and Prometheus are examined as symbolic texts that dramatize tensions between freedom, alienation, and responsibility. The study situates these myths within the philosophical frameworks of Camus, Sartre, and Russell, while also engaging psychoanalytic theory to uncover unconscious dimensions of guilt, repression, and agency. This dual lens, existentialist philosophy and psychoanalysis, is supplemented by a cultural contextualization that interprets the myths as reflections of modern anxieties about autonomy and moral obligation. The methodology is therefore interdisciplinary, drawing on textual analysis, philosophical comparison, and psychoanalytic critique to articulate how myth functions as a cultural medium for negotiating human agency under conditions of alienation.

1. The Absurd Hero and the Defiance of the Superego: Camus and Sisyphus: To align precisely with the authority of Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society, this section moves beyond a purely philosophical reading of the Absurd. Instead, it interprets Sisyphus's eternal, repetitive struggle as a psychological metaphor for the unconscious repetition compulsion, and his ultimate defiance as liberation from the punishing demands of the internalized archaic superego. In this light, the myth resonates with Samudrala Raghavaacharya's poetic philosophy from the 1953 film *Devadas*: 'Let the realization dawn that the very act of enduring is bliss; that awareness itself is eternal joy' (Raghavaacharya. S. 1953). The juxtaposition underscores how endurance, far from being mere suffering, can be reinterpreted as a psychoanalytic transformation, the shift from compulsive repetition to conscious acceptance, where awareness itself becomes a source of joy. Thus, Sisyphus's burden is not only a symbol of existential absurdity but also a cultural metaphor for the possibility of reconciling alienation with agency through the psychoanalytic revaluation of endurance.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus introduces the foundational premise of his philosophy: the Absurd. For Camus, the Absurd is not a structural property of the universe, nor is it a defect inherent to human nature. Rather, it is a relational fracture, an inescapable friction born from the collision between the human desire for inherent meaning and the 'unreasonable silence' of a cold, indifferent world. To experience the Absurd is to experience a profound form of existential alienation, where the cozy, habitual illusions of daily life collapse, leaving the individual acutely estranged from their surroundings and their own sense of purpose. Camus finds the ultimate psychological and symbolic expression of this condition in the ancient myth of Sisyphus, whom the Gods condemned to roll a massive boulder up a mountain, only to watch it roll back down to the bottom, for all eternity.

2.The Repetition Compulsion and the Eternal Rock: When read through a psychoanalytic lens, Sisyphus's eternal, futile labor mirrors what Sigmund Freud identified as the 'repetition compulsion' (Wiederholungszwang). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1955), Freud observed that the psyche often drives individuals to unconsciously repeat traumatic or unrewarding behaviors, acting out what cannot be consciously remembered or processed. Sisyphus's rock becomes the ultimate externalization of this psychic loop: like an individual trapped in neurosis, he is bound to a mechanical cycle of expenditure and collapse, his ascent symbolizing the ego's striving for mastery and meaning, and the inevitable descent dramatizing the shattering of those illusions by an indifferent universe. In a pathological state, this compulsion functions as a prison of unconscious guilt, where the ego punishes itself to appease the demands of a harsh, internalized authority. Yet Camus's reinterpretation of the myth marks a radical departure: Sisyphus's defiance transforms passive suffering into conscious endurance, reframing the cycle not as punishment but as liberation from the archaic superego, where awareness itself becomes the source of joy.

3.Overthrowing the Archaic Superego: The pivotal moment of Camus's analysis occurs during Sisyphus's descent back to the plain. It is in this brief pause, as he walks behind his rock, that Sisyphus achieves conscious awareness. Camus writes, 'That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that hour is the hour of consciousness' (Camus, A. 1942). By introducing awareness into the repetitive coil, Sisyphus fundamentally alters his psychological relationship with his tormentors. In psychoanalytic terms, the gods who condemned him embody the archaic superego, a primitive, tyrannical psychic structure sustained by internalized guilt, prohibition, and the enforcement of irrational external laws. When Sisyphus accepts the absolute meaninglessness of his task and chooses to roll the rock anyway, he performs an act of radical psychological defiance. He no longer seeks divine justification or cosmic reward; instead, he acknowledges that the rock and the mountain belong entirely to him, transforming punishment into ownership and alienation into agency.

By stripping the gods of their power to make him feel despair, Sisyphus achieves a profound therapeutic victory. He decathects, withdrawing emotional energy from the punishing authority of the superego, and thereby loosens the grip of internalized guilt. What was once an externally imposed punishment is transformed into an internally driven choice, a conscious act of defiance that reclaims agency from compulsion? In this moment, the unconscious guilt that fuels the repetition compulsion dissolves under the light of awareness, and the cycle of suffering is revalued as endurance freely embraced. Sisyphus's descent thus becomes not a return to despair but a radical reconfiguration of psychic life, where the rock and the mountain belong entirely to him, and consciousness itself becomes liberation from the archaic superego.

4.Responsibility in the Absence of Transcendence: Ultimately, Camus's Sisyphus demonstrates how human agency can be reclaimed even in the depths of alienation. He does not escape the fractured cultural or cosmic landscape, the rock remains, and the mountain does not shrink. Instead, responsibility is localized entirely within his immediate, lived experience. By concluding that 'one must imagine Sisyphus happy,' Camus suggests that true psychological autonomy is achieved not by fleeing the absurd constraints of reality, but by courageously confronting them. Agency belongs to the ego emancipated from the need for external validation, transforming a cosmic condemnation into a triumph of self-authored responsibility. In this act of defiance, endurance itself becomes liberation, and consciousness becomes the ground of freedom.

This section deepens the psychoanalytic critique by moving from individual neurosis, exemplified in Camus's Sisyphus and the repetition compulsion, to collective pathology. Orestes's journey is framed as a psychological liberation from an introjected cultural superego, a social authority that manufactures guilt to self-determination. In Sartre's 'The Flies,' the Gods and their rituals of remorse function as instruments of collective repression, binding the community to cycles of submission and fear. Orestes's refusal to accept this imposed guilt represents not only an existential assertion of freedom but also a psychoanalytic act of decathexis, withdrawing psychic energy from the punitive superego and redirecting it toward conscious agency. His defiance thus dramatizes how liberation from collective guilt can dissolve the pathological structures that sustain cultural alienation, transforming responsibility into a self-authored act rather than an externally enforced burden.

Radical Freedom and the Exorcism of Collective Guilt: Sartre and Orestes: While Albert Camus frames alienation as an absurd encounter with a silent universe, Jean-Paul Sartre situates it squarely within the social and psychological structures of human existence. In his landmark play 'The Flies' (*Les Mouches*, 1943), written and performed during the German occupation of France, Sartre adapts the classical Greek myth of Orestes to dramatize his philosophy of

radical freedom. Through this theatrical medium, Sartre demonstrates that the most paralyzing form of alienation is not cosmic, but introjected, a psychological captivity maintained by internalized cultural prohibitions and manufactured guilt.

5.Argos as a Pathological Dynamic: In *The Flies*, the city of Argos functions as a vivid metaphor for a collective psychological pathology. Following the unpunished murder of King Agamemnon by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, the entire populace is submerged in a perpetual state of state-sanctioned remorse. The city is literally plagued by swarms of black flies, which Sartre uses to symbolize the Furies, the ancient deities of vengeance. Psychoanalytically, these flies represent the externalization of neurotic guilt and a punishing, collective superego.

In *The Flies*, Sartre (1943) strips the myth of its cosmic grandeur to expose a darker, psychological manipulation at work in Argos. The Tyrant as Superego: Aegisthus and Zeus rule not through brute force alone, but by weaponizing the citizens' unconscious need for punishment, functioning as embodiments of the superego. The Economy of Guilt: By keeping the people perpetually fixated on their past sins and moral unworthiness, the authorities paralyze the ego, rendering the populace docile, compliant, and alienated from their own capacity for action. Into this landscape arrives Orestes, an educated, uncommitted outsider who experiences a profound alienation of displacement; he has no weight, no memories, and no place in the world. He represents the unconditioned ego, entirely free yet detached from meaningful engagement, a figure whose liberation depends on rejecting the manufactured guilt imposed by the cultural superego.

This liberation culminates in what can be described as the slaughter of the internalized law. Orestes's transition from detached alienation to authentic human agency occurs when he decides to take responsibility for the suffering of Argos. By committing matricide and killing Aegisthus, he performs a horrific act that the collective morality labels an unforgivable sin. Yet, it is precisely through this transgressive act that Orestes achieves psychological liberation. When confronted by Zeus, the ultimate cosmic projection of the father figure and the primordial superego, Orestes refuses to repent. Zeus demands submission, warning him of the crushing weight of the moral law. Orestes's response marks a radical rupture in the history of the existential ego: 'Suddenly, liberty crashed down on me and penetrated me... I am my own freedom. Scarcely had you created me when I ceased to be yours' (Sartre, 1943).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Orestes's defiance is an act of psychic iconoclasm. He does not merely disobey external authorities; he completely dismantles the internalized psychic structures that give those authorities power. Zeus and Aegisthus lose their terrifying grip the moment Orestes refuses to internalize the guilt they project onto him. By declaring himself 'humans are condemned to be free' (Sartre, J. P. 2007), Orestes accepts that there is no objective, transcendent moral ledger; the ego must author its own values. Orestes accepts that there is no objective, transcendent moral ledger; the ego must author its own values.

This ultimate realization of freedom leads directly to what can be understood as anguish and the exorcism of the furies. Sartre's psychoanalytic nuance lies in his treatment of the aftermath of the deed. Orestes does not deny the reality of what he has done; he does not repress the crime. Instead, he fully absorbs the consequences, carrying the weight of his actions without seeking absolution. When the Furies, represented as the flies in Sartre's (1943) drama, descend upon him with their screeching demands for self-punishment, Orestes does not flee or succumb to neurosis. Instead, he walks out of Argos, drawing the swarms of flies away from the citizens and onto himself. By refusing to convert his anxiety into guilt, Orestes transforms the Furies from terrifying psychological executioners into harmless, historical artifacts. His agency is forged in the fire of existential anguish (angoisse), the conscious realization that nothing stands between the self and the absolute responsibility of choosing the future. In the fractured cultural landscape of occupied Europe, and by extension the modern world, Sartre's Orestes serves as a powerful psychological blueprint: true autonomy requires the painful, conscious exorcism of an oppressive, introjected law.

6.The Promethean Intellect and the Sublimation of Despair: Russell and Rational Humanism: While Albert Camus frames agency as an absurd embrace of immediate reality and Jean-Paul Sartre views it as the radical assertion of the unconditioned will, Bertrand Russell anchors human agency in the liberating power of human reason and ethical solidarity. Writing from the tradition of analytical philosophy and scientific humanism, Russell's engagement with myth is less overtly theatrical than Sartre's or Camus's, yet it possesses a deep psychological urgency. Throughout his social and philosophical essays, most vibrantly in his landmark 1903 text 'A Free Man's Worship,' Russell invokes the spirit of Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from the gods to empower humanity, as the ultimate archetype for the modern, rational mind navigating an alien, mechanistic universe (Russell, R. 2009).

7.The Hostile Cosmos and Primitive Infantile Helplessness: In 'A Free Man's Worship,' Russell presents a vision of the cosmos that is terrifyingly indifferent, a blind play of atomic forces driven by 'unconscious power' that will eventually engulf all human achievements in the death of the solar system. This realization induces a profound sense of cosmic alienation (Russell, R. 2009).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the terror Russell describes closely mirrors the primordial anxiety of infantile 'helplessness' (Hilflosigkeit), which Sigmund Freud identified as the root of the religious impulse (Russell, B, 2004). Faced with a vast, uncaring universe, the immature human psyche tends to regress, first through the projection of omnipotence by placing an all-powerful, parental deity onto the cosmos to feel protected, and second through masochistic submission where humanity bows before tyrannical dogmas, interpreting cosmic indifference as deserved punishment from an angry god. Russell forcefully rejects this psychological regression, arguing that worshiping a deity out of fear of its power is a form of moral degradation and psychological slavery, a submission to an infantile, abusive projection of the father figure.

8.Prometheus as the Sublimated Ego: To counter this regressive urge, Russell champions the Promethean myth. Prometheus, chained to a rock and tortured by Zeus for daring to enlighten humanity, represents the emergence of the fully differentiated, courageous Ego arising from the chaotic waters of unconscious terror and religious dogma.

By stealing fire (which symbolizes both scientific illumination and creative capacity), Prometheus breaks the divine monopoly on power. In Russell's framework, when the human mind adopts this Promethean stance, it achieves a sophisticated form of sublimation: 1. Acknowledging Despair: The individual does not repress or deny the tragic reality of an uncaring universe. 2. Transforming Energy: The psychic energy that was once wasted on anxious appeasement and blind worship is redirected into the human world. 3. Intellectual Autonomy: The ego asserts its own supremacy over the external forces that crush it physically, because while the universe can destroy a human, the universe does not *know* it destroys, whereas the human mind possesses the conscious awareness of both itself and the cosmos. In this act of sublimation, Prometheus's defiance becomes a metaphor for the reclamation of agency, where despair is transfigured into creative power and alienation into intellectual freedom (Russell, B. 2004).

9.The Triumph of Rational Humanism over Cosmic Terror: For Russell, the 'Free Man's Worship' is not the worship of an external deity, but the honoring of the ideals generated within the human mind itself: beauty, truth, love, and justice. When humanity refuses to bend the knee to blind cosmic force or tyrannical religious structures, it effectively dethrones the punishing cosmic superego. As Shakespeare reminds in Hamlet, 'Men at times are the masters of their fates' (Shakespeare, w. 1992). Read through a psychoanalytic lens, this convergence underscores that agency is not bestowed by transcendent powers but authored by the ego itself, which transforms alienation into autonomy by consciously embracing responsibility (Russell, B 2004).

Russell writes that man must 'sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power' (Russell, B, 2004). Through a psychoanalytic lens, this is a profound statement of psychological resilience. By finding solidarity with other suffering human beings, sharing the Promethean fire of empathy and intellect, the individual creates a protective social and psychic sanctuary. Agency, in Russell's rational humanism, is the ultimate triumph of a mature, clear-eyed ego that refuses to let cosmic alienation devolve into psychological defeat, choosing instead to build an ethical home in an unfeeling wilderness (Russell. J.P. 1918).

Synthesizing Agency in a Fractured Landscape: The intellectual trajectories of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Bertrand Russell converge on a singular, urgent task: the rehabilitation of human agency in an era defined by profound alienation. By dismantling the transcendent frameworks that historically guaranteed human meaning, these thinkers did not abandon humanity to nihilism; instead, they returned the burden and the privilege of responsibility entirely to the individual. When read in dialogue with psychoanalytic theory, their philosophical projects reveal themselves as sophisticated psychological models for the emancipation of the ego from the tyrannical structures of internalized authority.

Through their respective mythic archetypes, Camus, Sartre, and Russell illustrate a progressive liberation of the human psyche. The psychological landscapes of existential and rationalist thought reveal a shared journey from alienation to autonomy, mapped through distinct mythological archetypes. For Albert Camus, exemplified by Sisyphus, alienation stems from a cosmic fracture with a silent universe; agency is achieved through absurd defiance, interrupting the psychoanalytic 'repetition compulsion' to break the cycle of unconscious guilt and decahex (detach psychic energy

from) a punishing archaic superego. Jean-Paul Sartre's Orestes confronts an alienation born of introjected social conformity and state-sanctioned remorse, staging an exorcism of the cultural superego by refusing collective guilt, converting paralyzing anxiety into existential 'anguish' (angoisse), and claiming radical, self-authored freedom. Finally, Bertrand Russell's Prometheus faces existential vulnerability within a blind, mechanistic cosmos, sublimating infantile 'helplessness' (Hilflosigkeit) by rejecting regressive submission to paternal deities and redirecting that psychic energy into rational humanism, intellectual autonomy, and ethical solidarity. Together, these thinkers demonstrate that true psychological liberation requires dismantling oppressive, internalized structures to forge independent meaning.

Ultimately, the psychological landscapes of Camus, Sartre, and Russell demonstrate that alienation is not merely a philosophical dilemma, but a profound psychic condition (Sartre, J.P. 1984). As we have explored, the transition to authentic responsibility cannot occur through a simple intellectual ascent; it requires a painful confrontation with the unconscious forces, the primal fears, the introjected laws, and the defensive regressions, that seek to keep the ego in a state of perpetual dependency. Whether it is Sisyphus interrupting the repetition compulsion through absurd defiance, or Orestes exorcising the cultural superego to claim radical freedom, or Prometheus sublimating infantile helplessness into rational humanism, true liberation always demands that the ego dismantle these internalized structures. By facing existential anxiety head-on without resorting to psychological defense mechanisms, the individual finally steps into authentic human agency and self-authored value.

In the contemporary and highly fractured cultural landscape, the synthesis of psychoanalysis and existentialism remains profoundly vital. Modern anxieties continue to manifest as symptoms of estrangement, often driving individuals toward the regressive security of new dogmas or the paralyzing loops of digital alienation. The collective insights of Camus, Sartre, and Russell remind us that true psychological autonomy is an active, ongoing achievement. To be responsible is to acknowledge our internal and external constraints while refusing to be defined by them. By using myth as a symbolic mirror, these thinkers illustrate that whether it is Sisyphus interrupting the repetition compulsion through absurd defiance, or Orestes exorcising the cultural superego to claim radical freedom, or Prometheus sublimating infantile helplessness into rational humanism, true liberation always demands that the ego dismantle these internalized structures. Ultimately, psychoanalysis and existential philosophy meet in this shared ethical clearing: they demand that we look into the dark architecture of our alienation, dismantle the tyrants within, and author our own meaning.

Conclusion: In the end, the psychoanalytic dialogue with existential philosophy reveals that alienation is not a terminal condition but the crucible in which agency is forged. Camus's Sisyphus, Sartre's Orestes, and Russell's Prometheus each dramatize the ego's confrontation with oppressive internalized structures, whether cosmic absurdity, cultural guilt, or mechanistic helplessness, and show that liberation arises only when these tyrants are dismantled. By refusing despair, rejecting manufactured remorse, and sublimating vulnerability into creative solidarity, the individual transforms alienation into autonomy. As Russell insists, man must 'sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power' (Russell, B. 2004). This is not a call to transcend the human condition, but to embrace it: to author meaning where none is given, to build ethical responsibility in an unfeeling wilderness, and to claim freedom as the conscious act of a resilient ego. In this synthesis, psychoanalysis and existentialism converge on a shared imperative, to dismantle the tyrants within and to live as agents of human values.

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