
'God's Middle Children' Metaphysical Rebellion in Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club

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"To kill God and to build a Church are the constant and contradictory purpose of rebellion."¹

—Albert Camus

Throughout their lives, human beings seek meaning, community, and purpose. People want to understand what it means to be alive. They want to love and to be loved by others. They want reasons to live. Happiness is imagined to be the reward for those who are able to satisfy these desires. At the same time, human beings experience the world as a place in which these aspirations are often unfulfilled. This tension between longing and disappointment often prompts questions such as "Why is my life so unsatisfying?" and "What can I do to make my life what it ought to be?" Answers to these questions can differ in levels of sophistication and soundness. *Fight Club*, written by American author Chuck Palahniuk, is a provocative and compelling novel about Americans that addresses these questions.

Originally published in 1996, *Fight Club* won a few regional fiction awards in 1997. In 1999, a film-adaptation was released

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¹ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (1956; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 103.

starring Edward Norton and Brad Pitt. In an afterword to the 2005 paperback edition of the novel, Palahniuk reflects upon the degree to which his story has captured the imagination of American readers and the broader culture. He explains that illegal fight clubs inspired by *Fight Club* have emerged in different places in the U.S. Academic conferences about the novel have been held. People have legally changed their names to Tyler Durden. He tells a story about going to a haunted house in which the guide changes the rules of fight club into the rules of the tour. According to Palahniuk, the guide had no idea who Palahniuk was or that *Fight Club* was even a book. About the positive response to his novel since it was originally published he writes, "Since then, thousands of people have written, most of them saying 'thank you.' For writing something that got their son to start reading again. Or their husband. Or their students."²

For readers who may be unfamiliar with the story, a brief summary is appropriate. *Fight Club* is set in the United States during the mid-1990s. As the title itself indicates, violence is a central theme in the novel. In *Fight Club*, feelings of alienation, powerlessness, and consumer captivity drive the narrator (no real name is given) to rebel against society, to "destroy" his life, and to seek individual meaning and community with other human beings on a new and authentic foundation. He meets a charismatic visionary named Tyler Durden. They become friends, and together they start the first fight club. Growing numbers of young men are drawn to fight club, and fight clubs start to spring up around the country. The characters believe that fighting is the only way to reassert their physical strength and masculinity in a society they perceive as weak and effeminate. But these clubs are about more than men punching and kicking each other in the name of manliness. Wherever it exists, fight club is a community, equipped with dogmas, scriptures, and rituals, devoted to obtaining the truth about existence through acts of violence and self-destruction. Later, the narrator, Tyler, and others start Project Mayhem, a terrorist organization committed to bringing the enlightenment its members have achieved in fight club to the rest of the world.

² Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (1996; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 217.

Project Mayhem's first acts of terrorism are crude pranks, but their activities quickly increase in scope and violence. Eventually, the narrator becomes disenchanted with Tyler, fight club, and Project Mayhem, and he tries to stop them all. The novel ends on an ambiguous note when the narrator is confined to an insane asylum.

In *Stranger than Fiction*, Palahniuk states: "[A]ll my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people."³ For Palahniuk, this theme is especially important in contemporary America. He argues that the American Dream amounts to little more than achieving power and material satisfaction, but success in America brings only emptiness and isolation. Palahniuk goes on to explain that purposelessness and alienation from humanity eventually prod lonely individuals to try to reestablish contact with the world.⁴ The characters of *Fight Club* express Palahniuk's general intuitions about the inadequacies of American life, and they connect their unsatisfying experiences with the shallow materialism of America's consumer culture to a more serious problem. They sense that dissatisfaction with American capitalism is actually a symptom of a deeper spiritual crisis. This insight shapes the manner in which the characters in the novel attempt to overcome despair and create meaningful lives.

As the following argument will show, *Fight Club* is a powerful aesthetic expression of metaphysical rebellion. Explaining the centrality of this rebellion in the novel will require a deeper textual analysis of *Fight Club* that draws upon a broader philosophical framework. In the mid-twentieth century, Albert Camus and Eric Voegelin worked separately on similar problems and issues. Each thinker identified and analyzed various disorders in modern philosophy and politics. Some of the concepts they developed can also be used to analyze works of art. In this article, Camus' notion of metaphysical rebellion, as explained in *The Rebel*, will be combined with compatible ideas from Voegelin, especially his notion of gnosticism, found in *The New Science of Politics; Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*; and other works. References to the political theories of Jean-

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³ Chuck Palahniuk, *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories* (2004; repr., New York: Anchor Books, 2005), xv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xv-xvi.

Jacques Rousseau and the early-twentieth century American scholar Irving Babbitt will shed further light upon metaphysical rebellion and the mindset out of which it emerges. Both Camus and Voegelin see Christianity as playing an essential role in creating the environment in which metaphysical rebellion becomes possible. *Fight Club* takes place in the United States, a nominally Christian society, and the characters draw heavily upon Christian ideas and imagery. Some consideration must therefore be given to Christianity. What *Fight Club* and the metaphysical rebellion at the heart of the novel might tell Americans about life and themselves will be addressed as the article draws to a close.

Metaphysical Rebellion: A Preliminary Account

*Metaphysical
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In *The Rebel*, Albert Camus explores the experiences of life that tend to culminate in acts of rebellion. He explains, "Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow, one is right."⁵ In the most general sense, the rebel finds the world to be a deeply disappointing place. This experience stems mainly from a conception of justice to which he feels the world does not conform, but could and should be made to conform. The rebel does not understand his sense of justice as subjective and arbitrary but as universal and authoritative. When his vision of justice is realized, he believes it will nurture the elements of human existence that had previously been ignored or denied. Rebellion can take many forms. One obvious form is that of a slave rebellion. In resisting his master, the rebel slave declares the injustice of his condition as mere property and affirms his innate dignity as a human being. Metaphysical rebellion is the most extreme variety of rebellion because this type of rebel "protests against the condition in which he finds himself as a man."⁶ It is not merely specific political or social arrangements but human nature and reality itself that the metaphysical rebel rejects as defective and unjust. He rebels against the entire structure of existence.

Eric Voegelin independently developed a concept very similar to Camus' notion of metaphysical rebellion. In a number of essays and longer works, Voegelin argues that an essential

⁵ Camus, *The Rebel*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

characteristic of modernity is “Gnosticism.” Whether it finds a contemplative or a political expression, Gnosticism attracts a particular type of person. The typical Gnostic is frustrated with his existence. To one degree or another, this experience is common among all human beings. One of the most important ways in which the Gnostic differs from the rest of humanity is in his refusal to hold human beings primarily responsible for their unhappiness. In *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* Voegelin writes, “If in a given situation something is not as it should be, then the fault is to be found in the wickedness of the world.” These sentiments are combined with the idea that the world can be transformed and thereby cured of its injustice. As Voegelin explains, “All gnostic movements are involved in the project of abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action.” Thus, human beings are thought to be capable of undertaking this “change in the order of being”—provided they have a true understanding of reality, a plan for change, and a prophetic leader to guide them. Under these circumstances, the Gnostic believes he can save himself and the world.⁷

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Drawing upon these thoughts from Camus and Voegelin, metaphysical rebellion can be described in a provisional manner as a rejection of God and the world on the basis of the rebel's conception of justice and his desires for individual meaning and human community. The metaphysical rebel holds God accountable for the suffering and injustice of the world. Finding little or no guilt on the part of human beings for this disappointing state of affairs, the rebel attempts to rectify the mistakes of an indifferent or cruel divinity. Total revolution is imagined to be the key to placing the world upon a just foundation. It is the process through which life will finally be invested with true meaning, purpose, and the spirit of brotherhood. It promises to transform human nature and the world. Metaphysical rebellion also serves as the source of

⁷ Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays*, trans. William J. Fitzpatrick, in *Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions; The New Science of Politics; Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, ed. Manfred Henningsen, vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 297, 305, 298.

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a new religious faith. It allows a community to form around a belief in the possibility of self-salvation. This notion and its components will receive further elucidation as the analysis unfolds.

Fight Club and Metaphysical Rebellion

In *Fight Club*, many of the characters are drawn to rebellion because they experience the world as unjust, disappointing, and lonely. The narrator works as a “recall campaign coordinator” for an automobile company, and he travels all over the United States to apply “the formula.”⁸ At each of his destinations, the narrator determines whether a product defect is serious enough to warrant a recall. Questions about the company’s ethical responsibilities to build safe cars and recall dangerous vehicles are not allowed to enter into the equation. A recall is simply a math problem about money and profit margins. Innocent people get hurt by the company’s shoddy products. The narrator develops feelings of anger toward his company because he feels forced to participate in its wickedness.

The narrator’s frustration at work is combined with loneliness at home. He explains, “Home was a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals.”⁹ His apartment is filled with a variety of consumer goods, such as a “clever” coffee table in the shape of a yin and yang symbol, a designer sofa, and “environmentally friendly” paper lamps.¹⁰ He also owns “hand-blown green glass dishes with the tiny bubbles and imperfections, little bits of sand, proof they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working indigenous aboriginal peoples of wherever.”¹¹ His life is prefabricated, vacuum-sealed, and disposable. His life is meaningless and boring.

The narrator believes that his life is representative of the lives led by most men of his generation. He states, “And I wasn’t the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography,

⁸ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 31, 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue."¹² Other characters confirm the representative status of the narrator's feelings. When the members of Project Mayhem threaten a police commissioner with castration for investigating the fight clubs, Tyler Durden says, "We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't. And we're just learning this fact So don't f—k with us."¹³ These comments express feelings of emptiness and anger that seem to be engendered by contemporary American capitalism: Jobs have no meaning. Life is solitary. Product consumption imparts neither virtue nor happiness. The culture lies.

*Rebellion
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emptiness
based on
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But, as the novel unfolds, the characters' meditations upon the source of their frustrations deepen. During a car ride, a mechanic tells the narrator, "We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression."¹⁴ The mechanic identifies the fundamental cause of this spiritual depression, explaining, "If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?" The mechanic argues that although most people spend their lives fruitlessly searching for their father and for their God, they need to consider the possibility that "God hates us."¹⁵ As the car ride continues, the narrator explains, "We are God's middle children, according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in history and no special attention."¹⁶ Later, a member of Project Mayhem crudely states, "I am the toxic waste by-product of God's creation."¹⁷ God, not capitalism or America's consumer culture, is ultimately responsible for the characters' disappointment and frustration. This is why

¹² Ibid., 43.

¹³ Ibid., 166.

¹⁴ Ibid., 149.

¹⁵ Ibid., 141.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 169.

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they describe their crisis as spiritual, not economic or political. This is why their rebellion is metaphysical.

It is not surprising that characters overwhelmed by these feelings would eventually find God guilty of having created a thoroughly unsatisfying existence and of contempt for his creation. Camus explains, "The only thing that gives meaning to human protest is the idea of a personal god who has created, and is therefore responsible for, everything."¹⁸ If God does not exist, and the world simply is what it is, then there could be no hope for change in the future. But if there is a God who possesses the power to create, then he must have the power to make a new and better world. God is guilty of injustice because he refuses to use his power in this way. Camus writes, "The metaphysical rebel is therefore not definitely an atheist, as one might think him, but he is inevitably a blasphemer."¹⁹ He elaborates upon this point about God and rebellion, arguing, "And so we can say, without being paradoxical, that in the Western World the history of rebellion is inseparable from the history of Christianity."²⁰ Voegelin develops similar insights when analyzing the relationship between Christianity and Gnosticism. This part of Voegelin's thought must be explained with care.

In various writings, Voegelin argues that Christianity expresses the maximum "differentiation" of reality for human consciousness. The idea of "differentiation" is vital to understanding Voegelin's insights into the relationship between Christianity and Gnosticism. In *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order*, Michael Federici demystifies a number of rather difficult arguments and concepts deployed by Voegelin in his numerous writings, including the idea of differentiation. He writes, "For Voegelin, human understanding of truth can be measured on a scale that moves from compactness to differentiation. As human experience with transcendent reality occurs through history, new and deeper insights are gained about the nature of reality and the human condition: this is the essence of differentiation." That newer and more complete insights into the structure of reality are obtained at particular points in history

¹⁸ Camus, *The Rebel*, 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

does not mean that preceding, more compact experiences of transcendence can or should be discarded. On the contrary, Federici claims that according to Voegelin, “The ‘new’ differentiated truth is not completely new; it builds on the insights of compact truth. In fact, less differentiated experiences share an equivalence with more differentiated experiences. New symbols are engendered to express new insights into the human condition, but the experiences are not new. They too come from human participation in the universal structure of reality.”²¹ On Voegelin’s view, when human beings have experiences of transcendence, they always experience one and the same transcendent reality. At the same time, efforts to articulate these experiences through the creation of symbols can vary widely in their comprehensiveness and transparency. This idea about the differentiation of reality, including the notion of equivalent experiences of transcendence, is one way of explaining how serious philosophers can recognize the unity *and* the diversity of experiences of transcendence throughout human history.

New symbols express new insights into the human condition.

One can now more easily understand what Voegelin means when he claims that Christianity provides the highest differentiation of the truth about human nature and the relationship between immanence and transcendence. In many writings, he argues that Christianity surpasses—but does not make wholly obsolete—the insights into the structure of being achieved by cosmological societies such as Ancient Egypt and Ancient China, as well as those articulated by earlier philosophical communities, such as those found in Ancient Greece, and by communities held together by earlier revelations, such as the Ancient Israelites. In “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” these notions about differentiation and equivalent experiences lead Voegelin to declare, “History is Christ written large.”²² Although Christianity sheds the brightest light upon the structure of reality, it does not claim to inaugurate a transformation of existence in time. Deeper insight into reality is not synony-

²¹ Michael P. Federici, *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 76, 77.

²² Eric Voegelin, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin Vol. 12: Published Essays 1965-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1990), 78.

*Christianity's
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of new reality.*

mous with the creation of a new reality. Thus, while Christianity clarifies the relationship between God and man as much as is possible for human consciousness, human beings continue to be born, to grow, to love, to suffer, and to die, just as they had before. One of Christianity's most important and most perplexing insights into life is that its fulfillment lies not in this world, but in the Beyond.

The impact of Christianity on Western civilization has been extensive, and it has presented some difficulties. In *The New Science of Politics* Voegelin argues, "Uncertainty is the very essence of Christianity. The feeling of security in a 'world full of gods' is lost with the gods themselves; when the world is de-divinized, communication with the world-transcendent God is reduced to the tenuous bond of faith, in the sense of Heb 11:1, as the substance of things hoped for and the proof of things unseen." For some individuals, the uncertainty produced by Christianity is overwhelming. Voegelin writes, "the very lightness of this fabric may prove too heavy a burden for men who lust for massively possessive experience."²³ The worldly success of Christianity, the degree to which the religion and its symbols permeate a civilization, increases the number of people exposed to but incapable of enduring the anxiety brought on by its differentiation. He argues: "The more people are drawn or pressured into the Christian orbit, the greater will be the number among them who do not have the spiritual stamina for the heroic adventure of the soul that is Christianity."²⁴ Whether they are Christians, indifferent to Christianity, or even overtly hostile to Christianity, such individuals will seek ways to provide themselves with a greater sense of security in the world than the one that emerges with Christianity.

The appeal of Gnosticism and metaphysical rebellion as alternatives to the uncertainty generated by the emergence of Christianity is understandable. Both promise to re-divinize the world and to invest human activity with god-like power. Rather than suffering through the unease of existence, people drawn to these types of visions can indulge in the belief that they are capable of transforming themselves and the world.

²³ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (1952; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 122.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

Despite their appeal, insofar as they both recede from the Christian differentiation of consciousness, Gnosticism and metaphysical rebellion can be categorized as “derailments.” In other words, these phenomena describe deliberate movements away from life lived in the light of tenuous truth and toward life lived in the shadowland of firm untruth.²⁵ It should be understood that a derailment into Gnosticism does not mean a return to a pre-Christian vision of reality, such as paganism. Even in the midst of this type of rebellion, the horizon of thought and action is still conditioned by the Christian differentiation. Consequently, it should not be surprising to discover that expressions of metaphysical rebellion and Gnosticism tend to be parodies of Christianity. The existence of this peculiar relationship is what leads Camus to claim, “To kill God and to build a Church are the constant and contradictory purpose of rebellion.”²⁶

Expressions of metaphysical rebellion tend to be parodies of Christianity.

In *Fight Club*, killing God and building a church is precisely the course of action the characters take. The idea that God has rejected these characters, and thus humanity, does not suppress their need for meaning, community, and salvation. Their collective response to God’s hatred is faith in self-salvation through self-destruction. The narrator explains, “At the time, my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves.”²⁷ To carry out the work of self-salvation, Tyler and the narrator create an *ersatz* religion that resembles Christianity. Early in the novel, fight club is the central component of this pseudo-religious movement. Its meetings are conducted like a Christian church service, steeped in ritual and communal participation. Each Saturday night, members congregate, the rules of fight club are recited, and the fights are held. As the narrator describes it, “There’s hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved.”²⁸ Each meeting is a liturgy of salvation through violence and self-annihilation. Fight club flourishes because it provides unity and community to lonely men. It gives them

²⁵ Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 310.

²⁶ Camus, *The Rebel*, 103.

²⁷ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

confidence, purpose, and something in which they want to believe.

Their success and growing membership notwithstanding, the fight clubs are ultimately an intermediary step in the process of self-salvation. The euphoria generated by fight club is indicative only of "premature enlightenment." The narrator explains, "Tyler says I'm nowhere near hitting the bottom, yet. And if I don't fall all the way, I can't be saved. Jesus did it with his crucifixion thing."²⁹ Tyler tells the narrator that he must hit bottom because, "It's only after you've lost everything . . . that you're free to do anything."³⁰ The narrator puts this lesson in his own words and says, "Only after disaster can we be resurrected."³¹ Tyler is sympathetic to the narrator's desire for self-destruction and wants to help him achieve salvation. During a conversation, Tyler explains to the narrator the various ways in which the elements of soap can be combined with other chemicals and materials to make bombs powerful enough to blow up bridges and buildings. Tyler kisses the back of the narrator's hand and says, "With enough soap . . . you could blow up the whole world."³² He pours lye on the narrator's wet hand and gives him a chemical burn.

The narrator tries to escape the pain through meditation, but Tyler screams, "Don't shut this out . . . Soap and human sacrifice go hand in hand."³³ He tells the narrator that long ago the accumulated remnants of human sacrifices, human fat and ash, would seep into rivers at the base of pagan altars, creating soap. People began to realize that the soap from the sacrifices cleaned their clothes. Tyler argues that it was right to kill all of the people that died in those sacrifices. The first soap, he explains, was made out of heroes. He says, "Without their death, their pain, without their sacrifice . . . we would have nothing."³⁴ Tyler tells the narrator that he will neutralize the burn, but first the narrator has to give up, embrace the pain, and realize that he is going to die some day. The narrator complies. On the back of his hand the narrator sees a bright, swol-

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 73.

³³ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

len scar in the shape of two lips. Tyler says, “‘Congratulations . . . You’re a step closer to hitting bottom.’”³⁵

Despite the pagan elements of Tyler’s sermon on soap, the characters’ tendencies to invoke Christian figures, images, and ideas to explain the meaning of salvation through self-destruction are clear from these passages. The connection they establish is important because the interplay between life and death and between suffering and salvation are central themes in Christianity. In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes the intimate relationship between death and life when he says, “‘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.’”³⁶ Here Jesus speaks metaphorically about the essential connection between death and life in his subsequent crucifixion and resurrection, events to which Tyler and the narrator directly and indirectly refer above. Without crucifixion, without suffering, no salvation, no resurrection would be possible.

The chemical burn—Tyler’s kiss upon the narrator’s hand—is an image especially rich in Christian overtones. It is an experience for the narrator similar to the account of Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the members of the fledging Christian community in the form of tongues of fire. The illumination they received enabled them to go out into the world to spread the message of their new religion.³⁷ In the novel, the chemical burn allows the narrator to gain a deeper insight into what salvation through self-destruction ultimately means. Being in a community with the other members of fight club is not enough. Fight club cannot be merely a Saturday night escape from the world. It cannot be a retreat for people who then go back into a world they hate and to which they do not belong. The metaphysical rebellion at the heart of *Fight Club* is total. Along with Tyler, the narrator begins to realize that the members of fight club must destroy more than themselves. They must destroy the world. It is the only way everyone can be saved. Out of this epiphany, Project Mayhem is born.

*Ersatz religion
requires
destruction of
the world to
save it.*

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ John 12:24 (KJV)

³⁷ See Acts 2:1-47 (KJV)

Tyler believes that Project Mayhem will save the world by destroying it, just as individual members of fight club are saved through self-destruction. Project Mayhem is organized in a way that resembles that of a monastic order. Like fight club, it has its own rules. The members have no names. They live communally under ascetic conditions in a home occupied by Tyler and the narrator. They study Tyler's teachings in the way that Christians study Scripture. Unlike a monastic order, they commit acts of terrorism that progress from the juvenile, such as pushing over an occupied chemical toilet, to the destructive, such as blowing up an entire floor of a building, to the murderous, such as killing the narrator's boss and a government official. About the violence of Project Mayhem, the narrator states, "Tyler didn't care if other people got hurt or not. The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world."³⁸

Tyler reveals to the narrator his vision of a world transformed by Project Mayhem:

Imagine . . . stalking elk past department store windows and stinking racks of beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos on hangers; you'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life, and you'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. . . . We'll paint the skyscrapers with huge totem faces and goblin tikis, and every evening what's left of mankind will retreat to empty zoos and lock itself in cages as protection against bears and big cats and wolves that pace and watch us from outside the cage bars at night.³⁹

Tyler and the other characters long for a simpler world, one that is not burdened by the conditions of life against which they feel forced to rebel. His dream is of a "natural" existence for the people that survive the apocalypse he has planned. He expresses his vision in vivid images of desolation, jungles, hunting, wild animals, and pagan idols. To reach the shores of this holy, primitive utopia is the reason Project Mayhem exists. It is not surprising that Tyler and the other characters are drawn to images with pre-Christian roots. The type of rebellion in which the characters are engaged is one that seeks to bring the world under a firmer degree of control than is possible af-

³⁸ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 122.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 125, 124.

ter the Christian differentiation.

The growth of Project Mayhem out of fight club and the embrace of global destruction as a means to salvation are developments consistent with metaphysical rebellion. In *The Rebel*, Camus explores the relationship between rebellion and violence when he reflects upon Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the novel, Ivan Karamazov, a literary ancestor of Tyler and the narrator, cannot reconcile the reality of innocent human suffering with the notion of a just and omnipotent God. Hence, out of his love for humanity, he rejects God. At the same time, Ivan concludes that without God all is permitted. About Ivan's way of thinking, Camus writes, "Ivan rebels against a murderous God; but from the moment that he begins to rationalize his rebellion, he deduces the law of murder. . . . Long reflection on the condition of mankind as people sentenced to death only leads to the justification of crime."⁴⁰ Ivan's theoretical conclusion about the permissibility of murder leads to the actual murder of his father at the hands of a Karamazov household servant, a bastard half-brother and disciple of Ivan.

Voegelin draws similar conclusions about the relationship between Gnostic rebellion and violence in an analysis of the nineteenth century Russian nihilist Mikhail Bakunin. For his revolutionary activities, Bakunin was arrested, imprisoned, and compelled to write a confession to Tsar Nicholas I. In his confession, Bakunin gives his defiance a spiritual basis and explains that faith is the source of his strength. He believes that faith guided by a powerful will can transform the world, and he wants others to believe in this too. He argues that the change in reality he desires can be achieved only through acts of violence that seek to annihilate the defective world. Only upon a clean foundation can a new and perfect world emerge. Voegelin draws attention to the intimate relationship between rebellion and violence in Bakunin's thought and writes: "The terroristic act as moralistic model is a symptom of the disease in which evil assumes the form of spirituality."⁴¹ As these

⁴⁰ Camus, *The Rebel*, 58.

⁴¹ Eric Voegelin, *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*, ed. David Walsh, vol. 8 of *The History of Political Ideas*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 26 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 278.

Despite destructive efforts of metaphysical rebels, the world stubbornly remains the same.

examples from Camus and Voegelin show, and as *Fight Club* itself confirms, the desire to save the world that is at the heart of metaphysical rebellion imparts the belief that all things are permissible for those who carry the fire of resistance, including murder.

Despite their fervent belief in their power to change the world, and despite the numerous acts of violence they commit in pursuit of this end, the characters in *Fight Club* never achieve their dreams. The world stubbornly remains more or less the same. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator has two experiences that lead him to renounce Tyler, fight club, and Project Mayhem. First, he learns that he and Tyler are two personalities in the same body. The longer the Tyler personality is in control, the further the narrator's consciousness fades away. Tyler warns the narrator not to interfere with his side of their shared existence. Tyler promises to punish the narrator if he gets in his way. Despite the warning, the narrator's instincts for self-preservation weaken his commitment to destruction, and he begins to work against Tyler, fight club, and Project Mayhem.

Second, the narrator's friend Bob, also a member of Project Mayhem, dies during a mission. At fight clubs around the country, the death of Robert Paulson is commemorated and celebrated. They chant his name and his age. The narrator remarks, "Only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes."⁴² But this paraphrasing of the moral of Tyler's story about soap and human sacrifice is of little comfort to the narrator. He is deeply affected by Bob's death. At the fight club he attends that evening, he tells the audience that fight club has served its purpose and that Project Mayhem is canceled. Silence fills the room. He continues, "'A man is dead, I say. This game is over. It's not for fun anymore."⁴³ The men start to shout the rules of fight club back to the narrator, and they eject him from the club. Shortly thereafter, members of Project Mayhem threaten to castrate him. Fight club and Project Mayhem

See also Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans. M. J. Hanak, ed. David Walsh, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

⁴² Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 178.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

have outgrown their founders.

Faced with the realization that he is directly and indirectly responsible for the deaths of a number of people, the narrator embarks upon his final acts of self-destruction. He attempts to kill himself by signing up for every fight at a meeting of fight club. He fails. Later, Tyler takes him to a skyscraper so that he can die when bombs planted in the building by Project Mayhem detonate. Tyler explains, "'A real opera of a death, that's what you're going to get.'"⁴⁴ Tyler holds a gun in the narrator's mouth so that he may kill the narrator should the police arrive at the building before it explodes. Instead, the narrator shoots himself in the cheek in an attempt to "kill" Tyler. After this, having saved neither himself nor the world, the narrator is sent to a mental institution.

That *Fight Club* ends in this way would not surprise Camus or Voegelin. Camus explains that in *The Brothers Karamazov* Ivan refuses to love God, but he recoils from the law of murder he once proudly pronounced. He writes, "Caught between unjustifiable virtue and unacceptable crime, consumed with pity and incapable of love, a recluse deprived of the benefits of cynicism, this man of supreme intelligence is killed by a contradiction."⁴⁵ The contradiction drives Ivan to despair and madness. Voegelin argues that some awareness that Gnostic rebellion is a form of madness is always present in the mind of the rebel because the rebel senses that human nature and the world cannot truly be transformed in the manner he desires. Even within an elaborately constructed *ersatz* faith, it is only the Gnostic revolutionary, not the world, that is changed. Voegelin writes, "The structure of the order of being will not change because one finds it defective and runs away from it. The attempt at world destruction will not destroy the world, but will only increase the disorder in society."⁴⁶ Taking these comments and the conclusion of *Fight Club* together, it appears that insanity is an inescapable consequence of metaphysical rebellion.

Voegelin and Camus have enhanced their explanations of Gnosticism and metaphysical rebellion by drawing atten-

Insanity an inescapable consequence of metaphysical rebellion.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁵ Camus, *The Rebel*, 59.

⁴⁶ Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 256.

Voegelin and Camus ignore or downplay Rousseau's contribution to metaphysical rebellion.

tion to literary, philosophical, and political figures that seem to embody these concepts. At the same time, it is unfortunate that neither scholar spends a great deal of time explaining their concepts with reference to a thinker who has done much to promote ideas and approaches to politics that exemplify the pathological mindset to which they apply their analytical tools. To state it simply, the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau are brimming with Gnosticism and metaphysical rebellion. In *The Rebel*, Camus directs some attention to Rousseau, but in this work, at least, he seems to downplay Rousseau's centrality in articulating the type of vision that is at the heart of his study. Voegelin oddly does not give serious attention to Rousseau in any of his works.

Babbitt explicates Rousseau's central place in modern Western philosophy, aesthetics, and political theory.

In contrast to Camus and Voegelin, Irving Babbitt devotes much of his scholarship to explicating Rousseau's central place in modern Western philosophy, aesthetics, and political theory. Babbitt sees Rousseau as being the great modern architect of a new way of imagining life and its possibilities.⁴⁷ In *Democracy and Leadership*, Babbitt claims the following about the comprehensive objective of Rousseau's writings: "Rousseau is, as a matter of fact, busy in creating a new set of myths that have, in their control of the human imagination, succeeded in no small measure to the old theology. Just as in the old theology everything hinged on man's fall from God, so in Rousseau everything hinges on man's fall from nature."⁴⁸ Rousseau's new mythology includes views of human nature, and of the relationship between the individual and society, which are rather different from those that predominated in the Western civilization held together by what Babbitt calls the "old theology." In *Rousseau and Romanticism* Babbitt argues, "Evil, says Rousseau, foreign to man's constitution, is introduced into it

⁴⁷ For a thorough explication of the central role played by the imagination in the creation of human knowledge, see Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997). For substantive analyses of qualities of imagination as well as of Rousseau's influence on the development of a particular strain of imagination in the modern setting, see Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund Inc., 1979), Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), and Claes G. Ryn, "The Imaginative Origins of Modernity: Life as Daydream and Nightmare," *Humanitas* Vol. 10, no. 2 (1997).

⁴⁸ Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 98-99.

from without. The burden of guilt is thus conveniently shifted upon society. Instead of the old dualism between good and evil in the breast of the individual, a new dualism is thus set up between an artificial and corrupt society and 'nature.'"⁴⁹ Babbitt's comments suggest that the animating spirit of Rousseau's philosophy has much in common with the vision of metaphysical rebellion expressed in *Fight Club*. Gaining some understanding of the relevant areas of Rousseau's thought will thus provide an even deeper understanding of the novel and its central concept.

*Rousseau's
new theology
shifts burden
of guilt from
the individual
to society.*

Like the characters in *Fight Club*, Rousseau is deeply disappointed with his life. At the beginning of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, he laments, "So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbour [sic] or friend, nor any company left me but my own. The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest."⁵⁰ Like the characters in the novel, Rousseau harbors deep resentment toward society. In *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, he calls society a "herd," and argues, "A vile and deceitful uniformity reigns in our mores, and all minds seem to have been cast in the same mold."⁵¹ On his view, human nature is good but it has been thoroughly corrupted by the comfort and refinements brought forth by the arts and sciences. True liberty, equality, and brotherhood have all been made impossible to achieve. Rousseau sees the culprits for this state of affairs as "society" and "civilization." In *Emile* he argues, "Civil man is born, lives, and dies in slavery. At his birth he is sewed in swaddling clothes; at his death he is nailed in a coffin. So long as he keeps his human shape, he is enchained by our institutions."⁵² Like the characters in the novel, Rousseau finds no culpability on the part of human beings for their depressing state of affairs. Social and political institutions alone are to blame.

As bleak as is Rousseau's assessment of the present, he of-

⁴⁹ Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 130.

⁵⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 27.

⁵¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 4.

⁵² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 42-43.

fers hope to his readers for a better future. In a manner similar to Tyler Durden, Rousseau argues that human action alone can transform the world and save humanity from the institutions and history by which it is being oppressed. Since Rousseau sees nothing fundamentally wrong with human nature, his reform efforts are directed toward society and politics. In *On the Social Contract*, he argues, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”⁵³ With these words Rousseau makes all existing governments and societies illegitimate. Upon the clean canvas he makes with this declaration, Rousseau proposes to construct a new politics and a new society, built upon a social contract, in which the wounds inflicted upon human beings by the old order will be healed and absolute liberty, equality, and brotherhood will reign. For Rousseau, paradise can be bought—and on the cheap. These are the main ideas and images that Babbitt has in mind when writing about Rousseau’s efforts to establish a new set of myths and a new dualism.

In order to achieve these goals, Rousseau argues that all members belonging to the social contract must forfeit all of their rights to the sovereign, which he terms the general will. It may sound as if the parties to the contract are consenting to slavery, but for Rousseau alienating all rights is precisely the act that allows citizens to experience genuine individual liberty as well as collective security and identity. Citizens are free, but they are also equal because they belong to a political community of which they are each an equal part. No citizen has more power than any other citizen. For Rousseau, only the general will, created by the social contract, can provide the environment in which the torments and alienation of the past can be overcome. Only the general will can protect and maintain popular sovereignty and the social contract. According to Rousseau, the content of the general will, that is, the practices and beliefs that will guide it in exercises of sovereignty, is first implanted by an almost magical figure called the Legislator. This individual is not party to the contract, but claims that he has the ability to form the general will of a particular people in a way that will be advantageous for those that are parties to

⁵³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 141.

the contract. Once he has completed his act of “founding” a new people, the Legislator departs.

In *Fight Club*, the characters belong to a community attempting to serve deeply felt spiritual needs. Like the main characters in the novel, Rousseau is not a proponent of traditional religions. He is especially hostile toward traditional Christianity. At the same time, Rousseau realizes that the type of devotion human beings tend to render to God could be helpful to his proposed regime, if only those feelings of intense faith could be redirected to Caesar. Rousseau does not wish to do away with religion or with belief in things divine. In *On the Social Contract*, he calls the social order he establishes a “sacred right.” He explains that the Legislator must tell the nascent general will that his laws are to be obeyed because they are of divine origin. He proposes a *civil* religion for his political community, one that is replete with dogmas (which he also calls “sentiments of sociability”), public professions of faith, and punishments for heretics, including death by execution.⁵⁴

Rousseau’s insight into the relationship between religion and revolutionary politics is profound. Generally speaking, human beings seem especially willing to fight, to kill, and to die for causes claiming to be grounded in truth and to have as objectives the realization of goals such as liberty, equality, God’s will, and justice. Rousseau’s notion that salvation through human action can be realized only when genuine faith in the truth of a new vision of humanity and society exists has much in common not only with Voegelin’s analysis of Bakunin, but also with the central theme of *Fight Club* and this analysis of metaphysical rebellion.

While it is true that Rousseau sees religious attachment as a central element in maintaining fidelity to the social contract, he views all of these efforts to instill faith in the citizenry as part of an elaborate and necessary deception. He describes the social contract as sacred, but he acknowledges that it remains a pure convention. He explains that the Legislator tells the emerging general will that his laws are divine, but the Legislator (and Rousseau) knows he is deceiving the parties to the

Rousseau seeks to redirect to his proposed regime the devotion humans tend to render to God.

Rousseau seeks to suppress genuine religious communities because they undermine fidelity to the state.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 141, 162-165, 220-227.

The tension in Rousseau's mind between actual religious unbelief and make-believe spirituality is also prominent in Fight Club.

contract. Rousseau promotes civil religion because it is seen as capable of strengthening popular attachment to the state. He does not attempt to serve any genuine spiritual needs with this convention. On the contrary, he seeks to suppress authentic religious communities in the society constituted by the social contract because they undermine fidelity to the state. The tension in Rousseau's mind between actual religious unbelief and make-believe spirituality is also a prominent feature in *Fight Club*. Both Rousseau and the novel seem to realize that even when traditional religions are rejected, human beings do not live by bread alone.

At times, Rousseau seems to sigh deeply under the weight of his peculiar vision of the world. He briefly intuits that he has overlooked aspects of reality that cannot be ignored, and he occasionally admits that his political and social ideas will be difficult if not impossible to realize. But for Rousseau such moments are of short duration. He longs to live in the idyllic world constituted by his dreams, and that is the place to which he inevitably returns. Like Rousseau in his rare moments of honesty, the narrator of *Fight Club* eventually becomes tired of the hoax he creates. Especially after the discovery that he and Tyler inhabit the same body and after the death of Robert Paulson, the narrator does not want to play fight club or Project Mayhem any longer. At the end of the novel, the narrator appears to be tired of these specific deceptions, but, in the spirit of Rousseau, he does not turn away from unreality so much as he looks to trade metaphysical rebellion for a new game. Such an ending would not surprise Babbitt. About the tendency of the Rousseauist to avoid painful self-scrutiny, he writes, "The ugly things that have a way of happening when impulse is thus left uncontrolled do not, as we have seen, disturb the beautiful soul in his complacency. He can always point an accusing finger at something or somebody else."⁵⁵ Insofar as the ideas of Babbitt and Rousseau have further elucidated the historical depth and motivating experiences of metaphysical rebellion and Gnosticism, they have made vital contributions to this analysis.

As *Fight Club* suggests, metaphysical rebellion is ultimately a self-defeating attempt to satisfy the desire for meaning in an

⁵⁵ Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 155.

uncertain world. According to Camus and Voegelin, Christianity plays an essential though inadvertent role in exacerbating the conditions that prompt outbursts of metaphysical rebellion and Gnosticism. Since Christianity has been implicated in the problem of metaphysical rebellion, it is necessary to gain some awareness of the Christian understanding of life in the world and its response to the anxiety of existence. A general sense of the relevant ideas can be obtained by exploring selected parts of the thought of St. Augustine. In this discussion, an alternative to metaphysical rebellion will emerge. An important component of metaphysical rebellion, both in *Fight Club* and as a general concept, will also be identified.

Augustine, Christianity, and Metaphysical Rebellion

In *The City of God*, Augustine explains that human life on earth is incurably imperfect. On his view, those who celebrate the life of virtue merely indicate that human beings are beset on all sides by evil. Virtue neither protects individuals against suffering nor guarantees happiness. Social life is generally disappointing. Friends today can become enemies tomorrow. Members of families let each other down. Augustine laments, "Yet, who can rely utterly even on family affection? How much unhappiness has sprung from the ambush of domestic disloyalties!"⁵⁶ Augustine's sober assessment of life extends to his thoughts on politics. He sees politics as a consequence of and a remedy for human sinfulness, and he illustrates this point with reference to criminal justice proceedings. Courts of law are essential institutions in civil society, but they are not perfect and can commit acts of inadvertent as well as deliberate injustice. Augustine writes, "No human judge can read the conscience of the man before him. . . . a judge in his ignorance will condemn to death, as sometimes happens, men who had nothing but the good of society at heart."⁵⁷ Politics can provide a limited amount of order and justice, but the cost is enormous. In the midst of constant foreign and domestic threats, regimes are often obligated to resort to force, brutality, and war.

⁵⁶ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, abr., trans. Gerald G. Walsh, Demetrius B. Zema, Grace Monahan, and Daniel J. Honan, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Image Books, 1958), 443-444.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 444, 445.

Augustine's
account of
frustrations
of human
existence
similar to
those of
Fight Club
characters.

Augustine's account of frustration and unhappiness in human existence is comparable to the experiences of disappointment with life conveyed by the characters of *Fight Club*. One can hear Augustinian echoes when the narrator explains, "Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise."⁵⁸ Elsewhere in the novel, the mechanic says, "I see the strongest and the smartest men who have ever lived . . . and these men are pumping gas and waiting tables. . . . Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need."⁵⁹ These passages from the novel and Augustine give added weight to the claim that longing for a better world while living in one that is disappointing is a permanent feature of human existence. And yet, although their descriptions of life are similar in some respects, the vision of the world held by the characters of *Fight Club* is fundamentally different from the one held by Augustine.

For Augustine,
God not to
blame for
the iniquity
resulting from
immoral use of
liberty.

In *The City of God*, Augustine argues that despite the rise and fall of many empires and civilizations, there exist only two cities in all of history, the City of God and the earthly city. Citizenship in each city is determined by the love that prevails in the heart of each person. Members of the heavenly city are pious, modest, and united by their love of God (*amor Dei*). Citizens of the earthly city are factious, proud, and consumed by self-love (*amor sui*). About the essential difference between these two types of people, he explains, "In the city of the world both the rulers themselves and the people they dominate are dominated by the lust for domination; whereas in the City of God all citizens serve one another in charity, whether they serve by the responsibilities of office or by the duties of obedience."⁶⁰ For Augustine, human sinfulness is the source of earthly injustice and suffering. God is not to blame for the iniquity that results from the immoral use of liberty. Insofar as all people are tainted by sin, all contribute to the disorder of the world. Even the most pious of human beings must seek forgiveness in life. But unlike the citizens of the City of God,

⁵⁸ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *The City of God*, 321.

the members of the earthly city revel in sin. Consumed by self-love, they reject the order of being. They seek to dominate everyone and everything while giving free rein to their violent impulses and desires.

*Those
consumed
by self-love
reject the
order of being.*

Insofar as the characters in *Fight Club* blame God for their misery and refuse to take responsibility for the disorder in their lives, from an Augustinian perspective they can be characterized as moral escapist. Self-love (*amor sui*) seems to be an essential element in metaphysical rebellion. Therefore, real equivalents to Christian love and community cannot exist in the fight clubs and Project Mayhem. As he nearly beats a fighter to death the narrator thinks the following: "I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I'd never have," "I wanted the whole world to hit bottom," "I wanted to breathe smoke," and, "This is my world, now."⁶¹ In their efforts at self-salvation, the characters in the novel only end up unleashing the will to power upon the world and each other.

For Augustine, the flaws in human nature and the disorder of the world that results from human sinfulness are permanent and cannot be transformed through human effort. A realistic vision of life in which uncertainty and disappointment can be made bearable and community and meaning can be achieved will have to take this into account. This is precisely what Augustine does when he elaborates upon how members of the heavenly city live on earth. He describes the citizens of the City of God on earth as pilgrims. These pilgrims find salvation, rest, and peace in the Beyond, but on earth they exist and act without losing sight of the heavenly home toward which they are traveling. They do not sit idly by, waiting to be taken up into Heaven, while the rest of the world burns. These pilgrims belong to a meaningful community that transcends barriers of race, nationality, and time. Their desires for unity are combined with respect for the diversity of the members belonging to the heavenly city. Augustine explains, "So long, then, as the heavenly City is wayfaring on earth, she invites citizens from all nations and all tongues, and unites them into a single pilgrim band. She takes no issue with that diversity of customs, laws, and traditions whereby human peace is

⁶¹ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 123, 124.

Even partial realization of peace and justice requires a preponderance of individuals practicing virtue.

sought and maintained.”⁶²

Augustine believes civilization, peace, and justice are incomplete and transitory achievements. Even the partial realization of these ends depends greatly upon a preponderance of morally mature individuals engaged in the active practice of virtue. And yet, despite all of its imperfections, the world is the only place where these pilgrims have an opportunity to love God and neighbor as self and thereby to cultivate piety. With these notions in mind he writes, “[T]he heavenly City, so long as it is wayfaring on earth, not only makes use of earthly peace but fosters and actively pursues along with other human beings a common platform in regard to all that concerns our purely human life and does not interfere with faith and worship.”⁶³ The lives of these pilgrims on earth are far from perfect, but they are tolerable. The pilgrim symbol enables Augustine to describe possibilities for community, purpose, and meaning in the world that do not ignore or seek to destroy the fundamental structure of reality. He resists the temptation to incorporate the transcendent destiny of humanity into a scheme to build a terrestrial paradise. He acknowledges the self-inflicted nature of human suffering, and he identifies ways in which human beings can achieve some amount of happiness in life. The pilgrim symbol represents a compelling alternative to the metaphysical rebellion of the characters in *Fight Club*.

Conclusion

Now that *Fight Club* has been shown to be a powerful aesthetic expression of metaphysical rebellion, one may wonder what the popularity of the story in the U.S. might tell Americans about themselves. It seems to be the case that an ever-growing number of Americans suspect that the United States is not well. More and more they see American corporations, banks, and government led by hucksters, opportunists, and criminals. They are increasingly skeptical that more product purchases and entertainment will alleviate their feelings of boredom. They despair under the weight of the vapid and humiliating day-to-day experiences that form their progressively detached lives. With all this in mind, could it be the case that

⁶² Augustine, *The City of God*, 465.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

the novel resonates with so many readers because its characters bring into greater clarity their preexisting intuitions about the root cause of their feelings of disappointment and loneliness, feelings that seemingly result from the inadequacies of America's consumer culture?

In *Democracy and Leadership*, Babbitt writes, "When studied with any degree of thoroughness, the economic problem will be found to run into the political problem, the political problem in turn into the philosophical problem, and the philosophical problem itself to be almost indissolubly bound up at last with the religious problem."⁶⁴ Both Voegelin and Camus would agree with Babbitt on this point. So apparently would Tyler Durden and the narrator. By showing how a certain type of frustration with contemporary American life emanates from a deeper spiritual anxiety, these characters are in partial agreement with Babbitt on the true nature of civilizational crises. Allowing this insight to emerge in the minds of the characters is the novel's greatest accomplishment, and it deserves attention.

This achievement notwithstanding, the broader vision articulated by the characters is highly problematic. Tyler, the narrator, and others are unwilling to identify and reflect upon the ignoble aspects of the human condition that surely must contribute to the type of life that they despise and resist. They never consider that their pride, impulsiveness, violent behavior, and moral escapism are the primary causes of their misery. In the spirit of Rousseau, they always find someone or something else to blame for their ennui. For these characters, there is no perceived need and thus no real potential to become attuned to the transcendent order of being and to cultivate the ethical self-restraint accounted for in symbols such as Augustine's pilgrim. By failing to identify the source of their disappointment, the characters' opportunities for finding actual happiness are limited. Their options for self-salvation are confined to engaging in an unending series of what inevitably turn out to be temporary and unsatisfying diversions from reality. Further, the characters' proposed remedy for the problems of American life has a starkly utopian cast. The possibil-

⁶⁴ Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 23.

ity of evading individual moral responsibility while drafting a program to save the world all at once and for all time is what appeals most to the characters' imaginations, but the center of such a daydream cannot hold. As the novel itself shows, metaphysical rebellion cannot make good on its promises. Tyler and the narrator's plan to save the world turns out to be diabolical when put into practice. Their revolt produces destruction, murder, and insanity, but Heaven refuses to come within reach. This outcome seems to shock and disappoint the narrator, but it would not surprise a moral realist, that is, a person accustomed to thinking along the lines represented by Babbitt, Voegelin, Camus, and Augustine. In the novel, the weaknesses in the characters' overarching vision are what prevent them from exploring genuine possibilities for cultural renewal and spiritual regeneration.

*True vision—
embodied in
historical acts
and imaginative
works—
the only
antidote to
sham vision.*

It might be tempting simply to dismiss the characters of *Fight Club*, with their self-absorbed and destructive attitudes, as metaphysical brats. A certain degree of childishness seems to be a common element in metaphysical rebellion. In *The Rebel*, Camus writes, "Our most effective terrorists, whether they are armed with bombs or with poetry, hardly escape from infancy."⁶⁵ At the same time, a more sympathetic reading of the novel could conclude that the main characters, despite their flaws, gave very bad answers to very good questions. If the characters of *Fight Club* provide the wrong answers to the right questions about life, then the right answers need to be given because the questions remain as important as they have ever been. True vision is the only antidote to sham vision. Works of art that capture the imagination *and* account more completely for life—including the ethical life—are desperately needed. Without being didactic, true works of art can provide real answers to the legitimate questions about existence raised by Tyler, the narrator, and others. Readers drawn to these characters and this novel would then have available to them captivating images and concrete insights into how they may overcome the "spiritual depression" of their lives without resorting to metaphysical rebellion.

⁶⁵ Camus, *The Rebel*, 82.

