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## Rereading Albert Camus' The Plague During a Pandemic: Of Plagues and Nazis: Camus' Journey from Moral Nihilism

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**Rereading Albert Camus' *The Plague* During a Pandemic:  
Of Plagues and Nazis: Camus' Journey from Moral Nihilism**

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*During our current pandemic, Albert Camus' novel, *The Plague*, can serve readers well by illustrating and perhaps helping us resolve the feelings, options and decisions we are now facing. Indeed, Camus can help us learn much from our current situation.*

Camus' plague takes place in Oran, an Algerian city under the control of France. The features of the city and of its inhabitants make it an appropriate place for the drama of the plague to unfold. It is, Camus tells us "a thoroughly negative place...a town without pigeons, without any trees or gardens, where you never hear the beat of wings, or the rustle of trees" (p. 3).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is situated in such a way that "it turns it back on the bay, with the result that it is impossible to see the sea" (p. 6).

In a way that parallels this absence of nature, the town's residents also do not utilize the deeper attributes of human endeavor. "The truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to developing habits" (p. 4). For Camus, Oran is a thoroughly modern town, dominated by business endeavors and less than intimate personal interactions. Most telling, in terms of the plague that will soon strike, "is the difficulty one may experience there in dying...Being ill's never agreeable but there are towns that stand by you, so to speak, when you are sick; in which you can after a fashion, let yourself go" (p. 5).

In this unexceptional town, a plague might seem an unlikely event. But Camus' genius shines in offering us insight into how his ordinary characters respond to this onslaught. *The Plague* can help us today, as we live through a similar catastrophe, and strive to find our own moral paths.

Camus' message is best understood in light of his earlier views about living a good life. In *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus set out an existentialist view which denies the existence of God, human nature, and a scale of moral values. Such a world offers us no guidance about how to live a good life. It is a world dominated by "the absurd"--a world which does not respond to our desires for meaning and value. In such a world, where value judgments have no foundation, the paths we can take are optional. What matters is not striving to live the *best* life, but rather striving for the *most* life. We can do this by attending with utmost clarity to each moment along the path we choose—and any path will do. With the lack of meaning in such a world, there is no hope of achieving some ultimate goal. Thus, Camus' model of Sisyphus eternally and lucidly rolling a rock up a hill--a rock which inevitably falls back down—illustrates the absurdity of our own lives in such a world. And if my rock happens to crush you as it rolls, the absurdity of the world is apparent.

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<sup>1</sup> Most page references are from Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Stuart Gilbert, tr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991). As indicated, some references are from Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, Anthony Bower, tr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

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But if we face honestly the events of our real lives, even our deepest commitments can be upset. And so it was for Camus. In some of his writings before *The Plague*, Camus came to realize the troubling implications of the world-view he had espoused. With the rise of the Nazis, these implications hit him full force. Camus knew that such oppression, whether imposed by the natural world or by other humans, demands resistance. But he needed to struggle to find a new moral ground underlying that imperative. His “philosophy of the absurd” could not morally discriminate between the paths of stoking the crematoria or fighting for the oppressed. His struggle for moral clarity brought into focus the issues which are central to our lives during times of both oppression and peace. The deeply difficult decisions faced by central characters in *The Plague* illustrate aspects of Camus’ own struggle.

Two of Camus’ characters represent the endpoints of a spectrum of moral responses which were open to the people of Oran. Jacques Cottard, a criminal in non-plague times, continues his self-interested exploits during the plague, like profiting from smuggling. Cottard is unique among Camus’ central actors in collaborating with the oppression, but certainly he is not unique among the French who collaborated with the Nazis.

On the other end of the spectrum is Joseph Grand, a frail older man with a little “goodness of heart.” His immediate reaction is to say that “one’s got to help a neighbor, hasn’t one?” (p. 20). His decision is easy—by acting on his natural inclinations, he steps up to help fight the plague by keeping careful records about its progress. Camus tells us he is “the hero” of the book—a simple man who knows his moral task immediately. But through his other, more conflicted protagonists, Camus shows us the heart-rending moral decisions with which Camus himself, and many of us, have to struggle.

One might think that the devout Jesuit priest of the town, Father Paneloux, would see the road ahead clearly. Yet in the face of a plague which God is allowing to happen, it can be difficult to decide if a believer should accept God’s actions or oppose them. At first, Paneloux—who committed to accepting God’s will—tells the townspeople that the plague is God’s justified punishment of them for not attending sufficiently to His commands. The priest needs to find the insight to offer them a more compassionate message.

Raymond Rambert is also torn between two motives. He is a journalist who has been separated from his Parisian home and his lover. We can, then, sympathize with his initial pleas that he doesn’t belong in Oran and should be allowed to leave. But the quarantine of the city makes it impossible to do that legally. So he spends many days trying, with the help of Cottard, to arrange some other way out. Camus had come to Oran for his health, and was now experiencing Rambert’s exile from home and a loved one.

The experience which provides both Rambert and Paneloux with a clear moral imperative is their witnessing of the suffering of a child as he dies from the plague. In an excruciating scene, Camus describes for us, moment to moment, the pain of this innocent child. Rambert and Paneloux are both transformed by this experience. By witnessing “the angry death-cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind” (p. 216), both Rambert and Paneloux find the moral

ground which provides a basis for moral judgments, and both resolve to stay and fight the plague. As Rambert puts it:

Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen what I've seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business. (pp. 209-210)

At this point, we see Camus abandoning his earlier existential view in favor of an "essentialism," which claims that we do have a human nature which must be respected and preserved:

...a human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed. Why rebel if there is nothing permanent in oneself worth preserving? It is for the sake of everyone in the world that the slave asserts himself when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something in him which does not belong to him alone, but which is common ground where all man—even the man who insults and oppresses him—have a natural community. (*The Rebel*, p. 16)

In resisting the oppression of others, with the willingness to give up my life in that fight, the solidarity of people shines forth. As I fight my own oppression, I stand up against the oppression of all, and assert the common dignity of mankind. As Camus says, "I rebel--therefore we exist" (*The Rebel*, p. 22).

Having shown us the rebellious moral path demanded of us by oppression, pandemic and all suffering, Camus' last two protagonists provide us with a final, crucial insight regarding the appropriate goal of this rebellion. Both Jean Tarrou and Dr. Bernard Rieux have, from the start, steadfastly recognized the moral demand to resist oppression. But they differ about the ultimate goal of their fight. For Tarrou, the goal is to rid himself of any possibility of passing on to others the plague that is, in part, in all of us. Replacing God's inaction by human lucidity, Tarrou strives to be a "a saint without God." Rieux says, "What interests me is being a man." And Tarrou answers by saying, "Yes, we're both after the same thing, but I'm less ambitious." (p. 255)

This claim provides the final piece in Camus' new view of our moral imperative. We must fight against oppression to defend the dignity of the nature we all share. But, in that fight, we must observe certain limits. Camus puts it beautifully:

...a loveless world is a dead world, and always there comes an hour when one is weary of prisons, of one's work, and of devotion to duty, and all one craves for is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart (p. 261).

As humans we are imperfect beings who, above all, need love from and for others. So our fight against oppression must be focused on restoring the world for loving relationships, rather than on acquiring power in the name of some abstract ideology. These relationships allow for the possibility of harming others, but striving for sainthood leaves behind this greatest human good. In this way, Camus' new ethics anticipates the movement of "care ethics" which came to the fore after his death.

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In *The Plague*, then, Camus provides a response to his earlier moral nihilism. And he provides us all with a moral guide for moving ahead, in these times of pandemic and for all future oppressions.