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## Medicine as an Absurdist Quest in Albert Camus' *The Plague*

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### **Abstract:**

As a social construct, modern medicine reflects a society's paradigms and perspectives. Within a modern technological age of increasing estrangement, intellectuals developed new philosophies such as absurdism—as well as literature reflecting these paradigms—that soon questioned whether a “magic bullet” could ever offer a panacea for antiseptic institutions. One exemplar is French-Algerian writer Albert Camus. In his 1947 novel *The Plague*, Camus quarantines the inhabitants of Oran in a struggle against a bubonic-like epidemic. Within this microcosm, Camus juxtaposes medicine against government and religion in his quest to find medical meaning in an absurd world.

**Keywords:** absurdity, Albert Camus, existentialism, medicine, plague

### **Resumen:**

**La medicina como una búsqueda absurdista en *La Plaga* de Albert Camus**

Como construcción social, la medicina moderna refleja los paradigmas y las perspectivas de una sociedad. Dentro de una era moderna y tecnológica de

creciente enajenación, los intelectuales desarrollaron nuevas filosofías tales como el absurdismo —así como también una literatura que refleja esos paradigmas— que rápidamente se cuestionó si “una bala mágica” alguna vez ofrecería una panacea para las instituciones antisépticas. Un modelo es el del escritor franco-argelino Albert Camus, que en su novela *La Peste* (1947), pone en cuarentena a los habitantes de Orán en la lucha contra una epidemia como la peste bubónica. Dentro de este microcosmos, Camus yuxtapone la medicina contra gobierno y religión en su búsqueda del sentido médico en un mundo absurdo.

**Palabras claves:** absurdismo, Albert Camus, existencialismo, medicina, peste.

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## Absurdist Existence of Camus

If any author truly can be born into the circumstances that would shape his literary future, then that author would be Albert Camus. Born in French-Colonial Algeria in 1913, Camus immediately experienced life as a Western outsider in an ostensibly Arab land. His home life provided few connections: Camus grew up not knowing his father, who had died as a soldier in World War I; his illiterate mother worked as a cleaner. Although not rendering “Camus a bitter or jealous man,” his impoverished childhood is critical for interpreting the “moral and political attitudes within his writing” (Bellos, 2004, p.xii).

Perhaps as a response or to challenge his difficult upbringing, Camus successfully threw himself into academic studies. As if to presage the inescapability from an absurd existence —as Camus would later postulate— illness in the forms of tuberculosis and depression had the potential to limit his experiences of the world, at least in a physical sense. The twists and turns of his adult life, however, were not to be limiting but exhilarating toward intellectual explorations of an increasingly estranged world. As a student, Camus earned scholarships and completed his studies at the University of Algiers. Fueling his literary interests, Camus joined with fellow young literati in the North Africa Literary School even while beginning his working career as a journalist. Eventually, Camus transitioned from factual newswriting into fictional literature to mark his individuality in an alienated world. Perhaps this life on the periphery fueled the power of his philosophical writing that remains his legacy to the world. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, he would die just three years later in France from an automobile accident as one last whim from a capricious world (Literature Resource Center, 2004, n.pag.).

Not only the machinations of his personal life but also that of his very world would contribute to the development of Camus' absurdist stance. Philosophies like absurdism and its precursor existentialism arose in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as reactions to the senseless atrocities of the age —notably the horrors of two world wars fought on Camus' doorstep. Facing evils that could no longer be accepted as a “divine plan,” philosophers and writers grew disillusioned with age-old institutions like government and the church seemingly impotent to protect against or even explain the world's terrors (Ward, 1995, p.829). Soon, even the meaning of existence came into question: both existentialism and its offshoot absurdism posited no meaning for a world in which innocent infants could be slaughtered; hence, any meaning could derive only through an individual's experiences.

Parting paths with his existentialist contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus expanded this lack of prima facie meaning to existence. Although one cannot know if existence has any meaning, Camus contends, virtue results from striving in the face of unknowing if life simply



ends with death. Hence, Camus posits that living one's life to its fullest has more meaning than actually knowing whether that meaning indeed exists. In his treatise *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus explains absurdism as being "born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world". The irrationality of a world without inherent meaning collides against the human need for a meaningful life, producing the struggle termed the absurd, much like "three characters in the drama" of humanity: the need for meaning, the lack of meaning, and the collision of these two within absurdity (Camus, 2004a, p.515). Camus uses his writing, such as *The Plague*, in a quest for meaning in an otherwise absurd world.

Camus' novel *The Plague*, which was originally published in 1947 in French as *La Peste* (Literature Resource Center, 2004), explores responses of bureaucratic government, dogmatic religion, and scientific medicine to a bubonic-like epidemic in Oran, a seaside Algerian town that soon becomes isolated from the world through a self-imposed quarantine. Within this microcosm, Camus dissects and diagnoses effects of disease: not so much the plague but more so his society. Isolated by sand and sea, inhabitants look in vain to societal institutions —government, religion, medicine— in their struggle to survive an epidemic relentlessly raising its death tolls daily. In this context, Camus' absurdism —human struggle when trapped between contradictory inevitabilities— coalesces within an estranged society impotent against an almost anthropomorphized infection fought by Dr. Bernard Rieux.

From this novel's initial publication, though, Camus' eponymous plague would be overwhelmingly interpreted as allegory for the Nazi invasion of France, with characters configured to reflect the French Resistance (Bellos, 2004). Given Camus' background, not to mention the timing of the book's release, such interpretation is understandable. This allegorical role of Rieux "define[s] what is essential in contrast to all superfluous trivialities. All energies are concentrated on the fight against the plague (...), which is futile in the sense that there is no cure for the deadly disease which kills mercilessly" (Charney, 1988, p.101). Yet the striving of Rieux and his colleagues against the plague commands "overwhelming compassion and respect for people and their pursuit of meaning" (Rhein, 1989, p.42). Whether as an allegory for Nazism or any other evil, the plague in Oran "represents whatever threatens to prevent the fulfillment of human life within the given limits of an absurd world" (Rhein, 1989, p.37).

This generally accepted interpretation of Camus' plague as allegorically representing the wartime occupation of France need not be the only vantage into the author's quest for meaning within absurdity. As Davis (1994) develops, a strong argument can be made for this novel as being less straightforward than perceived in a surface reading of the characters' ethical dilemmas and responses. Much of the expected allegorical elements remain aloof:

characters are neither sinners nor saints; even the plague defies medical classification as it departs Oran as inexplicably as it arrived. Because “[t]his lack of closure within the text...should be precisely what permits and ensures new readings of the novel” (Davis, 1994, p.137), the quest for absurdist meaning must be undertaken from this less-constrained perspective of *The Plague*.

As will be argued in this paper, government and religion fall short in leading the citizenry during Oran’s plague, leaving medicine as a likely path toward meaning. Nevertheless, in Camus’ eye, medicine is not a straightforward path. Consider the transformation of medicine during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as Camus wrote *The Plague*. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century into the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “techniques and instruments [that] increasingly revealed the physico-chemical determinants and mechanisms of living material, ...became increasingly incorporated into routine practice and research as integral components of the conduct of medicine and medical science” (Tansey, 1997, p.102). Taken together, such scientific advances wrought a paradigmatic shift in the physician’s approach to medicine: patients became data; treatments became algorithms; hospitals became institutions; and governments became financiers. Camus’ novel thus can be seen as much a reflection of his past as a reaction to his present.

### **Historical Influences on Camus’ Medicine**

In tandem with a scientific emphasis, the impact of the two World Wars and the intervening Great Depression called into debate the level of health care to which citizens had an expectation for the state to provide, regardless of socioeconomic status. This point is especially pertinent in an estranged world whose “nature of health care is inextricable from modernity...brought about by industrialization and urbanization” (Dutton, 2007b, p.33). Complicating such debate would be rhetoric growing in “the era of Fascism, Nazism, and Stalin’s consolidation of Communist powers in the Soviet Union. U.S. and French proponents of private medicine were quick to identify their cause with democratic liberties and to contrast them with the menace of totalitarianism (Dutton, 2007c, p.68). How to provide health care without the state being labeled as non-democratic became a key issue for legislatures of the Western powers.

Responding to the aftermath of the first global war, governments in Europe —and to some extent the United States— began to view healthcare for the populace as “proper concerns of the State” (Tansey, 1997, p.116). Advances in technology contributed to the prevailing “belief in the progressive power of scientific medicine to cure...shared by policy-



makers and consumers, as well as by the medical profession itself" (Lewis, 1997, p.278). Legislative efforts might encompass lost wages, public health, or medical science. Stepping past Germany's Sickness Insurance Law of 1883, Great Britain enacted its National Health Insurance Act of 1911 (Lewis, 1997, pp.282-283), followed in 1942 by a clear "plan for Britain's postwar welfare state, including the National Health Service" (Dutton, 2007d, p.115). For France and the United States (with their histories of revolution), "a central question was whether individual liberty should be sacrificed for the sake of collective equality and the common good. In both countries, the debates exhibited nuanced arguments that sought to reconcile liberty and equality" (Dutton, 2007a, p.3).

These two countries' "political leaders rightly surmised that highly centralized government-directed health care would be unpopular. Instead, they advocated a leading role for civil society organizations, considering them the best suited to reconcile liberty and equality in the pursuit of health" (Dutton, 2007a, p.10). For Camus' homeland, France "turned to greatly expanded social insurance programs, especially *Sécurité Sociale*, created in 1945[, which] marked a milestone on the road to widespread health security" (Dutton, 2007d, p.112). The French blueprint, drafted in Britain by the exiled Resistance, "professed three goals for *Sécurité Sociale*: administrative unity, national solidarity, and democratization" (Dutton, 2007d, p.116). Although none of these plans would solve its nation's dilemmas, each marked a step forward for medicine.

Pertinent for Camus selected locale of Oran, the prevailing emphasis on diseases endemic to colonies such as Algeria would be continued beyond the wake of World War One (Tansey, 1997, p.114). Plagues —while not at the forefront of medical establishments enticed by technology— remained a background worry. Specters like the Black Plague that devastated Western Europe several hundred years earlier could always raise their threatening heads to devastate anew. "Throughout human history, successive epidemics and devastating pestilences have punctuated and scarred the populations of the world. Of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, Pestilence has struck humankind with the severest blows" (Dobson, 1997, p.176). For Camus, what better caprice than plague as the instrument for his exploration of absurdism?

### **Reluctant Responsibility of Government**

As the mysterious plague sneaks into Oran, the lone first signs are disappearance of cats and sudden appearance of rats that come from hiding to die in public. Initially seen as a "particularly disgusting nuisance", the increasing numbers of dead vermin would have been

ignored by the government: "Actually the Municipality had not contemplated doing anything at all" (Camus, 2004b, p.16<sup>1</sup>). When pressed by a worried town, their response is to increase trash collections, rather than to investigate the cause of the phenomenon. Soon, the first human death, that of Rieux's door-porter, raises the stakes from "bewildering portents" of moribund vermin to "panic" that necessitates civic action (p.23). Through Camus' pen, Oran assumes the metaphorical guise of the infected human:

"It was as if the earth on which our houses stood were being purged of its secreted humours—thrusting up to the surface the abscesses and pus-clots that had been forming in its entrails. You must picture the consternation of our little town, hitherto so tranquil, and now, out of the blue, shaken to its core, like a quite healthy man who all of a sudden feels his temperature shoot up and the blood seething like wildfire in his veins." (p. 16-17)

This image of the infected individual, rather than the collective infected community, allows municipal officials to disregard the growing problem, since, "[s]o long as each individual doctor had come across only two or three cases, no one had thought of taking action" (p.34). Eventually, the collective death toll cannot be avoided. Rieux's colleague the elder Dr. Castel first espouses the dreaded diagnosis. Still, Rieux could not bring himself to that conclusion, given the plague's rarity. "[W]ith very slight differences, [Rieux's] reaction was the same as that of the great majority of our townsfolk. Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky" (p.35). Only after searching for explanations of less dread is Rieux —human as well as doctor— forced to initiate a formal meeting with Oran's prefect, a character never clearly described and always remaining anonymous behind his title.

The prefect's main goal, rather than erring on the side of safety of his populace, is to forestall formal recognition of the plague. As the assembled doctors debate diagnosis, "[t]he Prefect gave a start and hurriedly glanced towards the door to make sure it had prevented this outrageous remark [i.e., diagnosis of plague] from being overheard in the passage" (p.45). Even one of the holdbacks from the diagnosis, Dr. Richard, asserts that this outbreak, despite its appellation, must trigger "rigorous prophylactic measures laid down in the Code" if the situation did not resolve, with the prefect's response of administrative action requiring at least acknowledgment of the purported diagnosis (p.47). Finally, Rieux acquiesces to an

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<sup>1</sup> References to this text cited by only page number(s) hereafter.

intermediate stance of the municipality acting as if the outbreak were plague —without ever admitting so— to permit formal measures.

This stance temporarily assuages the prefect's trepidations; instead of being blamed for either allowing plague to invade his town or over-reacting to a disease of less severity, "the Prefect felt no doubt that everybody in his jurisdiction would wholeheartedly second his personal efforts" (p.49). Not until even the prefect could no longer deny that the dreaded plague had indeed invaded his town were these measures more than preventative in nature, with many couched as recommendations rather than requirements. Alarming increases in daily death tolls finally impel him to seek firmer action. Still not willing to shoulder his mantle of responsibilities, the prefect seeks a formal directive to relieve him of culpability in an unavoidable decision to take drastic measures. At long last, the central government instructs the prefect by telegram in no uncertain terms: "*Proclaim a state of plague stop Close the town*" (p.59).

Once unburdened by responsibility, the prefect's government fully implements the required measures of quarantine: all town gates close; ships are turned away from the harbor; rail service halts; those outside the town are barred from reunion with loved ones caught within the administrative blockade. These manifestations of quarantine herald the isolation of the patient in Camus' "modern" world and its scientific advancements. Ironically, it is now Oran's inhabitants who deny the reality of plague:

"In spite of such unusual sights our townsfolk apparently found it hard to grasp what was happening to them.... Nobody as yet had really acknowledged to himself what the disease connoted. Most people were chiefly aware of what ruffled the normal tenor of their lives or affected their interests. They were worried and irritated—but these are not feelings with which to confront plague. Their first reaction, for instance, was to abuse the authorities". (pp.69-70)

Much as the prefect had earlier done, Oran's populace avoids acknowledgment of the plague until this harsh reality can no longer be denied.

Despite the firm, albeit reluctant, response by Oran's government, the dimensions of the plague eventually outdistance what efforts they might muster. At this point, Oran's populace must act less individually and more collectively for the community's welfare. Several characters, for instance, assume lead roles in the civil brigades that transport victims of disease, enforce isolation of families, tend to makeshift hospitals, and even dispose of bodies—all with little regard for the risks to their own safety. Rieux's close friend, Jean Tarrou, recognizes the limitations of reliance on government: 'Officialdom can never cope



with something really catastrophic. And the remedial measures they think up are hardly adequate for a common cold." Tarrou volunteers to organize others into a workforce that, once officially "empowered", can "sidetrack officialdom" (p.112).

Tarrou's volunteer force does supplement the municipality's efforts, particularly as the plague spreads. Interestingly, Camus lionizes these volunteer efforts of neither individual citizenry nor physicians who serve them. In his absurdist view, individuals (including physicians) by their very nature must act for the common good; inaction would result only from ignorance. "Those who enrolled in the 'sanitary squads' as they were called had, indeed, no such great merit in doing as they did, since they knew it was the only thing to do, and the unthinkable thing would then have been not to have brought themselves to do it." By following the example of these sanitary squads, however, even the townsfolk come to acknowledge their own responsibility vis-à-vis the plague:

"These groups enabled our townsfolk to come to grips with the disease, and convinced them that, now that plague was amongst us, it was up to them to do whatever could be done to fight it. Since plague became in this way some men's duty, it revealed itself as what it really was; that is, the concern of all" (p.118).

Surprisingly, the individual commended by Camus for being the true hero of Oran is Joseph Grand, a bureaucrat eking a meager existence but too timid to seek higher wages promised earlier in his career. Deserted by his wife and left to spend evenings rewriting the first sentence to a never-completed novel, Grand as an allegorical Sisyphus timidly becomes indispensable as an administrator to the sanitary squads of Tarrou:

"[M]ore than Rieux or Tarrou, Grand was the true embodiment of the quiet courage that inspired the sanitary groups. He had said 'Yes' without a moment's hesitation and with the large-heartedness that was a second nature with him.... All he had asked was to be allotted light duties: he was too old for anything else. He could give his time from six to eight every evening. When Rieux thanked him with some warmth he seemed surprised. 'Why, that's not difficult! Plague is here and we've got to make a stand, that's obvious. Ah, I only wish everything were as simple!" (p.120)

In contrast to Grand and Tarrou, the prefect had been spurred to reluctant action only after being absolved of responsibility. By extension, then, Camus castigates governments for haughty ignorance, which he terms vice: "[Individuals] are more or less ignorant, and it is this that we call vice or virtue; the most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance which

fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill" (p.118).<sup>2</sup> While Camus' opprobrium targets the government in this instance, by extension it applies to physicians transfixed by the advances of medical science. Ignorance of what they do not — and perhaps can never— know is at the heart of the tension between medicine as interpersonal care and medicine as technological achievement. Seemingly, Camus challenges modern physicians of Oran and elsewhere to keep in mind their Hippocratic promise of never to act so as to harm the patient, whether deliberately by incorrect action or unknowingly through tragic hubris.

As the plague spreads into all neighborhoods of Oran, the government responds with makeshift hospitals and quarantine centers. Eventually, the sports arena is transformed into a convenient holding pen to isolate the afflicted: "It was already surrounded by high concrete walls and all that was needed to make escape practically impossible was to post sentries at the four entrance-gates. The walls served another purpose; they screened the unfortunates in quarantine from the view of people on the road" (p.210). It is in this camp that Oran's magistrate, Othon, is discovered during a visit by Tarrou and Raymond Rambert, a journalist marooned by the quarantine. Othon too becomes ensnared by laws that he is held to enforce when his young son, Jacques, succumbs to the plague; more specifically, Jacques suffers horribly before dying as a test case for a vaccine prepared by Castel. The father seeks only consolation: "I hope Jacques did not suffer too much" (p.213). In response, Tarrou lies compassionately.

Yet an offhand comment from Tarrou reveals much about Othon's transformation. "Poor Monsieur Othon!" Tarrou murmured as the gate closed behind them. 'One would like to do something to help him. But how can you help a judge?' (p.214). In his plague diary, Tarrou earlier lampoons Othon: "The paterfamilias is a tall, thin man, always dressed in black and wearing a starched collar.... He uses no terms of endearment to his family, addresses politely spiteful remarks to his wife, and bluntly tells his kids what he thinks of them" (p.27). But allowed to leave quarantine after his son's death, Othon remains to assist others and then succumbs to the waning plague: "Tarrou said of him that 'he'd had no luck', but one couldn't tell if he had in mind the life or the death of M. Othon" (p.237). Certainly, Othon had enough "luck" to realize his humanity.

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<sup>2</sup> This same concept applies to Camus' opposition to capital punishment (Bellos, 2004), an issue outside the scope of this examination of medicine and absurdity.

## Dogmatic Absolutism of Religion

While the prefect shelters himself from responsibility, other townsfolk find solace in religion. Camus again distinguishes individuals from societal groups—this time, religion rather than government. The townsfolk, as to be expected, are slow to religious action as long as they can deny the plague's existence in its early stages. Before Oran's shoreline had been closed, more persons were to be found sunbathing on Sunday mornings than in church: "But..., now that the town was closed and the harbour out of bounds, there was no question of sea-bathing.... Thus they felt under no obligation to make any changes in their habits, as yet" (p.83).

That protected view would begin to change when "the ecclesiastical authorities in our town resolved to do battle against the plague with the weapons appropriate to them, and organized a Week of Prayer. These manifestations of public piety were to be concluded on Sunday by a High Mass celebrated under the auspices of St Roch, the plague-stricken saint, and Father Paneloux was asked to preach the sermon" (p.83). This priest would emerge as a pivotal player in Camus' examination of religion.

Not yet conceding that the plague had struck, many townsfolk remain indifferent to religion for their corporeal, if not ethereal, salvation. Making such a concession would require acceptance of the disease; nevertheless, many townsfolk feel that the Week of Prayer might be worth the effort. Tarrou in his diary expands on that thought:

"Most of those who took part in the Week of Prayer would have echoed a remark made by one of the church-goers in Dr Rieux's hearing. "Anyhow, it can't do any harm." Even Tarrou, after recording in his notebook that in such cases the Chinese fall to playing tambourines before the Genius of Plague, observed that there was no means of telling whether, in practice, tambourines proved more efficacious than prophylactic measures. He merely added that, to decide the point, we should need first to ascertain if a Genius of Plague actually existed, and our ignorance on this point nullified any opinions we might form.... In any case the Cathedral was practically always full of worshippers throughout the Week of Prayer." (p. 84)

To conclude the Week of Prayer, Paneloux delivers his assigned fire-and-brimstone sermon, coincidentally accompanied by a raging storm for deistic impact. He blames the plague on the heathen lifestyle heretofore common to Oran: "[W]hen he launched at the congregation his opening phrase in clear, emphatic tones—'Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it'—there was a flutter of aghast surprise that

extended to the crowd massed in the rain outside the porch" (p.85). Paneloux's oratory is as harsh as the downpour seemingly hurled by an angry god.

In his bombastic sermon, Paneloux unleashes allusions to the plagues wrought on the Egyptian pharaoh, the destruction of the sinful towns of Sodom and Gommorah, and the sign of shame permanently affixed to the forehead of Cain. Yet, within these images, he calls on the town to "rejoice.... Today the truth is... a red spear sternly pointing to the narrow path, the one way of salvation.... This same pestilence which is slaying you works for your good and points your path" (p.88). For Paneloux, the assuredness of unquestioned faith allowed him to find both evil and good, vice and virtue, death and salvation in the plague. If only the townsfolk would repent: "He hoped against hope that, despite all the horrors of these dark days, despite the groans of men and women in agony, our fellow-citizens would offer up to heaven that one prayer which is truly Christian, a prayer of love. And God would see to the rest" (p.89).

Still, the North-African sun begins to bake the town; the death toll rises in its wake. As the townsfolk begin to realize their ensnarement, their response might not be directly attributable to Paneloux's sermon—as "it was a problem whether the change was in the atmosphere or in their hearts" (p.90). Yet, Camus ridicules neither priest nor a religion to which he himself cannot subscribe. In trying to understand Paneloux, Tarrou questions if Rieux believes, "like Paneloux, that the plague has its good side; it opens men's eyes and forces them to take thought?" (p.113). The doctor's response reflects Camus' absurdism. Acknowledging that any evil could be viewed as having a positive aspect in finding one's virtue, Rieux separates his perspective from the dogmatic faith of Paneloux: "All the same, when you see the misery it brings, you'd need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind, to give in tamely to the plague" (p.113).

Nevertheless, Camus sidesteps this opportunity to make a villain of this priest, much as he avoids vilifying the magistrate, Othon. Isolated in religious academia, Paneloux is "a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn't come in contact with death; that's why he can speak with such assurance of truth—with a capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners, and has heard a man gasping for breath on his death-bed, [would] try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence" (p.113). Through Rieux, Camus refuses to castigate this priest for trying in his own way to save the people in his charge: "But no one in the world believed in a God of that sort; no, not even Paneloux, who believed that he believed in such a God" (p.114). The fault of Paneloux's dogmatic zeal, then, is the aforementioned vice defined by Camus as ignorance through hubris, a charge to be leveled against all three respondents to Oran's plague: the government, the clergy, and the physician.

Later, in his second of two sermons on the plague of Oran, Paneloux espouses the all-or-nothing essence of his devout, dogmatic faith: what we cannot understand as humans, we can only accept as having purpose for an order higher than ourselves. Again backed by nature in the form of high winds, Paneloux preaches to a “congregation... sparser than on the first occasion.... [M]ost people... had replaced normal religious practice by more or less extravagant superstitions. Thus they were readier to wear prophylactic medals of St Roch than to go to Mass” (p.194). Camus does not ridicule the return of people from organized faith to prophetic superstitions, although he does point out the futility of both options: “Thus Nostradamus and St Odilia were consulted daily, and always with happy results. Indeed the one thing these prophecies had in common was that, ultimately, all were reassuring. Unfortunately, though, the plague was not” (p.195). In vain, Paneloux and his flock seek through different venues for a salvation not to be found within the stricken town.

For this second sermon, Paneloux uses a softer rhetorical approach, particularly notable in the switch from accusatory second-person to inclusive first-person grammatical forms. For Paneloux, the dogma of Christianity requires the faithful to accept all that may come, even if not understandable in human terms. Reflecting absurdism, Paneloux challenges the congregation to not only accept the plague, but to work for the betterment of all at the same time. He draws on a medieval tale from days of the Black Death, in which almost all of the monks desert their townsfolk through concern for themselves. “And, bringing down his fist on the edge of the pulpit, Father Paneloux cried in a ringing voice: ‘My brothers, each of us must be the one who stays!’” (p. 200).

Now, though, the priest’s dogmatic mandate departs from the absurdism of Camus. By the time of this second sermon, Paneloux and Rieux had witnessed the horrific death throes of the magistrate’s son. While Paneloux’s faith requires acceptance, Rieux’s and Camus’ absurdism cannot. The priest contends that “we must hold fast, trusting in the divine goodness, even to the deaths of little children, and not seeking personal respite” (p.200). Rieux, however, will never accept such a view. Although this philosophical distinction constrains neither priest nor physician from ministering to those afflicted —albeit for different reasons— Paneloux chooses to die with the same dogmatic faith by which he lived. Facing his imminent death from the plague, he avoids medical attention. Instead, he prefers to die with his fevered eyes affixed to the crucifix firmly clutched in hands of faith: “At the hospital Paneloux did not utter a word. He submitted passively to treatment given him, but never let go of the crucifix.... Paneloux’s eyes kept their blank serenity and when...found dead, his body drooping over the bedside, they betrayed nothing” (p.206). Nothing but his unwavering faith.

In continued reflections with Rieux on this dead priest, Tarrou voices his perception that “there are pestilences and there are victims.... [And] a third category: that of the true healers. But it’s a fact that one doesn’t come across many of them, and anyhow it must be a hard vocation.” Within this hierarchy, Tarrou wishes to work on the victims’ behalf. “It comes to this,’ Tarrou said almost casually, ‘what interests me is learning how to become a saint” (p.225). In reply, Rieux muses, “[Y]ou know, I feel more fellowship with the defeated than with saints. Heroism and sanctity don’t really appeal to me, I imagine. What interests me is—being a man” (p.226). Tellingly for Camus’ absurdist espousal, Tarroux responds: “Yes, we’re both after the same thing, but I’m less ambitious” (p.226). Paneloux’s steadfast faith may lead him to sanctity as promised after death, but Camus through Tarrou contends that striving without unshakeable belief is all the more difficult—and thus more laudable.

### **Medical Quest for Meaning**

To explore the meaning of medicine in an absurd world, Camus paints Oran as “a town without intimations; in other words, completely modern” (p.6). “Modern” at the time of Camus’ writing of this novel would refer to the technological advances moving to the forefront of medical practice, as well as the concomitant isolation of the patient within such a sterile system. Indeed, Camus describes the alienation of the ill in such a “completely modern” town as a metaphor for how a dehumanized society can isolate patients trusting in them for altruistic care:

“Being ill is never agreeable, but there are towns which stand by you, so to speak, when you are sick; in which you can, after a fashion, let yourself go. An invalid needs small attentions, ...to have something to rely on.... Think what it must be for a dying man, trapped behind hundreds of walls all sizzling with heat, while the whole population, sitting in cafés or hanging on the telephone, is discussing shipments, bills of lading, discounts! It will then be obvious what discomfort attends death, even modern death, when it waylays you under such conditions in a dry place”. (p. 6-7)

Soon, though, inhabitants of this “dry place” come face-to-face with their own mortality in a town, much like any of ours, that hides its discomfort with death within the banality of business exigencies. Like a pied piper, the anthropomorphized plague begins calling forth rats to die in hallways, foyers, and streets. Then the plague moves on to humans. After a smattering of deaths across Oran, the plague ratchets up to geometric proportions. Local reports released by Oran’s municipal government are at first alarming,

then ignored as a psychological protective mask, and eventually accepted with finality. Yet, as long as the plague avoids their own homes and families, inhabitants of Oran can ignore the plight of those around them:

"The doctor was still looking out of the window. Beyond it lay the tranquil radiance of a cool spring sky; inside the room a word was echoing still, the word "plague." A word that conjured up in the doctor's mind not only what science chose to put into it, but a whole series of fantastic possibilities utterly out of keeping with the grey-and-yellow town under his eyes, ...the noises of a happy town, in short, if it's possible to be at once so dull and happy. A tranquility so casual and thoughtless seemed almost effortlessly to give the lie to those old pictures of the plague". (p. 38)

Affliction with this plague is unlike any previously experienced by the inhabitants of Oran: joints racked with pain from pus-filled, hardened buboes with only temporary relief by the blood spurts of lancing; high fevers exacerbated by thirst and engendering spasms and delirium; in later pneumonic cases, chest-wrenching coughs to extirpate balls of sputum bright-red with blood; and finally death. Leading the medical community in its response, Rieux finds himself in conflict with not only colleagues unwilling to recognize the inevitable, but also the town's other two institutions. Specifically, he must deal with a bureaucratic government represented by the unnamed prefect and the magistrate Othon (with a name and family), and also the religious faith epitomized by Father Paneloux of the town's Catholic Church.

As Rieux races to convince his colleagues and the town's prefect of the dire need to combat this illness immediately, Camus introduces his absurdism. Knowing whether this disease is bubonic plague is no more the issue than is trying to know if life has meaning; the key point is responding to the challenge as if saving lives does matter. In reply to a challenge to the diagnosis of plague, Rieux retorts, "You're stating the problem wrongly. It's not a question of the term I use; it's a question of time" (p.48). Whether the causative agent is correctly named or identified in a scientific sense pales in comparison with Rieux's imploration to save them while they still can. Rieux thus represents the interpersonal model of medicine desperately needed as scientific advances estrange patient from physician.

Finally, the town of Oran itself is quarantined, as are victims of the plague along with their caregivers, in an attempt to thwart the invader. This isolation proves a decisive moment in the manner whereby individuals respond to this illness encasing them like the stone walls and closed gates of Oran. Unable to hide, inhabitants are now forced to share an absurdist existence:

"From now on it can be said that plague was the concern of all of us.... [O]nce the town gates were shut, every one of us realized that all...were, so to speak, in the same boat, and each would have to adapt himself to the new conditions of life.... [T]hey forced themselves never to think about the problematic day of escape, to cease looking to the future, and always to keep, so to speak, their eyes fixed on the ground at their feet.... [T]hey drifted through life rather than lived, the prey of aimless days and sterile memories, like wandering shadows that could have acquired substance only by consenting to root themselves in the solid earth of their distress". (pp. 60-65)

This "consenting to root themselves in the solid earth of their distress" epitomizes the absurdism of Camus. Not knowing if meaning exists, but nonetheless acting as if life had meaning, would enable some townsfolk to cope with the isolation imposed by society in response to their illness. Oran would, in due course, learn to accept and deal with the plague, following the examples of Rieux and the other key characters of this novel.

One such character is Rambert. Throughout most of the novel, Rambert obsessively fights a meaningless exile from his wife, who symbolizes both love and freedom for this victim of chance. If his newspaper assignment had concluded, or if it had never begun, his plight would never have been. In his obsession to escape by any means possible, illegal ones included, Rambert represents individuals grasping for meaning rather than accepting the confusions of existence and yet acting as if life matters nonetheless.

This conflict between viewpoints of Rambert and Rieux stands in counterpoint to the friendship that they share. Rieux even stands aside at Rambert's machinations, despite the risk of plague being spread. Yet, Rambert accuses Rieux of "using the language of reason, not of the heart; ...liv[ing] in a world of...of abstractions" (p.78). In response, Rieux muses on his friend's accusation:

"[W]as...[Rambert] right in reproaching him, Rieux, with living in a world of abstractions? Could that term "abstraction" really apply to those days he spent in his hospital while the plague was battering on the town, raising its death-toll to five hundred victims a week? Yes, an element of abstraction, of a divorce from reality, entered into such calamities. Still, when abstraction sets to killing you, you've got to get busy with it. And so much Rieux knew: that this wasn't the easiest course...was no light task." (p. 79)

Absurdism to Camus "was no light task" indeed. Like Sisyphus, the mythological victim condemned to an eternity of toiling to push a boulder atop a hill only to have it roll back down, Rieux continues his battle against a seemingly invincible foe. A level of scientific

abstraction, much like the protective distance between physicians and patients, is needed in medicine; yet, scientific advancements exacerbate this abstraction by relegating the human person to a clinical case. Nevertheless, abstraction does not perforce mean a total divorce of the physician's world from the patient's reality; Rieux, in fact, struggles with this same balance:

"One grows out of pity when it's useless. And in this feeling that his heart had slowly closed in on itself, the doctor found a solace, his only solace, for the almost unendurable burden of his days.... Thus he was enabled to follow...the dreary struggle in progress between each man's happiness and the abstractions of the plague". (p.82)

This abstraction of medicine, particularly in modern technological society, clashes at times with the humane conduct inherent in true healing, even within Oran's microcosm. Facing his foe, Rieux searches feverishly for any hint to stop the plague's march through Oran. Overwhelmed at times by the plague's incessant march, he must professionally distance himself at times for the survival of his patients and himself:

"Indeed, for Rieux his exhaustion was a blessing in disguise. Had he been less tired, his senses more alert, that all-pervading odour of death might have made him sentimental. But, when a man has had only four hours' sleep, he isn't sentimental. He sees things as they are: that is to say, he sees them in the garish light of justice; hideous, witless justice. And those others, the men and women under sentence of death, shared his bleak enlightenment. Before the plague, he was welcomed as a saviour. He was going to make them right with a couple of pills or an injection, and people took him by the arm on the way to the sickroom. Flattering, but dangerous. Now, on the contrary, he came accompanied by soldiers, and they had to hammer on the doors with rifle-butts before the family would open it. They'd have liked to drag him, drag the whole human race, with them to the grave." (p. 169-170)

Whereas science had once promised a "magic bullet" to cure any ill, plague reminds all in Oran of the limits of technological advancements and especially the risk of hubris in playing god through medical science.

Throughout the novel, Rieux does minister with caring to individual patients as much as he can within constraints of time and energy, not to mention the rules of quarantine. Specifically, Camus captures the humanity of this physician as he attends to his friend Tarrou, who succumbs to the plague ironically once its specter is lifting from Oran. Tarrou had already been staying in Rieux's apartment due to shortages in accommodations, and Rieux

decides to allow him to die there in friendship, rather than to call in the authorities. All the more poignantly, this physician decides to break the rules of quarantine that he himself so vigorously implemented despite the pleas of ordinary citizens not wishing to be isolated from their infected loved ones. This time, Rieux not only turns a blind eye to scientific logic but also risks a new outbreak as he faithfully remains by Tarrou's bedside throughout the long night's vigil:

"This human form, his friend's, lacerated by the spear-thrusts of the plague, consumed by searing, superhuman fires, buffeted by all the raging winds of heaven, was foundering under his eyes in the dark flood of the pestilence, and he could do nothing to avert the wreck. He could only stand, unavailing, on the shore, empty-handed and sick at heart, unarmed and helpless yet again under the onset of calamity. And thus, when the end came, the tears that blinded Rieux's eyes were tears of impotence; and he did not see Tarrou roll over, face to the wall, and die with a short, hollow groan as if somewhere within him an essential cord had snapped...." (p. 254)

Rieux remains by the bedside, bereaved that their friendship forged within the fires of Oran's plague did not have enough time to mature. He seeks solace only by thinking of Tarrou's death through Tarrou's own words:

"Tarrou had "lost the match", as he put it. But what had he, Rieux, won? No more than the experience of having known plague and remembering it, of having known friendship and remembering it, of knowing affection and being destined one day to remember it. So all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories. But Tarrou, perhaps, would have called that winning the match." (p. 256)

Tarrou's very term—"winning the match"—solidifies Camus' exhortation against blind adherence to scientific logic in the cause of life. Despite losing perhaps his only close friend, Rieux realizes that the fundamental tenets of life mean more than its physiological explanations. Plague, in that sense, unwillingly granted Rieux a more precious gift than technology.

### **Medical Meaning in an Absurd World**

Finally in February, when Oran's quarantine is lifted, the deaths of Tarrou and also Rieux's own wife preclude celebrating with townsfolk; he soon returns to his duties as a

physician. As Rieux emerges from the patient's home to streets of revelry, he resolves to "compile this chronicle...: and to state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise" (p.271). Thus, for both Rieux and Camus, acting as if life had meaning despite the fear that it does not is the meaning to be culled from medicine in a quest through an absurd existence. Physicians who truly care for patients—unlike nameless bureaucrats who shirk responsibility and dogmatic zealots blinded by unerring faith, epitomize "all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers" (p.271). Death is inevitable; disease will strike; plague is never beaten. Nonetheless, the physician must not concede; "it is instead the work of humans to reduce suffering when they can, to act with the acceptance that all cannot be healed, resolved, or explained on this earth" (Winter, 2006, p.557).

However, as Rieux and we the readers learn throughout the ordeal of Oran, the experiences of plague, pestilence, disease, and death change each person through a quest for meaning in an absurd world. Despite advances in scientific knowledge that allow meaning to be imagined, the slip of cure from our grasp, or the emergence of another horseman of the Apocalypse, leaves us like Sisyphus watching the efforts of our toil roll back down the hill so that we must start anew. But within this realization that we must start anew is Camus' point. As the doctor discovered in his battle against a seemingly invincible plague, "[t]o struggle when victory is beneficial and possible is simply rational. But when the victory would be most beneficial yet defeat seems inevitable, action becomes a bold, existential declaration, a self-affirmation in the face of emptiness" (Reiner, 1994/1995, p.182).

Is not this boldness in the face of disease and death the attitude that each physician must imbue to alleviate the suffering and ease the death of patients? Certainly, each physician would hope for a future that brings a stronger armamentarium with which to stave off, and perhaps even conquer, each new disease in the world. In such a world, neither Rieux nor Paneloux would need to debate how a god could allow children to die in pain and terror. But that is not the reality of our world: "We must now live without hope since our present state is our only state. There is no tomorrow. But to live without hope is not to live in despair, it is to live without illusion.... Why? Because the 'aware' human being rejoices in each successive moment as part of his or her revolt against a meaningless and finite existence" (du Plock, 2005, p.18).

In this revolt, however, we must all also recognize that an absurdist world does not perforce mean an isolated world. Within his toil against the horror of plague—as well as the bureaucracy of government and the dogma of religion—this physician never succumbs to the hubris of ignorance found through modern technological advancements. He follows his instincts, tempers science with compassion, extracts strength from each small victory, and

commiserates with the aggrieved. Camus carefully, though, steers away from positioning Rieux as a symbolic paragon of medical virtue. Furthermore, Rieux never emerges as the classical hero whose tragic flaw leads to divine retribution. In Camus' absurdism, paragons do not exist, and retribution cannot come from on high—bureaucratically or deistically. Like Rieux and Sisyphus, we must struggle in a world whose meaning cannot be assured.

This struggle for meaning amid absurdity is all the more critical today because “the nature of health care is inextricable from modernity” (Dutton, 2007, p.33). In dire circumstances like the plague, medicine appears justified in using all technological advancements in an unfair battle. Yet rebellion against disease need not engender further estrangement: “For Camus, rebellion is not a test of super[-]human strength; it instead brings out the best of people—their compassion, loyalty, drive, and ingenuity. Rieux cannot fight the plague alone—he needs the help of others” (Winter, 2006, p.560). Despite the plague, Rieux grows into humanity: he learns friendship from Tarrou, persistence from Castel, faith from Paneloux, perseverance from Grand, and compassion from Rambert.

Camus' depiction of Rieux's personal revolt perchance is desperately needed once again in an estranged world of bureaucracy, dogma, and science. Physicians, caregivers, patients—none of us need remain alone; rather, we must unite in a collective quest for medical meaning in an absurd world.

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