

On Plague

I know positively...that each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it. ... All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims; no more than that. ... That's why I decided to take, in every predicament, the victim's side.

—Albert Camus, *The Plague*

By the time we finally begin to fully understand Jean Tarrou toward the end of Albert Camus' 1947 novel *La Peste*, he had long been guided by the potentially crippling realization that he, like everyone else in the world, was responsible for murder—that the human condition, by definition, situates every individual such that “we can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody.”¹ Thus enlightened, when Tarrou finds himself a stranger suddenly exiled in a town besieged by plague, he reacts not with terror or desperation but rather with the confidence and intentionality of one who has been proven right by the universe: As the plague bacillus moves from person to person, overwhelming the port city of Oran, Tarrou sees evidence to support his contention that everyone has, inherently, the capacity to transmit the plague, to exile, and to kill. Any action—any *choice*—has the potential to be life or death. Decisions made with the best of intentions may cause harm even while generating positive, perhaps even life-saving results; in a case like this, Tarrou contends, in spite of any good intentions or positive outcomes, the individual decider is responsible for the harm caused.

¹ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 228.

At the same time, precisely because every individual in every moment has the capacity to cause harm, all thereby simultaneously have the capacity to save others by minimizing their participation in the transmission and perpetuation of plague:

I only know that one must do what one can to cease being plague-stricken, and that's the only way in which we can hope for some peace or, failing that, a decent death. This, and only this, can bring relief to men and, if not save them, at least do them the least harm possible and even, sometimes, a little good. So that is why I resolved to have no truck with any thing which, directly or indirectly, for good reasons or for bad, brings death to anyone or justifies others' putting him to death.²

In a 2001 essay for *The New York Review of Books*, Tony Judt argues that one way to understand Tarrou's contention is to recognize the presence of Camus' own personal, political experience.³ During the 1930s, Camus had been a member of the Communist Party in Algeria. And although he eventually abandoned communism upon learning of the horrific violence that had been perpetrated on its behalf (particularly in the Stalinist U.S.S.R.), Camus likewise recognized that, despite his explicit and intentional departure from that ideology, he could not likewise free himself of his own direct responsibility for the past, present, and future violence resulting from that ideology.

This is an insightful interpretation of what Camus may be expressing through Jean Tarrou, and it accords nicely with the larger possible reading of *La Peste* as an allegory of the Nazi occupation of France. Both accounts are not only plausible interpretations of Camus' text, but they also lend a particular political relevance to the novel that, despite the passage of nearly eighty years, remains prescient today. Another plausible and oft-posit interpretation suggests that the novel should be seen as a philosophical continuation of an analysis of *the absurd*, which Camus first explored fictionally in his aborted novella *La Mort*

² Ibid., 228–229.

³ Tony Judt, "On *The Plague*," *The New York Review of Books* 48, no. 19 (November 29, 2001).

heureuse and which ultimately found its first literary expression in *L'Étranger*. Whereas these early works each presented an individual confronted with the absurdity of existence and the subsequent solitary attempt to reconcile the absurd for oneself, *La Peste* presents the fundamental components of the awareness of the absurd—suffering, alienation, exile, and death—and presents these experiences not merely as individual and personal but rather as experiences shared by a *community*. Consequently, Jean Tarrou's radical assumption of responsibility for the health of others, and Dr. Bernard Rieux's stubborn refusal to give in to plague, ought to be seen not just as individual expressions of individual values but rather as part of a collective expression of shared *community* values in solidarity.

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AT THE HEART of Camus primary texts on the absurd, *L'Étranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, lies the articulation of *revolt* as the only authentic and meaningful manner by which an individual can engage, and thus reconcile oneself with, the absurdity of existence. Both Meursault and Sisyphus embody the individual struggle against the awareness of temporality, alienation, and death wherein the experience of the absurd is constituted.

In *L'Homme révolté*, his book-length essay on rebellion as both a metaphysical and historical phenomenon, Camus expounds upon this articulation, noting that revolt has, and must always maintain, its founding and guiding principle in the human experience of solidarity in a shared struggle: "The affirmation implicit in every act of rebellion is extended to something that transcends the individual in so far as it withdraws him from his supposed solitude and provides him with a reason to act."⁴ One such possible and compelling reason to act can be found, according to Camus, in the experience of *suffering*—not merely in the sufferings of Meursault or Sisyphus as they grapple individually with the absurd, but in the extrapolation from such individual sufferings to the recognition that this manner of suffering is, precisely and necessarily, a *human* condition that is thus shared by all:

⁴ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 16.

In absurdist experience suffering is individual. But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience. Therefore, the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of [suffering] is shared with all [humanity] and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the same distance which separates it from the rest of the universe. The malady experienced by a single individual becomes a mass plague.⁵

What is this “mass plague”? It is a shared experience of the absurd, a universal condemnation to suffering, to alienation and exile, to death. All of us are, merely by virtue of being human, universally sentenced to our finitude, to suffering, to exile, and to death. Humanity is united by its shared capacity to suffer and equally by its attendant capacity to relate through this shared capacity to suffer.⁶ To witness suffering is to recognize the possibility of one’s own potential suffering; likewise, to suffer forces the recognition of, and confrontation with, the potential suffering of others.

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A CONSTANT THREAD in the work of Emmanuel Levinas is the contention that simply through the *recognition of* the other,

⁵ Ibid., 22. Anthony Bower translates the quoted passage as “the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of *strangeness* is shared.” Throughout this portion of the quoted text, Camus is discussing the human response, individually and collectively, to the absurdity of human existence in the world and the suffering which results from the encounter with the absurd. “Strangeness,” as a stand-in for absurdity, is above clarified as “suffering” to emphasize that Camus is not merely concerned with absurdity per se but rather with the consequences of the human encounter with absurdity.

⁶ For more on the primacy of relation in the experience of suffering, particularly as this suffering results from violence or the intention to harm, see Steven A. Burr, “Transcending the Paradox of Violence: A Dialectical/Dialogical Interrogation of the Colonial–Anti-Colonial Struggle in Algeria,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 101, no. 4 (2018): 322–40.

through *dialogue with* the other, the individual is compelled toward concern for the fate of the other as if that fate were one's own fate. "In the relation to the other, the other appears to me as one to whom I owe something, toward whom I have a responsibility."⁷ Levinas further contends that this recognition and subsequent responsibility may be experienced most acutely in the witnessing of the suffering of the other or through the realization of the possibility of the death of the other:

The death of the other puts me on the spot, calls me into question, as if I, by my possible indifference, become the accomplice of that death, invisible to the other who is exposed to it; and as if, even before being condemned to it myself, I had to answer for that death of the other, and not leave the other alone to his deathly solitude. It is precisely in that recalling of me to my responsibility by the face that summons me, that demands me, that requires me—it is in that calling into question—that the other is my neighbor.⁸

The experience of being interrogated by the other, being forced to reckon with the death of the other, leads, according to Levinas, to a profound individual responsibility for the death of the other which, once realized, can never be forgotten or forsaken, even if the ultimate expression of responsibility is limited to witnessing, to acknowledging, to saying, "in the powerless confrontation with the death of the other, 'Here I am.'"⁹ However, although the manner in which this responsibility is borne may be ambiguous, what is clear is the profundity of the relation between the individual and the other, between me and, in Levinas' terms, "my neighbor."

My *neighbor*—the descriptor is heavy with connotations and implications. My neighbor is one with whom I share a space; by

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Proximity of the Other," in *Alterity and Transcendence* (trans Michael B. Smith; New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 101.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and Transcendence," in *Alterity and Transcendence* (trans Michael B. Smith; New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 24–25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

virtue of our proximal situation, we share common concerns, common threats, and common goals—we go about our lives, whether we acknowledge it or not, in relation to each other. Yet this experience of neighborliness ought not be limited to those others who are in my immediate proximity. Karol Wojtyła (before becoming Pope John Paul II) used the term *neighbor* to describe all who I experience, not just by their proximity, but by their being an *I*, like me but distinct from me. To recognize the other as a *neighbor* is likewise to posit the being of the other as equal in her participation in humanity; it is the affirmation that the other is an autonomous, intentional, self-directing *I*.¹⁰ Implicit in this affirmation is the acknowledgment that the joys, hopes, desires, and sufferings that I experience, as well as those experienced by the other, are experienced by us, *as neighbors*, in common.

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BUT WHAT DOES it really mean, in actual lived experience, to experience anything *in common* with my neighbor? Is the kind of solidarity described by Emanuel Levinas and personified by Jean Tarrou, particularly in suffering, an attainable condition? In her 2004 text *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler argues not only that this kind of human solidarity is *not* a reality (at least not yet), but also that the fact that it is not a reality is revelatory of a more profound and terrible truth about the way in which we see (or *allow* ourselves to see) the humanity of others. Butler contends that we simply do not see—whether because of our own prejudices or because of prejudices held by the political-cultural systems that govern us—all

¹⁰ “A consciousness that the ‘other’ is a ‘different I’ points to the ability of participating in the very humanity of other people and initiates that participation. As a result, everyone can be for me a ‘neighbor.’ For, the ‘other’ denotes not only the sameness of existence alongside me and even acting in common with me in some kind of a scheme of activity. The ‘other’ on the basis of this real situation denotes a no less real although *primarily subjective participation in humanity*, flowing from the consciousness that the other human being is the ‘other I,’ that is, ‘also some kind of an I.’ ... Neighbor is another human being not only on the basis of a general feeling of humanity, but primarily on the basis of being an ‘another I.’” Karol Wojtyła, “Participation or Alienation?,” in *The Self and the Other: The Irreducible Element in Man [Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research, Volume VI]* (ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka; Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Reidel, 1975), p. 64.

instances of suffering and death in the same way. An example Butler uses throughout her work is the distinction often made in U.S. culture between Americans killed in war versus ‘enemies’ killed in war; whereas lost American lives are publically mourned, enemy lives lost are much more readily ignored or even celebrated. In Butler’s terms, the American deaths are “grievable” deaths, whereas the enemy deaths are not. Further, the way in which each death is understood reveals something equally profound about the life itself that was lost: “Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human.”¹¹ A death that is grievable is the end of a life that *mattered*; a death that is not grievable is the end of a life that counted for less, that was somehow *less than human*.

Butler’s example drawn from war depicts only one possible manifestation of the determination, consciously or not, of which lives *matter* and which deaths are *grievable*. Of the many other possible examples, not all are a direct result of the lack of close proximity that defines Butler’s example. In his book *Another Day in the Death of America*, Gary Younge focuses on one particular day in the United States—November 23, 2013—to examine the lives and deaths of ten teenagers who were killed that day to better understand what the ways in which their deaths were (or were not) mourned reveals about the value placed on each of those lives lost. Of the ten killed that day, seven were black, two Hispanic, and one white. None of the ten was from a family or a community of wealth or privilege. Perhaps because of these simple facts alone, despite the fact that they were *children* (the youngest victim that day was Jaiden Dixon, of Grove City, Ohio, who was only nine years old), not one of these deaths seemed to matter beyond the immediate families and communities in which the death occurred:

[T]heir deaths did not intrude on the accepted order of things but conformed to it. ... Far from being considered newsworthy, these everyday fatalities are simply a banal fact of death. They are white noise set sufficiently low to allow the

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), pp. xiv–xv.

country to go about its business undisturbed: a confluence of culture, politics, and economics that guarantees that each morning several children will wake up but not go to bed while the rest of the country sleeps soundly.¹²

The horrible truth, as Gary Younge, Judith Butler, and countless others have discovered, is that whereas some lives and deaths matter to us on a grand scale, others simply do not. Those of us who are privileged—either because of our wealth, our race, our education, or where we happened to be born and raised—are simply not compelled to recognize, to *witness*, the lives, sufferings, and deaths of others outside of our sphere of privilege. In their sufferings and deaths we fail to see the possibility of our own suffering and death, in large part because the conditions that fostered their fates are conditions which we do not, and likely will not, have to experience. In the United States in the 21st century, as in most of the ‘privileged’ societies of the world, there seems to be no equality, and thus no possibility for solidarity, in suffering and death.

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TONY JUDT CLAIMS that Camus’ *La Peste* “teaches no lessons.”¹³ Given one possible perspective from which he classifies the novel—as an allegory of the traumas endured in Vichy France from 1940 to 1944—Judt is right that Camus offers “little comfort to political polemicists of any school.” Yet there *is* a lesson offered in the novel, the relevance of which is particularly acute today: Against the fact of human suffering and death, whether as disconnected occurrences or as a universal fate, issuing from the actions of a malevolent humanity or merely as a necessary condition of existence in an indifferent universe, what matters most are the choices made by individuals and the ways in which they, *as individuals*, engage and assume responsibility for each of those sufferings and deaths.

One of the more uplifting stories told by Bryan Stevenson in his profoundly important book *Just Mercy* is “The Stonecatcher’s

¹² Gary Younge, *Another Day in the Death of America: A Chronicle of Ten Short Lives* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), p. xiv.

¹³ Judt, “On *The Plague*.”

Song of Sorrow.”¹⁴ After Stevenson had successfully argued for the resentencing (and ultimately, the immediate release) of Robert Caston from Angola Prison in Louisiana, an elderly black woman, whom Stevenson was sure he had seen on multiple occasions whenever he argued a case in the New Orleans court system, invited him to sit with her. When Stevenson asked the woman whether she was related to someone from the case he had just argued she said no, explaining that she was simply there to help people: “This is a place full of pain, so people need plenty of help around here.” She then told Stevenson her story—how, fifteen years before, her sixteen-year-old grandson, who she “loved more than life itself,” was murdered; how she sat through the trials of the two boys who had killed her grandson, trying desperately to make sense of it all; how the judge’s decision to sentence both boys to life in prison actually made her feel worse; how after the sentencing she sat in the nearly empty courtroom and cried for two hours, while a woman she had never before met hugged her and gave her a shoulder to lean on. Since that time, she has frequented the courtrooms, ever trying to be the same source of strength that the stranger had been for her fifteen years earlier:

When I first came, I’d look for people who had lost someone to murder or some violent crime. Then it got to the point where some of the ones grieving the most were the ones whose children or parents were on trial, so I just started letting anybody lean on me who needed it. All these young children being sent to prison forever, all this grief and violence. Those judges throwing people away like they’re not even human, people shooting each other, hurting each other like they don’t care. I don’t know, it’s a lot of pain. I decided that I was supposed to be here to catch some of the stones people cast at each other.¹⁵

To the already-mentioned categories of *pestilence* and *victim*, Camus’ Jean Tarrou adds a third—*the true healer*. The healer is one who, like Tarrou, takes “in every predicament” the side of the

¹⁴ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014), 295–310.

¹⁵ Stevenson, 308.

victim: “Among them I can at least try to discover how one attains to the third category; in other words, to peace.”¹⁶ It is precisely this peace, engendered in solidarity with all of one’s neighbors, particularly those who suffer, which allows Tarrou to find happiness, “a happiness that forgot nothing, not even murder.”¹⁷ This is the lesson that Camus offers—that empathy and compassion in response to the sufferings of others is not just a fundamental human capacity but also a fundamental human *responsibility*. This is the lesson that Bryan Stevenson’s unnamed *Stonematcher* echoes in her persistent presence as a witness without judgment to the sufferings of others: “I’ve been singing sad songs my whole life. Had to. When you catch stones, even happy songs make you sad. ... But you keep singing. Your songs will make you strong. They might even make you happy.”¹⁸

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PLAGUE, SICKNESS, FINITUDE, DEATH—fundamental qualities that both define and ultimately undermine what it means to exist as a human being—cannot, finally and decisively, be overcome. As he watches most of the surviving citizens of Oran celebrate their victory over the plague at the conclusion of Camus’ novel, Dr. Bernard Rieux stoically acknowledges that any victory over plague and death is tenuous and conditional: “such joy is always imperiled...perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightenment of men, [the plague] would raise up its rats and send them forth to die in a happy city.”¹⁹

In contrast to the violence, marginalization, and subsequent suffering wrought by human malevolence, plague does not discriminate; all are equally vulnerable to sickness and death simply by virtue of existing as a finite being.²⁰ To be human is to be

¹⁶ Camus, *The Plague*, 230.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁸ Stevenson, 309–310.

¹⁹ Camus, *The Plague*, 278.

²⁰ Sadly, this equality often exists only as an abstract potentiality and not as a lived reality. In April 2020, there is no more obvious and irrefutable proof of this fact than the profoundly disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations, especially the elderly, racial minorities, the poor, and the incarcerated. On April 13th, Jayne Miller of WBAL TV in Baltimore reported the following statistics: In the Baltimore City zip code 21215, which

susceptible to suffering, to be vulnerable, to be sick. Plagues remind us of this fact and reawaken a shared, universal concern, not merely for what may befall any one of us but for what may, what *will*, befall our neighbors; for our universally shared plight as sick, finite creatures, inextricably bound both by our shared being-in-the-world and the shared mortality which will necessitate our eventual departure from this world and from each other.

In 1958, in the preface to his *Chroniques algériennes*, Albert Camus wrote that “the real question is not how to die separately but how to live together.”²¹ It is not coincidental, nor is it meaningless, that Camus was here addressing the profound colonial tension in Algeria—even in the midst of such radical difference, Camus fully recognized both the need for and the possibility of a harmony in-relation. An essential part of living together toward such harmony entails the recognition that each of us is vulnerable, finite, sick—that we are thereby irrevocably bound by our shared status as “victims.” To fully participate in our common humanity is to recognize this fact, just as to fully allow the other to participate in our common humanity is to recognize the other’s “victimhood.” If the plagues of history and of today give us nothing else, let them at least lead us to a kind of solidarity in suffering and death that must be achieved if there is to be any hope for happiness, for harmony, and for peace.

has a median income of \$32,189, a 95% black population, and a 37% population of children living in poverty, there had been 134 confirmed COVID-19 cases; in the Baltimore City zip code 21210, which has a median income of \$117,951, a 77% white population, and a 2.8% population of children living in poverty, there had not been a single confirmed case (<https://twitter.com/jemillerwbal/status/1249722308199174144>). These two zip codes are separated by less than three miles.

²¹ Albert Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2013), 29.

Confluence