

Yearning for the Human in Posthuman Times: On Camus' Tragic Humanism

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Pandemonics

What's natural is the microbe. All the rest – health, integrity, purity (if you like) – is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter.¹

In the middle of the global pandemic, in the course of 2020, while the calls for an 'exit strategy' from the global restrictions of (human) movement and social distancing introduced to avoid the spreading of the new Corona virus pandemic were getting louder, many politicians and virologists were advocating even tighter measures of confinement to slow down the number of new infections, to protect the vulnerable and to avoid the collapsing of overstretched and underfunded health care systems, overwhelmed by the prospect of further successive waves of the pandemic. It became increasingly clear that economic interests were on a collision course with a humanitarian ethics of care and a weighing-up process began that pitched the loss of human life to the virus against the loss of human life due to poverty as a result of the social lockdown and the global economic downturn to follow. Environmentalists (and advocates of 'degrowth') quickly saw the fall in economic activity and the decrease in carbon emissions, or the temporary recovery of cities from air pollution in times of emptied streets, as a sort of vindication of the Fridays-for-future marches: You see! It *can* be done, if a pandemic can reverse climate change by forcing us to downscale our economic activities we have to accept that, that's just what it takes!

Just as easily other ways of inflecting the pandemic rose to the surface: We've all got used to the idea that global finance capitalism will not be able to continue to generate wealth for ever more people and places, but hadn't it been so successful, politicians wouldn't currently be able to throw vast amounts of money at the Corona crisis fall-out and at the development of a vaccine. So, it's not difficult to see how economists will – after a due check on some global strategies that have proven exaggerated and unhelpful (e.g. just-in-time no-stock transnational production lines) – will want to return to wealth generation with a vengeance to make up for the huge losses and deficits that have built up since the beginning of global lockdown. Science will probably also do very well out of this crisis. Scientists have been making a comeback as public intellectuals and as the main 'authorities' to provide prop-ups for stringent and often anti-constitutional, extremely unpopular, illiberal, and increasingly contested policing measures. After decades of a steady global rise of populism scientific experts are all of a sudden back in the national and global media and are "listened to".

The pandemic will also be seen as an opportune moment to look again at the role of social media and the importance of a (national, European, international, global) public sphere, once it becomes clear to what extent 'fake news' will have been shared as virally as the virus itself. Last but not least, another community will have capitalised from the pandemic climate of 'bio(in)security', namely all those people who have been pointing at (human) biology as the weakest link in humanity's chance for survival and further evolutionary development. It is fairly easy to see how 'transhumanists', for whom pandemics (apart from asteroids, catastrophic climate change but also future wars) form global risks of extinction that need to be countered with the right political and technological consensus to overcome 'our' frustratingly disappointing 'human condition', this less than perfect mortal frame of ours. In their eyes, it has almost become a moral obligation to technologically and

¹ Albert Camus, *The Plague* [1947], trans. Stuart Gilbert (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 207.

thus ethically enhance ourselves and transcend our current limits by extracting ourselves from nature and its viruses.²

Given this explosive mix of antagonistic and opportunistic discourses it seems unlikely that the world after Corona will be in any way a better place. There will be calls to rebuild, to remember the essentials, or to be better prepared next time, to learn the lessons, to overcome, to celebrate life and so on. Calls for human solidarity will encourage a return to universal humanist values, a return to essential and timeless truths and celebrations of the tragic but heroic beauty of human (self)sacrifice; calls for a new Enlightenment and optimism, onwards and upwards, will resound; a global 'rolling-up of sleeves'. What there will probably not be much time for, however, is critical reflection of an existential, ontological kind. Who will still have time for questions like: what does it mean to be human, once humanity has been (re)united in confronting an 'evil' and invisible enemy, a deadly virus?

In short, this pandemic has brought pandemonium to the globalised neoliberal capitalist world and, at the same time, has sharpened our awareness that posthumanism and the time 'after' the human can neither be a simple return to old humanist or even humanitarian reflexes nor a simple 'moving-on-regardless' process. In short, humans can neither self-abdicate, nor continue to reign supreme – this is the true dilemma of 'postanthropocentrism', a post-COVID-19 dilemma one might call 'pandemonics'. Pandemonium refers to the "abode of all demons; hell, the infernal regions" (*OED* online). It also means "a centre of vice and wickedness; a haunt of evil", and, more recently, "a place or state of utter confusion and uproar; a noisy disorderly place... a tumult; chaos". Etymologically, there is of course no convergence between pandemic and pandemonium. Pandemic goes back to *demos*, (the) people, while pandemonium derives from *daimon/daemonium*, the devil, which raises the question whether it would not be a great evil to mix up these two etyma – people and devil, society and chaos, even though, some will argue that it is the *demos*, precisely, who have become the *daimon*, in the form of global overpopulation but also as far as the steady rise of populism is concerned. However the phrase 'pandemic pandemonium' obviously appeals because of its alliteration. There is, for example, an archived post by James C. O'Brien (Principal of the Albright Group LLC) from 2007 on the website of the online journal *Industry Today* that begins with what, today, has to be called a truly prophetic statement: "According to experts, including the World Health Organization (WHO), an influenza pandemic is inevitable. The pandemic will spread along supply chains, making businesses especially vulnerable to the disease and to measures taken to protect public health".³ And I also found a short article by Josh N. Ruxin (then an assistant clinical professor of public health) in *The National Interest* in 2008, equally prophetic with hindsight, which emphasises that "[t]oday's pandemics have evolved to prey on our greatest weakness: our inability to wage sustained fights against pressing health issues".⁴ Ruxin's (not entirely disinterested) call for a proactive approach to public health clearly combines the social, economic and humanitarian costs of a pandemic threat: "it may be worthwhile to consider how a pandemic could push people living on

² A fairly representative view on the "dangers for the world after (COVID-19)" can be found in any number of magazines and manifestos explaining the new world scenario. There is for example *Le Spectacle du monde 2* (Autumn 2020) that identifies the pandemic, transhumanism and demography (i.e. overpopulation) as the "new" main global challenges. The collective authors of the *Second manifeste convivialiste* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2020) argue for a "post-neoliberal" world that is ecologically responsible, degrowth (*décroissance*) and post-market oriented (*démarchandisation*), post-globalised (*déglobalisation*) and against technoscientific *hubris*.

³ James O'Brien, "Pandemic Pandemonium", *Industry Today* 11.1 (2007), available online at: industrytoday.com/pandemic-pandemonium/; last accessed 28 March 2020.

⁴ Josh N. Ruxin, "Pandemic Pandemonium", *The National Interest* 96 (2008): 26.

the edge into poverty and starvation. With food production suffering greatly, the urban centers that are dependent on daily imports of food could rapidly fall victim... the economic and potential political destabilization that would result would cross these borders and be felt in everyone's bank accounts".⁵

While these two visions, contracting pandemic and pandemonium, are thoroughly materialist and secular, one might say, I am here equally interested in the metaphysical, religious connotations of pandemonium because they are connected to what I find most striking about the current co-implication of a sanitary and a civilizational crisis and in the way many commentators seem to have instrumentalized COVID-19. Collapsologists, consequently, see the sanitary crisis with its political and socioeconomic fallout and the possibility of 'the end of civilization' as an ecological chance, or at least as a welcome and overdue wake-up call for humanity to rethink its relationship to other species and to the planet. Even someone as poised as Philippe Descola, in an interview with *Le Monde*, joined the widespread apocalypticism by saying "Nous [i.e. Western capitalist 'man'] sommes devenus des virus pour la planète".⁶ That humans might be the real virus or disease on and for this planet has become somewhat of a posthumanist topos at least since Agent Smith in the *Matrix* called 'us' that. 'Viral' thinking or information going 'viral' have of course also become central metaphors for digitalisation. And like every major crisis a global pandemic is the bearer of both hope (for change) and dejection (extinction angst). It produces both nihilist (we're all going to die anyway) and idealist (we can build a better world) reactions. While most of the current high-visibility thinkers use COVID-19 to justify their own conceptualisations of and agendas for social critique – from a more affirmative biopolitics to postanthropocentric solidarity to compositionism, entanglement, degrowth or anarchism, to transhumanist calls for technological 'optimization' – it might be worth (re)gaining some detachment and thus some critical distance to escape the frenzied preoccupation with the question whether the human, or the planet or both have a future and remember how 'we' got into this pandem(on)ic mess and what brought 'us' here.

Pandemics, like all natural and unnatural disasters, bring out the best and worst in humans –and thus touch the core of their self-understanding, that is their humanism, whether it be of a secular, atheist or religious inflection. And this also inevitably includes any posthumanist attempt to escape this humanist 'gut reaction' – the desire to become (more, or more-than) human. This double human nature, the best and the worst, this *psychomachia* (the fight between good and evil forcing the individual to take the 'right' choice), is at the heart of any humanist morality. It is based on the idea that the experience of tragedy will produce an improvement (catharsis – a cleansing and an at least temporary release, from suffering, or dilemma). In the face of the absurdity (of the cruelty, evil, death, suffering and injustice) in this world, becoming (truly) human is the main *task* for each and every human. This moral imperative is fundamental to a tragic humanism and it can be seen everywhere at work, again or still, during the COVID-19 global crisis. It is a well-rehearsed human reflex with regard to the absurdity and inscrutability of evil (the problem of theodicy) and the *outrage* they cause.

Many like-minded people with a self-critical (theoretical, philosophical) disposition, after the onset of the pandemic, will have reached back on their analogue or digital bookshelves to pull out their Foucault volumes. Others will have remembered their literary (humanist) education and reached for their Camus. This is not to say that these reactions are mutually exclusive but they translate into different foci. The Foucauldian route leads to a critique or a genealogy of the disciplinary

⁵ Ruxin, 27-28.

⁶ Philippe Descola, "Nous sommes devenus des virus pour la planète – entretien", *Le Monde* 21-22 May (2020), 27.

apparatuses, the politics of power and administration and the scopic regimes put in place to create human 'subjects' and 'docile bodies'. The Camusian route is likely to emphasise the metaphysical revolt of the human subject in the face of absurd suffering and his (mostly his) attempt to overcome it in solidarity and love.⁷ What follows below is not meant as a contribution to literary criticism. It is not a valorisation of the greatness of Camus's work, which is in fact difficult to classify, situated as it is between philosophy, literature, drama and journalism. It is also not another comment on whether Camus should or shouldn't be taken seriously as a philosopher. On the other hand, it is also not a contribution on the sociological, political or ecological impact of COVID-19. It is also not about 'the virus' *per se*. It is an attempt to show that posthumanism – at least the form of it that I would like to designate as 'critical' – is not all about technology, the new alliance between science and the humanities, biopolitical entanglement, new challenges like climate change and extinction threats. It is all of that of course, but it feeds, necessarily, from something else; something that is often forgotten in the breathless race towards who's most serious about their 'postanthropocentrism'. Something that is the motivation of why one should engage with a thinking that is so arcane and complicated as a lot of posthumanist theory undoubtedly is in the first place, namely its ongoing critique of humanism, the desire to understand what went wrong, and what continues to be wrong with our most cherished values and self-understandings and the question whether this really is just a Western 'problem' of troubled and melancholic self-searching in a 'decolonial' world. Questions not only concerning what it *is* but what it *means* to be human, or what a *good* life is and which way *evil* lies. This posthumanism of a more critical and genealogical kind is not nostalgic, or maybe only a little, in tone but not in spirit, it is not technophobic but it refuses to answer the question of technology in a deterministic or essentialist way. It is not religious in any way even though it does read the postsecular not as a straightforward turn away from the modern and enlightened, political notion of secularism. It is in this deconstructive vein that I think Camus and the controversy to what extent he was or wasn't an *existentialist* and whatever happened to this existentialism (i.e. to what extent it should still inform us today), are relevant for the discussion about where COVID-19 has taken us, might still take us. So, this is an intervention on how aspects of humanism – which might well prove to be unsurpassable – are still governing our thinking despite our best intentions or our most insistent repressions.

From Absurdity to Revolt

. . . one cannot help but be struck by the ethical force of Camus's works. . . .⁸

Camus' 'tragic humanism' still seems to remain a tempting point of reference whenever one is faced with apocalypse, extinction, and crises like a global pandemic. It is precisely because Camus is such a strong defender of liberal values like individual freedom, social justice, pluralism and dialogue,

⁷ In fact, the two routes can be found in Camus' work as well. Camus' play, *État de siège*, one might argue, is much more focused on the administrative power shift, the aspect of "governmentality", while his novel, *The Plague*, foregrounds the drama of "separation" from a more strictly humanist and tragic angle in the form of a metaphysical revolt. See also Matthew Sharpe's *Camus, Philosophe: To Return to Our Beginnings* (Leiden, Brill: 2015), esp. chapter 1 ("Plague Power: Camus with and against the Critiques of Instrumental reason", pp. 61-97). Camus' *État de siège* (1948) appeared almost at the same time as *La Peste* (1947), in Camus, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II (1944-1948) (Paris: Gallimard: 2006), 91-373.

⁸ David Sherman, *Camus* (Chichester: Wiley & Sons, 2009), 7.

democratic republicanism, and the rule of law in the very face of catastrophe that his tragic humanism may again appear attractive to many, especially those who are always willing to return to and affirm liberal humanist values and even hoping to extend them when faced with adversity. And it is precisely this desire to reconnect with these values (or indeed, without ever really having disconnected from them) that needs to be investigated by a critical posthumanism, now, again. Why do these values retain their strong attraction when we know that the hope and universal appeal they offer have such a bad track record as far as our learning from their flaws, their exclusions, their nostalgia, or their resentments are concerned?

Albert Camus' *The Plague* remains the most obvious modern literary reference for a humanist scenario playing itself out in the context of an epidemic. It emplots the task to become or remain fully human in the face of annihilation, to search for the human in inhuman, or one might say, posthuman times. It is through witnessing and accepting the fact of death and through experiencing the humiliation of endless defeat while facing the merciless epidemic that Doctor Rieux and his comrades impersonate the idea of human revolt. Out of the experience of absurdity arises the need to act, and thus to embark on a quest for a better, more human(e), world. Most of us know this story; many of us have internalised it in some form; it is almost impossible not to believe in it somehow; it seems without alternative. It is the age-old yearning for transcendence that drives it. And this is regardless of the fact that this yearning is linked to the idea of technological development, social progress, or to the morality of human perfectibility, from Christian notions of resurrection to Nietzsche's Overman to transhumanist prophecies of enhancement and the evolutionary replacement of humans by a superior AI.

The return to Camus in the time of the plague might be very predictable, as predictable as the reaction of future-oriented transhumanists who have been arguing for a technical fix to human suffering for a long time. Transhumanists would probably distance themselves from such a seemingly reactionary and moralistic move, stuck in a 'can't do' attitude as far as the 'human condition' is concerned. There have certainly been conservative motivations in rereading *The Plague*, framed as an example of how to retain one's humanity in the face of suffering, or as an answer to a yearning for ordinary humanity and good sense,⁹ a call for decency and fidelity and the need to hold on to our humanity in the face of the plague and evil by way of vigilance.¹⁰ But there were also much more nuanced reminders. Jacqueline Rose, for example,¹¹ reminds us of the complexity of Camus' novel and its reception – a text that Camus intended to have at least three levels: an almost anthropological level of how people behave when faced with an epidemic and suffering; a symbolic level dealing with Nazi ideology, totalitarian practice, bureaucracy, and camp mentality (preceding Foucault, Agamben and the entire discussion on 'bare life' and biopolitics); and a metaphysical-theological level that explores the problem of evil and the question of theodicy from a (post)secular angle (i.e. after Nietzsche's 'death of god'). Rose also puts her finger on what may be the two most significant absences in *The Plague*, namely the literal absence of Oran's Arab population and Camus' complicated position as a *pied-noir*, a French-Algerian, regarding colonial politics and postcolonial

⁹ Cf. Robert Zaretsky, "Out of a clear blue sky: Camus's *The Plague* and coronavirus", *TLS* 10 April (2020): available online at: www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/albert-camus-the-plague-coronavirus-essay-robert-zaretsky/; last accessed 31 May 2020.

¹⁰ Stephen Metcalf, "Albert Camus' *The Plague* and our own Great Reset", *Los Angeles Times* 23 March (2020): available online at www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2020-03-23/reading-camu-the-plague-and-coronavirus; last accessed 31 May 2020.

¹¹ Jacqueline Rose, "Pointing the Finger: Jacqueline Rose on *The Plague*", *London Review of Books* 42.9 (7 May 2020): available online at www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n09/jacqueline-rose/pointing-the-finger; last accessed 31 May 2020.

resistance, as well as the low visibility and the subservient, accessory role of women in Camus' work and existentialism more widely. However, the chord that *The Plague* cannot help but strike even today lies in the narrator's (i.e. the medical doctor Rieux's) final carefully crafted, both tragic and hopeful message that the epidemic leaves behind, namely that "there are more things to admire in men than to despise".¹² Rieux's is a statement that encapsulates the entire post/humanist problematic in that it may be precisely this arch-humanist consensus that may no longer be tenable or even desirable and suspicious. And one way, precisely, in which it has become suspicious, as feminists and critical posthumanists would agree, lies in the use of the word "men". Men, deep down, will still think that there is something desirable about them in the hope that at least some women (and men, or other genders) will agree. All is thus still to decide or to play for, as Rose says, and so much that remains to be done.¹³

Camus' work is often described – based on his own classification into different 'cycles' – by a development "from absurdity to revolt".¹⁴ Absurdity arises out the fact that after the 'death of God', the human finds him-, her- or itself alone in this world. This causes a deep moral crisis, the loss of transcendent and religious values, and the experience of meaninglessness and nihilism. Instead of a liberation, the absence of God leads to a lack of a sense of direction, and ultimately to a reduction of freedom and the loss of dignity. An absurd life is a life where everything is permitted, but nothing makes sense. The only unshakable knowledge is that there is death at the end of life. There are only two options: revelling or rebelling, to put it starkly. Either one lamentingly accepts the absurdity of life and becomes a nihilist, or one takes absurdity as a starting point of one's personal revolt against this very absurdity and stands up to nihilism. The challenge is thus to accept life's absurdity and derive positive and constructive values and a limited notion of freedom out of what otherwise might become collective nihilistic depression. However, this affirmative new humanism must refrain from seeking new transcendental values outside of the human. It is purely immanent in its radical anthropocentrism, but not in a materialist, consumerist, or capitalist sense, which would seek the significance of life in the accumulation of wealth and consumption. Instead, it must be in close connection with 'nature'. This is not to be confused with a romanticised ecological notion in Camus' case, however. For Camus, nature is utterly ambivalent in its 'inhumanity'. The consciousness of absurdity, nature's inhuman beauty, and the acceptance of death as the ultimate limit can be the only ground for developing a set of values on which to build a community of humans and reach solidarity. The individual experience of absurdity leads to consciousness and to metaphysical revolt, out of which arises the experience of community in suffering. This, in turn, stirs the collective fight against evil in this world. It is basically a cathartic or tragic vision, which derives intrinsic collective human grandeur out of the individual (but shared) experience of suffering, of death but also scorn, persistence, and strength in adversity, authenticity, integrity, and dignity. In one word, it is heroic in its 'meekness' – a "lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert".¹⁵ The experience of absurdity should therefore lead to lucidity and to an affirmation of life despite everything. In this sense, "living is keeping the absurd alive".¹⁶ The "divorce between the mind that

¹² Camus, *The Plague*, 251.

¹³ The 'masculinist' bias in Camus' "particular version of humanism, in which virility and fraternity are often key values" is also pointed out by Martin Crowley, in "Camus and Social Justice", *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, ed. Edward J. Hughes (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 93.

¹⁴ Cf. for example John Foley's, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt* (London: Routledge, 2014) on this point. Tad Sessler sees in this development a move from solipsistic nihilism to immanent humanism, and links his to the 'ethical turn' in Camus and Levinas; see Sessler, *Levinas and Camus: Humanism for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Continuum, 2008).

¹⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* [1942], trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 7.

¹⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 53.

desires and the world that disappoints” should spark to a “nostalgia for unity” and coherence.¹⁷ Suicide, self-annihilation, withdrawal, acceptance... all these, by contrast, amount to a betrayal of the injunction to pursue happiness in the face of evil. This is the main message of *The Plague* – namely to be resolutely on the side of the victims while putting up a fight against evil without delusion, accepting absurdity without either becoming complicit with or adding to it.

From an existentialist point of view, in the absence of God, all the meaning is for humans to produce. Against the destructive movement of history, the only option is this desperate (tragic, heroic, Sisyphean) hope combined with a utopian desire without illusion – on which all remaining human dignity relies – and which alone constitutes human freedom. This yearning manifests itself in the individual’s endeavour to overcome ‘his’ alienation and thus to show ‘fraternity’ and solidarity with the victims (of persecution, of cruelty, absurdity...).¹⁸ The sanitary fight against the deadly microbe is therefore, at the same time, a form of political resistance and a moral duty. It is a fight against indifference and for freedom for which self-delusion and ideological division is itself a pernicious form of death. This revolt against the human condition is based on this existential(ist) recognition of the human (double) nature. Nevertheless, more and more humans are becoming aware that all of this is not only a rather self-righteous, self-indulgent, and nostalgic misconception of what solidarity might mean, but that it is a worldview that is also increasingly becoming a threat to the planet and to nonhuman as well as human survival. Hence the urgency of a shift towards a (critical) posthumanism understood as the ongoing critique and deconstruction of humanism.

Camus and Tragic Humanism

. . . créer les conditions d’une pensée juste et d’un accord provisoire entre les hommes qui ne veulent être ni des victimes ni des bourreaux.¹⁹

In *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*,²⁰ I investigated ‘our’ ongoing love-hate relationship with humanism which continues to manifest itself in an absurdist belief based on nostalgia, revolt, and the yearning for something entirely other – another planet, another life, another freedom – and which seems to ‘get us’ every time, especially in moments like the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis. But why, indeed, should this be a surprise? Humanism is humanity’s greatest (and most dangerous) achievement. However, it is an ideology, a set of values, a worldview that is now increasingly turning against its subjects, in the face of ever more threatening global crises, extinction *angst*, human-induced climate change, new genocides, global refugee movements; in short, unending human and nonhuman suffering. And the central question remains: What to do about ‘it’? And what to do about ‘us’? How may reading Camus (still) help in such a seemingly irresolvable situation? How can we

¹⁷ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 50.

¹⁸ It is worth pointing out the tacit ‘masculinist’ (or at least paternalistic and heteronormative) consensus again that much of existentialism, humanism, and (French) republicanism presuppose.

¹⁹ Camus, “Ni victimes ni bourreaux”, *Actuelles – Écrits politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 123. “. . . to create the conditions for a thinking this is just and a provisional agreement between humans who wish to be neither victims nor perpetrators” (my translation).

²⁰ Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013; the original German version was published under the title *Posthumanismus – Eine kritische Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009).

'unlearn' the very humanist gestures that keep returning precisely in those very moments when we start believing (hoping?) to have left them behind?

The least thing one could say about Camus' relationship to humanism – and this is what he shares with today's critical posthumanists – is that he was disappointed by it. He was disappointed by the Christian humanism of Kierkegaard or Mauriac, which, in the face of the 'human condition', through a kind of 'leap of faith', emphasises the 'humanity' of God in Christ and elevates human suffering into a form of divine selection and salvation. He was disappointed by the atheist humanism of existentialists like Sartre as well as that of Marxism even though he shared their premises, namely that the human (especially in inhuman, totalitarian, nihilistic times) is the greatest value in need of protection. However, he distanced himself from any human divinisation, including the idea of a Nietzschean Overman or any kind of political absolutism in the name of which humans may commit violence against other humans. The best way to describe Camus' very particular humanism is that it emphasises the importance of human solidarity in the face of evil and suffering without however compromising the notion of human freedom and dignity.

Camus' generation witnessed first-hand what the threat of nihilism means and how quickly political ideals can turn into nightmares. Camus' humanism is tragic, precisely, because it has gone through the experience of despair. As he said about his generation in his acceptance speech of the Nobel prize for literature in Stockholm in 1957: "They have had to forge for themselves an art of living through times of catastrophe, in order to be reborn, and then to fight openly against the death-instinct which is at work in our time."²¹ It is the experience of the absurd, evil, suffering, and death in this world that provokes the temptation of nihilism and that needs to be resisted by a humanist renewal expressed in revolt and solidarity. Camus looks to the life-affirming tradition in classical Greek philosophy and morality – a tradition he sees perpetuated in Mediterranean thought and nature – to accept the ambivalence of human existence. Humans are capable of as well as subject to the 'best' and the 'worst' and they are thus condemned to make choices in the absence of absolute knowledge. They are subject to both love and despair. In a world where innocent children are suffering and dying, the problem of theodicy (i.e. if God is good and just, why does he let evil happen to the innocent?) highlights the existential absurdity of the human condition. Camus, however, sees in this no justification for some kind of desperate faith (as exemplified in *The Plague* by the character of Father Paneloux) nor for a complicity with violence or a nihilist 'anything goes' attitude. The revolt Camus increasingly comes to advocate in his writings after his first cycle of works is born from the experience of the absurd and the resistance to it, the scorn that Sisyphus shows of his tragic fate imposed by the gods – and which is why, despite his suffering, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy".²² Therefore, the experience of the absurd presents some valuable notions for us to learn from. In other words, "from the apparently purely negative experience of the absurd itself", as John Cruickshank aptly summarises, there are "three values ultimately derived":

First, there is the individual's discovery of the part of himself which he holds to be important, which he identifies as his essence as a human being, in the name of which he confronts the absurdity of human existence – the value, we might say, of the individual human worth. Second, the individual shares with other men this worth which he discovers in himself and this fact leads him to a second value – a common human nature. Third, this value takes him directly

²¹ Cited in John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus – And the Literature of Revolt* (New York: Galaxy, 1960), x.

²² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 111.

to the idea of the bond which links all men in face of the absurd – the value of human solidarity.²³

The answer to this individual and collective revolt, however, cannot lie in some kind of religious or political community seeking ‘transcendence’ of the human condition. It needs to be achieved not ‘vertically’ but ‘horizontally’, so to speak, in the pursuit of happiness in this life and in the pursuit of (social) justice based on (human) solidarity.

Other critical questions arise at this stage regarding the legacy of Camus’ tragic humanism: In what sense, exactly, might Camus’ very specific take on humanism have survived the anti-humanist wave of poststructuralist theory that was to emerge shortly after Camus’ death in 1960? And, how to explain its continued attractiveness in ‘posthuman’ times? One of the most comprehensive contemporary reassessments of Camus’ life and work is the already mentioned *Camus, philosophe: To Return to Our Beginnings* by Matthew Sharpe (2015). As its subtitle indicates, Sharpe believes that Camus’ continued relevance lies in the way he reconnects modernity and humanism with its Greek origins. The ‘modern’ Camus is the one who, together with his entire generation, investigated the nihilistic ‘abyss’; the ‘pre- and postmodern’ Camus looks both ahead and back as an incorrigible humanist and moralist. It was his moralism in the face of absurdity, evil, and revolt which made him look completely *dépassé* shortly after his death, “in the heroic eras of structuralism and post-structuralism after 1960 in France, and the generations of the ‘theoretical turn’ influenced by these movements in the UK, US, Australia and globally”, as Sharpe explains.²⁴ However, it is precisely this moral affirmation (of the human, the world, nature etc.) in reaction to the absurd, suffering, injustice, and death – the core of his tragic humanism – which again seems to chime with certain aspects of contemporary posthumanist thinking. Sharpe provides a very colourful portrait of Camus’ Janus-faced reception which is worth quoting in full:

Camus’ divided reception bespeaks the singularity of Camus’ thought and writing as an author both Algerian *pied noir* and proudly republican; both Mediterranean and European; philosophically trained yet famed as a *litterateur*; deeply “of his times” yet drawn to ancient paradigms; a man of sentiment yet legate to “a certain kind of dry, plain, contemplative rationalism, which is typically French” [Sartre’s words]; a *résistant* moved by solidarity with the political struggles of his contemporaries, while longing for the solitary leisure characteristic of what less interesting times called the *vita contemplativa*; hedonist and humanist; a thinker inveterately sceptical of all totalising philosophical systems, yet an unfailing defender of the life of the mind; one of the first, most powerful critics of French barbarities in Algeria, yet unable to endorse complete French withdrawal from its colonial possession; a man of the Left, yet increasingly anti-Stalinist; a figure acutely moved by what one early essay names “the love of life”, but a love whose *envers* in all his writings is a nearly-tactile sense of the transience of things, the reality of senseless suffering, and the proximity of death.²⁵

Camus’ surviving appeal most probably lies in his struggle for ‘authenticity’ and the consciousness of his own ambivalence, as described by Sharpe above: the desire to be ‘himself’ all the while deeply ‘caring’ about others and humanity’s fate in general. This is what makes Camus the “last thinker of authenticity”, as Jacob Golomb claims; Camus understands his desire for unity and his need for clarity and coherence as an act of lucidity.²⁶ In a time when the human in the humanist sense is threatened

²³ Cruickshank, xvii.

²⁴ Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe*, 4.

²⁵ Sharpe, 5.

²⁶ Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995), 168-169; quoting Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus*, 45.

with disappearance – literally and conceptually – Camus’ tragic or desperate attempt to seek assurance for the human dignity guarantees a continued or a renewed desire to be (or to become) human, after all:

But I know that something in the world has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one. The world has at least the truth of man, and our task is to provide its justification against itself.²⁷

Camus’ cry of revolt remains a “fundamental expression of the universal, transcultural human desire for unity”, Sharpe claims.²⁸ In a world facing “ecological collapse, resource shortages, species extinctions, the superexploitation of the South, the liberal-plutocratic eclipse of democratic will-formation, the rise and rise of forms of state-based and extremist terrorism, and the growing of states’ security and surveillance apparati”, Camus’ is a “kind of measured, neoclassical naturalism and humane thinking that the world today cannot very much longer do without”.²⁹ Impossible, it seems, to argue with this, and yet...

Today’s Plague

Je tiens au monde par tous mes gestes, aux hommes par toute ma pitié et ma reconnaissance. Entre cet endroit et cet envers du monde, je ne veux pas choisir, je n’aime pas qu’on choisisse.³⁰

The Plague belongs to Camus’ second cycle of works which he named “The World of Tragedy and the Spirit of Revolt” and which followed on from the cycle of “The Absurd”, as Margaret Gray aptly summarizes it:³¹

In keeping with this cycle’s exploration of tragedy and revolt, *La Peste* chronicles the imprisonment, exile, oppression and suffering experienced by the citizens of Oran when plague strikes. Yet the novel also dramatizes the victory of human spirit and solidarity over that which would threaten and dismember it: a plague, an enemy occupation, existence itself.³²

However, *The Plague* is also a great drama of separation and solitude (the narrator, Doctor Rieux, is separated from his wife, Rambert is separated from the woman he loves, and virtually all inhabitants of Oran are brutally separated from their dead loved ones, not to speak of Camus’ own experience of exile during the war while writing the novel).³³ And yet, it is Rambert’s choice in favour of solidarity

²⁷ Camus, “Letters to a German Friend”, *Resistance, Rebellion, Death*, ed. and trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: The Modern Library, 1974), 28.

²⁸ Sharpe, *Camus, philosophe*, 49.

²⁹ Sharpe, 53.

³⁰ Camus, “L’Envers et l’endroit [The Wrong Side and the Right Side]”, *Oeuvres complètes d’Albert Camus* (Paris: Éd. Du Club de l’Honnête Homme, 1983), 155. “I care about the world in everything I do, I care about humans with all my compassion and gratitude. Between these two sides of the world I do not want to choose, I do not like that one chooses” (my translation).

³¹ Cf. Margaret E. Gray, “Layers of Meaning in *La Peste*”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, ed. Edward J. Hughes (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 165-177, for an excellent first overview.

³² Gray, 165.

³³ The ‘tragic’ dynamic in Camus’ work and his humanism are generally attributed or at least linked to Camus’ experience of exile as French-Algerian during Algeria’s occupation and subsequent movement towards independence. Cf. for example Lawrence D. Kritzman, “Camus’s Curious

over his own happiness that emblematises the victory of human spirit of revolt against the segregation and repression of the pandemic regime (i.e. the plague itself and the administrative reaction to it – both also meant as an allegory of France’s occupation by the Nazis and the existence of concentration camps). As Camus’ narrator claims, when it comes to plagues, “everybody is a humanist”,³⁴ in the face of its utter meaninglessness. It is the anonymity of death during a plague, the sheer arbitrariness in which it claims the lives of random individuals (including the most innocent ones), the de-individualisation of bodies buried in mass graves that makes an epidemic so absurd and which calls for solidarity and revolt (both in a metaphysical and political sense). It is the ‘banality of evil’ (of the plague, but also of the other epidemic that Camus allegorises in the novel, namely Nazi fascism, fanatical nihilism, and political or religious absolutism of any sort) that is most terrifying and dehumanising. It is that which calls for resistance in the knowledge that illness and death (just like the ‘rats’ carrying the pestilence *bacillus*) cannot ultimately be defeated (or, indeed, Camus’ life-long struggle with tuberculosis). Since there is no salvation outside of this world, it is this one life that counts and that needs affirmation. It is an affirmation, however, that is ultimately without hope because it will inevitably end in death and defeat. And it is a struggle that must be based on the recognition that an individual pursuit of happiness can only function through solidarity with others. “For human truth lies in accepting death without hope. Real courage means never to cheat. That double lesson is at the core of Camus’s major novel, *The Plague*”.³⁵ Even though it may be endless, the fight against suffering and the pursuit of immanent happiness is all the more important, since the ‘microbe’ (the *bacillus* of the plague) is constantly present *in* and *with* ‘us’. But so is the beauty of this world. Revolt is thus a question of “common decency [*honnêteté*]”, as Tarrou explains.³⁶

Arguably, the central scene of *The Plague* is the dialogue between Tarrou and Rieux, two friends united in their revolt against suffering, which contains all the central elements, values, moves, maybe ‘reflexes’ of a tragic and liberal humanism as the only credible answer to the absurdity of the human condition and the inhuman beauty of life. One could argue that Tarrou serves as a living example of conscious human sacrifice (as opposed to the unconscious, ‘gratuitous’ death of the innocent child, judge Othon’s son, which leads to a confrontation between Father Paneloux and the atheist, Doctor Rieux). Rieux is the helpless witness to Tarrou’s losing battle against the microbe, but as the narrator, he is also its prime moral ‘beneficiary’, the survivor to tell the tale. Tarrou is motivated – like every *homme révolté* – by a hatred of violence even if committed in the name of apparently good causes.³⁷ It is the ‘inner plague’, the “plague within [humans]”,³⁸ which is the reason that “[w]e must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody’s face and fasten the infection on him”.³⁹ “[T]he good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention”, in this scheme. Tarrou’s ‘lesson’ on the sacrificial logic of the (good, or at least less evil) human culminates in what is probably the best-known statement of the novel: “All I

Humanism or the Intellectual in Exile”, *Modern Language Notes* 112.4 (1997): 550-575; Tony Judt, “The Reluctant Moralist: Albert Camus and the Discomfort of Ambivalence”, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 87-135; and Ronald D. Srigley, *Albert Camus’ Critique of Modernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011).

³⁴ Camus, *The Plague*, 34.

³⁵ Victor Brombert, “Albert Camus, the Endless Defeat”, *Raritan* 31.1 (2011): 30.

³⁶ Camus, *The Plague*, 136.

³⁷ *The Plague*, 206-207.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences [*fléaux*] and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join force with the pestilences".⁴⁰

What Tarrou aspires to is being a "saint without God"⁴¹ and being even "less ambitious" (in terms of heroic humanism) than Rieux, who still aspires to being human: "What interests me is – being human [*être un homme*]"⁴² This may, indeed, be the hardest lesson to be administered to humans, as their ultimate 'sin of pride' is to aspire to 'humanity', when all they need to do is to perform their "*métier d'homme*".⁴³ In this sense, Tarrou's death, the ultimate defeat for the medical doctor unable to help the friend he loves and admires, is tragically cathartic. Tarrou's legacy is for Rieux, the witness, to tell – a tale (or chronicle) that is not heroic in the sense of a song of praise of human grandeur, but maybe heroic in a more stoic sense, of an unwinnable fight against "the spear-thrusts of the plague" striking his friend's "human form . . . consumed by searing superhuman fires".⁴⁴ And what, then, one may ask, is the lesson of such a tragic humanism? That "all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories". However, this is not a quietism; "Tarrou, perhaps, would have called that winning the match".⁴⁵

Rieux legitimates his role as the narrator (he only reveals himself as such once the events of the plague in Oran have been resolved, so to speak) in order to create and maintain the idea of a 'chronicle' – an objective, self-less account of an almost 'cosmic' battle (between good and evil), expressed in the mystifying sentence:

Summoned to give evidence regarding what was a sort of crime, he has exercised the restraint that behoves a conscientious witness. All the same, following the dictates of his heart, he has deliberately taken the victims' side and tried to share with his fellow-citizens the only certitudes they had in common – love, exile, and suffering. Thus he can truly say there was not one of their anxieties in which he did not share, no predicament of theirs that was not his.⁴⁶

In the (legal) case against the human brought on by the cosmic force of nature in the form of the microbe, "Dr Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favour of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; 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".⁴⁷ This cathartic and affirmative lesson – the degree zero of any humanism, namely that humans are and remain redeemable – remains a temporary achievement, however. It constitutes the radical 'openness' and ambivalence of the human-animal and it is, ultimately, what guarantees that the cosmic drama will continue. This is the knowledge and humility that the plague has administered to Camus' lone humanist survivor:

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Tarrou's statement inspired a number of post-Holocaust, post-totalitarian intellectuals and novelists, among them Elio Vittorini and his *Uomini e no* (1945) [translated as *Men and not men*] whose main message and sacrificial humanist logic states that the victim is always more human than the perpetrator. Cf. Elio Vittorini, *Men and not men*, trans. Sarah Henry (Marlboro, Vt: The Marlboro Press, 1985).

⁴¹ *The Plague*, 208.

⁴² *The Plague*, 209; translation modified.

⁴³ Camus, "Le Vent à Djemila", Noces, in *Oeuvres Complètes d'Albert Camus* (Paris: Éd. du Club de l'Honnête Homme, 1983), 170.

⁴⁴ *The Plague*, 235.

⁴⁵ *The Plague*, 237.

⁴⁶ *The Plague*, 246.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightenment of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city.⁴⁸

In other words, it gives rise to tragic 'nostalgia' and the insight that "through suffering comes knowledge".⁴⁹

Yearning for the human in inhuman or posthuman times is a desire that drives any humanism. Posthumanist suffering today involves a recognition that the tragic anthropocentrism of Camus cannot be ignored but also that the principle of solidarity that humanism proposes has proven to be insufficient. Camus was certainly deeply aware of the beauty and inhumanity of nature in his keenly felt, exilic attachment to the Algerian landscape of his youth. However, the realm of the nonhuman (nature, 'the animal', the alien and absent god) remains 'other' in its indifference. And in its indifference or ambivalence, it also remains a challenge or task. What separates a posthumanist understanding from existentialism, ultimately, is the awareness of an inextricable entanglement between humans and nonhumans (between nature and culture, between human and nonhuman animals, life and death, bodies, and technics...). It is this new non/human (or more-than-human) condition, which does not so much invalidate the tragic humanist desire for meaning but extends it, that calls for affirmation and solidarity today. It is an extension of Camus' life-affirmation 'beyond' the human, accommodating, living-with the nonhuman, including the 'microbe' (*bacillus*, virus...) and an extension of solidarity to nonhumans.⁵⁰ The posthuman communities of ecological entanglement should see Camus' ethical and political struggle for happiness and social justice in the face of 'absurdity' despite all its shortcomings and weaknesses not as irrelevant or opposed but as complementary to the search for new ecological forms of multi-species justice. After all, to transform nihilism from passive despair into a way of revolting against the death drive at work in the Anthropocene is still very much at the heart of contemporary climate concern. However, there will not be much time left to regret the downfall of the tragic human and 'his' condition. 'He' will need to be told to get a grip. While there is no harm in believing that there is (still) more things to admire than to despise in humans (or nature for that matter), the human can no longer remain a semi-detached 'stranger' to this world. Tragedy's catharsis and the cultivation of 'moral excellence', today, lie outside anthropocentrism.

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⁴⁸ *The Plague*, 252.

⁴⁹ Cf. Robert Zaretsky, "The Tragic Nostalgia of Albert Camus", *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 39.3 (2013): 67.

⁵⁰ Cf. My "Microbes", in *Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, eds. Lynn Turner et al. (Edinburgh: EUP, 2017), 354-366.

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