5 Yearning for the Human in Posthuman Times – On Albert Camus's Tragic Humanism

> Inasmuch as few epochs require as much as ours that one should be equal to the best as to the worst, I should like, indeed, to shirk nothing and to keep faithfully a double memory (…). There is this will to live without rejecting anything of life, which is the virtue I honor most in this world.[1]

> Il est à craindre que l'humanisme ne soit plus aujourd'hui qu'une référence littéraire et historique commode pour nous assurer de notre bonne conscience.[2]

> 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.[3]

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. At the same time it was becoming increasingly clear that economic interests were on a collision course with a humanitarian ethics of care and a weighing-up process had already begun that pitched the loss of human life to the virus against the loss of human life due to poverty as a result of a global economic and social lockdown. One could easily see the positioning process that was occurring in political circles ready to benefit once the crisis was over or at least relenting. Environmentalists (and advocates of 'degrowth') have been seeing the fall in economic activity and the decrease in carbon emissions and the temporary recovery of cities from air pollution in times of emptied streets as a sort of vindication of their protest 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 you could see other ways of inflecting the pandemic: 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 have been able to throw vast amounts of money at the Corona crisis fall-out and at the development of a vaccine. So, it is not difficult to see how economists – after a due check on some global strategies that have proven exaggerated and unhelpful (e.g. just-in-time no-stock transnational production lines) – are wanting to return to wealth generation with a vengeance to make up for the huge losses and deficits that have built up in the past years, especially since the pandemic has now given way to a return to a

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[1] Albert Camus, "Return to Tipasa", *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1987), pp. 169-170.

[2] Jean-François Mattéi, "La crise de l'humanisme contemporain", in: Jean-Marc Aveline, ed., *Humanismes et religions: Albert Camus et Paul Ricoeur* (Münster: LIT, 2014), p. 36. It is to be feared that humanism today is merely a literary and historical reference point that remains convenient in assuring us of our good conscience (my translation).

[3] Albert Camus, *The Plague* [1947], trans. Stuart Gilbert (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 207. Further references will be given in the text as *P*.

forced attention to international conflict in both Ukraine and Palestine (not to mention the numerous more 'local' wars around the world that had to be repressed while the global media attention focused on the crisis 'at hand').

Science also has done quite well out of the pandemic. Scientists have been making a comeback as public intellectuals and as the main source of prop-ups for stringent and often anti-constitutional and extremely unpopular, illiberal, political action. After decades of a steady global rise of populism, experts (at least some iconic ones) are back in the national and global media. The pandemic was also an opportune moment to look at the role of social media and the importance of a (national, European, international, global) public sphere, and once again it has become clear to what extent bogey advice and fake news have been shared as easily and virally as the virus itself through Facebook, YouTube, Twitter etc. and thus have indirectly contributed to the global death toll. And another community has been capitalising on the 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 so-called 'transhumanists' for whom pandemics (apart from asteroids, catastrophic climate change but also future wars) are global risks of extinction that need to be countered with the right political and technological consensus to overcome this frustratingly disappointing 'human condition', this less than perfect 'mortal frame' of ours. In their eyes, it is almost a 'moral obligation' to technologically and thus ethically enhance ourselves and 'transcend' our current limits by extracting ourselves from 'nature' and its viruses.[4]

Given this explosive mix of antagonistic and opportunistic discourses it always was unlikely that the world after Corona would be in any way a better place. There have been 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 have been encouraging 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, a global 'rolling-up of sleeves' – all in the face of new military conflict and ever more pressing climate concerns. What there has of course not been much time for, however, is critical reflection of an existential, or ontological kind. Who is now still having 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, or war, or climate change?

In short, the pandemic and its aftermath has brought pandemonium to the globalised neoliberal capitalist world order and to liberal humanism alike. The result, one could say, is a state of 'pandemonics'. Pandemonium, as the *OED online* explains, refers to the "abode of all

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[4] A fairly representative view on the "dangers for the world after (COVID-19)" appeared in a number of new magazines and manifestos explaining the new world scenario. There was for example *Le Spectacle du monde* 2 (Autumn 2020) that identified the pandemic, transhumanism and demography (i.e. overpopulation) as the main global challenges. The collective authors of the *Second manifeste convivialste* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2020) argued for a 'post-neoliberal' world that should be ecologically responsible, for degrowth (*décroissance*) and for a post-market oriented (*démarchandisation*) post-globalisation (*déglobalisation*), and against technoscientific *hubris*.

demons; hell, the infernal regions". It also means "a centre of vice and wickedness; a haunt of evil", and, "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 be 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 has become the *daimon*, in the form of global overpopulation, for example. 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 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".[5] And there is 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".[6] Ruxin's call for a (not entirely disinterested) 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 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".[7] And they did not fail to do so, of course, even though some bank accounts have actually grown as a result.

While these two visions, contracting pandemic and pandemonium, are thoroughly materialist and secular, one might say, I am equally interested in the metaphysical, 'religious' connotations of pandemonium because they are connected to what I find most striking about the co-implication of a sanitary and a civilisational crisis in the way many commentators seem to have instrumentalised COVID-19, from the variety of angles outlined above. 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 apocalyptism by saying "Nous [i.e. Western capitalist 'man', I assume] sommes devenus des virus pour la planète".[8]

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[5] James O'Brien, "Pandemic Pandemonium", *Industry Today* 11.1 (2016), available online at: industrytoday.com/pandemic-pandemonium/; last accessed 12/12/2023.
[6] Josh N. Ruxin, "Pandemic Pandemonium", *The National Interest* 96 (2008): 26.
[7] Ruxin, pp. 27-28.
[8] Philippe Descola, "Nous sommes devenus des virus pour la planète – entretien", *Le Monde* 21-22 May (2020) : 27.

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 to 'our' (i.e. 'Mr. Anderson's') face. 'Viral' thinking or information going 'viral' have now been central metaphors for digitalisation for a while. 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 high-visibility thinkers used 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 'optimisation' of humans, the 'ecosystem planet' – it might be worth 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, including of course any 'posthumanist' attempt to escape them. This double human 'nature', the best and the worst, this *psychomachia* (the fight between good and evil, forcing the individual to make the 'right' choice), is at the heart of 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, dilemma, etc.). 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 could be seen everywhere at work, again or still, during the COVID-19 global crisis. It is a well-rehearsed human gut reaction 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 ('humanists', in the old philological sense, basically), after the onset of the pandemic, reached back on their analogue or digital bookshelves to pull out their Foucault volumes. Others 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 led to a critique or a genealogy of the disciplinary apparatuses, the politics of power and administration and the scopic regimes put in place to create human 'subjects' and 'docile bodes'. The Camusian route emphasised the metaphysical revolt of this human 'subject' in the face of absurd suffering and his (mostly his) attempt to overcome it in solidarity and love.[9] What follows below, however, is not meant as another such contribution to literary criticism. It is not a valorisation of the greatness of Camus's work, which is in fact difficult to

[9] In fact, the two routes can be found in Camus's work as well. Camus' play, *État de siège*, one might argue is much more focused and the administrative power shift, the aspect of 'governmentality', while his novel, *The Plague*, focuses on the drama of 'separation' from a more strictly humanist and tragic angle as 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's *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), pp. 91-373.

classify, 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 have been designating as 'critical' (CPH) – 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, out of something else; something that is often forgotten in the breathless race towards who is most serious about 'postanthropocentrism'. Something that is the motivation of why one should engage with a thinking that is so arcane and complicated as 'posthumanism' (or 'postanthropocentrism') in the first place, namely its ongoing critique if humanism, the desire to understand what *went* wrong, and what (still) *is* wrong, with our most cherished values and self-understandings and whether this is really just a Western 'problem' of troubled and melancholic self-searching souls. These are questions that not only concern what it *is* but also what it *means* to be human, or what a *good* life is and which way *evil* lies. This posthumanism of a more critical in the sense of genealogical kind is not nostalgic, or only a little in tone maybe 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 either, 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 (and other crises since) has taken 'us', and might take 'us' still. 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 maybe, or 'our' most insistent repressions.

From the Absurd to Revolt

> [O]ne cannot help but be struck by the ethical force of Camus's works.[10]

Albert Camus's *The Plague* is without doubt still the most obvious modern literary reference for a humanist scenario playing itself out in the context of an epidemic. It emplots the (originally gnostic) 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.[11] It is through witnessing and

[10] David Sherman, *Camus* (Chichester: Wiley & Sons, 2009), p. 7.

[11] On the question of gnosticism and theodicy in connection with Camus see Josephine Donovan's study *Gnosticism in Modern Literature: A Study of the Selected Works of Camus, Sartre, Hesse, and Kafka* (New York: Garland: 1990). See also Matthew Sharpe's more recent "The Black Side of the Sun: Camus, Theology, and the Problem of Evil", Political Theology 15.2 (2014): 151-174. It is worth remembering that Camus completed his studies with a thesis on "Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme", in: *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. I (1931-1944) (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), pp. 999-1081 containing a chapter on the gnostics.

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 *révolte*. Out of the experience of absurdity arises the need to act, and thus to embark on a quest for a better, more human, world. Arguably, most of 'us' have internalised this story in some form; it is therefore almost impossible not to somehow 'believe' in it; it seems without alternative. It is the age-old yearning for transcendence that drives it, whether this yearning is instrumentalised in the form of technological development, the idea of social progress, or the morality of human perfectibility, from Christian notions of resurrection to Nietzsche's overman to transhumanist prophesies 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 *post*- and, even more likely, *trans*humanists who have been arguing for a technical fix to human suffering for a long time to distance themselves from such a seemingly reactionary and moralistic move that seems stuck in a 'can't do' or 'can't chaange' attitude as far as the 'human condition' is concerned. There have certainly been conservative motivations in rereading *La Peste* where, on some occasions, it was framed as an example of how to retain one's humanity in the face of suffering, as an answer to a "yearning for ordinary humanity and good sense",[12] a call for "decency and fidelity" and the need to "hold on to our humanity" in the face of the "*fléau*", or "evil" by way of "vigilance".[13] But there were also much more nuanced reminders, especially the one by Jacqueline Rose.[14] Rose reminded 'us' of the complexity of Camus's 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, 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 put 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's complicated positioning as a *pied-noir*, a French-Algerian, in connection with colonial and postcolonial politics, and thus the problematic relationship between (post)humanism and (post)colonialism more generally, as well as the low visibility and subservient, accessory role of women in Camus's 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". This is a statement that encapsulates the entire posthumanist

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[12] 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 12/12/2023.

[13] 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-camus-the-plague-and-coronavirus; last accessed 31/05/2020.

[14] 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 12/12/2023.

problematic in that it may be precisely this arch-humanist consensus that is no longer tenable or even desirable or, at least, that has become suspicious. And one way, precisely, in which it has become suspicious, from a feminist point of view, 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) will agree. It is all thus still to decide or to 'play for', as Rose says, and "so much to be done".[15]

Camus's work is often described – based on his own classification of it into different 'cycles' – by a development "from absurdity to revolt".[16] Absurdity arises out the fact that after (Nietzsche's) 'death of God' the human finds him- or herself 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 a loss of dignity. An absurd life is a life where everything is permitted but nothing makes sense in the only 'safe' knowledge 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 for a revolt against this very absurdity and denies its nihilistic conclusion. The challenge is thus to accept life's absurdity and derive positive and constructive values and a limited notion of freedom out of this collective nihilistic depression.[17] However, this affirmative new humanism must refrain from seeking new transcendental values outside of the human. It is purely immanent in its radical anthropocentrism, however, not in a materialist, mercantile or capitalist sense, which seeks the significance of life in the accumulation of wealth or consumption, but in close connection with nature. However, this is not to be confused with a romanticised ecological notion in Camus's case for whom nature is utterly ambivalent in its 'inhumanity'. 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 obtain solidarity. The individual experience of absurdity leads to consciousness and to metaphysical revolt, out of which arises the experience of community in suffering and which, 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 from 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".[18] The experience of absurdity should lead to lucidity and to an affirmation of life despite all. In this sense, "living is keeping the

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[15] Martin Crowley also points out the 'masculinist bias' in Camus' "particular version of humanism, in which virility and fraternity are often key values"; cf. Martin Crowley, "Camus and Social Justice", in: Edward J. Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 93.

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

[17] This is the main message of Camus's "Lettres à un ami allemand", in: *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II (1944-1948) (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), pp. 1-29.

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

absurd alive".[19] The "divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints" should lead to a "nostalgia for unity" and coherence.[20] Suicide, self-annihilation, withdrawal, acceptance, all amount to a betrayal of the injunction to pursue happiness in the face of evil. This is also the main message of *The Plague* – to be resolutely on the side of the victims while putting up a fight against evil without delusion, accepting absurdity without becoming complicit with or even 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 an utopian desire without illusion – on which all remaining human dignity relies – al in the hope of human freedom. This yearning manifests itself in the individual's endeavour to overcome 'his' alienation and thus to show 'fraternity' and create solidarity with the victims (of persecution, of cruelty, absurdity).[21] 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. 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, it is a worldview that is also increasingly becoming a threat for the planet and nonhuman, as well as human, survival. Hence the urgent need for a shift towards a *critical* posthumanism understood as the ongoing critique and deconstruction of humanism.

Tragic Humanism and The Plague

> [C]réer les conditions d'une pensée juste et d'un accord provisoire entre les hommes qui ne veulent être ni des victimes ni des bourreaux.[22]

In *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*,[23] 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, and especially in moments of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. But why, indeed, should this be a surprise? Humanism is humanity's greatest (and most dangerous) achievement – itself an ideology, a set of values, a worldview

[19] *Ibid*., p. 53.
[20] *Ibid.*, 50.
[21] It is worth pointing out the tacit 'masculinist' (or at least paternalistic) consensus that much of existentialism, humanism and (French) republicanism presupposes.
[22] Camus, "Ni victimes ni bourreaux", *Actuelles – Écrits politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 123. [T]o 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).
[23] 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).

that is now increasingly turning against ‘us’, 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 also: what to do about ‘us’? How may reading Camus (still) help in this situation which seems irresolvable? How to learn to mistrust and avoid the very humanist gestures that keep returning precisely at the moment one starts believing (hoping?) to have left them behind?

The least one could say about Camus’s 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 a Kierkegaard or a Mauriac, which, in the face of the ‘human condition’ through a kind of ‘leap of faith’ emphasised the ‘humanity’ of God in Christ and elevated human suffering into a form of divine selection and salvation. He was disappointed by the atheist humanism of existentialists like Sartre, as well as by that of Marxism, even though he shared their premise that ‘human(e)ness’ (especially in inhuman, totalitarian, nihilistic times) remains the greatest value in need of protection. However, he distanced himself of any human ‘divinisation’, the idea of a Nietzschean ‘overman’, or any kind of political absolutism in the name of which humans may continue to commit violence against other humans. The best way to describe Camus’s very particular humanism is by emphasising the importance of finding a moral response to the evil of human suffering through an emphasis on human solidarity without, however, compromising human freedom and dignity.

Camus’s generation witnessed first-hand what the threat of nihilism means and how quickly political ideals can turn into nightmares. Camus’s humanism is tragic, because, precisely, 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.[24]

It is the experience of the absurd, evil, suffering and death in this world that provokes the temptation of nihilism 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 choose between them in the absence of absolute knowledge. They are subject both to love and despair. In a world where innocent children are suffering and dying (for example, from epidemics like the plague, or war, or climate change) the problem of theodicy (i.e. if God is ‘good’ and ‘just’, why does he let evil happen to the obviously ‘innocent’?) highlights the existential absurdity of the human condition. Camus, however, sees in this no justification for some kind of desperate faith (as Father Paneloux advocates in *The Plague*) nor for a nihilist ‘anything goes’, or indeed, a complicity with violence. The revolt Camus increasingly comes to advocate in his writings after

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

his first cycle of works is born from the experience of this 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'. John Cruickshank aptly summarises the "three values ultimately derived from the apparently purely negative experience of the absurd itself":

> 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 to the idea of the bond which links all men in face of the absurd – the value of human solidarity.[25]

The answer to this individual and collective revolt (which Camus expresses in a transformation of Descartes's *cogito* – I rebel, therefore we are), however, cannot lie in some kind of religious or political community seeking 'transcendence'. 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.

If one accepts this sketch of Camus's very specific 'take' on humanism (which, as I would argue, however, has become widely influential and constitutes one of the 'go-to' value systems whenever 'the West' is confronted with a crisis, or is reminded of the 'evil' of human suffering, injustice, or a lack of solidarity when faced with a shared 'human condition') it will be beneficial to look at how this Camusian 'system' of values has fared and maybe developed over time – in particular, from Camus's untimely death in 1960 and the emerging 'anti-humanism' of the decade that followed it, up to today, with the emergence and acceptance of various strands of 'posthumanism'. In this chapter I will of course only be able to provide a very selective and sketchy picture.

Paul de Man in a brief article in 1965 commenting on the English translation of Camus's *Notebooks* noticed the "subtle change that separates the intellectual atmosphere of the fifties from that of the sixties", and that can be "measured by one's attitude toward the work and the person of Albert Camus".[26] De Man discovered a "deliberate, controlled style (...) behind a pseudoconfessional tone that serves to obscure, rather than to reveal, his true self" in the *Notebooks,* revealing an "irresolute man" lamenting a solitude that is "most of all an estrangement from what he considers his authentic former self".[27] "The more he gets involved with others, with social issues and public forms of thought and action, the more he feels a loss of contact with his true being".[28] What De Man derives from this very selective reading mostly based on Camus's first, absurdist, cycle, becomes one of the cornerstones of antihumanist critique, namely the decentring of the liberal humanist (individual) self:

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[25] Cruickshank, xvii.
[26] Paul de Man, "The Mask of Albert Camus (1965)", in: *Critical Writings, 1953-1978*, ed. Lindsey Waters (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 145.
[27] *Ibid*., pp. 145-146.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 148.

> There never is any doubt in [Camus's] mind that the source of all values resides in the individual, in his ability to resist the monstrous encroachments that history makes upon his integrity. And for Camus this integrity, which he strove to shelter from totalitarian and deterministic forms of thought, is founded in man's capacity for personal happiness.[29]

The authenticity of this 'self' that Camus derives from his experience of his Algerian-Mediterranean youth is founded on an intimate bond with nature for which the awareness of 'others' is an interruption of a sacred moment of unity. De Man specifically refers to a pre-absurdist piece in *Noces* where Camus writes, in 1937, of a harmony between the self 'without humanity' and nature 'without man' – both *topoi* that have become the preoccupation of current posthumanist *ecological* worldviews:

> The great truth the world patiently teaches us is that heart and mind are nothing. And that the stone warmed by the sun, or the cypress magnified by the blue of heaven are the limits of the only world in which being right has a meaning: nature without man (…). It is in that sense that I understand the word 'nakedness' [*dénuement*]. 'To be naked' always contains a suggestion of physical freedom and I would eagerly convert myself to this harmony between hand and flower, to this sensuous alliance between the earth and man freed from humanity if it were not already my religion.[30]

Camus' early 'religion' – a very pagan, maybe vaguely pantheist one, based mostly on Greek naturalism, Neoplatonism and a gnostic disposition – is not only the most fundamental source of his own and somewhat contradictory humanism ('without' humanity, it seems). It is what anchors him in his experience as French-Algerian *pied noir*, as a member of the *petit colons* and his upbringing in utter poverty but 'blessed' by a natural environment bathed in the light and warmth of the Mediterranean sun. Even though De Man was writing his damning piece on Camus in 1965, five years after Camus's death, in the middle of the period of decolonisation and the Algerian War of independence from France, he does not refer to Camus's own personal tragic experience of exile from what he always considered his 'home' (i.e. French Algeria). Instead De Man criticises Camus for his nostalgic and 'antimodern' stance which he, curiously, links to his 'goalkeeper's' mindset:

> The melancholy that reigns in the *Notebooks* reminds one of Camus's youthful sadness on the soccer field: too solitary to join the others up front, but not solitary enough to forego being a member of the team, he chose to be the goalkeeper of a society that was in the process of suffering a particularly painful historical defeat. One could hardly expect someone in that difficult position to give a lucid account of the game.[31]

This critique, with the benefit of hindsight, is of course particularly 'rich' from someone who, very much unlike Camus, was on the side of the Nazi collaborators rather than the resistance. And whatever one might think of goalkeepers and their role they always ultimately tend to receive the blame for defeat and their mistakes are usually very costly. Their experience of

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[29] *Ibid*.

[30] Camus, *Noces* [1937] suivi de *L'été* (Paris : Gallimard, 1959); quoted and translated in De Man, The Mask of Albert Camus", p. 149.

[31] De Man, "The Mask of Albert Camus", p. 152.

the sociality of the 'game' is certainly different from that of field players but to castigate them for a lack of 'solidarity' clearly goes too far. De Man here seems to be wilfully silencing Camus's political role as influential post-War intellectual and also his (unsuccessful) attempts to mediate in the struggle for Algerian independence between advocates for an all Muslim state and a secular and cosmopolitan republic with some French influence maintained.

Raymond Williams, one year later, in 1966, is much more sympathetic to Camus's (and Sartre's) "tragic despair and revolt". In his study of modern tragedy Williams uses Camus to demonstrate what he as a Marxist and cultural materialist sees as the necessary "transition from a liberal to a social humanism".[32] He singles out Camus as a "writer and humanist [who] put all his strength into going beyond that point at which humanism is supposed to break down into despair".[33] Williams sees Meursault, Camus's 'stranger',[34] as a tragic figure who has lost connections with others and thus with social reality while retaining an intense awareness of himself in other respects. He is emblematic of the absurdity of modern alienation. The tragic conclusion that Williams derives from Meursault's (as well as from Caligula's misanthropy)[35] is that the 'inner freedom' of the individual, the consciousness of the absurdity of this world, cannot be experienced as freedom if it is against other people/without others, which he sees as a justification, for Camus, to replace "liberal humanism" with "tragic humanism".[36] The main problem for Williams lies in Camus' extrapolation from individual to collective experience, however. He refers to a central and "honest ambiguity" in Camus' work which "recognizes the sources of this [tragic, human] condition in particular circumstances, and yet also asserts that it is absolute".[37]

> For any man, his own particular condition is absolute. To argue otherwise is to reject actual men. Yet the assertion of an absolute condition as *common* is something else again. We have to ask how much rhetoric, how much lying rhetoric, is involved in that almost unnoticeable transition, under the power of art, from absolute to common.[38]

Williams, one of the fathers of cultural studies, here criticises Camus – and liberal humanism more generally – for his ideological-aesthetic move, from the absolutisation of individual experience to a social politics based on commonality, or in other words, he demythologises the surreptitious move that every humanism has to make, namely deriving a shared from an individual experience by universalising it. In doing so, humanism elides difference which it represses through the "power of representation" (i.e. "lying rhetoric", or the "power of art"), again encapsulated, for Williams, in Camus's neo-Cartesian move from absurdity to revolt: "I *rebel*, therefore we *exist*".[39] Similarly, Camus's *The Plague* is characterised by "a common process of collective suffering" and a "condition of common exile" which, in the case of Doctor

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[32] Raymond Williams, "Tragic Despair and Revolt: Camus, Sartre", *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 174.
[33] *Ibid*., p. 176.
[34] Camus, *L'Étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942).
[35] Camus, *Caligula* [1942] suivi de *Le malentendu* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1958).
[36] Williams, "Tragic Despair and Revolt", p. 178.
[37] *Ibid*., p. 179.
[38] *Ibid*., p. 181.
[39] *Ibid*.

Rieux, the narrator, brings out the ultimate conviction that "there are more things to admire in men than to despise".[40] This is the fundamental belief of an 'insistent humanism' that refuses to give in to despair and is committed to 'healing' in the face of a 'tragic condition' against which the revolt is made and which informs Camus's view of justice. It is a view that suffering and violence are as inevitable as they are unjustifiable.

Where Williams departs from Camus (and where he seems to prefer Camus's contemporary critics, especially Sartre) is his tendency towards metaphysical a-historicism (something that Roland Barthes also famously reproached Camus with in his review of *The Plague*). As a cultural materialist, Williams finds Camus's metaphysical transcendence of historical action to promote a "sense of history outside history", "disturbing":

> For the reality we have to face in the end is that while history is an abstraction it is still an abstraction from the actual lives of ourselves and others. There is a point at which the refusal of history, the limitation of significance to the personally known and affirmed, becomes in effect the refusal of others, and this also can be evasion and even complicity.[41]

From a Marxist, material and historicist point of view one could say (with Sartre, endorsed by Williams) that "Camus was ostensibly in revolt against historical suffering, he was less concerned to end this than to find a personally satisfying position: a metaphysical revolt against eternal injustice".[42] Williams ultimately locates an underlying 'problem' in existentialism's ambivalent attitude towards nature (as either matter to be dominated or indifferent, resistant, inhuman(e)) and concludes that what is absent in Camus is that "there is no sense of common process or common life, and this, itself an analogue of individualism, leads inevitably to despair".[43] Williams nevertheless ultimately underwrites Camus's tragic humanism as the modern world view that is or at least was the most adequate diagnosis of his time (i.e. the 1950s and 60s). But the question for him remains as to "whether this is really as far as we can go, whether under the weight of a common suffering this is our own last word".[44]

Jumping from these two early assessments to more contemporary readings 'after (antihumanist, postructuralist) theory', so to speak: one of the most comprehensive contemporary reassessments of Camus's life and work can be found in the already cited *Camus, philosophe: To Return to Our Beginnings* by Matthew Sharpe (2015). As its subtitle indicates, Sharpe believes that Camus's 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 looked into 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

[40] *Ibid*., p. 182.
[41] *Ibid*., p. 184.
[42] *Ibid*.
[43] *Ibid*., p. 189.
[44] *Ibid*.

the generations of the 'theoretical turn' influenced by these movements in the UK, US, Australia and globally", as Sharpe explains.[45] 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's janus-faced reception which is worth quoting at length:

> 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 legatee 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.[46]

It is worth reminding at this stage that my aim in this chapter is not the same as Sharpe's. Even though it is difficult not to admire Camus as a 'great writer' and a 'great man', two very humanist reactions indeed, always disputable and calling for relativisation, the objective here is to use Camus's as a representative 'position' – a cultural option, so to speak, namely that of a 'tragic humanism' in the face of adversity and crisis, which remains a tempting route to follow whenever faced with apocalypse, extinction and crises like a global pandemic etc. It is precisely because Camus is such a strong defender of 'liberal values' like individual freedom, social justice, pluralism and dialogue, democratic republicanism, the rule of law and so on in the very face of catastrophe, that his 'tragic humanism' again can appear attractive to many, who are always willing to return to and affirm liberal humanist values and even hoping to extend them in the face of adversity. And it is precisely this desire to reconnect with these values (while never really having disconnected from them) that needs to be investigated by CPH, now, again. Why do these values retain their strong attraction when we know that the hope and the universal appeal they offer have such a bad track record in learning from their own mistakes, their exclusions, their nostalgia, their *ressentiments*, as Nietzsche would say?

The appeal most probably lies in Camus's 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. As Jacob Golomb writes, Camus is the "last thinker of authenticity", who by an "act of lucidity" understands his "desire for

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[45] Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe*, p. 4.
[46] *Ibid*., p. 5.

unity" and his "need for clarity and coherence".[47] In a time when the human in the humanist sense is threatened with disappearance – literally and conceptually – Camus's tragic or desperate attempt to seek assurance for the human gains a renewed *grandeur* in the 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.[48]

Camus's cry of revolt remains a "fundamental expression of the universal, transcultural human desire for unity", Sharpe claims.[49] 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's is a "kind of measured, neoclassical naturalism and humane thinking that the world today cannot very much longer do without".[50] 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.[51]

The Plague belongs to Camus's 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".[52]

> 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.[53]

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[47] Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 168-169; quoting Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 45.

[48] Camus, "Letters to a German Friend", *Resistance, Rebellion, Death*, ed. and trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: The Modern Library, 1974), p. 28; quoted in Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe*, p. 48.

[49] Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe*, p. 49.

[50] *Ibid*., p. 58.

[51] Camus, "L'Envers et l'endroit [The Wrong Side and the Right Side]", in: *Oeuvres complètes d'Albert Camus* (Paris: Éd. Du Club de l'Honnête Homme, 1983), p. 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).

[52] Cf. Margaret E. Gray, "Layers of Meaning in *La Peste*", in: Edward J. Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 165-177, for an excellent first overview.

[53] *Ibid*., p. 165.

However, it 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's own experience of exile during the war while writing the novel).[54] However, it is Rambert's choice in favour of solidarity 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). Camus writes that when it comes to plagues, "everybody is a humanist" (*P* 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 (or, as seen during COVID-19, stored in refrigeration lorries) 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 virus 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 like illness and death (and the 'rats' carrying the pestilence bacillus) cannot ultimately be defeated (just like Camus's 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 ultimately is without hope in that 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*".[55] The fight against suffering and the pursuit of immanent happiness is all the more important, even while being endless, since the 'microbe' (the bacillus of the plague, the virus) is constantly present *in* and *with* 'us' and so is the beauty of this world. It is a question of "common decency [*honnêteté*]", as Tarrou explains (P, 136).[56]

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[54] The 'tragic' dynamic in Camus's work and his humanism is generally attributed or at least linked to Camus's experience of exile as French-Algerian during Algeria's occupation and its subsequent movement towards independence. Cf. for example Lawrence D. Kritzman, "Camus's Curious 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).

[55] Victor Brombert, "Albert Camus, the Endless Defeat", *Raritan* 31.1 (2011): 30.

[56] This is also the starting point of what is called the 'new biology' which sees the role of viruses and microbes more generally as necessary and as pre-existential in evolutionary terms. For a more detailed analysis of the 'microbial turn' in biology and posthumanism see my "Microbes", in: Lynn Turner et al., eds., *Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 354-366. Ref to chapter included in volume here. Ed Cohen's work, in particular, spells out the autoimmunitarian logic behind 'viral containment': "the reason we (i.e. humans) want to contain such diseases is precisely because we (i.e. living organisms) already contain them". Ed Cohen, "The Paradoxical Politics of Viral Containment; or, How Scale Undoes Us One and All", *Social Text* 29.1 (2011): 15. On the connection of 'zoonotic diseases' and the 'microbiome' in a posthumanist context

Arguably, the central scene of *La Peste* is the dialogue between Tarrou and Rieux, two friends united in their revolt against suffering, which contains all the central elements, values, moves, maybe also '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, innocent 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':

> As time went on I merely learned that even those who were better than the rest could not keep themselves nowadays from killing or letting others kill, because such is the logic by which they live; and that we can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody. Yes, I've been ashamed ever since; I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace. And to-day I am still trying to find it; still trying to understand all those others and not to be the mortal enemy of anyone. I only know that one must do what one can to cease being plague-stricken, and that 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. (*P*, 206-207)

It is the 'inner plague', the "plague within [man]" (*P*, 207), 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" (*P*, 207). "[T]he good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention" (*P*, 207), 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 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" (*P*, 207).[57]

What Tarrou aspires to is to being a "saint without God" (*P*, 208) and to be even 'less ambitious' (in terms of heroic humanism) than Rieux, who still aspires to be 'human': "What interests me is – being human [*être un homme*]", Rieux says (P, 209; translation modified). This may, indeed, be the hardest lesson to be administered to humans, namely that their ultimate 'sin of pride' is to aspire to 'humanity', when all they need to do is to perform their "*métier d'homme*".[58] In this sense, Tarrou's death, the ultimate defeat for the medical doctor

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see also Alan and Josephine Smart, *Posthumanism: Anthropological Insights* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2017), chapter 2 (pp. 17-42).

[57] 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 the perpetrator. Cf. Elio Vittorini, *Men and not men*, trans. Sarah Henry (Marlboro, Vt: The Marlboro Press, 1985). Ref to chapter on Vittorini here.

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

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" (*P*, 235). And what, then, is the lesson of 'tragic humanism'?, one might ask. That "all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories" (*P*, 237). This is not quietism, however, "Tarrou, perhaps, would have called that winning the match" (*P*, 237).

Rieux legitimates his role as narrator (he only reveals himself 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' – i.e. 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. (*P*, 246)

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" (*P*, 246).

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 (cf. Agamben); 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's humanist:

> 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. (*P*, 252)

It gives rise to the 'tragic nostalgia' and the insight that "through suffering comes knowledge".[59]

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

Yearning for the human in inhuman or posthuman times is a desire that drives any humanism. *Post*human 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 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 a task. What separates a posthumanist understanding from existentialism, ultimately, is the awareness of the inextricable entanglement between humans and nonhumans (between nature and culture, between human and nonhuman animals, life and death, bodies and technics, etc.). It is this new 'non/human' condition and the new forms of solidarity it calls for, which does not so much invalidate the tragic humanist desire for meaning but extends it, or that calls for affirmation and non/human solidarities today. It is an extension of Camus's life affirmation 'beyond' the human, accommodating, living-with the nonhuman, including the 'virus' and an extension of solidarity to nonhumans. The posthuman communities of ecological entanglement should see Camus's 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 protest movements. 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.