



# Building Hope and Solidarity: Camus and Derrida

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Pandemics, epidemics, and plagues are generally subjects of religious or medical discussions. God/s or fate is believed to be the cause and medical practitioners and scientists are believed to be the seekers of solutions to liberate the world of devastating illnesses. Dominated by the scientific approach to pandemics, what seldom finds place in discussions is the existential experience of death, suffering, isolation, and exile simultaneous with experiences of heroism, sacrifice and defiance. Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* highlights some of these themes and raises a moral question about the possibility of enduring suffering as a universal condition and collective shared experience (not an individual burden). It forces us to consider our moral obligation to others, thus, giving this extraordinary experience a life affirming value of hope and solidarity<sup>i</sup>.

This essay is divided into two parts. The first part explains the existential understanding of pandemics. It offers an understanding of the absurdity of conflict, suffering as well as the moral obligation that one has towards others. Since Greek tragedies offer an account of human vulnerability in the most dramatic way, this section makes reference to Greek literature (that has reference to epidemics). Camus' novel *The Plague* explains the life affirming values that drive its characters towards hope and solidarity. The second section explains the possibility of the same through adoption of Derrida's notion of autoimmunity<sup>ii</sup> and unconditional hospitality<sup>iii</sup> towards the almost certain predicament of death. It suggests offering unconditional hospitality to those who endure suffering as a moral obligation of beginning a shared struggle against universal vulnerability and misery. Such an inquiry is most relevant and urgent to the current crisis. It spells out that the only way to resist a pandemic is by acknowledging that it cannot be overcome by medical solutions alone, but mandates struggle, sacrifice and solidarity with its victims.

## I

## Pandemics: Camus' Existential Perspective

Crises such as pandemics expose the vulnerable and helpless nature of human existence. Thus, they formed the theme for many Greek narratives.<sup>iv</sup> They served as a framework for the evolution of the plot or formed a backdrop for the unfolding of the personal tragedy of the protagonist. Plagues were generally described as the result of tragic faults of human nature or bad leadership. At the start of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the city of Thebes is described as suffering from a terrible plague, crops failing and women and children dying (2010, lines 1-55). The cause as we know is Oedipus' tragic fate of murdering his father. Thucydides, the Greek historian, describes the devastation caused by plague in the seventh chapter of his work, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. He describes it as a state where the Athenians were completely unprepared. Neither physicians nor sacrifices to Gods and divinations could successfully stop the misery. Sick people died of bad governance, isolation, neglect, lack of shelter and diseases spread from improper burials, lawlessness and looting (Thucydides 2012, 241-273). Yet, such misery did not stop the Athenians from embarking on a war with Sicily, nor did it stop Oedipus' sons from raging a civil war. Thus, epidemics and plagues made an ideal backdrop for making sense of human faults and exposing human vulnerability. The Greek tragedies bring to light the indifferent nature of the natural and divine forces. Since there is no cosmic order and the universe is unsympathetic, human beings are doomed to suffer and die. The last paragraph of Camus' novel *The Plague* suggests too that plague is an undeniable part of life. Dr. Bernard Rieux, the protagonist claims, that "...the plague bacillus never dies or disappears... it can lie dormant for years..." (2010, 297). Camus is critical of religious discourses as they cannot justify human suffering or rationalise the mortality imposed upon every human. Dr. Rieux asks his stranded visitor Jean Tarrou, "...mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes towards the heaven where he sits in silence?" (Camus 2010, 124). Thus, the plague assists people to understand that personal suffering is vain. It suggests that the only way out is to embrace the omnipresence and omnipotence of the plague through acts of altruism and heroism, "...healers", as Dr Rieux calls them (Camus 2010, 296). Thus, the novel also highlights the importance of hope and solidarity and empowers people to respond to plagues by enduring its absurdity with courage and resilience. Such acts of heroism are displayed in the novel by Dr. Bernard Rieux, the volunteering anti-plague sanitation squad formed

by Tarrou, a visitor to Oran and Joseph Grand, a municipal clerk of Oran. They, along with volunteers, fight the plague by helping others even though the struggle is futile in the face of certain death. Grand's quest for a perfect manuscript for his novel is as hopeless as his struggle to fight the plague (Camus 2010, 45). It illustrates that the only way of dealing with the absurdity is to keep struggling against inadequacies of language, the tyranny of plague and by creating one's own meaning and happiness from that struggle <sup>v</sup>.

Camus' novel also discusses the experience of exile and imprisonment. After a long period of denial, the authorities take note of the rising deaths and quarantine the town of Oran (Camus 2010, 60). People are left stranded, without resources, and some are separated from their loved ones. Camus describes the townspeople's feelings that range from denial, plans to escape from Oran and rejoin with their loved ones to, later, living hopelessly in the illusion of sadness, disappointment and longing. The townspeople suffer similar pains in the epidemic and experience comparable kinds of exile and imprisonment, yet they feel alone in their suffering (Camus 2010, 63-64). Only those who accept the plague's power and their own state of exile are able to find a personal sense of meaning and freedom. As healers, Dr Rieux, Tarrou and Grand exhibit empathy, love, and solidarity <sup>vi</sup>. They exhibit life affirming values of hope in the most irreducible and impossible situations. The absurdity of the situation brings one to realise that we are interconnected. Though one cannot escape being a victim, one can build solidarity by sharing suffering and, thus, escaping the exile and loneliness. The plague brings to light our inherent incompleteness and the futility of medical, political or religious models of dealing with it. Only in making one's own self vulnerable to this absurdity can one sustain oneself. The next section explores the possibility of applying Derrida's notion of autoimmunity and unconditional hospitality in realising the same.

## II

### **Derrida's Notion of Autoimmunity and Hospitality: A Humanistic Intervention to Pandemic**

This section makes a case for a humanistic intervention following Derrida's notion of autoimmunity and hospitality. As mentioned earlier, Derrida's logic of an autoimmune condition is that which consists in the spontaneous destruction of the defense mechanisms supposed to protect the organism from external aggression. Thus, the living organism

seems to work to destroy its own protection by immunizing itself against its own community (Borradori 2003, 150). The establishment of a metaphorical relationship between the human body and the body politic is relevant here. To conceptualise the political body as a living body is one of the most prominent features of political and nationalist discourses. It theorizes biological health as analogous to the health of the political body, thus, state control over the health of individuals becomes a moral norm<sup>vii</sup>. This explains and justifies quarantine as the state response to pandemic. As Camus in the novel explains, "Thus the first thing that plague brought to our town was exile." (Camus 2010, 67) The town exiled itself from the rest of the world for the fear that the plague can spread to the rest of world. Further, the people isolated from one another as they feared that their neighbours may infect them (Camus 2010, 71). Deprived of communities, people are alienated from themselves. Further, Camus explains the futility of the system of patrols instituted in the town of Oran; they are on duty to kill the cats and dogs that they believe are possible carriers of infection (Camus 2010, 108). Dogs and cats become scapegoats that human societies can blame, while the actions of patrolling groups do not prevent or slow down the spread of plague in any way. They only increase the tension already existing in the town. In contrast, those who enrolled in the anti-plague squad, though gaining no results, knew that it was the only thing to do. These groups enabled the townsfolk to come to grips with the disease and convinced them that fighting the plague was the concern of all.

This makes a case for Derrida's notion of autoimmunity as a continuation of Camus' project in *The Plague*. In his work *Rogues*, Derrida uses the term autoimmunity to describe a motivation of self-defence or self-preservation that in fact leads to that thing's destruction. It enables an exposure to the other and, importantly for Derrida, the logic of autoimmunity reveals that absolute immunity is impossible: an attempt to achieve absolute protection only results in destruction<sup>viii</sup>. In *The Plague*, the sanitation squad put up by the people does not necessarily achieve anything worthwhile, yet by accepting the destruction in the universe, people build a community by creating a group that mutually accepts death. Though people in Oran already know that they will be killed by the plague, the squad helps people come to terms with this predicament and encourages them to do their best to accept it. By making themselves vulnerable, many get infected: Joseph Grand, a judge called Othon who recovers but requests to be posted back in quarantine facilities to help others (Camus 2010, 249), Raymond Rambert who eventually joins the anti-plague squad (Camus 2010, 199) and Tarrou, who eventually dies of the disease (Camus 2010, 277). Yet, they are heroic in dropping their immunity guard and finding meaning in healing others.

This seems to be the only way to fight the random destruction caused by plague. Not only do they exhibit Derrida's logic of autoimmunity but also his philosophy of embracing unconditional hospitality.

The logic of autoimmunity requires unconditional hospitality, opening up to the future in a way that we risk everything. In *Rogues*, Derrida states that hospitality requires autoimmunity, the possibility of suppressing one's own immune relations in order to allow contact with the outside world (Derrida 2005, 35). It is a constant negotiation with what seems to threaten one's security, as that is the only chance of a peaceful future (Thomson 2007, 77-78). In his essay "On Hospitality", Derrida explains it as an aporia, a puzzle or a paradox that harnesses an impossible reconciliation between two contradictory imperatives. Firstly, the imperative contained in hospitality is to welcome the other in an absolute unconditional sense (before one is aware of knowledge or recognition of names and identity). Secondly, the imperative to welcome a person who may pose a threat to one's own self. Derrida states that pure unconditional hospitality does not consist in an invitation (that is, one is welcomed on the condition that one adopts the laws and norms of the territory). Pure unconditional hospitality opens to someone who is neither expected nor invited, to the one who arrives as a foreign visitor, a new arrival, non-identifiable and unforeseeable, an absolute other (Derrida 2003, 211-212). It is building an ethical relation that is transgressive in its overcoming of all barriers, towards building a hospitality of care for those who suffer. Self-protection makes the self more vulnerable. It is precisely in performing unconditional hospitality, as an inherent openness to the possibility for the other (death) to arrive, that one finds freedom and meaning. Thus, autoimmunity not only entails the potential destruction of the self, it is also where the self is always compromised (Derrida 2005, 36).

To conclude, this essay attempts to make a case for existential hope and solidarity as a response to the challenge posed by the pandemic. Though medical interventions are indispensable, the essay aims to emphasise on human ability to use one's own personal impulses to find wisdom, growth, healing and fulfilment. It reminds us that we are not autonomous and that our actions affect others and the world around us; thus, breakdowns and crises require humanistic interventions. In times of pandemics, the success of medical and political practice calls for prioritising the ethical responsibility of crossing the threshold of securing immunity towards embracing human vulnerability and being hospitable to the other.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Nietzsche in his work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, maintains that myths instill life affirming attitudes that he describes as "...pessimism of strength..." (2007, 4). The significance of tragedy is that the tragic sense of life can be overcome by justifying life as desirable in spite of its dark moments.

<sup>ii</sup> Derrida discusses this notion in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* and in his *Rogues*. His notion of autoimmunity implies a self-destructive tendency whereby an organism works to destroy its own protection by working against its own immunity. He suggests this in the context of explaining wars, terrorism and nationalism. He believes that such nationalism contains its own internal logic of destruction, the only way would be to drop the guard and explore the possibility of turning enemies into allies. This alone can ensure peace (Borradori 2003, 150-154). This concept is relevant here as the essay suggests that the way to challenge the pandemic is not only quarantine and isolation measures. However certain the sickness may be, the only way to challenge it is by building solidarity and working towards serving those who suffer from it (as illustrated in the novel *The Plague*).

<sup>iii</sup> In his work "Hospitality", Derrida explains unconditional hospitality as compromising one's own self and accepting the other with its hostility. This is also used in the context of suggesting peace among nation states that wage wars. The concept is relevant here as pandemics bring in lockdowns and people become selfish in protecting their own self. Closely tied with the concept of immunity, it suggests a way of building collaboration and solidarity to counter the pandemic.

<sup>iv</sup> Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* also explains the limitations of the scientific approach and the relevance of Greek myths in understanding the human condition (2007, 5). Since the essay also makes a case for shifting from a medical/scientific approach to a more human approach, evoking Greek myths is relevant here.

<sup>v</sup> For Camus, the myth of Sisyphus is a metaphor of an absurd life that should nonetheless be taken as a challenge. The myth explains that life is absurd, this absurdity consisting in the fundamental disharmony and the tragic incompatibility of human existence. It is the product of collision and confrontation between human desire for order, meaning and purpose to life. Human beings desperately seek hope and meaning in the hopeless and meaningless world. They seek clarity and transcendence on one hand, and they realize that the cosmos does not offer it. Human beings are fated to inhabit this world that is indifferent to pain and human protest (Camus 1991, 93-96).

<sup>vi</sup> Contrasted by characters like Raymond Rambert, a journalist stranded in Oran who devises a plan to escape the city to join his lover in Paris. After city officials refused his request to leave, he befriends some criminals so that they may smuggle him out of the city (Camus 2010, 102-106). Father Paneloux, sermonises that the plague was an act of God for the citizens' sinful nature (Camus 2010, 94-95). Living in denial of the absurdity of the situation is philosophical suicide (Camus 1991, 48, 61)

<sup>vii</sup> Plato does so in his work *The Republic* (2003, 427d-449a) and Thomas Hobbes in his work *Leviathan* (1973, 100-105)

<sup>viii</sup> Derrida explains this in the context of nation states. Since nation states remain uncompromising about their borders, they remain threatened internally by their own logic. He suggests that if democracy were absolutely immune from compromise, it would be absolutely sovereign, inert and hostile to the other. Autoimmunity, paradoxically, nurtures a democratic culture of openness towards the possibility of infinite alteration, reworking and re-orientation (Derrida 2005, 33-34)

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