

**Absurdity in Modern Medicine:
A Study of Camus' Work on Absurdity From the Perspective of the
COVID-19 Pandemic**

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Main study: Medicine

Date of Completion: 16-01-2022

Words: 8828

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Introduction

The years 2020 and 2021 have been nothing less than tumultuous. Two years in which all has been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic; our society has changed drastically, from the general goings-on of our sociocultural existence, which have largely been inhibited by the preventive measures that have been taken, to the political and medical sphere in which the new coronavirus has been the main theme for almost two full years.

Psychiatrists everywhere are warning for the overwhelming effects of the pandemic on our mental health, even predicting the approaching failure to cope with the situation, caused by our innate inability to live only in the present, without any certainty of what the future might hold.¹ This pandemic has disrupted our way of life and now confronts us with the ‘new normal’, as Dutch governance has dubbed the preventive measures. However, the new normal is constantly changing and when the situation will stabilise and in what form, exactly, is unclear as of yet. This lack of perspective and the uncertainty it brings causes a lot of stress.

Although the agreement that the protection of vulnerable people deserves priority was almost unanimous at first, people wonder more and more when they can return to their offices, plan the vacations they long for, and even attend a party or go shopping. Even the most mundane of activities have proven to be greatly missed once removed from daily life. Humans are typically quite mentally and practically adaptable creatures, but in this scenario, the crux of our psychological and philosophical peril lies in the uncertainty of this crisis’

¹ Mahbub Hossain, Samia Tasnim, Abida Sultana, Farah Faizah, Hoimonty Mazumder, Liye Zou, Lisako McKyer, Helal Ahmed and Ping Ma, “Epidemiology of mental health problems in COVID-19: a review,” *F1000Research* vol. 9 636 (2020), doi:10.12688/f1000research.24457.1.

Kabita Pandey, Michellie Thurman, Samuel Johnson, Arpan Acharya, Morgan Johnston, Elizabeth Klug, Omalla Olwenyi, Rajesh Rajaiah and Siddappa Byrareddy, “Mental Health Issues During and After COVID-19 Vaccine Era,” *Brain research bulletin* vol. 176 (2021): 161-173, doi:10.1016/j.brainresbull.2021.08.012.

Jutta Lindert, Marija Jakubauskiene and Johan Bilsen, “The COVID-19 disaster and mental health-assessing, responding and recovering,” *European journal of public health* vol. 31, Supplement_4 (2021), doi:10.1093/eurpub/ckab153.

nature. Where man's living conditions change, man tends to change with them, as we have, but when the conditions of the future are wholly uncertain, man's mental health seemingly declines and his sense of existential stability crumbles.

The practical aspect of man's adaptability is primarily a consequence of its aptitude for problem solving. Throughout modern history it has become the norm for man to triumph over nature in virtually all aspects of life, also in medicine and healthcare. The habitual victory over illness and continuous progression of science has rendered the world subject to our will. In the gaze of the modern man, illness is typically little more than a setback, an annoyance even. The famous slogan of the Middle Ages 'memento mori' has long dwindled from our collective consciousness; confrontations with our mortality are frantically avoided, ignored or hidden, until the very last phase of our lives.

The new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, has changed this. A new virus which kills some but is barely a cold to others has rapidly spread the globe, instilling a newfound vulnerability and uncertainty in our minds while our daily lives as we knew them quickly ground to a halt. We were faced with a problem we could not immediately solve. The problem-solving paradigm of modern society suddenly fails, vulnerability and mortality could no longer be ignored.

I am not the first to notice the parallels between the current global situation and the events described in *La Peste (LP)*, a novel by French writer and philosopher Albert Camus published in 1947, which describes the events in a French Algerian city called Oran. *LP* gives insights into the experiences of various kinds of characters as their fate unfolds before them, governed only by the plague. The book shows the inherent passivity of a situation in which people can exercise very little influence over their own life and future, both in a literal and abstract sense. In short: *LP* astutely captures the absurdity which is so greatly magnified by times of crisis.

Absurdity comes from the clash between man and universe, or more explicitly said: absurdity arises from the disparity between man's seemingly inherent search for meaning, clarity and understanding, and the universe's randomness. Camus has written extensively on the concept of absurdity in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus (MS)*. The plague in *LP* and COVID-19 both exemplify the absurdity of the universe's randomness in the eyes of its beholder, us. Through a discussion of both works this thesis will explore the influence the pandemic has had on absurdity's manifestation in our lives and how this influences our approach to the most notable and noticeable global health crisis in recent memory.²

² Saad Mallah, Omar Ghorab, Sabrina Al-Salmi, Omar Abdellatif, Tharmegan Tharmaratnam, Mina Iskandar, Jessica Sefen, Pardeep Sidhu, Bassam Atallah, Rania El-Lababidi and Manaf Al-Qahtani, "COVID-19: breaking down a global health crisis," *Annals of clinical microbiology and antimicrobials* vol. 20, 1 35 (2021), doi:10.1186/s12941-021-00438-7.

Chapter 1

La Peste

LP (1947) is one among many well-known books written by Camus, others include *L'Étranger* (1942) and *La Chute* (1956); these three are all novels. Camus's most famous philosophical works are two essays, namely *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) and *L'homme révolté* (1951). *LP* is arguably his most popular book and it has been subject to a plethora of interpretations and insights of political, philosophical and religious nature. However, before we can bother with interpretations and of course the thematisation of *LP* within the context of this thesis, we must first summarise the contents and characters on its pages.

In a *Studium Generale* podcast on the relevance of *LP* in the pandemic, Prof. Dr. Ruud Welten of Erasmus University Rotterdam gave a striking description of the pandemic and its characters.³ The following will be inspired by his words and insights.

Camus has written *LP* not to be a narrative in the classic sense. Rather than being a story, it is a report of events in the form of eyewitnesses' written testimonials; these personal experiences are inherently subjective and show how the causes and consequences of everything that happens during *LP*, as well as our own pandemic, are different for its various characters. Even though the book is made up of various interwoven storylines which are all part of the greater plot, very few major events seem to happen. All the testimonials are written in a somewhat matter-of-factly fashion, seemingly drained of strong emotion. While emotion is clearly present on the pages of *LP*, it reads as if described, rather than explained. The

³ Ruud Welten, "Book Club #1: Introduction to the plague by prof.dr. Ruud Welten," April 2020, Studium Generale Podcast, 40:35, <https://www.eur.nl/nieuws/podcast-over-de-pest>.

narrator even says he regrets that there is nothing spectacular to say. He follows with: “The trouble is, there is nothing less spectacular than a pestilence and, if only because they last so long, great misfortunes are monotonous. In the memory of those who have lived through them, the dreadful days of the plague do not seem like vast flames, cruel and magnificent, but rather like an endless trampling that flattened everything in its path.”⁴

This quote exemplifies that Camus is not a storyteller. Instead of simply telling a story, he shows that events have no causes or logical, predictable consequences. This becomes clear in *L'Étranger*, in which the main character commits a murder without any intention, he just does it. In *LP* we even find hints to this event: a young sales clerk kills an Arab on the beach. The court wants to demonstrate premeditation and motive, which Camus uses to explicate how an event which is completely senseless is overloaded with meaning. This meaning is always attributed afterwards. Hence, *LP* is not a guide to surviving a pandemic or a philosophical work of its own, it is only literature; the fictional and subjective eyewitness report of the plague in Oran, a small French Algerian town, taking place in 1940.

Broadly spoken, *LP* describes a universal topic which has confronted mankind innumerable times before, namely the outbreak of collective illness and the struggle that follows. The response pattern in *LP* seems to be very similar to what has happened during the outbreak of COVID-19; at first, people are unimpressed and still appear to feel untouchable. In the Netherlands, for example, people saw the virus as something that would not spread in Europe, at least not on a large scale. As the virus advanced and the first few Europeans were infected, a slight unrest started to appear. This unrest eventually turned into fear and when the infections, hospitalisations and deaths were published, people started to panic. At the center of all these emotions laid a large uncertainty which in due time caused a feeling of depression.

⁴ Albert Camus, *The Plague* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 138.

The symptoms of crises that Camus so acutely describes in *LP* are those we also see represented in the pandemic we have faced in 2020: anxiety, rising death rates, political insecurity, measures – like a curfew – that would be deemed authoritarian in normal circumstances, weary doctors, widespread anger and dissatisfaction. Throughout the book, Camus follows multiple people who each experience the plague in their own unique way, all representing one of the symptoms of crisis. This is articulated through the following main characters:

Dr. Rieux: an emphatic man who continually shows solidarity to those who suffer and who attempts to help as many people as possible. He does all this dutifully and while reading one will be impressed with the dedication and faithfulness towards his patients. At one point during *LP* someone accuses Rieux of thinking in abstractions.⁵ At first he rejects this notion and feels unjustly reproached, but upon further contemplation he recognises the validity of the claim. The patients suffering from the plague are no longer individual humans, but are reduced to merely patients: seen as one large entity. He realises that this is also what the demands of being a doctor entail. In order to assess, diagnose and treat, a degree of abstraction is necessary. Rieux, being the narrator of the story, represents humanity above all. He is the character most readers will identify with the strongest, and he is also representative of Camus himself; he is skilled, but insecure, he does what he can do, he is averse to pretentious philosophy, and everything he does is driven by the unbearable nature of human suffering. Contrary to many of his fellow citizens, Rieux is not willing to get on his knees and succumb to the plague, he argues that all they can do is fight the plague. All other stances he views as harmful, for they lead to abstractions that eventually lead to truth claims. This is demonstrated as being harmful by people continuously becoming victims of their truths.

⁵ Camus, *The Plague*, 68.

Jean Tarrou: a man who has only been living in Oran for a few weeks, but is already a part of the residents. Like Rieux, whom he has befriended, he is involved in battling the plague and helps with the organisation of rescues and caregiving, even though the local administrators advise him not to do so. He also makes notes on the progression of the plague, but interestingly only notes small, seemingly irrelevant details. Perhaps most notably, he is set on trying to be meaningful to others and accepts the risks that the associated actions might pose to him. Throughout the book, however, Camus makes clear that a plague is not an epic in which it is desirable to play the hero.

Joseph Grand: someone who goes for life. He is a writer who, in the midst of the plague and all its chaos, is still mostly concerned with the opening sentence of his book, on which he has been working all his life. For every step he takes forward, he seems to take two steps back. It eventually becomes clear this is a metaphor for him trying to flee the plague, while it is also an act of fleeing in itself; by endlessly focusing on this one sentence, he protects himself from having to progress his writing and his story. When talking to Grand, it is clear on all fronts that he wants nothing to do with the plague. He only speaks of times after the plague, when things will all be better.

Cottard: the opposite of Grand. Cottard embodies death and struggle. Before the plague has broken out in Oran, Cottard makes a suicide attempt, which fails. It is never made clear why he attempts suicide and it is not of importance. What is relevant, however, is how Cottard experiences the plague. As the plague manifests itself, Cottard seems to cheer up and he even benefits from the state of chaos around him. Although Cottard benefits financially and even enjoys the new situation, “loving the people in their suffering,” as Welten so poetically put it, he is not portrayed as an evil or malevolent character and his enjoyment does not come from a

place of sadism.⁶ Cottard is actually the only character in the book who is genuinely living in the moment, taking the situation as it comes to him. He says of his fellow townspeople: “‘After the plague, I’ll do this, after the plague I’ll do that...’ They’re ruining their lives, instead of staying calm.”⁷ The relevance of Cottard’s attempted suicide is his experience with facing death or more strongly put: the tendency towards death that he shows. Cottard is a man who lives without hope, which Camus describes as being a realist, the radical realism eventually becomes morally unbearable, hence the attempted suicide and the enjoyment of the plague. The only person who seems to relate to Cottard is Tarrou, with whom he quickly becomes friendly. Tarrou is fascinated by Cottard and writes of his actions and expressions in all his notes. Finally, when the plague appears to be beaten and the people dare dream of continuing their lives as they knew before the plague, Cottard turns into a terrorist. He cannot accept the return of a life which he knew not how to live. The final pages of the book describe the celebrations that take place on the streets of Oran and how Cottard starts randomly shooting at the rejoicing people.

Raymond Rambert: a young journalist who is only visiting Oran when the plague strikes and the city goes into a strict lockdown, which prohibits him from leaving. This frustrates him at first, because he desperately wants to leave the city to go back to the woman he loves in France. Camus uses Rambert as an example of what is called ‘double suffering’; on one hand our own suffering, on the other hand the suffering on behalf of the other, caused by our imagination of how they must feel.⁸ The separation of lovers is a recurrent theme in the book, and a situation which Camus experienced himself through his separation from actress Maria

⁶ Welten, “Book Club #1: Introduction to the plague by prof.dr. Ruud Welten.”

⁷ Camus, *The Plague*, 154.

⁸ Camus, *The Plague*, 56.

Casarès, with whom he was deeply in love, but could not see due to his being married.⁹ “The truth must be told: the plague had taken away from all of them the power of love or even of friendship, for love demands some future, and for us there was only the here and now”, Camus said.¹⁰ Understandably, Rambert wants to flee the city and thus starts acquiring contacts who could help him escape. The first person he approaches is Dr. Rieux, whom he asks to provide proof of his health so that he may be allowed to leave the city. This does not work. He then approaches Cottard, who has formed a secret, illegal organisation that helps people escape Oran. However, right when the entire escape plan has been arranged, Rambert starts feeling solidarity with the city and the sufferers of the plague, which eventually makes him decide to stay.

Father Paneloux: a Jesuit priest, who is seen as a wise person by the people of Oran; he is very learned and gives noticeably philosophical preaches. When the plague starts, he frames it as God’s punishment for the people’s sins, mainly for the individualism against which he was already preaching before the plague. At first, Paneloux is used to create contrast: he describes the plague as ‘earned wages’ for the people of Oran, a consequence or punishment for their behaviour, saying: “My brethren, a calamity has befallen you; my brethren, you have deserved it”¹¹, while Camus is constantly showing why the plague is not a moral problem. Later in the book, Paneloux’ character deepens and his views get explained in more detail. A small child dies of the plague and Paneloux feels ashamed; he wonders how a child could be viewed as a sinner in the eyes of God, and how He could punish a child so severely. This event changes the plague from an abstraction to a simple truth for Paneloux; it is no longer

⁹ Albert Camus and Maria Casarès, *Correspondance: 1944-1959*, (Paris: Edition Gallimard, 2017).

¹⁰ Camus, *The Plague*, 140.

¹¹ Camus, *The Plague*, 73.

mere punishment or action and consequence, but a painful, seemingly random fact. He then gives a speech in which he proclaims that we cannot understand the plague.¹²

LP is not an autobiographic work, but a lot of Camus' work contains certain themes for which he likely drew inspiration from his own life. For *LP*, the theme which resonates with Camus' life the most, is the feeling of isolation, as can be caused by illness. In *LP* it is caused by the plague and the lockdown that follows, but for Camus it was caused by his own suffering from tuberculosis. Many of the consequences are similar, such as being contagious to other people and experiencing sickness. Most importantly, his diagnosis forced him to live in isolation for a significant period of his formative years. This also meant having to give up his football ambitions, which saddened him deeply.¹³ Knowing this, the emotions displayed in *LP*'s characters seem to be reminiscent of the disillusionment Camus experienced himself.

In his writing of *LP*, Camus has been known to depend on the work of Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), which describes in great detail the plague that reigned through London in 1665.^{14, 15} Camus even starts *LP* with a quote from Defoe: "It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not."¹⁶ What inspired and influenced Camus the most was Defoe's style of writing. Although Defoe is known as the first proponent of what is considered 'the English novel', *A Journal of the Plague Year* is not written in this manner. Rather, it is written as a report, a seemingly factual description of events including tables, death-rates, et cetera. It is precisely this cold rendering of the events that makes the story so

¹² Camus, *The Plague*, 172.

¹³ David Sherman, *Camus* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 11.

¹⁴ Welten, "Book Club #1: Introduction to the plague by prof.dr. Ruud Welten."

¹⁵ Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

¹⁶ Camus, *The Plague*, 3.

striking. However, like *LP*, *A Journal of the Plague Year* is complete fiction and was written almost 60 years after the plague in London; Defoe was merely inspired by his childhood memories of the events that actually took place. Camus has written the book in a similar, albeit less factual manner. He framed his story as being drawn from the personal notes of its characters, letting the narrator describe the events and emotion of the characters from a distance.

What is important to realise, is that Camus wanted to write *LP* as a literal description of a plague, not as an analogy or a metaphor. The book is not an allegory, it is only literature. So although it is only natural that people read further into the story and typically see whatever they seek to find, the book in itself was not specifically meant in any other way than a story about the human experience of the plague.

When fiction turns into reality

Our current experience is one of an actual ‘plague’: the coronavirus, which makes our reading of the book very similar to how Camus intended to write it. The people who read it when it came out in 1947, on the other hand, saw in the story the symptoms of a totalitarian Nazi regime spreading through Europe, like a plague. Granting that this was not Camus’ intention in writing *LP*, he has written an analogous story of this kind in the form of *L’État de siège* (1948), which tells a tale of plague in the form of totalitarianism and dictatorship using fear as its weapon; in this case, it is clearly a metaphor for Nazism in Europe. If one does wish to deem *LP* a metaphor, the term ‘living metaphor’ as coined by Paul Ricœur might be suitable. A living metaphor is about what a certain work means to someone personally, given the context of their time and place and individual interpretation. A metaphor, then, is not an

actual subtext written into a book by its author, but merely the meaning that someone projects onto the story upon reading it.¹⁷

In *LP*, the disease is completely impersonal, but affects people nonetheless. There is no intention, it is anonymous invasion, an abstraction that you cannot ignore. Camus is not a symbolist who wants to convey a disguised message by saying something other than he wants to say. Apparently nothing is more difficult for us than to deal with life in its absurd truth. We want there to be something behind it, so that it may be allowed to bear meaning in its truth. *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), written by Susan Sontag, asserts that illness has been viewed as containing metaphorical qualities for a long time; illness has often been believed to be a punishment from God, or to be correlated to certain psychological characteristics.¹⁸ “This plague is not retributive. Camus is not protesting anything, not corruption or tyranny, not even mortality. The plague is no more or less than an exemplary event, the irruption of death that gives life its seriousness. It is not about bringing judgment”, Sontag writes.¹⁹ Sontag’s work makes the point that while it is not wrong to reflect on oneself, it is not justified to project one’s own meaning onto any and all events. In our own case, the pandemic we are currently (2020-22) living through is a global catastrophe on all fronts, and virtually no one saw it coming. What *LP* really demonstrates, is that Camus was a thinker against hope and against moralism. He saw the idea of hope as a lie, an untrue picturing of life as it actually is. This is precisely what Camus shows in *LP*: first, the people suffer and deteriorate, until all they can do is fight and undergo the plague; then, when the plague finally passes, people give in to false optimism.

¹⁷ Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 142.

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York City, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

¹⁹ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 59.

Hope, like many other sentimental articulations, is merely a predicate put upon the events of life in order to fabricate meaning. Life, according to Camus, is nothing more than absurd. The absurd is that which emanates from the collision between life as it is and the artificial meanings we attribute to it. There is no order in life, apart from lived reality; no secret message in which the meaning of life is locked up. We make our lives a story, a plot, but this story is continuously disturbed as we live on, thereby interfering with the ongoing internalisation of our stories – thus confronting us with the absurd. Camus' case against hope is at the core of his philosophy and is also extensively displayed in *MS*. Whereas the ancient Greeks used Sisyphus as an example for the underlying meaning of our actions and sufferings, Camus uses Sisyphus to argue that there is no such meaning to be found.

In the next chapter, *MS* and its relation to *LP* will be discussed in more detail, in order to show how the absurd nature of our world and the meaninglessness of its events can still leave room for a lived experience full of fulfilment, joy and even the feeling of happiness, without us having to labour under the delusion of true meaning.

Chapter 2

Le Mythe de Sisyphe

The Myth of Sisyphus is Camus' primary essay on his notion of the absurd and the conclusions he draws from it. The goal of this chapter is not to give an exhaustive retelling of the entire essay, but to highlight those ideas and insights that are relevant to the scope of this thesis, in order to bring into experience the fundamental feeling of absurdity.

In its essence *MS* covers the topic of absurdity. However, the absurd is not a conclusion that is worked towards, but rather a fundamental premise from which Camus begins to describe the human condition. Parallel to the mode of storytelling in *LP*, Camus declares early on that *MS* is only “description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady” (the absurd), framing *MS* as being of an empirical nature, rather than a philosophical one.²⁰ So the questions that Camus asks do not lead to absurdity, but arise from man's experience of the absurd. First and foremost, Camus states the following:

The fundamental subject of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is this: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has meaning: therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face. The answer, underlying and appearing through the paradoxes which cover it, is this: even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate.²¹

Although the question of suicide specifically is not the main theme of this thesis or *LP*, Camus goes about answering this question by elaborating on his understanding of the absurd

²⁰ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 3.

²¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, preface.

and the human condition as a whole, which makes it relevant to the scope of this thesis. Suicide is not decided upon through rational reflection, but follows from a subtle accumulation of emotion that is hard to understand, which makes it impossible to mark exactly at what point one becomes utterly convinced that life is not worth the trouble anymore, which eventually leads to a confession of this conviction through the actualisation of the deed.²² Therefore, it deserves preference to deduce consequences from the act itself. Ultimately, then, suicide can be seen as a recognition of the fact that our suffering is useless; a recognition of the fact that our lives are profoundly meaningless. This suffering stems from the continual experience of absurdity; the sensation of a world that can be explained and described in minute detail, while containing no indication of meaning or hope, clashing with the inherently human search for meaning in life where there is none to be found.²³

Fatal evasions

To ask whether or not suicide is a viable option, is synonymous to the question of whether we can deal with absurdity. In other words, can one live a life devoid of meaning, with no hope of eternal bliss or any sort of transcendence beyond absurdity and meaninglessness and, thus, sustain his life in the barren philosophical landscape Camus entitles ‘the desert’?²⁴ Does man need an escape?

²² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 7.

²³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

²⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13.

Absurdity usually presents itself without having to be looked for. Man lives life: wakes up, eats breakfast, goes to work, works, goes home, eats, watches tv, sleeps. Life passes him by and time drones on, until weariness becreeps him and he gets awakened to absurdity. “At any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face”²⁵, Camus says, concluding that this awakening will ultimately conclude with either recovery or suicide.²⁶

A man defines himself by his make-belief as well as by his sincere impulses. There are parts of us we cannot access, but which are partially revealed in the acts they bring forth and the feelings they create. Camus frames himself herein as revealing a method; one of analysis, rather than knowledge: “solely appearances can be enumerated and the climate make itself felt.”²⁷

Camus strikingly describes the abject birth of absurdity, the instance in which one truly thinks of nothing, meaning the void has materialized within, the instance in which the rhythm of life is disturbed and the nature of man seeks to re-establish it, but cannot; this is where absurdity has been brought into life.²⁸ This weariness, the experience of absurdity’s birth within, has also been described by multiple other philosophers. Heidegger calls it anxiety, Sartre calls it nausea, Kierkegaard and Jaspers use their own terms of description.²⁹ What all these philosophers have in common, Camus says, is the philosophical suicide they commit in their attempted solution to the conundrum absurdity imposes on us. They all seek salvation in the inexplicable: transcendence, faith, or God. Kierkegaard calls it ‘the leap of faith’, which aptly describes to illogical mechanism by which all those aforementioned seek

²⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 10.

²⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 12.

²⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 11.

²⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 14.

²⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 12-24.

to escape the absurd. But what they actually do, Camus points out, is prove the absurd, only to then immediately dispel it, in order to escape it.³⁰

Since Camus proposes the absurd as the founding truth of his problem, or one of the terms the problem is set upon, it is impossible to, by the solution of the problem, do away with the absurd. The problem's solution cannot change the reality in which the problem is presupposed, since this renders the problem null to begin with, and therefore, also, does not solve it. The negation of the absurd that these solutions are based on is what Camus refers to with the words 'philosophical suicide', something that typifies all existentialists. What Camus concluded is that "the absurd is lucid reason noting its limits."³¹ Thus, no solution is to be found.

This non-negatable absurdity that lies in the metaphysical state of the awakened man, makes hope impossible.³² For Camus, the very concept of hope implies premises that negate the nature of absurdity's conclusions. However, as stated before, man has an innate urge to seek harmony; this continuous and inevitable collision between man and the absurdity to which he is bounded upon its discovery creates a struggle. As soon as man is devoid of hope, he ceases to belong to the future, the fatal evasion has evaporated and he can no longer seek to escape the universe he has created. This provides a stark contrast between Camus and the existentialists, who create hope by the aforementioned negation of absurdity.³³

The lack of hope does not necessarily mean the lack of God or any form of transcendence, it only means that knowledge of such a phenomenon is impossible. The indifference to transcendence and the persisting resistance to the temptation of taking a leap of faith, is man's

³⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 27.

³¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 37

³² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 31

³³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 25.

way to ‘absurd freedom’, as Camus calls it. Faith or, rather, trust is the antipode of the absurd man’s *modus operandi*; the absurd man wants only that which he fully understands, and acknowledges the impossibility of understanding that which is beyond the limits of his reason.³⁴

Camus goes on to claim that life is lived better without meaning. To live with what we know and to not seek knowledge where there is none to be found. Man must keep the absurd alive; this is done by contemplating it, by consistently coming face to face with absurdity, by revolting against it.³⁵ “Constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity”, as Camus puts it, “that revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.”³⁶ In this revolt there is, however, no aspiration to be found, for it is a hopeless revolt. This raises the question: is suicide, without hope of an afterlife, not the ultimate revolt? This form of unwillingness to resign to one’s fate conveys the impression of being an unequalable insurgency to the absurd universe. However, to Camus, it merely conveys a repudiation; “it is essential to die unreconciled and not of one’s own free will.”³⁷

Man, before he faces the absurd, is bound to the postulate of freedom provided by the illusion in which he lives. But this illusion (of liberty) presupposes an imaginable purpose, this purpose entices man to adapt himself towards the means to this goal. Hence, man becomes a slave of his own, imagined liberty. This conventional life of aims and direction, of concern for the future, of hope, is shattered by the absurd. However, when the absurd has cancelled all man’s chances of eternal freedom, through God or other transcendence, it gives

³⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 40-41.

³⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 42-43.

³⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 41.

³⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 41.

back an inner freedom, a 'freedom of action', that is created by man's presence in the present.³⁸

Coping with absurdity

How then, in a universe that contains no intrinsic meaning, does one live? How does one deal with the absurd? Camus nuances life's meaninglessness by stating that meaning can be found by using up everything that is given in life. If the absurd is all there is, quantity is more important than quality; not the best living, but the most living. What does 'the most living' mean? Camus writes that a man's rule of conduct and his scale of values have meaning through the quantity and variability of his experience. Like Camus has said before, no code of ethics is justifiable a priori, he now explains that it is aggregated through experience. This quantity of experience is not dependent on circumstance, but rather on mindset, it is about being conscious of one's life, one's revolt and thus, one's freedom.³⁹

Sisyphus: absurd hero?

This, finally, brings us to the myth of Sisyphus. Who is this Greek mythological figure? In his book *Mythos* (2017) author Stephen Fry describes Sisyphus, the king of Corinth, as a brash, arrogant man. A man who, through his lying, cunning and trickery managed to cheat both Thanatos and Persephone and thus escape the underworld no less than two times. When

³⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 42.

³⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 45-46.

Sisyphus' time on earth eventually runs out, it is Hermes' honour and duty to guide him to the underworld. However, instead of simply placing Sisyphus in the fields of punishment, he had contrived a clever way to punish Sisyphus for his insubordination to the gods. Hermes flatters Sisyphus and compliments him on his gumption and intelligence, exclaiming his wonderment for Sisyphus' feat of deception, declaring: "Such an achievement deserves a chance at immortality. Follow me." Sisyphus is then led to a large, underground hall, filled only with a moderately sized hill, at the foot of which a boulder sits. Through a hole in the ceiling, a beam of light files in that illuminates the hall. Hermes explains that on the other side of the hole, the upper world resides. As he points out the hole, a hatch closes and the light disappears. It is then, that Hermes makes his offer: if Sisyphus can manage to push the boulder all the way up the hill, the hatch will open and he will be free to return to the upper world and enjoy immortality. If he does not take the offer, he will be escorted to Elysium, where he will spend eternity in happy comfort; but if he chooses the boulder, he will have to keep trying until he succeeds. As we all know, fuelled by hubris, Sisyphus starts pushing as hard as he can. He comes far, but with just one fingernail's length between him and immortality, the rock slips and thunders down the hill. Yet, Sisyphus remains optimistic and thinks to himself that if he just goes a bit slower and conserves his energy, he will make it. According to myth, Sisyphus is still there, pushing the boulder, believing he can do it.⁴⁰

Naturally, every myth knows multiple narrations; in Camus' telling of Sisyphus' tale the focus lies mostly on what happens to Sisyphus after he has reached the underworld. The inexorable determination that drives Sisyphus to keep pushing the boulder for all eternity, in continuous attempt to spite the gods, is what makes him, in the eyes of Camus, an absurd

⁴⁰ Stephen Fry, *Mythos* (London: Michael Joseph, 2017), 267-282.

hero; someone who revolts against his faith, against the gods, and lives or attempts to live fully in the passions of earth.⁴¹ Camus says of Sisyphus:

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step towards the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the height and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.⁴²

So, we can conclude, it is Sisyphus' refusal to be defeated that makes him victorious. If we follow Camus' reasoning, Sisyphus' fate does not comprise merely of pushing his rock, but of being miserable, of being defeated. It is this state of consciousness determined in his fate that he confronts and which he resists. "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."⁴³

Camus utilises this myth as an analogy to everyday life. He points out that Sisyphus' drudging with the rock is no different from the labour performed in factories, or any other life in the absurd universe, for that matter.⁴⁴ The only universal truth we can live by, is the absurd and its consequences: the hopelessness of our fate, to which the only remedy is continual confrontation, revolt and scorn.

⁴¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 87.

⁴² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 87.

⁴³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 88.

⁴⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 87.

Conclusions

For the past two years, the medical and scientific community has done everything in its power to bridle the COVID-19 pandemic that has disturbed societies all over the earth. From the first confirmed case in February 2020 until the current lockdown during the holiday season of 2021/22. But how can the last two years be characterised? We can all remember the first articles about a new, potentially deadly virus that was discovered in China. However, most people were not immediately startled by this news. The reasoning was that, like in the case of Ebola, the virus would never significantly manifest within the safe comforts of the western world. Soon after, the first cases in The Netherlands were a fact and people slowly stopped turning a blind eye; it was at this time that absurdity first made its uncomfortable presence felt.

Like in *LP*, when people finally realise the gravity of the situation, panic strikes. It is then up to both government and scientists, such as virologists and epidemiologists, to come up with a plan of action and, perhaps most importantly, communicate this plan to the public in order to settle the unease that is felt throughout society. As becomes clear already, the immediate reaction is to flee the confrontation with absurdity. In March of 2020 the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte holds the first of many press conferences to inform his nation about the current status of the virus whilst also trying to preserve the people's trust, which is greatly needed in order for people to remain willing to comply to all sorts of measures.⁴⁵ Behind the scenes, work on an effective vaccine has already begun. A large body of knowledge about coronaviruses, the group to which the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes

⁴⁵ "Maart 2020: Maatregelen tegen verspreiding coronavirus, intelligente lockdown," Rijksoverheid, published March 2020, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn/maart-2020-maatregelen-tegen-verspreiding-coronavirus>.

COVID-19 belongs, already existed prior to the beginning of the pandemic; this enabled a vastly accelerated vaccine development. But of course, at the time, this was mere conjecture and in his press conferences, prime minister Rutte prepared us for the ‘new normal’; a popular concept in Dutch media during the first stages of the pandemic, referring to the adapted lifestyle one was expected to adopt in order to contribute to the minimisation of COVID’s spread. This concept turned out to be of fluid definition: at first, it comprised of little more than social distancing and hand-washing; then, the ‘intelligent lockdown’ and wearing a facemask in public spaces; and later, COVID testing was made accessible.

When summer finally began, people got more optimistic. Even though virologists had long before explained that viruses like the one that causes COVID-19 survive for a shorter time under hot conditions, with dry air and more sunlight, people still took the decreasing infection rate as a cause for celebration and a reason to loosen restrictions. Of course, this is not a strange decision, the economic impact of lockdowns in the majority of the world was immense, but there is also a significant element of emotional exhaustion, not being able to withstand the temptation of fleeing the situation at hand and choosing to see an overly optimistic scenario, despite the professional opinion of scientists and medical professionals worldwide. One could even argue that the economic arguments are employed in order to satisfy this urge to return to the status quo as it was before the pandemic, or at the very least, that this urge lies deeper in man’s nature than the desire to uphold economic stability. As the summer drew to a close, the infection rates were already increasing; as the temperatures started dropping, the spread of the virus escalated further. Absurdity once again made itself felt.

On the 8th of December 2020, the first vaccine that was not part of research, but of a national vaccination programme, was administered to an elderly lady in the UK.⁴⁶ This was regarded globally as the beginning of the end of COVID, the ultimate solution to the problem that had pestered the world for almost a whole year. Although the vaccines have proven to be effective in containing the virus and reduce the strain that has been put on hospitals, retirement homes and healthcare professionals by the pandemic, they were not the panacea that many envisioned them to be; unfortunately, while the vaccines were being distributed, a new variant of SARS-CoV-2 was discovered in the UK, the Delta-variant. This mutated version of the virus turned out to have a demonstrably higher morbidity and mortality. The increase in both morbidity and mortality disrupted man's attempt to resume 'normal' life. Another winter of lockdowns followed, but as vaccination rates, especially in the western world, steadily increased throughout 2021, the world seemed to very slowly find a new, workable status quo that includes COVID, in which preventive measures were being gradually phased out and life began to resemble that of the pre-COVID-era. Stability seems to ensue, until, as the days grew shorter, scientists yet again discovered a new variant, Omicron, about which not much is currently known, except for the fact that infection rates have shot up even faster than before. As previously, absurdity struck man in the face.

Negating absurdity

There is a discernible cycle of man reluctantly coming face to face with the absurd nature of our world, and then doing everything in his power to negate this absurdity by projecting his

⁴⁶ "Covid-19 vaccine: First person receives Pfizer jab in UK," BBC, published December 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-55227325>.

own rhyme and reason onto the randomness that is our universe. Everything man does, is fleeing the absurd. In science there exists a paradigm focussed on the identification of problems, followed by an attempted solution of this problem. At any instance where absurdity presents itself, a new problem is diagnosed, a new enemy determined; in this delineation of an obstacle lies automatically the hope over overcoming it. Absurdity is continuously swept under the rug.

Another symptom of the problem-solving-paradigm's aversion for absurdity is found in its tendency towards abstraction; the same abstraction that Dr. Rieux is accused of by Rambert in *LP*. Though Rieux is initially offended, he eventually recognises that, as a doctor, he cannot consider every aspect of every patient; he cannot worry about a family wishing to say goodbye to their loved one, he can only worry about the risk of infection. He cannot actually focus on the patient, since he has to focus on the disease; the patient has become his disease and the disease has become the patient. The same exact thing goes for the nurses and doctors of this pandemic. Not only medicine in practice, but the entirety of the scientific method produces abstraction. The first year of the pandemic is remembered in part by the daily push notifications informing the public on the daily death tolls, hospital admissions, infections and so on. This information was meant to educate and warn, but it was simultaneously and ultimately an abstraction. A prime example of what Camus construed as humans wanting to understand, but merely being able to describe; science and statistics take the human experience of absurdity, in the form of death, anxiety and fear, which cannot be contained by reason alone, and abstract or even obscure it into a comprehensible fact or number. Science creates something that the grips of human reason can reach, albeit a referent to something which cannot be rationalised. A death toll of one thousand people is easily grasped, it guilelessly describes a fact and one can even visualise or imagine this quantity of people, but this number alone does not represent the absurd randomness encapsulated in the

passing of the lives it describes. Rieux admits that he does not know whether he speaks the language of reason, he only knows that he speaks the language of facts.⁴⁷

Naturally, there is no solution or straightforward alternative to scientific abstraction. As Rieux said in *LP*: “when an abstraction starts to kill you, you have to get to work on it.”⁴⁸ Healthcare workers are not at fault here. The truth is that there can exist no science without abstraction, no medicine either. I am speaking here of what Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek would refer to as *unknown knowns*: the shadows of knowledge and belief that do not reach our consciousness but that affect us nonetheless.⁴⁹ We could never dispel abstraction entirely, we can only try to be aware of its workings, for reason would not permit is to fathom the unabstracted reality of absurdity in its ubiquity.

Today’s absurd hero

What has become evident is that all man does is flee the absurd; every attempt made to structure experience is an attempt to eclipse absurdity. Nonetheless, the absurd will always make itself felt, no matter how inexhaustible our drive for clarity. Of course, the workings of this human mechanism are exemplified and exacerbated by the pandemic, but the absurdity of life has not increased, nor will it ever decrease, it is our only constant. As Camus described in *MS*, it is the disturbance of life’s regular cadence, the pandemic, that provokes man’s urge to reconcile his life with the terms he set for it.⁵⁰ What, then, do we make of Sisyphus, Camus’ absurd hero, within the context of our world? Sisyphus, to Camus, is an absurd hero

⁴⁷ Camus, *The Plague*, 68.

⁴⁸ Camus, *The Plague*, 69.

⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “What Rumsfeld doesn’t Know That He Knows about Abu Ghraib,” *In These Times*, May 21, 2004.

⁵⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 12.

on the grounds that he continually revolts against absurdity, against his fate. The absurd hero is someone who embraces earthly passions and faces the randomness with stubborn determination.

Sisyphus' situation might not translate flawlessly to our world. Arguably, Sisyphus displays belief in the very hope Camus so explicitly condemns; he keeps trying to break the shackles that chain him to his rock. In this sense, Sisyphus is a hopelessly hopeful man, who has enslaved himself to his Gods by embracing the fate he wishes to overcome. To take this perspective, however, is to disregard the message Camus intends to convey through the analogy of Sisyphus. "Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth", Camus wrote.⁵¹ If one wishes to be happy in this world, absurdity must be recognised. It is the refusal to do this that makes us unable to acknowledge Sisyphus' chance at happiness. We reject absurdity, so we reject Sisyphus' happiness. "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."⁵² Of course, this is not only the case for Sisyphus, but for ourselves as well. The thematisation of this pandemic is still one of finding a solution to a problem, and absurdity is still constantly rejected. We still live for the future, for after the pandemic; all the while denying and fleeing from the present. This the exact same attitude that Cottard, who revelled in the absurd, accused his fellow townspeople of in *LP*.

Perhaps, we need our own absurd hero, a figure that represents guidance in this pandemic. We know of people who already fulfil the role of spokesperson, displaying authority and leadership, but not in a manner that embraces the absurd, like Jaap van Dissel, director of the Centre for Infectious Disease Control of the National Institute for Public Health and Environment. Van Dissel does what he is supposed to do: he informs the public on the advancements of the virus and the endeavours to restrain its spread; but in doing so, he

⁵¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 88.

⁵² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 89.

also perpetuates the use of abstractions as a means to escape the absurd, he is the face of science identifying problems and trying to find solutions and, thus, of hope. We use this guidance of scientists and politicians to shield ourselves from absurdity, but the absurd can penetrate the strongest of defences. Our absurd hero should guide us not through medical and epidemiological information, thus contributing to false hope of banishing absurdity forever, but through bringing the experience of absurdity into consciousness; enticing people to revolt against it. What we need to realise, is that this pandemic is not only about death, because death is already a certainty. This pandemic is about absurdity and the existential dread it has put into our lives. Every time the presence of absurdity becomes too uncomfortable, too palpably present, we create a new escape: new problems and new hope. But there is no booster jab that will make us immune to the absurdity that arises and will always arise from our experience of life.

What was written in between the lines of *LP* has been made explicit in *MS*: “At any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face.”⁵³ This phenomenon is not limited to pestilence, and similar subtexts of absurdity can be found in Camus’ other works, such as *Caligula* and *L’Étranger*. In every aspect of our lives, at all times, under any circumstance, absurdity can present itself. This is the reason that we must imagine ourselves happy; we cannot keep hoping for some deus ex machina that saves humanity from the pandemic. Even if we were released from the pandemic this instant, absurdity would soon enough present itself again, and again, forcing us back into the escapism of abstraction and rejection.

If we were to search for our own absurd hero, I must concede that it would be impossible to unambiguously assign this role to one person. Revolt cannot be externalised, cannot be pursued vicariously through any politician or public figure. If man is to live without

⁵³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 10.

hope, if he is to come eye to eye with the absurdity his experience brings into existence, he must dare look into the abyss over which he lives. Man must accept that there is no 'normal' for him to know and, thus, that he can never be comforted by the experience of certainty. Man must, as Sisyphus, scorn the randomness of this universe and be superior to the fate that is thrown in his lap by chance. In man's life, there can only be one absurd hero: man himself.

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