

# Pandemic Philosophy

## Fourth Lecture

**Dr. Andrew Fiala**  
**Department of Philosophy**  
**Fresno State**



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## Pandemic Philosophy Schedule/Plan

- September 8: The Bioethical
- September 15: The Political
- September 22: The Spiritual
- September 29: The Existential
  - Metaphors
    - Sickness
    - Immunity
    - Contagion
    - Plague
  - Existentialism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century
    - Sartre, *Nausea*
    - Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*
    - Camus, *The Plague*
  - Healing and Hope

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## What is the value of philosophy?

- Precision in thinking and in language
- “What can be said at all can be said clearly”
- “Philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday.”

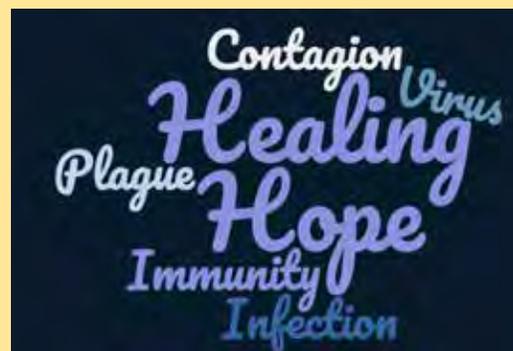


Ludwig Wittgenstein  
1889-1951

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## Pandemic Metaphors

- Disease/Illness/Sickness
- Immunity
- Contagion
- Plague
- Virus
- Infection
- Pathology
- Healing



- These are medical words... but they apply to social, political, and ethical life

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## A slip of the tongue...? Sept. 15, 2020

- Trump defended his repeated assertion that the virus will eventually disappear even without a vaccine, citing what he called "**herd mentality**," an apparent reference to "herd immunity."
- ABC News' Chief Anchor George Stephanopoulos asked Trump whether the coronavirus "would go away without the vaccine?"
- "Sure, over a period of time. Sure, with time it goes away --" Trump responded.
- Stephanopoulos interjected: "--And many deaths."
- "And you'll develop, **you'll develop herd -- like a herd mentality**. It's going to be -- it's going to be herd developed - and that's going to happen. That will all happen."
- The Washington Post calculated that nearly three million Americans would have to die for the U.S. to reach herd immunity without a vaccine.
  - <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/15/herd-mentality-trump-again-asserts-coronavirus-disappear/5812463002/>



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## Herd Mentality

- Politics is concerned with herds rather than with individuals, and the passions which are important in politics are, therefore, those in which the various members of a given herd can feel alike. The broad instinctive mechanism upon which political edifices have to be built is one of co-operation within the herd and hostility towards other herds.
  - Russell, "Nobel Prize Lecture" 1950



**Bertrand Russell,**  
1872 – 1970

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## A troubling metaphor

<https://andrewfiala.com/coronavirus-pandemic-is-not-a-war>

- To call the pandemic a war shows a failure of imagination.
- President Trump claimed he is a wartime president. The Governor of North Carolina said, "This pandemic is a war, and we need the armor to fight it." Finance gurus want to issue coronavirus war bonds. Foreign policy pundits are saying absurd things like, "We need to fight a holding action on the economic front." The Head of NATO said we are fighting "a common invisible enemy."
- This is nonsense. Wars are intentional actions that deliberately kill human beings. The enemy is a person serving a government. War is a political act involving the conscious decisions of moral agents.



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## A troubling metaphor

<https://andrewfiala.com/coronavirus-pandemic-is-not-a-war>

- A virus is a force of nature. It has no intentionality. A pandemic has no political agenda. There are no enemies here. There is no one to negotiate with. There will be no peace treaty.
- The war metaphor makes us think in nationalistic terms. But a pandemic is a global problem. Nationalism prevents cooperative action. We don't need a wartime president. We need a global team of scientists and doctors.



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## Immunity

- Trump v. Vance (2020)
  - The President seeking to avoid releasing tax information to Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance, Jr.
- The President argued... “that a sitting President enjoys **absolute immunity** from state criminal process under Article II and the Supremacy Clause.”
- Court Concluded: “a **President does not possess absolute immunity** from a state criminal subpoena.”

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## Immunity

- Qualified Immunity for Law Enforcement
  - <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-controversy-over-qualified-immunity/>



'Qualified Immunity': A Doctrine That Made It Much Harder To Sue The Police

NPR:

<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872470083/qualified-immunity-a-doctrine-that-made-it-much-harder-to-sue-the-police>

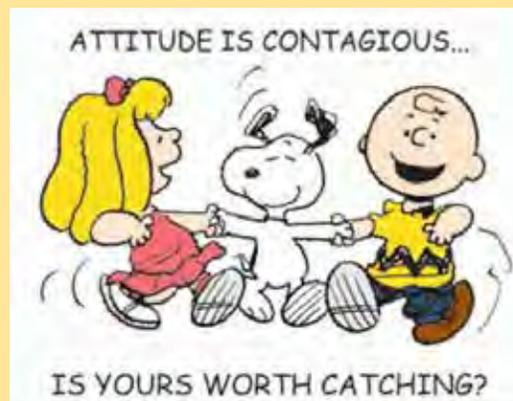
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# Contagion

## Emotional Contagion

Negative emotions magnified by feedback loops

BUT: positive emotions are also be contagious



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# Contagion and Social Media

A study of nearly 700,000 Facebook users suggests we can pick up on — and mirror — the emotions we encounter in our social media feeds too.

"We found that when good things were happening in your news feed — to your friends and your family — you also tended to write more positively and less negatively," says Jeff Hancock, a communications researcher at Stanford University and author of the two studies on digital interactions. And the reverse was true too. Viewing more negative posts prompted people to write more sad or angry things. Overall, the effects were very small, compared with what has been documented in face-to-face interactions, "but [the study] suggested that emotions can move through networks through contagion," Hancock says.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/02/25/697052006/anger-can-be-contagious-heres-how-to-stop-the-spread>

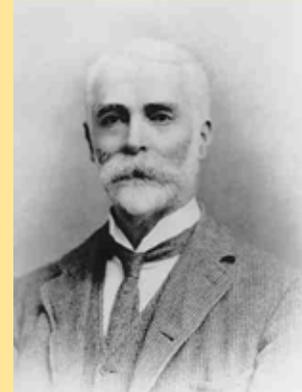


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## Education as Contagion

- Modelling virtue vs. “giving principles as pills”
- Everything is contagious. We are all of us always communicating ideas, and more especially moral ideas.
- Contagion is always communicating moral ideas; and contagion, perhaps, after all is said and done, remains the only certain way.

- Bernard Bosanquet, “The Communication of Moral Ideas” *International Journal of Ethics* 1890

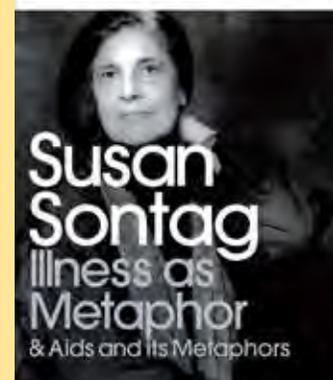
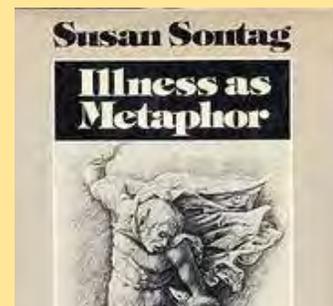


**Bernard Bosanquet**  
1848–1923

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## Illness as Metaphor: Disease, Guilt, Punishment, Invasion

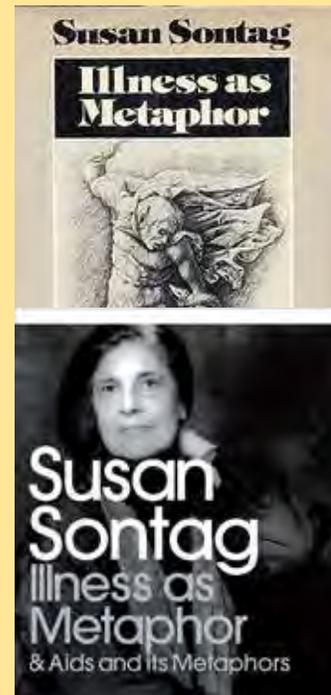
- Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor, Aids and Its Metaphors, Regarding the Pain of Others*
- Disease as a “mysterious malevolency”
- Tuberculosis and cancer: the body is “consumed” by a foreign invader (the tumor, TB as “consumption”)
- “Illness is a species of invasion.”
- Shameful “sexually transmitted disease” and “animal origin” of diseases



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## Disease, Guilt, Punishment, Invasion

- The persistence of the belief that illness reveals, and is a punishment for, moral laxity or turpitude can be seen in another way, by noting the persistence of descriptions of disorder or corruption as a disease. So indispensable has been the plague metaphor in bringing summary judgments about social crisis...
- **The plague metaphor was common in the 1930's as a synonym for social and psychic catastrophe.**



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## Infections, Pests, and Slaughtering the Other

- Black Plague → Burning of Jews
  - 1340's and 50's: "Jews were accused of poisoning food, wells and streams, tortured into confessions, rounded up in city squares or their synagogues, and exterminated en masse"
  - Example:
    - Basel: authorities baptized 130 Jewish children and burned 600 adults alive on the sandbank of the Rhine
    - (Samuel Cohn, "The Black Death and the Burning of Jews")



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## *The White Disease* (1937) by Karel Čapek

- Fascist Dictator (“the Marshal”) uses epidemic fear to gain power
- Doctor to the Marshal:
- Your excellency, we are honored by your presence. We know too well how slight our achievements are compared to your work to save us from the bane of our nation: **the pest of anarchy, an epidemic of barbarian freedom, the leprosy of corruption, the plague of social decay, which has afflicted and nearly collapsed the organism of our nation.** I pay homage to you as the greatest of all healers, who has cured us all of national leprosy with radical, but life-saving therapy.



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJMUIBEzYnl&feature=emb\\_err\\_woyt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJMUIBEzYnl&feature=emb_err_woyt)

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## Hitler, January 30, 1944

- Anyone sold to Jewry as England did will sooner or later die of this plague, unless he manages to pull himself together at the last minute and remove these bacteria from his body by force. The view that it is possible to live together peacefully or obtain a reconciliation between your own interests and those of this ferment of the decomposition of nations is like hoping that the human body will be capable of assimilating the plague bacillus in the long run.
- <http://www.nommeraadio.ee/meedia/pdf/RRS/Adolf%20Hitler%20-%20Collection%20of%20Speeches%20-%201922-1945.pdf>



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## Richard A. Koenigsberg “Genocide as Immunology”

- Nazi Ideology
- The state/people is an organism
- The nation possesses an immune system
- Jews (Bolsheviks and others) are like bacteria (“a poisonous bacillus”)
- Hitler as the “doctor,” who diagnosed the disease and prescribed the cure
- The solution is to exterminate the other and purify the social body

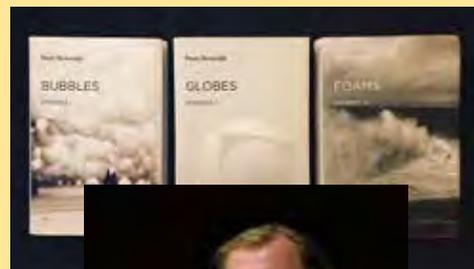


- <https://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/newsletter/posts/2018/2018-12-11-immunology.html>

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## Immunity Peter Sloterdijk: Bubbles, Spheres, and Foams

- Spheres immunize against outside threats
- Spheres are environments with immune systems
- Spheres protect us from the outside
- Spheres contain an “ambiance” or environment = a place to dwell
- Spheres can merge and divide (like cells, bubbles, sexual reproduction, nations)
- Examples
  - Cells and Bodies
  - Caves and Homes (cf. pandemic social bubble)
  - State
  - Religion



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## Social Distance Bubbles and Quarantine Pods

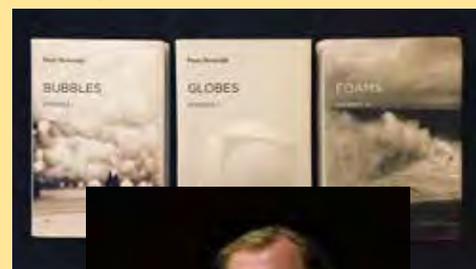


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## Immunity

### Peter Sloterdijk: Three Immune Systems

- Biological
- Psychological
- Social/Cultural
  
- PROBLEM: Rival spheres compete
- SOLUTION: Need to evolve global co-immunity



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## Immunity

### Peter Sloterdijk: *You Must Change Your Life* (2009)

- The subsystems still exist in mutual rivalry, following a logic that repeatedly turns the immune gains of some into the immune losses of others. Humanity does not constitute a super-organism, as some theorists prematurely claim; it is, for the time being, no more than an aggregate of higher-level organisms which are by no means already integrated into an operational unity of the highest order.
- **All history is the history of immune system battles.** It is identical to the history of protectionism and externalization. Protection always refers to a local self, and externalization to an anonymous environment for which no one takes responsibility. This history spans the period of human evolution in which the victories of the own could only be bought with the defeat of the foreign.



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## Sloterdijk:

### Co-Immunity, Pandemics and Climate Change

<https://www.noemamag.com/co-immunity-an-ethos-for-our-age-of-climate-change/>

- Most people have only very vague ideas about what the term “immune system” really means. On the biological level, it designs the inner defense and protection structures of an organism. That is why one could go as far as to say: “Life itself is the success phase of an immune system.”
- Immunity, however, is not limited to an individual organism — and this is exactly what one has to learn with all its radical consequences. The security of groups depends on the faculty of its members to provide each other with the advantages of individual and collective immunity combined. So what we call “herd immunity” — a term occurring quite often these days — is a form of deep mutualism that means a state of protection that can only be reached collectively. That is why I have coined the term co-immunity. It is part of a moral-political reflection leading to a new definition of togetherness.
- **The coronavirus pandemic is an emergency strongly hinting that the co-immunity imperative has arrived. In this crisis, one can already see that there is no real private property of immunity advantages. The virus ignores national borders, fences and walls. Now, the moment has come to share the means of protection even with the most distant members of the family of man/woman.**

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## Existentialist Literature

- The Plague is Everywhere...
- In our dreams
- In the social world
- Existence is a sickness
- Hope: in the healers...



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## Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea (1938)

- *My thought is me: that's why I can't stop. I exist because I think... and I can't stop myself from thinking. At this very moment - it's frightful - if I exist, it is because I am horrified at existing. I am the one who pulls myself from the nothingness to which I aspire.*



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## Sarte, *La Nausée*

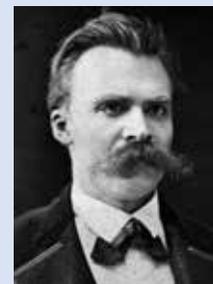
The word Absurdity is emerging under my pen; a little while ago, in the garden, I couldn't find it, but neither was I looking for it, I didn't need it: I thought without words, on things, with things. Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the breath of a voice, only this long serpent dead at my feet, this serpent of wood. Serpent or claw or root or vulture's talon, what difference does it make? And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the clue to existence, the clue to my nauseas, to my own life.



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## Nietzsche, European Culture is Sick *Beyond Good and Evil* (1882)

- To work at the preservation of everything sick and suffering, which means in fact and truth at the corruption of the European race?
- A shrunken, almost ludicrous species, a herd animal, something full of good will, sickly and mediocre has been bred, the European of today.

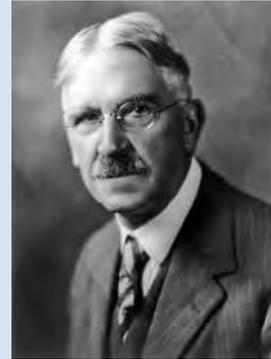


Friedrich Nietzsche  
1844-1900

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## John Dewey, “A Sick World” (1923)

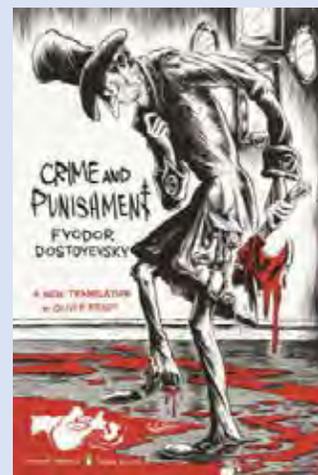
- The pathology of social life appears to be its exciting and interesting part.
- The world has always been more or less a sick world. The isles of harmony and health with which we dot the map of human history are largely constructions of the imagination, cities of refuge against present ills, resorts for solace in troubles now endured. But it may be doubted if the consciousness of sickness was ever so widespread as it is today.
- A cured body or mind is in no sense the same thing as a healthy, vitally growing mind or body... Cure is a negative idea; health is a positive one. The interest in cures and salvations is evidence of how sick the world is.



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## The Plague of Nihilism: Raskolnikov's Dream Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

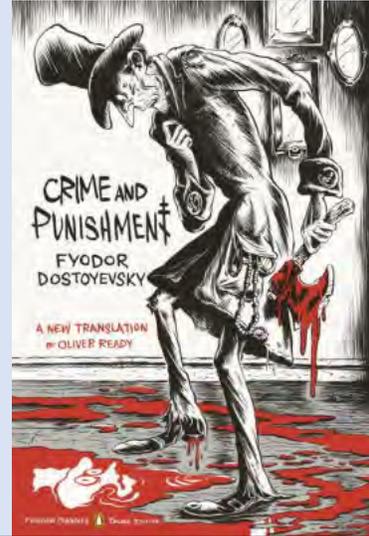
- Epilogue: Raskolnikov in prison in Siberia
- Illness, Fever, Delirium...
- What had he to live for? What had he to look forward to? Why should he strive? To live in order to exist? Why, he had been ready a thousand times before to give up existence for the sake of an idea, for a hope, even for a fancy. Mere existence had always been too little for him; he had always wanted more. Perhaps it was just because of the strength of his desires that he had thought himself a man to whom more was permissible than to others.



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## The Plague of Nihilism: Raskolnikov's Dream Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

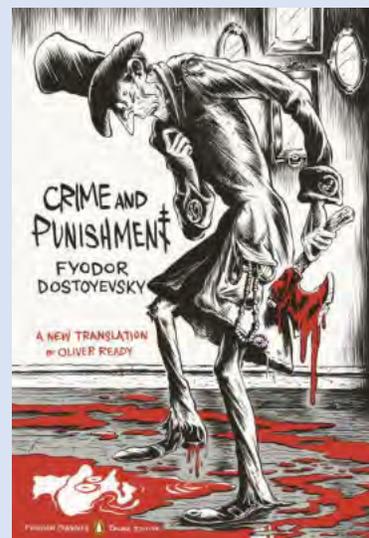
- He dreamt that the whole world was condemned to a terrible new strange plague that had come to Europe from the depths of Asia. All were to be destroyed except a very few chosen. Some new sorts of microbes were attacking the bodies of men, but these microbes were endowed with intelligence and will. Men attacked by them became at once mad and furious. But never had men considered themselves so intellectual and so completely in possession of the truth as these sufferers, never had they considered their decisions, their scientific conclusions, their moral convictions so infallible. Whole villages, whole towns and peoples went mad from the infection.



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## The Plague of Nihilism: Raskolnikov's Dream Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

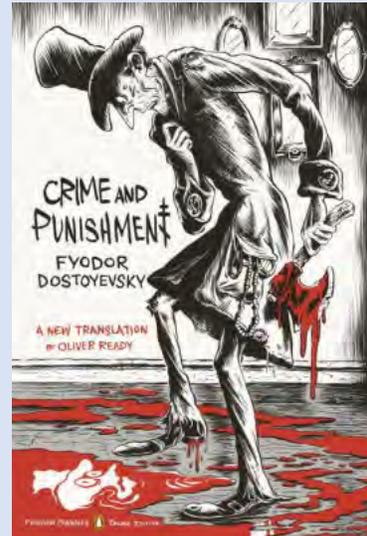
- All were excited and did not understand one another. Each thought that he alone had the truth and was wretched looking at the others, beat himself on the breast, wept, and wrung his hands. They did not know how to judge and could not agree what to consider evil and what good; they did not know whom to blame, whom to justify. Men killed each other in a sort of senseless spite.



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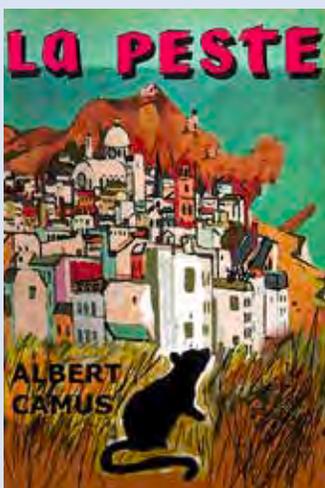
## The Plague of Nihilism: Raskolnikov's Dream Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

- The land too was abandoned. Men met in groups, agreed on something, swore to keep together, but at once began on something quite different from what they had proposed. They accused one another, fought and killed each other. There were conflagrations and famine. All men and all things were involved in destruction. The plague spread and moved further and further. Only a few men could be saved in the whole world. They were a pure chosen people, destined to found a new race and a new life, to renew and purify the earth, but no one had seen these men, no one had heard their words and their voices.



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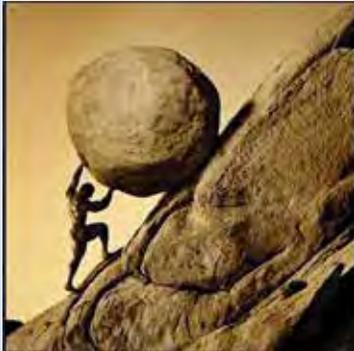
## Albert Camus: The Plague and Common Decency



Albert Camus  
1913 –1960

*The Plague*  
1947

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## Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus* 1942



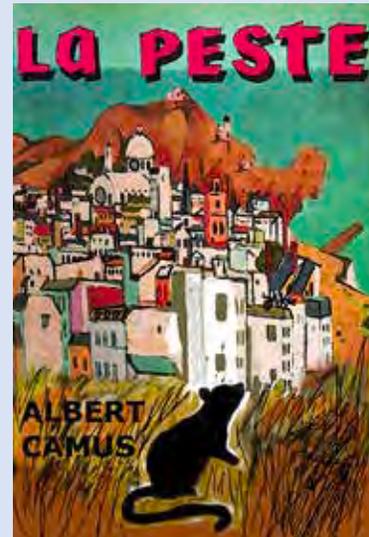
*One must imagine Sisyphus happy.*

*I can perform absurd work, choose the creative attitude rather than another. But an absurd attitude, if it is to remain so, must remain aware of its gratuitousness.*

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## Camus, *The Plague* (1947)

- Boring, normal town → the rats begin to die
- People are worried but go on about their business → people begin to die
- The town is sealed off: Exile, Isolation, Separation, Panic, Despair
- There are “collaborators” and people in denial → and a few “heroes” who try to help
- The Moral?
  - Endurance, persistence, and truth
  - Ordinary people living decent lives of quiet compassion
  - Solidarity and Truth: working together to fight within modest limits
  - Sympathy = Rescuing the Victims



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## Camus: The Context of Le Chambon

- 1942: Camus stuck in Panelier (recovering from Tuberculosis)—two miles from Le Chambon-sur-Lignon
- In Le Chambon, André Trocmé and others led a rescue effort for Jews during Vichy (Nazi) regime—saving 3,500 Jewish children
- Camus likely knew about the rescue operation



See:  
<https://wagingnonviolence.org/podcast/albert-camus-the-plague-nonviolent-resistance-rescue-wwii-coronavirus/>  
 AND: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/albert-camus-le-chambon>

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## Camus: The Context of Le Chambon

- In 1943, while in Paris, Camus sent a Jewish woman to Le Chambon with a coded note:
  - “I’m sending someone to you who has a hereditary infection.”
- The Nazis as “rats” and “brown pests”
- The plot of *The Plague*: rescuing those who fall victim to the plague against a backdrop of indifference



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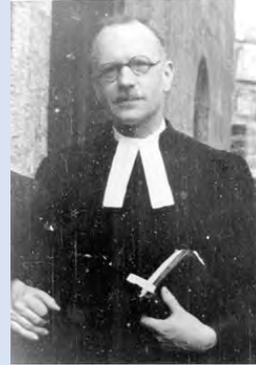
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## The Context of Le Chambon

André Trocmé and Edouard Theis, Sermon June 23, 1940

Tremendous pressure will be put on us to submit passively to a totalitarian ideology. If they do not succeed in subjugating our souls, at least they will want to subjugate our bodies. The duty of Christians is to use the weapons of the spirit to oppose the violence that they will try to put on our consciences. We appeal to all our brothers in Christ to refuse to cooperate with this violence

...



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## The Context of Le Chambon

André Trocmé and Edouard Theis, Sermon June 23, 1940

Loving, forgiving, and doing good to our adversaries is our duty. Yet we must do this without giving up, and without being cowardly. We shall resist whenever our adversaries demand of us obedience contrary to the orders of the gospel. We shall do so without fear, but also without pride and without hate.

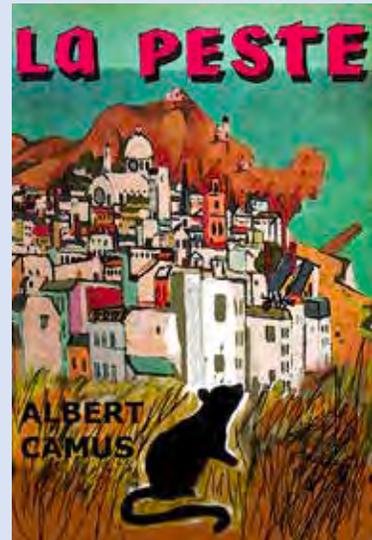


André Trocmé: *"We do not know what a Jew is. We only know men."*

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## Camus, *The Plague* (1947) Modern Humanism vs. Pestilence

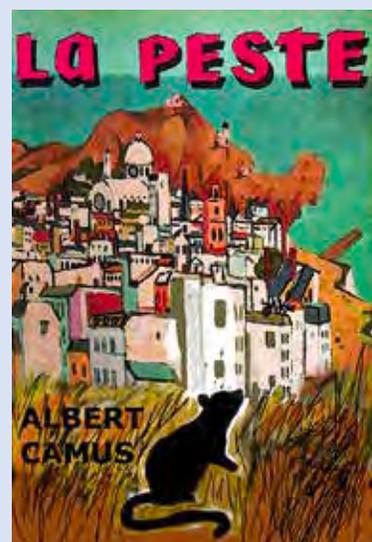
- Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise.



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## Camus: Modern Humanism vs. Pestilence

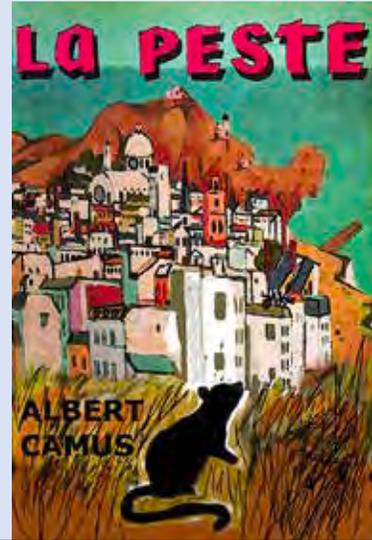
- In this respect, our townsfolk were like everybody else, wrapped up in themselves; in other words they were humanists: they disbelieved in pestilence.
- A pestilence isn't a thing made to man's measure; therefore we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn't always pass away...



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## Camus: Modern Humanism vs. Pestilence

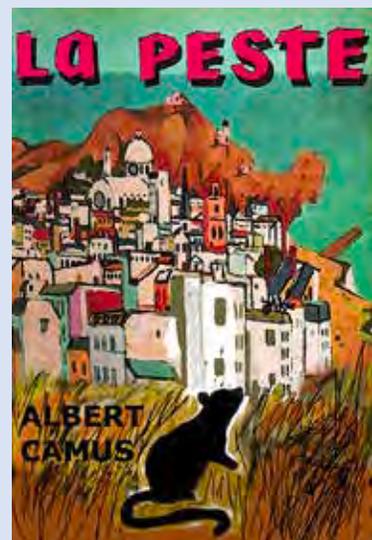
- Our townsfolk were not more to blame than others; they forgot to be modest, that was all, and thought that everything still was possible for them; which presupposed the pestilences were impossible.
- How should they have given a thought to anything like plague, which rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views. They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences.



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## Camus: Abandonment and solitude

- Thus each of us had to be content to live only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky. This sense of being abandoned, which might in time have given characters a finer temper, began, however, by sapping them to the point of futility.
- In this extremity of solitude none could count on any help from his neighbor; each had to bear the load of his troubles alone.



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## The Existentialist Hero: Truth, Duty, Sympathy

- A man who was sick and tired of the world he lived in—though he had much liking for his fellow men—and had resolved, for his part, to have no truck with injustice and compromises with the truth.
- The evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding. On the whole, men are more good than bad; that, however, isn't the real point. But they are more or less ignorant, and it is this that we call vice or virtue; the most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance that fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill. The soul of the murderer is blind; and there can be no true goodness nor true love without the utmost clear-sightedness.



**Albert Camus**  
1913 –1960

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## The Existentialist Hero: Truth, Duty, Sympathy

- We do not congratulate a schoolmaster on teaching that two and two make four...
- This good will of theirs was one that is shared by the schoolmaster and by all who have the same feelings as the schoolmaster, and, be it said to the credit of mankind, they are more numerous than one would think.
- Again and again there comes a time in history when the man who dares to say that two and two make four is punished with death. The schoolteacher is well aware of this. And the question is not one of knowing what punishment or reward attends the making of this calculation. The question is that of knowing whether two and two do make four. For those of our townfolk who risked their lives in this predicament the issue was whether or not plague was in their midst and whether or not they must fight against it.



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## The Existentialist Hero: Truth, Duty, Sympathy

- There's no question of heroism in all this. It's a matter of common decency. That's an idea which may make some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is — common decency.
- The path for attaining peace is "the path of sympathy."
- I feel more fellowship with the defeated than with saints. Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me. What interests me is being a man.



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## The Existentialist Hero: Truth, Duty, Sympathy

- Each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it. And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a care- less moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. 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. The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention.



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## The Existentialist Hero: Truth, Duty, Sympathy

- I've learned modesty. All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences. That may sound simple to the point of childishness; I can't judge if it's simple, but I know it's true.
- ALSO: true healers. But it's a fact one doesn't come across many of them, and anyhow it must be a hard vocation. That's why I decided to take, in every predicament, the victims' side, so as to reduce the damage done.



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## Conclusions...



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## Bearing Witness to Suffering... And to Decency

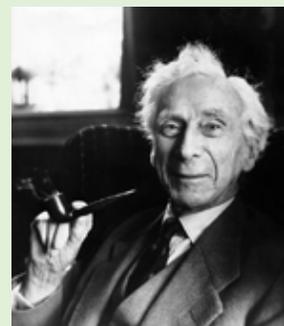
- He should bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.
- Refuse to bow down to pestilences and strive your utmost to be a healer.



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## Education

- I would say, in conclusion, that if what I have said is right, the main thing needed to make the world happy is intelligence. And this, after all, is an optimistic conclusion, because intelligence is a thing that can be fostered by known methods of education.
- Russell, "Nobel Prize Lecture" 1950



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## Lessons Learned

- Pandemics, plagues, disease are woven into the history of philosophy
- Philosophy aims at “health” → wholeness, and happiness
- Keys: Critical thinking, virtue, modesty, self-control
- Controlling Emotions (“Fire” and “Rage”) = Stoicism
- Reality of loss, death, and disease = Objectivity of Truth
- Big Questions and Conflicting Values: Religious Liberty, God’s Will, Political Polarization
- Pandemic Metaphors
- Bearing Witness to Suffering
- Healing...

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## Hope and Progress

<https://andrewfiala.com/progress-is-possible-and-hope-sheds-light/>

- Incremental change is tedious. It takes persistent effort. The good it produces is slow in arriving and unexciting once it gets here. But lasting improvement occurs through painstaking effort.
- In a crisis, despair can set in quickly. When things appear to be falling apart, it is easy to throw in the towel. That’s why it is important to recall the progress we have made. When we understand that smart, creative effort improves the world, it is easier to roll up our sleeves and get to work.
- The world will never be perfect. But it won’t get better unless we believe that through our efforts it can be improved.



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