



Bioethics Tested by Health Crisis: A Camusian Refiguration of Moral and Health Protocol in The Plague

Chahrazed YOUSFI

¹ University Frères Mentouri Constantine 1 (Algeria),
chahrazed.yousfi1@doc.umc.edu.dz

 Orcid account ID link: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5986-1541>

Received: 10/02/2026

Accepted: 10/03/2026

10/02/2026 10/03/2026 10/04/2026 10/05/2026 10/06/2026 10/07/2026 10/08/2026 10/09/2026 10/10/2026 10/11/2026 10/12/2026 11/01/2026 11/02/2026 11/03/2026 11/04/2026 11/05/2026 11/06/2026 11/07/2026 11/08/2026 11/09/2026 11/10/2026 11/11/2026 11/12/2026 12/01/2026 12/02/2026 12/03/2026 12/04/2026 12/05/2026 12/06/2026 12/07/2026 12/08/2026 12/09/2026 12/10/2026 12/11/2026 12/12/2026 1/01/2027 1/02/2027 1/03/2027 1/04/2027 1/05/2027 1/06/2027 1/07/2027 1/08/2027 1/09/2027 1/10/2027 1/11/2027 1/12/2027 2/01/2028 2/02/2028 2/03/2028 2/04/2028 2/05/2028 2/06/2028 2/07/2028 2/08/2028 2/09/2028 2/10/2028 2/11/2028 2/12/2028 3/01/2029 3/02/2029 3/03/2029 3/04/2029 3/05/2029 3/06/2029 3/07/2029 3/08/2029 3/09/2029 3/10/2029 3/11/2029 3/12/2029 4/01/2030 4/02/2030 4/03/2030 4/04/2030 4/05/2030 4/06/2030 4/07/2030 4/08/2030 4/09/2030 4/10/2030 4/11/2030 4/12/2030 5/01/2031 5/02/2031 5/03/2031 5/04/2031 5/05/2031 5/06/2031 5/07/2031 5/08/2031 5/09/2031 5/10/2031 5/11/2031 5/12/2031 6/01/2032 6/02/2032 6/03/2032 6/04/2032 6/05/2032 6/06/2032 6/07/2032 6/08/2032 6/09/2032 6/10/2032 6/11/2032 6/12/2032 7/01/2033 7/02/2033 7/03/2033 7/04/2033 7/05/2033 7/06/2033 7/07/2033 7/08/2033 7/09/2033 7/10/2033 7/11/2033 7/12/2033 8/01/2034 8/02/2034 8/03/2034 8/04/2034 8/05/2034 8/06/2034 8/07/2034 8/08/2034 8/09/2034 8/10/2034 8/11/2034 8/12/2034 9/01/2035 9/02/2035 9/03/2035 9/04/2035 9/05/2035 9/06/2035 9/07/2035 9/08/2035 9/09/2035 9/10/2035 9/11/2035 9/12/2035 10/01/2036 10/02/2036 10/03/2036 10/04/2036 10/05/2036 10/06/2036 10/07/2036 10/08/2036 10/09/2036 10/10/2036 10/11/2036 10/12/2036 11/01/2037 11/02/2037 11/03/2037 11/04/2037 11/05/2037 11/06/2037 11/07/2037 11/08/2037 11/09/2037 11/10/2037 11/11/2037 11/12/2037 12/01/2038 12/02/2038 12/03/2038 12/04/2038 12/05/2038 12/06/2038 12/07/2038 12/08/2038 12/09/2038 12/10/2038 12/11/2038 12/12/2038 1/01/2039 1/02/2039 1/03/2039 1/04/2039 1/05/2039 1/06/2039 1/07/2039 1/08/2039 1/09/2039 1/10/2039 1/11/2039 1/12/2039 2/01/2040 2/02/2040 2/03/2040 2/04/2040 2/05/2040 2/06/2040 2/07/2040 2/08/2040 2/09/2040 2/10/2040 2/11/2040 2/12/2040 3/01/2041 3/02/2041 3/03/2041 3/04/2041 3/05/2041 3/06/2041 3/07/2041 3/08/2041 3/09/2041 3/10/2041 3/11/2041 3/12/2041 4/01/2042 4/02/2042 4/03/2042 4/04/2042 4/05/2042 4/06/2042 4/07/2042 4/08/2042 4/09/2042 4/10/2042 4/11/2042 4/12/2042 5/01/2043 5/02/2043 5/03/2043 5/04/2043 5/05/2043 5/06/2043 5/07/2043 5/08/2043 5/09/2043 5/10/2043 5/11/2043 5/12/2043 6/01/2044 6/02/2044 6/03/2044 6/04/2044 6/05/2044 6/06/2044 6/07/2044 6/08/2044 6/09/2044 6/10/2044 6/11/2044 6/12/2044 7/01/2045 7/02/2045 7/03/2045 7/04/2045 7/05/2045 7/06/2045 7/07/2045 7/08/2045 7/09/2045 7/10/2045 7/11/2045 7/12/2045 8/01/2046 8/02/2046 8/03/2046 8/04/2046 8/05/2046 8/06/2046 8/07/2046 8/08/2046 8/09/2046 8/10/2046 8/11/2046 8/12/2046 9/01/2047 9/02/2047 9/03/2047 9/04/2047 9/05/2047 9/06/2047 9/07/2047 9/08/2047 9/09/2047 9/10/2047 9/11/2047 9/12/2047 10/01/2048 10/02/2048 10/03/2048 10/04/2048 10/05/2048 10/06/2048 10/07/2048 10/08/2048 10/09/2048 10/10/2048 10/11/2048 10/12/2048 11/01/2049 11/02/2049 11/03/2049 11/04/2049 11/05/2049 11/06/2049 11/07/2049 11/08/2049 11/09/2049 11/10/2049 11/11/2049 11/12/2049 12/01/2050 12/02/2050 12/03/2050 12/04/2050 12/05/2050 12/06/2050 12/07/2050 12/08/2050 12/09/2050 12/10/2050 12/11/2050 12/12/2050

Abstract:

This study conducts a hermeneutic and bioethical analysis of Albert Camus's *The Plague*, examining the novel not as a mere allegory but as a narrative refiguration of moral and sanitary protocol during crisis, as through a comparative lens that juxtaposes the fictional epidemic with the COVID-19 pandemic, the research investigates how the text prefigures contemporary bioethical principles—autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice—while interrogating the roles of the physician, the state, and the citizen in the face of collective vulnerability.

The study concludes that Camus's work anticipates the core dilemmas of modern health crises, particularly the tension between individual liberty and collective safety, where the findings demonstrate that the novel's portrayal of sanitary measures, paternalistic authority, and an ethic of solidarity provides a prophetic framework for understanding the return of consequentialist logic during emergencies, thereby revealing literature's capacity to serve as a vital space for critiquing and comprehending the human dimensions of public health policy.

Keywords: *Bioethics; COVID-19 pandemic; health crisis; hermeneutics; responsibility; solidarity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

“For he knew what this joyous crowd did not know, and what can be read in books: that the plague bacillus never dies or vanishes entirely [...]. The day would come when, for the misfortune and the edification of mankind, the plague would rouse its rats and send them to die in a happy city” (Camus, 1947, p. 278).

When fiction meets reality: Camus’s *The Plague* seems to awaken, reactivate, and metamorphose into a new pathogenic vector, at once invisible, virulent, and adaptable. This scourge struck abruptly, shaking certainties and shattering the comfort of a modern world that believed itself safe from the deadly afflictions of the great pandemics of the past. In 2020, the fictional scenario imagined by Camus found a striking echo in this global crisis; this microscopic virus brutally redrew the contours of the societal order, tracing in history the tragic continuity of great epidemics. At the heart of this ordeal, the pandemic revealed human fragility, but also the strength of solidarity, revolt, and collective engagement. Like the plague that descends upon Oran, it plunged societies into a state of isolation and moral questioning. In a climate of uncertainty, literature once again became a space for reflection on responsibility towards others, the meaning of care, and moral commitment in times of crisis. Among these works, Albert Camus’s *The Plague* has emerged as a seminal text, reviving an ethical and existential reading of the relationship between man, science, and evil.

“We have all, to some extent, become inhabitants of its chapters” (Kaplan & Marris, 2023, p. 61).

The Plague thus appears as a meditation on human dignity and collective responsibility in the face of a scourge, where the duty of care becomes the most concrete expression of revolt and humanism. In our modern world, which considers itself increasingly autonomous, “The autonomy/vulnerability dyad is problematized, and the notion of vulnerability is invoked in a critical relationship to that of autonomy” (Maillard, 2011, p. 14). These questions, exacerbated by the pandemic, find a powerful echo in Camus’s work, where the consciousness of duty and moral lucidity reveal the limits of autonomy in the face of human fragility. Through the figure of Doctor Rieux, Camus illustrates a moral consciousness that acts not out of heroism, but out of duty. Literature here becomes the mirror of our collective becoming: it stages the tension between action and reflection, between the rigor of medical knowledge and the vulnerability of life; indeed, *The Plague* already anticipates contemporary bioethical dilemmas.

This study interrogates the literary representation of the scourge as a mirror of real health crises, analyzing medical responses, emergency protocols, and the moral stakes linked to the care of vulnerable populations. It proposes to read *The Plague* as a space for humanist and bioethical reflection, where literature illuminates the foundations of an ethic of care and responsibility in times of crisis. Thus, the central question guiding this research is as follows:

How does Albert Camus’s *The Plague*, through its poetics of the scourge and the figure of the physician, anticipate the principles of modern bioethics and contemporary care dilemmas, while proposing responses and solutions that resonate with contemporary health emergencies?

To address this question, our analysis rests on three complementary hypotheses:

1. *The Plague* highlights the clinical, scientific, and ethical responses that prefigure the principles of modern bioethics and medical responsibility.
2. The Camusian work illuminates contemporary care dilemmas, revealed notably during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the tension between collective protection and individual freedoms tested established bioethical frameworks.
3. The novel anticipates the recourse to certain paternalistic and consequentialist decisions mobilized during public health emergencies—restrictive measures and lockdowns—showing that extreme crises sometimes force bioethics to suspend certain rules in order to adapt its principles to the imperatives of urgent sanitary needs.

II. The Ethics of Care at the Heart of Plague Literature

Epidemic plagues, cyclical phenomena of human history, have nourished literary production since antiquity—from Thucydide to Defoe, and on to Camus and contemporary narratives of COVID-19, such as Hervé Le Tellier’s *The Anomaly* (2020). These works constitute a privileged space for testimony and reflection on the human condition in the face of the great ordeals of contagion. In *The Plague*, Albert Camus transcends mere testimony to create a moral and philosophical mediation; through the figure of Doctor Rieux, a symbol of lucidity and pragmatism, he unites scientific rigor with humanism. The Camusian chronicle, which depicts a collective affliction, presents itself simultaneously as a clinical observation and as a laboratory of the human condition, for it interrogates man’s capacity to act, to resist, and to mobilize in order to preserve life when confronted with calamity. Within *The Plague*, the poetics and thematics of science are tightly interwoven with the stakes of biomedical ethics, as Camus conjugates the precision of medical observation with an existential reflection on solidarity and duty. The narrative thus becomes the site of a dialogue between science and humanism, between medical reason and moral responsibility.

The work opens an interpretive path whereby literature both anticipates and reflects contemporary bioethical questioning, shedding light on the concrete testing of moral values in a crisis situation: namely, the obligation to resort to strict measures, sometimes at the expense of individual liberties, in order to contain contagion and protect collective health. From this perspective, reading the novel engages a hermeneutic process wherein the contemporary reader’s consciousness reactivates the meaning of the text in light of their own context. According to the Ricœurian logic of Mimesis III (Ricœur, 1991, p. 114), the act of reading becomes a refiguration of the world of the text—an ethical appropriation through which the story of Oran converges with that of our own health crises. To read *The Plague* today is to re-read our protocols, our decisions, and our public health policies through a literary and moral lens that illuminates their human significance. This refiguration makes literature a space for transposing and interpreting reality: the reader’s experience, confronted with the memory of the Camusian scourge, becomes the locus of a critical consciousness. In this sense, the plague is not merely a prophetic fiction; it constitutes a testing ground for moral judgment and a mirror of our collective relationship to health, care, and responsibility.

Bioethics is defined as “the systematic study of human conduct in the area of the life sciences and health care, examined in the light of moral values and principles” (Haut Conseil de la santé publique [HCSP], 2011, p. 74). Since the late 1970s, bioethics has been structured around four foundational principles, now universally recognized: “Respect for the autonomy of the subject (the subject’s capacity to decide, consent), beneficence (achieving favorable consequences), non-maleficence, and equity” (HCSP, 2011, p. 3). These foundations serve to illuminate ethical reflection in times of health crisis, and the Camusian reading resonates fully with this perspective, for it already anticipates the tension between medical responsibility, collective duty, and respect for human dignity in the face of universal fear and vulnerability.

III. Ethical Foundations and Interpretive Approach

Building upon this foundational reflection, it becomes imperative to examine how the Camusian text, when critically illuminated by contemporary bioethical principles, can be apprehended through a nuanced interpretive approach—one that deliberately articulates a close literary reading with the concrete demands of an ethics of care and the profound imperatives of collective responsibility, for this methodological synthesis aims not merely to describe but to highlight the enduring moral and humanist import of *The Plague* by framing it as a unique symbolic laboratory where the abstractions of science, the immediacy of conscience, and the urgency of action dynamically and relentlessly converge. This section, deeply informed by a hermeneutic reflection anchored in the work of Paul Ricoeur—particularly his conception of narrative as a mode of refiguring human time and ethical understanding—and carefully framed

by established bioethical paradigms, proceeds from the conviction that literature constitutes a vital, irreplaceable form of ethical inquiry; it is a mimetic act that does not simply report on crisis but actively constructs a space for its moral comprehension, thereby allowing abstract principles to be tested against the textured grain of imagined yet profoundly authentic experience.

To this end, the study adopts a consciously hermeneutic and comparative methodology, one that involves systematically cross-referencing a sustained literary analysis of Camus's novel with the ethical principles and humanist values that were mobilized, contested, and often severely strained during recent global health crises; the core objective is to move beyond surface-level analogy to understand how Camusian fiction structurally anticipates, vividly models, and critically illuminates the specific moral dilemmas laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing the perennial tensions beneath the contemporary emergency. The analysis therefore rests on a disciplined "mirror reading" between two contexts separated by time yet bound by a common existential fabric: the fictional plague of Oran, a chronicled collective ordeal where doctors, caregivers, and ordinary volunteers confront the scourge with a courage forged in necessity and solidarity, and the very real COVID-19 pandemic, a global event marked by the extraordinary commitment of health personnel who were forced to make urgent, heartbreaking decisions under conditions of radical uncertainty and systemic overload. This parallel reading facilitates more than a comparison of symptoms and policies; it enables a critical examination of the very strategies of response deployed against contagion and exposes the recurrent shortcomings in crisis management—whether they are medical, logistical, institutional, or, most significantly, ethical in nature—thereby revealing a shared narrative arc involving triage, isolation, the anxiety of waiting, and the profound burdens of leadership.

Central to this interpretive framework is the figure of Doctor Bernard Rieux, who emerges not as a simplistic hero but as the pivotal ethical archetype; he embodies an ethics of care founded not on romantic heroism but on a lucid, almost stoic sense of professional duty and human responsibility, a stance that finds its powerful echo in the countless contemporary caregivers who, despite palpable fear and personal risk, persevered in their mission. This deliberate parallel allows us to trace the deep symbolic and moral continuities between the fictional and the real, suggesting that Rieux's enduring relevance lies precisely in his demonstration of an ethical posture that becomes indispensable when standardized protocols fail and when abstract principles collide with the brutal, unyielding facts of an epidemic. The analytical framework thus actively employs the four cardinal principles of bioethical reflection—autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice—yet it deploys them not as a rigid checklist for judgment but as dynamic, interpretive lenses through which to interrogate their own limits and inherent tensions when subjected to the extreme stress-test of a pervasive crisis; the narrative probes, for instance, the moment when autonomy must recede before the imperative of collective survival, how beneficence is negotiated amid crushing scarcity, and what distributive justice can possibly mean when applied to a terrified population rather than an individual patient.

Consequently, these principles serve as essential guides for understanding how Camus, through the singular medium of literary narrative, manages to reformulate an ethics of care and collective responsibility *avant la lettre*; the novel performs a kind of philosophical prefiguration, staging scenarios and dilemmas that would only later become the formal subject of bioethical discourse. Through this hermeneutic engagement, the text itself transforms from a passive object of study into an active agent in the ethical conversation, challenging its readers to reflect on the foundations of their own judgments and assumptions. In conclusion, this interpretive approach, by placing the literary work in a sustained and rigorous dialogue with contemporary

crisis, firmly establishes that the significance of *The Plague* transcends its specific historical moment; it is, rather, a permanent laboratory for the human conscience, a space where the eternal questions of duty, sacrifice, and solidarity are perpetually tested, refigured, and rendered urgent anew by each successive calamity.

IV. Health Crisis and Moral Conscience: A Bioethical Reading of Camus's *The Plague*

“If there is a plague, we must defend ourselves, that’s clear.. Ah, if only everything were so simple!” (Camus, 1947, p. 126). During the COVID-19 health crisis, unprecedented ethical dilemmas emerged, revealing the limits of medical systems when confronted with the unpredictability of a sudden calamity; this ordeal strained the relationship between public health imperatives and respect for individual liberties, placing medical reason and moral conscience—both mobilized to save lives—under tension, thereby forcing institutions to reconsider their bioethical frameworks and adapt their principles to a profoundly vulnerable humanity. In *The Plague*, Albert Camus, through the figure of Doctor Rieux, embodies an ethical stance that is both rigorous and deeply humanist, and faced with a devastating scourge, he responds not with despair but with medical competence and an unshakeable moral commitment. Much like this Camusian fiction, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented mobilization of health systems while confronting caregivers with major ethical dilemmas—patient triage, limited access to resources, urgent decisions made under uncertainty, as these complex situations remind us that, even in the modern era, nothing is simple in the face of such afflictions. These tensions find an echo in the very foundations of medical ethics inherited from Hippocrates: “In diseases, there are two considerations: to relieve, or at least, to do no harm, as the Art consists of three things: the disease, the patient, and the physician, where the physician is the servant of the Art; the patient must cooperate with the physician in combating the disease” (Berche & Perez, 2021). These principles of beneficence and non-maleficence resonate with the conduct of Doctor Bernard Rieux, who embodies the necessary scientific rigor, moral probity, and humanism required to manage contagion in the interest of collective well-being. “[...] the only way to fight the plague is with honesty. [...] in my case, I know it consists of doing my job” (Camus, 1947, p. 151). Similarly, contemporary bioethics has structured a response to health crises by relying on “four essential ethical principles [...] to guide interventions, namely autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice” (Mathieu et al., 2022). However, in the face of urgency, the application of these principles clashed with tensions between sanitary efficacy and respect for fundamental rights: lockdowns, mandatory vaccination, health passports, as these measures, though indispensable for curbing the virus's spread, rekindled age-old debates on the moral legitimacy of restricting individual liberty in the name of the collective good.

1. Bioethical Dilemmas: The Return to Paternalistic Practices in the Image of *The Plague*

“The main thing was to do one’s job well” (Camus, 1947, p. 44); in *The Plague*, Camus stages an ethics of care founded on moral duty, embodied by Doctor Rieux, whose commitment is rooted not in an explicit contract but in a profound ethical responsibility. This posture, marked by an assumed medical paternalism, grants the physician the authority to act in the patient’s interest, even when this implies a restriction of individual freedom. Such a logic resurfaced strikingly during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an era nevertheless committed to patient autonomy and the principle of informed consent. Indeed, the pandemic called into question certain foundations of modern bioethics in the name of collective urgency.

As Jacob Dahl Rendtorff notes: “The pandemic is a matter of bioethics and biolaw.” It led to the suspension, even redirection, of certain established ethical norms to prioritize exceptional biosecurity measures. According to Rendtorff, “The key dimensions of this bioethical response [...] must be founded on a genuine concern for the protection of humanity, the person, and the fundamental rights of citizens” (Rendtorff, 2021, p. 37).

Camus anticipates this tension: “We found ourselves in a situation without compromise, where the words ‘bargaining,’ ‘favor,’ ‘exception’ no longer had any meaning” (Camus, 1947, p. 68). The sanitary rigor imposed on Oran—a “brutal and prolonged separation” (Camus, 1947, p. 70)—finds an obvious parallel in the lockdowns, quarantines, and movement restrictions imposed during COVID-19. These measures, justified by public health imperatives, limited individual freedoms and reactivated a protective, even paternalistic, state logic. In an analogous manner, the requirements for distancing, mask-wearing—“One had to watch oneself constantly to avoid slipping, in a moment of distraction, into breathing in another’s face” (Camus, 1947, p. 209)—and constant vigilance plunged societies into a form of biopower based on prevention, control, and the discipline of bodies.

The notion of “exile” here takes on symbolic weight: “a sudden exile” (Camus, 1947, p. 76). This situation refers to the experience of a frozen, disoriented world compelled to live within enclosed spaces, echoing the significant phrase: “[...] they locked themselves in with the plague” (Camus, 1947, p. 168). Humanity, likewise, found itself confined within contemporary pandemic logics. Mandatory or conditional vaccination, particularly through the implementation of vaccine passports, revived a major ethical dilemma: the tension between individual liberty and collective interest. This problem, already perceptible in the Camusian narrative, interrogates the limits of medical control and the margins of action for medicine when facing the unpredictability of health crises.

Ultimately, this tension between sanitary security and individual liberty, exacerbated by contemporary measures, calls for a rethinking of medical ethics in times of crisis. In *The Plague*, Camus suggests a possible path: that of an ethics of responsibility, centered on care and moral conscience; thus, Doctor Rieux’s formulation retains all its relevance: “The main thing was to do one’s job well” (Camus, 1947, p. 44). The analysis reveals a striking analogy between *The Plague* and the COVID-19 crisis, particularly in the implementation of rigid sanitary measures and the bioethical tensions they provoke, as through fiction, Camus anticipates contemporary dilemmas linked to the restriction of freedoms in the name of the common good, where literature thereby becomes a critical tool for understanding collective responses to scourges and for reflecting on the moral dimension of public health.

2. Vaccines and Sera: Development and Experimentation, from the Plague to COVID-19

Confronted with the same situation of urgency, the imperative to rapidly find a remedy to stem the contagion asserts itself, whether facing the plague bacillus or the COVID-19 virus. “The only way to erect a biological barrier against viral propagation relies on vaccination against SARS-CoV-2; all vaccines under development target the Spike protein to produce antibodies that block cellular penetration of the virus” (Berche & Perez, 2021, p. 502). The COVID-19 pandemic unfolds within a rigorous scientific framework, supported by innovative strategies such as the use of DNA-based vaccines: “Innovative strategies are also being implemented using DNA vaccines” (Berche & Perez, 2021, p. 502). In contrast, Camus’s *The Plague* depicts a world where science is less prepared, where uncertainty dominates, and where technical means remain limited, thereby rendering the management of the health crisis more arduous: “Castel placed all his confidence and energy into manufacturing sera on site, with makeshift equipment; Rieux and he hoped that a serum manufactured from cultures of the very microbe infesting the city would have a more direct efficacy than sera brought from outside [...] Castel hoped to have his first serum ready fairly quickly” (Camus, 1947, p. 126).

In this struggle to save lives, ethics are present, yet trials proceed without formal protocols, driven by hope for a positive effect: “Rieux judged his case hopeless, the small body would be devoured by the infection without a reaction [...] He was defeated in advance. That is why Rieux had the idea of trying Castel’s serum on him” (Camus, 1947, p. 194). During the

pandemic, despite scientific advances and the speed of research, a climate of caution persisted regarding vaccination: “However, public acceptance of this ‘accelerated’ vaccination is far from assured; caution remains due to the lack of long-term perspective on the efficacy and harmlessness of these vaccines” (Berche & Perez, 2021, p. 502). The ordeals endured during the COVID-19 pandemic, much like the protocols adopted, reveal an approach guided by both science and ethical reflection, dynamics which resonate profoundly with the methodical and lucid logic of Camusian writing. The health crisis thus illuminated bioethical dilemmas akin to those raised in *The Plague*, particularly concerning human values, moral duty, and collective responsibility.

By meticulously describing the steps, obstacles encountered, and strategies adopted as emergency health responses in the city of Oran, Camus highlights the complexity of epidemic management; this parallel also underscores the necessity for global cooperation in the face of a planetary-scale pandemic, where science, morality, and solidarity must converge to preserve life.

3. Pandemic and Bioethics: Toward a Global Consensus

Within two contexts upended by contagion—the fictional universe of *The Plague* and the pandemic reality of COVID-19—a mobilization both ethical and sanitary has affirmed itself in favor of collective well-being, whether for the inhabitants of Oran or the citizens of the world. Although each society reacts according to its own resources and knowledge, a similar ethic of responsibility runs through both human experiences.

In *The Plague*, the interaction between “prefectoral measures” and “the order of physicians of Oran,” under the direction of Doctor Rieux, testifies to a humanist reaction in the face of a population rendered vulnerable. This dynamic is expressed in the directive: “Declare a state of plague. Close the city” (Camus, 1947, p. 64)—a sign of a shift from a local framework toward a logic of expanded collective protection. This same logic is observed in the declaration of the WHO Director-General: “We don’t know what sort of damage this virus could do if it were to spread in a country with a weaker health system. We must act now to help countries prepare for that possibility,” said the head of the WHO. “For all of these reasons, I am declaring a public health emergency of international concern over the global outbreak of novel coronavirus” (UN, 2020).

In *The Plague*, the adopted strategy resembles what Jacob Dahl Rendtorff terms a “biosecurity strategy” (Rendtorff, 2021, p. 40), founded on rigor, control, and prevention. Although the term is of contemporary usage, its logic is already anticipated in Camus’s work through concrete measures of confinement, separation, and sanitary vigilance. Thus, the protection against contagion applied to the city of Oran fits within an evolutionary continuity with contemporary devices for combating COVID-19: lockdowns, movement restrictions, physical distancing, mask-wearing, and vaccination campaigns. “Such a biosecurity strategy was at the origin of the governments’ precautionary policy, which translated into total lockdown, restrictions regarding physical distancing, and strong vaccination recommendations” (Rendtorff, 2021, p. 39). These responses, although contextualized differently, rest on the same bioethical foundation: “This solidarity means that concern for vulnerable persons is at the heart of the community’s biopolitical response strategy” (Rendtorff, 2021, p. 41).

In *The Plague*, Camus portrays a society forced into unity in the face of peril: “From that moment on, it can be said that the plague was everybody’s business” (Camus, 1947, p. 67). This vision finds an echo in Vardit Ravitsky: “COVID-19 highlights our interdependence. The virus threatens us all and requires a global response” (Ravitsky, 2020). From fiction to reality, these pandemics reveal the necessity of transcending national borders to conceive of a global ethics. Camus, through Doctor Rieux, already sketches a figure of universal care, anticipating the contemporary call from the WHO for a “necessity of international solidarity” (Davis, 2021, p.

162). Contagion, whether bacterial or viral, demands a response founded on cooperation and shared consciousness: “[...] they realized that they were all, the narrator included, in the same boat and that they had to make the best of it” (Camus, 1947, p. 67).

The sanitary solidarity evoked in *The Plague* resonates with global efforts against COVID-19, in a dynamic that transcends national bioethical norms toward a convergence of values on a planetary scale. Through a “poethical” writing (Doumet, 2013) that conjugates aesthetic exigency and moral engagement, Camus demonstrates a foresight that Kaplan and Marris describe thus: “Camus was ahead of his time and practiced a form of literary Bioart *avant la lettre*” (Kaplan & Marris, 2023, p. 169). *The Plague* and COVID-19, beyond their medical dimension, interrogate the human condition and the moral structure of societies; they show to what extent literature, by illuminating collective vulnerability, can become a reflexive space where ethical responses to crisis are reinvented.

Bioethics, between theory and application, is put to the test in major crises such as pandemics. These extreme situations invite a rethinking of protocols and decision-making strategies—sometimes guided by a certain consequentialism—as a necessity imposed by contagion, in order to optimize collective protection and save the greatest number of lives. They also underscore the duty of responsibility incumbent upon medicine and the biomedical sciences, whose primary concern remains the preservation of life and respect for human dignity. This responsibility translates into concrete sanitary engagement toward others—the sick, the fragile, and vulnerable populations—within a dynamic of solidarity and care.

Thus, Camus’s *The Plague* refigures this ethic of sanitary duty through a morality rooted in humanism, mobilization, and compassion, oriented toward the care of Oran’s citizens and the preservation of common health, while striving to prevent the scourge’s propagation beyond the city’s borders.

V. Conclusion:

In bringing this hermeneutic analysis of *The Plague* to a close, and through an interpretive reading centered on responses to sanitary emergencies alongside the ethical tensions laid bare during the COVID-19 epoch, the work emerges as a genuine form of narrative bioart—a discursive space where literature, medicine, ethics, and human experience intersect. To read Camus in a time of pandemic is to understand how narrative performs a refiguration of bioethical themes, for it dramatizes public health measures, interrogates the foundations of collective responsibility, illuminates the social and institutional reactions to a global crisis, and reveals—through the physician’s figure—the moral demands inherent to caregiving under extreme duress. Rooted in a philosophical tradition of examining both self and world, the text proposes an authentic poetics whereby language lays bare the human condition and challenges individual and institutional conduct when confronted with widespread contagion.

In this regard, the reciprocal illumination between novel and twenty-first-century pandemic underscores the work’s anticipatory power; *The Plague* operates as a “modern myth” (Demoulin, 2020), one that highlights the divergence between theoretical rules and practical realities on the ground. The sudden onset of catastrophe imposes unforeseen constraints, thereby forcing a revision and adaptation of established protocols, a dynamic which confirms the initial hypotheses—namely, that the novel prefigures modern bioethical principles, clarifies contemporary care dilemmas, and foreshadows the paternalistic or consequentialist compromises activated in times of urgent need; moreover, as Camus observes, scourges carry a paradoxical lesson: “the plague has its advantages, it opens men’s eyes, it forces them to think” (Camus, 1947, p. 119). Health crises thus function as revelatory events, exposing human fragility and ethical tensions while simultaneously unveiling capacities for lucidity, mutual aid, and transformation; in this sense, they offer a profound instruction for living. *The Plague* consequently stands as a symbolic prototype of the human condition, its recurring

motifs resonating deeply with our contemporary reality.

Ultimately, Camus's work provides a precious conceptual and affective framework for reflecting on bioethics in times of crisis, revealing that plagues transcend their medical dimension to become humanist trials wherein community, empathy, compassion, shared duty, and the principles of care are continually renegotiated. Thus, *The Plague* both anticipates and elucidates modern bioethical challenges, affirming that epidemic management is never a mechanical application of norms but a continuous process of adaptation, guided by reason, prudence, and a fundamental concern for the living: "The main thing was to do one's job well" (Camus, 1947, p. 44).

Referrals and references:

- Berche, P., & Perez, S. (2021). *Pandemics: From origins to Covid-19*. Perrin.
- Camus, A. (1947). *The plague*. Gallimard.
- Davis, M. (2021). *The monster is among us: Pandemics and other scourges of capitalism*. Divergences.
- Demoulin, A. (2020, April 23). Why 'The Plague' by Albert Camus is the ideal book to reread during lockdown? *20 Minutes*. Retrieved July 21, 2025, from <https://www.20minutes.fr/arts-stars/culture/2765919-20200423-pourquoi-pestes-albert-camus-livre-ideal-relire-pendant-confinement>
- Doumet, C. (2013). *Poéthique*. Éditions La Transparence.
- High Council of Public Health. (2011). *Ethics in the health environment: Area of uncertainty from which an advisory opinion is built* (Opinion No. 77).
- Kaplan, A., & Marris, L. (2023). *The state of plague: Reading Camus in the time of pandemic* (P. Hersant, Trans.). Gallimard. (Original work published 2023)
- Maillard, N. (2011). *Vulnerability: A new moral category*. Labor et Fides.
- United Nations. (2020, January 30). Coronavirus: WHO declares a global health emergency. *UN News*. Retrieved July 21, 2025, from <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2020/01/1060852>
- Ravitsky, V. (2020, April 23). A justice-oriented bioethics. *Acfas Magazine*. Retrieved July 21, 2025, from <https://www.acfas.ca/publications/magazine/2020/04/bioethique-axee-justice-covid-19>
- Rendtorff, J. D. (2021). Common ethical principles and biopolitics in the age of covid-19. *Esprit*, (3/4), 37–49.
- Ricœur, P. (1991). *Time and narrative: Volume I – The plot and historical narrative*. Seuil Editions. (Original work published 1983)