

**Understanding Death in the Times of Epidemic: Perspectives in *La peste***

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### **About the Author**

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**Abstract**

This paper analyses the concept of death as an inevitable consequence of an epidemic in ‘The Plague’ through the prism of the epistemological principle of perspectivism of Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19<sup>th</sup> century German Philosopher. The interpretive philosophy of perspectivism emphasises the individual's point of view rather than the absolute truth. This paper is interested in reading the meaning of death in an epidemic as perceived by different characters in ‘The Plague’. Does this epidemic give a new meaning to the ultimate truth, i.e., death? Does this truth become relative, or does it remain absolute?

*Keywords: epidemic, death, perspective, relative, absolute*

## Understanding Death in the Times of Epidemic: Perspectives in *La peste*

The fear of incomprehensible death gives a new meaning to life in times of an epidemic. With the current Covid-19 pandemic, we witness the fictional story of an epidemic in the city of *Oran* in Albert Camus's 'The Plague' becoming real and Oran becoming a synonym of any city in the world. The underlying reason to study 'The Plague', thus, is to understand the current pandemic with all its complexity. In the complex labyrinth of a plague, Camus's characters in *La Peste* (The Plague, 1947) are in 'negotiation' with death in this French Algerian city in the 1940s. Each of the characters begins the 'conversation' with death with a particular perspective on the disease. During this 'dialogue' with the 'stubborn' death, their perspectives on life and disease take a turn. In this novel, the French absurdist writer, presents the multiple perspectives on death through the people of Oran when the epidemic knocks at their doors. This paper chooses to read three such perspectives. The study of perspectives draws its theoretical background from the philosophy of Perspectivism of Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Perspectivism is based on the epistemological principle that perception is relative and dependent on the individual's interpretation making truth subjective and relative rather than objective and absolute. For the people of Oran, death becomes a reality when the epidemic arrives; a truth that they must accept. On the other hand, the idea of death offers them unimagined possibilities to interpret and contextualise according to their situations.

### **The Plague of 'modernity' in Oran: Nature, People, Death**

Before the arrival of the Plague in the town of Oran, it is already 'plagued' with 'modernity'; a 'modernity' that is reflected in the weariness of nature and the incommunicable monotony

and disinterestedness of the people of Oran. When death comes to their doors with the epidemic, they are drawn 'inside' to understand and search for the meaning of death.

### **The Nature**

In 'The Plague', Albert Camus presents a 'modern' town, Oran, in Algeria, a French Prefecture on the coast of Algeria in the 1940s. This calm, restful and ugly trading port town is *different* from other trading ports worldwide as it remains silent because there are no pigeons to fill it with the sound of the 'beatings of wings' (Camus 2020:5) nor any trees or gardens to fill it with the music of the 'rustling of leaves'. (*ibid*) Oran is filled with passivity and monotony of everyday life: it is a 'commercial' town directed by a capitalist mindset. Life is so mundane and neutral in this town that all weather seems the same; it is only when one raises one's head to see the sky that one gets a sense of change of weather. The other indicator is the marketplace, where one can see the spring being sold (*ibid*) when the street sellers bring flowers from the suburbs to sell in the town's market. People of this town witness extreme weather conditions; it is scorching in summer, and there is heavy rainfall in autumn, making the winter the only season with 'fine weather'. (*ibid*)

### **The People**

In this town, monotonous nature finds its way in the spirit of the people. For them, life has become a habit, a habit to earn money. This material goal has made their lives very methodical. In this 'modern' town of Oran, people spend all their time earning money except for Saturday and Sunday, which they keep aside for entertainment. With the crunch of time, they hardly think about the concept of love; love, too, has become a habit, and like anywhere else in the

world, they have become habituated to loving 'one another without knowing it'. (Camus 2020:6) They do so because 'people have to love one another'. (*ibid*)

## **The Death**

A place where people live in an immobile time and in the monotonous silence of nature, moments of pain become excruciating. There is nothing, neither nature, nor the people to assuage the passage of life into death. Thus, death is a moment of 'discomfort' (*ibid*) and loneliness. The narrator explains the loneliness of a sick person in Oran in these words:

'A sick person needs tenderness; he quite naturally likes to lean on something. But in Oran, the extreme climate, the amount of business going on, the insignificance of the surroundings, the speed with which night falls and the quality of pleasure, all demand good health. A sick person is very lonely here'. (*ibid*)

One day, the Plague sweeps in slowly in Oran, which is already surrounded by the black clouds of 'modernity' that had succeeded in neutralising people's nature and spirit. They are so thoughtless that even the approaching danger of the epidemic is imperceptible to them. Oran's passive man is so much habituated to the 'routine' that even the coming of an epidemic fails to 'move' him. It is only when the Plague threatens the lives of everyone in the town that it ensues action; people begin to *act* to save their lives from the Plague; it is the imposed danger of the epidemic that makes them come out of their passive neutrality and triggers them to 'think,' 'perceive' and 'interpret' the situations in their way. In these times of uncertainty, suffering is common to all, but its interpretation is not.

### **The Plague in Oran: Death, a Meaning**

Dr. Rieux, a doctor by profession and an atheist, is the first person who finds the death of a rat, a sign of a strange incident in the sleepy town of Oran and informs the concierge immediately about it; the inkling of a ‘problem’ sweeps in his mind. With the repetitive incidents of piles and piles of dead rats and eventually, with the death of the concierge, mere ‘troubling signs’ (Camus 2020:19) of a probable danger transform to panic in Oran; a panic that penetrates at the arrival of a ‘peculiar disease’. It causes his fellow citizens to reflect on the ‘uninvited’ and ‘unexpected’ change in town, which was otherwise indifferent, still, and resistant to developments of any sort. Sleeping deeply in the ‘passive’ quietude of the being, it was a difficult task to awaken the people of Oran. The death of the concierge creates a panic that forces them to slow down their lives and reflect on the issue. The panic and the surprise of Oran's fellow citizens at the concierge's death are expressed in these words by the narrator of the novel, Dr. Rieux:

‘You might say that the death of the concierge marked the end of this period full of troubling signs, and the start of another, comparatively more difficult, in which the original sense of surprise gradually gave way to panic’. (Camus 2020:20)

Soon, the Plague penetrates the whole town, and all the people struggle with common ailments such as high fever, irritation, nervousness, and a headache. With each passing day, the casualties of the ‘curious illness’ increase, and consequently, one concludes that it is a case of an epidemic. The narrator evokes this realisation in the following words:

‘In barely a few days the number of fatal cases multiplied, and it was clear to those who were concerned with this curious illness that they were dealing with a real epidemic’.

(Camus 2020:29)

The cause of this epidemic is the Plague. The Plague brings anxiety for the people because it does not have a cure, and it is infectious. The people of Oran start seeing the Plague as the face of death, it is approaching all, and nobody seems to have control over it. People of Oran, who did not reflect on life, are now forced to reflect on ‘death’. For them, it is time to ‘meet and converse’ with it. Nonetheless, they still have one choice left with them; the choice to choose their own opinion on death while conversing with it. Though it would not change the fact that they would die or not, their perspectives on death would indeed decide the quality of life they would spend before eventually falling in the lap of approaching death.

The commercial character of the town of Oran, ‘dictated by the considerations of trade,’ (Camus 2020:22) is now forced to become ‘personal’ with the arrival of the Plague. The passive and indifferent minds of the people take a pause, accept the reality of the approaching death, and try to understand and interpret it in their own way. Each one approaches the reality of death differently. For the first time in the town of Oran, people come out of their boredom of everyday life to indulge in an ‘active’ and ‘individual’ search for a meaning of death.

The advent of the Plague and the fear of the approaching death, thus, awaken the citizens of the sleepy town of Oran from the passivity and neutrality of the metaphorical Plague to bring them closer to their own selves to search for the meaning of death. Amidst its fear, the town ‘without inklings’ (Camus 2020:5) begins a journey to seek its meaning.

**Death, a Perspective: Dr. Bernard Rieux**



As a doctor, Dr. Bernard Rieux, is the one who uses the word 'Plague' to describe the curious disease that penetrates the bodies of the fellow citizens of Oran. He is the one who treats the first patient of Plague. He does everything in his capacity to assuage the patients from the pains of this disease and fear of death. With each passing day, as the gravity of the epidemic weighs down the people of the town, he remains a silent and helpless witness to the numerous deaths caused by the mysterious and powerful disease. To continue his duty of saving lives, he makes a conscious decision to distance himself, to keep himself from involving emotionally with the pain of a patient. He fights against death incessantly to relieve the sufferings of his patients even though he is aware of his limitations as a doctor. He does so because he feels that it is his duty and not for any grand reward from the almighty.

In the altruism of Dr. Rieux is embedded Nietzschean philosophy of horror of existence and eternal recurrence. For Friedrich Nietzsche, a 19th century German Philosopher, the understanding of the eternal recurrence depended heavily on the concept of the horror of existence. According to him, it is impossible to understand the absolute meaning of sufferings imposed arbitrarily upon us. Also, we are condemned to suffer now and for eternity in the timeless cycle of the eternal recurrence of life and death. Thus, to live a life, we should not attempt to unravel the meaning of suffering; rather understand that suffering has no meaning; there is no cause behind it. It is an arbitrary entity devoid of any purpose. Thus, Nietzschean philosophy does not believe in the cause of suffering nor the purpose of undergoing suffering. Instead, it demands a simple act of acceptance. It is in the act of acceptance that suffering, otherwise meaningless, finds its meaning. Voluntarily accepting our fate and all its sufferings without any regret would also give us the strength to live the present life and *act*<sup>i</sup>.

Dr. Rieux devotes his whole time to reduce the suffering of his patients; his action does not derive its motive from a desire to arrive at the ultimate meaning of suffering or death, nor from a desire to achieve an ulterior goal. He acts for the sake of action. He can *act* incessantly because he accepts suffering without letting it emotionally affect him. His voluntary acceptance of suffering and approaching death gives him the strength to live life as presented before him and *act*. Moreover, it is in his detached actions that the life of suffering gets its meaning. Philip Kain, in his article, 'Nietzsche, Eternal Recurrence, and the Horror of Existence,' discusses Nietzschean disbelief in the absolute knowledge of the horror of existence and the need for dissociation of an individual from suffering to allow 'action'. He says:

'Knowledge of the horror of existence kills action – which requires distance and illusion. The horror and meaninglessness of existence must be veiled if we are to live and act'. (Kain 2007: 51)

Amidst the uncomprehensive disaster, Dr. Rieux finds a purpose and meaning in life in his detached actions. These actions succeed in keeping hope for humanity alive in him. The motive to *act* in Dr. Rieux is presented at the end of the novel when the writer explains to the reader why he chose to narrate the account of the Plague in Oran. For Dr. Rieux, to write is to *act*, and writing the account of Oran engulfed with the Plague was a necessary action to keep alive the memory of the sufferings of the Plague and faith in humanity. He says:

'(...) Dr. Rieux decided to write the account that ends here, so as not to be one of those who keep silent, to bear witness on behalf of the victims, to leave at least a memory of the violence and injustice that was done to them, and to say simply what it is that one learns in the midst of such tribulations, namely that there is more in men to admire than

to despise'. (Camus 2020: 236) At the outbreak of the epidemic, Dr. Rieux chooses to *act*; 'against this [epidemic] terror and its indefatigable weapon, despite (his) own personal hardships'. (*ibid*)

### **Death, a Perspective: Monsieur Cottard**

Monsieur Cottard is a former criminal who has always lived a life of fear. He embodies the materialistic, monotonous, and alienated spirit of the people of Oran who refuse to help others in times of crisis; instead, when the epidemic knocks at the doors of the people of Oran, he takes advantage of this time to profit from the hardships of others by selling cigarettes and inferior liquor. There are many common points of contact between his intention of making profits at the cost of other hardship and the contemporary mode of production driven by the sole objective of profit by exploiting the proletariat or the working class in a capitalist society. Neither the suffering of the people nor the approaching death changes his capitalistic heartlessness; he continues to pursue profit-making until the endemic ends, and the gates of Oran are wide open. Cottard's unremorseful nature reflects the alienated spirit of the people in general. Marx gives the alienation theory (*Entfremdung*)<sup>ii</sup> in the 'Economic and philosophic Manuscripts of 1844'. He describes alienation as a human nature that develops within a man living in a rigid stratified social class. Driven by the sole motive of trade, the Oran people have lost themselves in the habit of their mundane, mechanic, repetitive work. The capitalistic design of the modern town of Oran has made the people 'thoughtless' and deprived them of the ability to introspect and take a decision to *act*. In a typical 'modern' society like Oran, people have become indifferent to themselves, their surroundings, and people. They love each other without understanding the concept of love because they 'have to love one another'. (Camus 2020:6) Though the advent of a crisis in the town makes people like Dr. Rieux self-introspective, it fails

to bring any change in Cottard. 'For his part, Cottard prospered, and his little speculations were making him rich'. (Camus 2020: 199)

Monsieur Cottard also incarnates the mindless speed and obsession with progress in the people of Oran that has resulted from a capitalist mindset. The epidemic, a period of crisis, poses as a haven for him. Nevertheless, once the crisis period ends, he loses his focus and is filled with confusion. In the end, a fear of arrest engulfs him, and in a state of madness, he shoots at random at people in the street, and consequently, the police arrest him. The madness of Cottard is symbolic of the collapse of capitalism with 'radical rupture', a concept envisaged by Marx in his 'Manifesto of the Communist party'. Cottard's madness echoes the Marxist revolution to *remake* society. This revolution, according to Marx, was needed to bring 'communism (that) abolishes eternal truths, (that) abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience'. (Cited in Marx and Engels 1848: 26)

Cottard's madness symbolises the Marxist revolution to uproot the 'mad' modernity dictated by the capitalistic mode of production. On the other hand, his arrest announces the end and collapse of capitalism and brings hope for a new society.

### **Death, a Perspective: Father Paneloux**

Marx posits Religion as the opium of the people in the introduction to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'. He argues that Religion is a social construct that serves the purpose of reducing the suffering of the oppressed; it acts like a veil and illusion that digresses them from the real problem and holds them back to initiate a revolution to overthrow

their oppressors. According to him, Religion would become obsolete once there is a collapse of capitalism. He says:

‘The abolition of religion as the *illusionary* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness’. (Marx 1843-1844)

Amidst the stronghold of capitalist mindsets in the town of Oran, Father Paneloux has a religious response to the crisis of the Plague. Champion of the pure form of Christianity, he believes that the epidemic is God's punishment for those who derailed from the path of Religion. On the other hand, God is also present for him, to give strength to tolerate the pain and give hope. Father Paneloux accepts the truth that in a world ruled by God, even though one cannot understand death rationally, one should accept it as God's will. For him, death is God's way to test his subjects. He refuses to call a doctor when he falls ill and dies at the end holding the crucifix. It remains unclear if he died because of the Plague. The narrator depicts the death of Father Paneloux in these words:

‘In the hospital Paneloux kept his teeth clenched. He gave himself up like an object to all the treatment he had to endure but did not let go of the crucifix. However, the priest's case remained ambiguous. Rieux was still not certain in his mind. It was the Plague and yet it wasn't’ (Camus 2020:180).

In human history, Religion and science have remained in the position of disagreements. Can we say that Religion is a digression and an illusion for Father Paneloux? When we compare the responses of Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux to the Plague, we note that they both learn to come to terms with the idea of death; even though both, realise that it is difficult to understand

the rationality of death, they accept the rationality of accepting death as a conclusive reality. Although both have a different approach to the epidemic, Dr. Rieux has a scientific approach, and Father Paneloux has a religious approach, their different approaches help them come closer to common certainties; 'love, suffering and exile'. (Camus 2020: 232)

The scientific and practical approach of Dr. Rieux and the religious response of Father Paneloux meet to attain the common goal to reduce the pain of the patients. These two approaches come together to fight against the common enemy, the Plague in the town of Oran. With the advent of a crisis, the conflict between Religion and science gets resolved and it breaks the myth that science is always right, and Religion is always wrong. In Oran, both, religion, and science embark on a journey to resolve the dilemma of uncertainty and absurdity of death.

The Plague awakens the people of Oran from its passivity and monotony. When the epidemic starts hurling death threats at them, they realise the uncontrollable nature of the situation, take a 'pause' to venture into a journey of finding the meaning of suffering and death. Each one of them has a different perspective on finding the answer to this question. They must take a 'pause' from the haste to 'progress' and introspect to begin this journey. In the process of introspection, the rational mind suggests the irrationality of searching for the absolute meaning of death; and it understands soon that it is in its acceptance of death that one finds its meaning. Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux abandon the disinterestedness imposed by a progressive capitalistic social structure to arrive at an answer to the absurd and inescapable death in the time of the epidemic. Both may have different perspectives on death, still, they both end in accepting death as an inevitable and absolute reality. This acceptance gives meaning to their otherwise meaningless lives. Their perspectives on death make us inquire about the viability of a 'commercial' society in a time of crisis. Is not Cottard's arrest at the end of the novel a sign of the failure of a modern

society obsessed with control and mindless progress? Should we not attempt to *remake and reset* our society that has a space and time for the 'self' in its very definition of progress?

The outbreak of an epidemic and its progress in Oran closely resembles the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the same way as the people of Oran are not initially bothered by the incidents of the death of rats, we too saw the initial signs of the disease and its rapid progression as a temporary problem. However, as the disease started sweeping the world steadily and killing people, the governments were forced to impose lockdowns. It was then that the fear of death and the fear of the end came crawling in people's minds and affected their psychological, social, and emotional health. Like in the novel, our attitude vis-à-vis the pandemic shifted from denial to acceptance, and eventually to self-introspection. The novel mirrors not only the beginning and the middle of the progression of the coronavirus pandemic, but it forewarns us of a continuous threat with which we might have to live forever. After the first and the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, the third wave has entered the world. In the unpredictable times of the current pandemic, should we not accept the truth propounded by Dr. Rieux at the end of the Plague that there would be a continuous threat with which the people of Oran (and in the same way we all) might have to live forever but at the same time there will always be more in life to 'admire than to despise'. (Camus 2020: 236)

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Ideas taken from Kain, Philip J. 2007. 'Nietzsche, Eternal Recurrence, and the Horror of Existence', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, (33): 49 - 63.

<sup>2</sup>*Entfremdung* means a feeling of alienation from other people.

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