

## **Camus' *The Plague* and COVID-19: Some Philosophical Reflections**

Raymund Pavo, PhD  
University of the Philippines – Mindanao  
rrpavo@up.edu.ph

### **Abstract**

This paper explores what Camus considers as possible types of persons or dispositions that may unravel when residents and visitors of a fictive town find themselves quarantined or locked up because of an epidemic outbreak. In *The Plague* (1948),<sup>1</sup> these persons are given these labels: the stickler, consoler, the very important person, trifler, red-tape merchant, overworked official, much-harassed official, or a traditionalist. Although such characters are not directly explored in the novel, this paper attempts to reconstruct the meaning of each disposition from various sections in the story as each character behaves differently when death and illness confront and challenge people's certainties and mobilities in the community. To deepen the discussion, insights, observations, and accounts on how I and the society deal with the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic are brought into a reflective examination. As a conclusion, this paper underscores Camus' advise that a person as he is stripped of many activities and engagements in a plague is to be considered not just an idea, but as a concrete, existential being that is subject to fear, anxiety, and his/her capacity for self-transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), 1-285.

**Keywords:** humanity, pandemic, plague, COVID-19

## Introduction

*The Plague* (1948) gained a resurgence in 2020 when the world found itself dealing with a global pandemic. Part of the reason perhaps for the revived interest in Camus' novel is the need to have characters and images of individuals, and communities that readers can relate to even if these characters are fictive. In reading the novel, it seems that there is something that each fictive character is capable of offering. It can be a sense of relief that my apprehension, worry, and anxiety are real, that it is normal to have such reactions, and that the fictive characters are undergoing such traumatic experience as well. Since I am also sure that the novel has been imagined by Camus, it assures me that what I am imagining while in this pandemic is within the bounds of human imagination. Is this the healing effect which art such as novels can provide? It appears so. The more that I read the novel, I realize that I am given time to process my thoughts and feelings as the images in the story allow me to revisit and re-imagine my experiences. It is like I am reading two things at the same time – the story in the novel and my experiences. In such sense, it is as if I am allowed to reconstruct or to re-live what happened so quickly and that I am tasked to be more mindful of what I am undergoing. Because of this therapeutic experience, I encouraged myself to continue reading the novel to at least allow me to empathize with my difficulties.

Upon reaching page 98 of Camus' novel, I decided to look into something as I was intrigued by this section:

In conversation with Dr. Rieux, Rambert classified the people whom he had approached in various categories. Those who used the arguments mentioned above he called the sticklers. Besides these, there were the consolers, who assured him that the present state of things couldn't possibly last and when asked for definite

suggestions, fobbed him off by telling him he was making too much fuss about a passing inconvenience. Then there were the very important persons who asked the visitor to leave a brief note of his case and informed him they would decide on it in due course; the triflers, who offered him billeting warrants or gave the addresses of lodgings; the red-tape merchants, who made him fill up a form and promptly interred it in a file; overworked officials, who raised their arms to heaven, and much-harassed officials who simply looked away; and, finally, the traditionalists-these were by far the greatest number-who referred Rambert to another office or recommended some new method of approach.”<sup>2</sup>

Which kind of person did I portray and may portray as I find myself in this struggle against an invisible enemy? Will I be a stickler, consoler, very important person, trifler, red-tape merchant, overworked official, much-harassed official, or a traditionalist? Although Camus did not directly explain each of these characters, I will try to reconstruct in this reflection such dispositions from a variety of contexts and responses explored in the novel and offer some attempts to describe how I experienced such dispositions in my dealings with this new and unfolding world. Moreover, this reconstruction will force or inspire me to have a closer reading of the novel, and perhaps bring me to a realization on the shifting dispositions that I find myself in as I perform new roles in this uncharted condition brought about by this pandemic, and the unfamiliar unfolding of human reactions, observation, judgments, and propensities. At this point, I also bracketed a question which I learned from a class in Epistemology: Is my feeling fictive if it is motivated by a fictive character? I think the meaning of such a question in this paper is already starting to become clear.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 98.

## Exploring the Characters

“But, as things were, such influence was unavailing. For the most part they were men with well-defined and sound ideas on everything concerning exports, banking, the fruit or wine trade; men of proved ability in handling problems relating to insurance, the interpretation of ill-drawn contracts, and the like; of high qualifications and evident good intentions. That was what struck one most—the the excellence of their intentions. But as regards plague their competence was practically nil.”<sup>3</sup> Camus seemed to have a very nuanced image of the *stickler*. Noting how experts are used to saying something for every situation, such competencies seem to diminish or find their natural end when confronted with unimaginable and life-threatening situations. In the novel, Rambert, for instance, tried to enforce his skills in argumentation to possibly carve a way out of the quarantined town of Oran. His confidence did not waiver and he was expecting that the authorities would give him a free pass. Two interrelated things, however, made his case unacceptable – he needed to establish that his exemption will not be a precedent and that the authorities will not be charged with favoritism. As an expert, he knew of the danger of allowing one person to leave the quarantined community and its consequential effect on the moral ground of the ones enforcing the law. I am not from this town; hence, I should be allowed to move out. This was his stance. But is he free from carrying the cause of the local epidemic? Rambert did not want to ask such a question.

I also did not want to ask such a query. At times, I find myself always ready to find an excuse to distance myself from the possibility of having COVID-19. I know what I am doing. This seems to be the working presupposition in Rambert's mind – always expecting that the worst cannot happen to me. At times I also have such disposition. How could I possibly be reckless and be misinformed? Unfortunately, this is where ignorance seems to assert its force. In a crisis, a friend of mine kept on reminding

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

me that it is best to anticipate and prepare for the worst. Have we seen the peak of COVID-19 cases? It is this uncertainty that is already gazing intently at all forms of accomplishment that states have identified in containing the virus. But can the virus be truly contained? It is this query that makes the government dread the possibility of lifting the community quarantine. The infamous Senator Koko Pimentel seems to overlap with Rambert's character as well. Can I be exempted from the state promulgated rules? He answered such a question via his visits to a grocery station and a hospital to assist his wife who was about to give birth. He did both while he was expected to be in quarantine being a person under investigation. He also talked about safety precautions against COVID-19 in one of his speeches at the senate. As an enforcer of the law, it seems that the Senator forgot ala Kant as explained by Paton<sup>4</sup> that he is both a lawgiver and lawmaker. This means that every time one acts, a law is created which should apply to all. Heeding Kant's categorical imperative, one cannot be either a lawmaker or a lawgiver. It has to be both.

But is such a sense of invincibility exclusive to the senator? He shares it with all church leaders who insisted that the gathering of the faithful in a church should continue as evinced in South Korea, producers of concerts in the UK who continued their events, and the young Americans who were resolved to frolic and have fun in spring break. Upon seeing such news, the world was shocked to see how such forms of reasoning could thrive. But is the Koko complex again exclusive to such accounts? Did I also interface with such dangerous dispositions? For the past days, I had difficulty in making sense of the fact that every step and move that I make will have a direct bearing on the health and well-being of the rest of the family members. If I go out of the house even for a few minutes, it may unknowingly expose me to the virus even if I try to be extra mindful of hygiene and avoid possible entry points for

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<sup>4</sup> Herbert James Paton, *The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 1971), 58.

cross-contamination. The working mantra is that I will just try to be as careful as possible. This means wearing a mask, bringing and using the alcohol, and maintaining physical distancing. But why should I leave the house? Is it necessary? These are questions that I did want to thoroughly acknowledge. Is everyone worried that he/she will be an exemption, hence a precedent to the general rule? This is another question that I was not directly listening to. Of course, this is way different from the case of the senator who was aware that he is a person under investigation and should never forget that he is morally obliged to protect others from the possibility of infection should his test results turn out positive. In a matter of hours, the test result came and confirmed that he has COVID-19.

The *consoler* sits well with this description in the novel: “Richard said that in his opinion the great thing was not to take an alarmist view. All that could be said at present was that we had to deal with a special type of fever, with inguinal complications; in medical science, as in daily life, it was unwise to jump to conclusions.”<sup>5</sup> True to form, the consoler wishes you to remain calm and collected since difficulties will just naturally die or dissipate. Being extra committed to problems makes one too pessimistic. The consoler's mantra includes: Choose to frame problems with the hope that eventually things will be back to normal; nothing is permanent in this world in the first place. With this flux-oriented mindset, Richard stresses that the alarmist view will only cause unnecessary stress and worry. As if having a misdirected philosophical take on problems, the consoler asks that we focus on the future where these so-called problems will no longer matter. For this take, however, I remember in Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*<sup>6</sup> insight as to how he was able to survive the holocaust. He stressed that he was not thinking upfront that there will be an end to their excruciating day to day struggles. He struggled and found ways

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<sup>5</sup> Camus, *The Plague*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, trans. by Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 70.

to find meaning in his suffering and knew that a future life awaited him. But as to how that will take form was something that he did not force himself to articulate. This is why he did not obsess himself with dates when hell would be over. Frankl observed that many of his friends died once they realized that the day that they once dreamt of when they can finally experience freedom did not happen. They lost every ounce of hope because they tied up everything to a single possibility. This was how life's meaninglessness engulfed their spirits.

Taking a cue from Frankl, the consoler is quick to dismiss what the senses can see and take notice. Although fire is brewing, the smell of smoke is simply disregarded. It is tempting to easily say that things will be alright. This temptation also cloaked many of the responses to the current pandemic. While the number of positive cases increased, I saw myself rushing to finish what can be accomplished in the course syllabus in my Ethics class. To this, I acted like the consoler given that I did not recognize and attend to the fire that made the smoke possible. Looking back, I could have done something else. I could have informed my students of the danger, and asked them what they would do in case the situation gets worse. Now, I regret to behaving like the consoler – that the semester will be shortly interrupted and classes will simply resume after a month. Looking at how things are, such possibility no longer exudes confidence. The world that I am seeing is gradually changing and survival seems to be elusive. What should be done at this point? This is the question which the consoler will brush aside. Listening to Frankl's advice, however, the consoler may simply say that we will eventually get through this pandemic together. The government will take care of us, and some good generous people will fund the efforts of scientists to search for the vaccine and/or treatment. But will that day arrive?

For the past days, I find such a question increasingly important. But what does it mean to ask such a question? Am I stretching the reasoning of the consoler that I should not think ahead so as not to cause unnecessary anxiety? Or, does it mean that I should be ready with what may unfold? Thinking about the

possible end of the enhanced community quarantine, for instance, has made me realize that it will not be that soon. Already considering that this pandemic may last for one year, the thought has helped me grapple with the possibility that the worse is just waiting to happen. Instead of dismissing such a bleak future, Frankl's advice figures in making sense of this uncertain phenomenon. But how will this affect everyone else who would need the government's assistance for food and money? It seems that the consoler will always be remiss of such urgency. When I think of the possibility that the pandemic will stretch until the end of this year, am I also becoming like the consoler in the sense that I am flaunting some form of economic privilege? When I say that things will eventually go well, does this mean that everyone will survive the pandemic and that no is left behind? These are questions that would somehow help tweak the indifference regulating a consoler's disposition.

The group of *very important persons* described in the novel seems to resemble politicians or persons in authority who are bound to make judgments and decisions for other people. The bureaucratic trappings also appear to serve as the context with the way Camus described this group of individuals. In the novel, these lines are suggestive of a unique and structurally power-driven, albeit narrow approach to a pandemic like situation: "When a microbe," Rieux said, "after a short intermission can quadruple in three days the volume of the spleen, can swell the mesenteric ganglia to the size of an orange and give them the consistency of gruel, a policy of wait-and-see is, to say the least of it, unwise."<sup>7</sup> In talking to old Castel – the prefect of the town, Dr. Rieux was hoping that the local authorities would create a health committee to look into the health concerns in the community and assess if the situation warrants intervention. The local authorities, however, were not convinced that it is necessary to form a health committee. For old Castel, they were also unsure if the word plague would best represent the situation. Thus, the local authorities waited with

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<sup>7</sup> Camus, *The Plague*, 45.

neglect. They could have imagined, acted early, and not wait for more cases to happen, however. The preventive mindset was not in place. Looking at the way bureaucracies eat up the imagination of the people, the novel depicted how the inaction of officials brought danger to the community.

For such a point, I remember the discussion on the late Senator Miriam Santiago's proposal to ready the country for a possible pandemic – the Pandemic Preparedness Bill. The proposed bill could have significantly equipped us for this plague that we are currently dealing with. Why is the bill still pending? My initial thought is that the late senator was either an opposition or an independent candidate when she vied for the presidency. Since she lacked the traditional political clout, even the well-meaning and forward-looking bill was sidelined. Echoing old Castel's disposition, the reason for the delay can be summarized in the following reasons: We are not sure if a pandemic of such kind will truly happen. If something of such kind will eventually take place, it will not be of such scale. Or, it will happen somewhere distant which will not directly affect our community. But why do such lines thrive? Why do they figure in the way persons in authorities approach problems especially the emerging ones? Upon reflection, such remarks point to one's unwillingness to face one's ignorance. During a new situation, where old and available knowledge does not work, there is a tendency to dismiss the suggested concern. Since new problems demand more focused attention, persons in positions may find it hard to admit that they need assistance in making sense of a new situation.

The same unhealthy disposition towards ignorance can be recognized in the way countries responded to the possibility of cross-infection and contamination of COVID-19. For instance, we have seen first world nations dismissing the gravity of having a few cases within their region. I also had a share of such dismissive posture when I saw the report on the National Capital Region's first COVID-19 positive patient last February. Residing in Davao City seemed enough to provide me a sense of protection from the possibility of local-community transmission.

Although people started to scramble for face masks, I think I am one of those who were unable to buy one, since all the stores that I visited already ran out of supplies. Interestingly, I was only able to buy ten pieces of face mask when I was in General Santos City for a conference around the last week of February. At that point, I was also a bit suspicious of the people around me, and I always brought along alcohol. I was also a bit wary of people who were from Manila. Such worries, however, were never enough for me to plan. In such instances, was I acting like a group of very important persons? When presented with suggestive evidence of COVID-19, was I leaning towards the postponement of serious thought and reflection on the possibility of experiencing what Wuhan in China experienced? These thoughts never crossed my mind. The idea of being subjected to community quarantine was a farfetched thought.

The delay in making decisions is also highlighted in Davao City's unfortunate case of the spread of COVID-19 in a derby event in Matina Gallera. While the city already announced the postponement of activities on the celebration of the Araw ng Davao early February, big events such as the one that happened in Matina Gallera, however, pushed through in March. The cancellation of the activity could have protected the city and nearby regions from the local transmission and avoided the difficult task of contact tracing around 500 individuals. For all the delays, I remember how Aristotle talked about phronesis or practical wisdom. This wisdom is so elusive that it has become strange for people to have a glimpse of it, especially in dire situations. What makes phronesis elusive is that the person can see through complexities, anticipate far-reaching outcomes, and can be the voice of reason. In a panic, for instance, a person who has practical wisdom would know what to do. While everyone else has gone mad, this wise person would say something which others can at least temporarily hold on to. This is the kind of wisdom which we also hope becomes embodied as COVID-19 takes us by storm. Since nobody is trained for such encounters, even the most proficient persons would not know what to do as they find themselves engulfed by precarious and ambivalent

situations. Paradoxically, *phronesis* as explained by Reeves<sup>8</sup> only reveals itself when unexpected turns or events, and new situations take place. With the various responses to COVID-19, have we seen instances, glimpse, or estimations of practical wisdom? Are we convinced that our political leaders are concretions of *phronesis*? Or, are there communities or individuals who gave us hope that *phronesis* is real and is a resource of inspiration?

The *triflers* according to Camus refer to a person who offers addresses of lodgings or options for places to stay. This seems to be the standard type of assistance from a trifler to anyone even if such assistance is of no use. By behaving lightly, the trifler presents himself/herself as the exact opposite of the urgency of the plague in the community. As if cushioned and trapped in a bubble, the triflers show that nothing more can be expected from them. They are simply bound to the limits of their tasks and responsibilities. Hence, in a plague, they end up as on-lookers or bystanders waiting for instructions if their routines are to change. In the novel, such character can be gleaned in Rambert's observation of the Prefect's office: "The remarkable thing and Rambert was greatly struck by this, was how, in the very midst of catastrophe, offices could go on functioning serenely and take initiatives of no immediate relevance, and often unknown to the highest authority, purely and simply because they had been created originally for this purpose."<sup>9</sup>

The seeming indifference of workers to the on-going predicament can mean many things, however. From a naïve perspective, workers may have realized that they cannot do anything about the emerging problem, hence they just decide to continue with work. Or, from a critical vantage point, the workers are hesitant to apply for a leave of absence since they would need to continue earning to assure economic relief in times of uncertainty. But when looked from the lens of bureaucracy, another critical approach suggests that the

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<sup>8</sup> Charles David Chanel Reeve, *Aristotle on Practical Wisdom: Nichomachean Ethics VI* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 24-31.

<sup>9</sup> Camus, *The Plague*, 100

situation in the office is possible because administrators do not regard the emerging health crisis as truly worthy of attention. For these administrators, it is business as usual despite sensing that their employees may feel tensed and worried about the situation. With such perspectives, what appears to be common is that no one recognizes the presence of the unfamiliar head-on. This means that familiar habits, and ways of doing remain privileged. The uncertain and unfamiliar are brushed aside and treated as fictive foes. In a culture where various forms of violence have been silenced, the same disposition is applied even when confronted by a burgeoning health crisis. Building on Russell's discussion in *The Problems of Philosophy*,<sup>10</sup> the familiar has analogously become a garrison that should be defended at all costs. Opposite perspectives are judged as intruders, trespassers, and impostors. In the case of Rambert's observation, for instance, the seeming indifference of triflers to what is happening outside the office of the prefect is critically taken to mean as the garrison's cloak and shield. But for how long? As the plague continues to change the atmosphere in the town of Oran, is it possible for people to remain indifferent, or eventually slip into indifference?

Noting Bourdieu's idea of the habitus as explained by Dovey,<sup>11</sup> the silence of the workers may also be a complicit commitment to the structures at work in an office. This means that the way workers behave and how the office is arranged foregrounds the administrators' ideological bias. This foregrounding, however, only conceals the anti-thesis or the built-in tension that regulates any ideology and structural arrangement. If the workers are unable to articulate such tension, then the administrators measure that as part of their success lauded and disguised as efficiency. This is the kind of indifference which administrators may unknowingly or intentionally cultivate. Another type of indifference can be seen

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<sup>10</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford, London: Oxford University Press, 1997), Chapter XV.

<sup>11</sup> Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

in an administrator's disposition towards disciplinary experts. Is Dr. Rieux, being a man of science, in a position to question the prefect's appreciation of the circumstances surrounding the gradual increase of deaths in the Oran? Unfortunately, the prefect was more concerned with politics, his image instead of valuing the health, protection, and survival of the residents from the plague. This disregard for the well-being of others happens when institutions do not know when to re-align their power and influence for the common good. In some institutions, administrators can even be so detached from the realities of its constituents that its employees even needed to beg for their incentives to help them prepare and get through the crisis in a pandemic. US President Trump also made a case for himself when he said that he was optimistic about a certain drug that could help improve the fighting chance of COVID-19 positive patients even if the drug is yet to be assessed in terms of efficacy and safety. Such types of indifference, unfortunately, put additional pressure on people in impoverished situations. As economic engines and social mobilities stop, people's sources of income are immediately snatched. Meanwhile, some rich personalities cannot help but magnify their privileges such as comic strips where family members are now struggling to keep their normal weight since eating seems to be the only thing that they will be doing while on quarantine. Should one remain indifferent to such realities? Should one be silent and complicit to the contexts of these social truths?

For the past weeks, I also struggled with the question of whether or not I have become indifferent to the struggles of others. While realizing that I was fortunate enough to be employed in a government institution that guarantees pay while working at home, I know that others are trying their best to deal with the current situation. How could I possibly help society at this point? Is staying at home for the past weeks enough? Is there something more that I can do? Aside from the little donations, the question of doing more than what you have already done begets confusion. It is this confusion which I think must remain perhaps. This readiness to reflect and evaluate, this

disposition to assess and the need to pray for guidance hover around this consciousness asking if a desire to help with meaningful intent would be sufficient. This week, the family has decided to increase a notch our experience with urban gardening. Will this be of help to what society is dealing with right now? I hope that the family is moving into a not so indifferent direction. The family is trying to respond to the call to grow food despite the limited space in our front yard.

The trifler is also not that different from the *red tape merchants*. Only interested in laying out numerous forms, which are subsequently filed, this character is also disinterested in changing processes and habits in his/her work station. The key difference perhaps is the red tape merchants' stress on forms and templates despite the need for quick decisions. In the COVID-19 pandemic, a similar red tape scenario floated when the government was thought to be lacking in clarity in terms of plans and processes in the distribution of food ration and financial assistance. With the local government units tasked to implement their guidelines in dealing with the COVID-19 and its interventions, the citizens were at the mercy of the wisdom and decisions of their local leaders. To add a burden to ambiguity, fake news made the process of distribution more difficult as energy was needed to address and correct misinformation. Is it true that hospitals were asked to submit letters to the DOH so they could be given with the PPEs? This is another concern that makes us ask if we are still working under the premise that COVID-19 is not an unprecedented problem. Is this the new social leviathan that we are fighting right now? Collingwood reflects in *The New Leviathan* that "The will to civilization is the will to earn one's self-respect and the respect of the other members of one's community; and this is done by the sheer exercise of will, joining with these others to do something about the situation in which you find yourselves."<sup>12</sup> The lack of this kind of will and solidarity is perhaps the primary problem in this

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<sup>12</sup> Robin George Collingwood, *The New Leviathan: Or, Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism* (Read Books Ltd, 2011), Chapter XXXVII.

pandemic that we are in. When individuals only mind their interest, it would only complicate matters for the health workers, immediate families, and community.

For the kind of politicians in the novel, Camus identifies two types: "the *overworked officials*, who raised their arms to heaven, and the *much-harassed officials* who simply looked away". The two politicians look at different directions, but both have accepted their resignation to the plague that is happening in the town of Oran. In the novel, Dr. Rieux expresses his frustrations towards the politicians' response to the public health crisis: "It was done through official channels, and half-heartedly. What they're short on is imagination. Officialdom can never cope with something catastrophic. And the remedial measures they think up are hardly adequate for a common cold. If we let them carry on like this they'll soon be dead, and so shall we."<sup>13</sup> In uttering his disappointment, Dr. Rieux noted that the only moral code that he is following while amid the plague is comprehension. When interrogated by Tarrou if religion might play a role in his conviction, he underscored that his approach to the plague is not influenced by any religious view for he has none. Why is he committed then to the fate of the people in Oran? What Dr. Rieux repeatedly mentioned is that he has seen many patients die and struggle in dealing with imminent death. He explained that it is because of such experiences that he tries his best to not only save people from death but from the misery that comes with it. As Dr. Rieux struggled to get a sense of urgency from the local politicians, he could only somehow muster to ask himself with these queries: Do they value life? Do they value the well-being of the people in the community? These I think are questions that seem to reverberate in his mind.

Given the way politicians in the country deal with the pandemic, we have seen local government units having well-thought-out plans and cities/municipalities with no plans at all. Can such differences in approach mean that the national government has entirely relegated decision-making

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<sup>13</sup> Camus, *The Plague*, 114.

responsibilities to the LGU? While national proclamations were enforced, two questions are in order: Where is the plan? What should be done by the local government units? These questions seem to suggest that most if not everyone were caught off guard by the decision to quarantine the National Capital Region (NCR). In the absence of clear instructions, multitudes were stranded, and long queues awaited those who wanted to enter the NCR. The exact opposite of such a picture was done by the national government of Taiwan, however. Since the Wuhan incident was reported in January 2020, Taiwan immediately and seriously planned and studied the emerging threat. In some news headlines, Taiwan is praised for seeing in advance the coming of COVID-19. Despite exclusion from the WHO, Taiwan crafted its approach to the epidemic with precision, transparency, and reliable information. On such note, the country was not remiss in its moral responsibility in tackling the virus given the epidemiological nature of the problem. Further, Taiwan showcased its moral integrity with this slogan: Taiwan can help. It is this slogan which the world needs right now as such a line brings hope to the rest of the world. COVID-19 can be tackled and its spread can be delayed to give enough time for scientists to discover and test effective and ethical treatment or a vaccine that will put a halt to the spread of the virus. Taiwan's aggressive and humane approach is the model that our country should seriously consider. In the local context, are there cities/municipalities in the country that is looked up to for model programs and solutions in dealing with the virus? Fortunately, we can name a few. These are cities that put fear to the spread of the virus to good use – early detection, mass testing, strict quarantine rules, and compassion for the survival of the poor.

The last character which Camus described in the novel is the *traditionalist*. This person has the propensity of narrowing the scope of one's work and responsibility which explains his/her tendency to handover a concern or query to another unit or office. Attached and secured to the familiar world, the habits of the traditionalist results in a lack of interest and intent to help

or the decency to at least listen. To top it all, each unit will have its interpretation of rules and requirements contributing to the disdain of inquirers, patrons, or consumers. This unproductive process is also reflective of the red tape character previously discussed. But in addition to the irrational character of the traditionalist, this person would not listen to new solutions. Suggestions would just land on deaf ears since new ideas/concepts and situations would only force the traditionalist to question their practices. This is the very situation which traditionalists will try to avoid. In comparison to the other seven characters, the traditionalist can function as the bigger conceptual category to the other seven characters previously explored. This is because each character – the stickler, consoler, very important person, trifler, red-tape merchant, overworked official, and much-harassed official – do not want to acknowledge the problem at hand, would rather settle with current interests, and would never want to reframe things because of the plague. Hence, the name traditionalist is a fitting end to characterize the dispositions of individuals in the novel.

In the global struggle with the pandemic, the traditionalist mindset can be compared to national leaders who remain oblivious to their shortcomings in handling the public health emergency. These countries have suffered the most in terms of positive cases, death counts, and dismal recoveries. Despite such failure, these leaders still tend to find fault in others and even force constituents and other countries to agree with the terms of their requests/demands. This is how the traditionalist enshrines his/her weaknesses. Who can be the next fall guy for the worsening conditions of the pandemic? The traditionalist will always look around and will grab every opportunity to tag individuals or institutions as the probable cause of the problem. In the US, there is now a call to dismiss the pronouncements of the President and to only listen to the advice of the scientists. Such pronouncements cannot be said of Taiwan, Vietnam, and other countries that are successful in slowing the spread of the virus. It seems that accountability is the antithesis of the traditionalist mindset. Noting Plato's

Allegory of the Cave,<sup>14</sup> it seems that only a few countries understand how shadows are but results of the flickering fire inside the cave. The light inside the cave will be temporary, hence unreal. In this difficult situation, the light that comes from the sun is what we need to seriously tackle this pandemic. As it turns out, our struggles to climb near the mouth of the cave means knowing how to distinguish real from illusory sources of knowledge, and understanding what it means to be a human being in this pandemic. Otherwise, our gains will only be temporary and our vision will still be entrenched to the values of those who control the limiting source of light inside the cave.

### **Concluding Insights: How will *The Plague* end?**

From the characters, dispositions, and the gloomy events in the novel, the story confronts us with the reality that our destiny is no longer determined by individual efforts. Each person will have a big role to play in putting an end to the plague. In the novel, such demand is expressed in this phrase: "But it would have been truer to say that by this time, mid-August, the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone. No longer were their individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotions was the sense of exile and deprivation, with all the crosscurrents of revolt and fear set up by these."<sup>15</sup> This is the reality that the community in Oran would need to take in since it is the collective destiny that needs to be carved. This is where the paradoxical relation between individual freedom and collective freedom also figures. Should individual liberties give way to collective destiny? The novel makes it clear that is it through solidarity among individual liberties that the collective good derives its meaning and purpose. This means taking to heart this necessary question: How will my actions help or deprive the community of reaching

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<sup>14</sup> Manuel C. Ortiz De Landazuri, "The Development of Self-Knowledge in Plato's Philosophy," in *Logos* 48 (2015), 123-140.

<sup>15</sup> Camus, *The Plague*, 151.

its goal? It is this question that each resident in the town of Oran would need to ask and answer each day until the plague has been arrested and solved. This is the same question that needs to be asked in this pandemic that has slowed down almost all aspects of our society.

Another difficulty in the process of dealing with the plague is tied to the realization that the town residents have been exiled from its everyday life, and deprived of basic liberties to move around. This is the same difficulty that the current pandemic has brought upon us. Moreover, the moral fabric of urban societies has also been exposed and we feel uncomfortable knowing that we have only seriously decided to look at our priorities since we are all forced by our present circumstance. This is the discomfort and the reason why in the novel, Rambert was also able to identify the kinds of characters that we have explored so far. Conditioned by his privileges, he considered the social quarantine as anathema to the very value that he espoused – freedom. It is the same privileges that we also need to give up. Since the people in Oran were morally forced to quarantine themselves in the community, it is this moral freedom and responsibility that Rambert struggled to understand and accept. Freedom as we know it and moral freedom seem to stand on opposite poles, and now we are directed by our situation to allow both freedoms to productively overlap.

With the deprivations, the people in the town of Oran felt unsure how to make sense of the mobilities that they need to give up, and the moral task to almost be immobile. This is what I am struggling to deal with as well. This structural discomfort can be traced perhaps to the realization that for some of us, we have not reflected on the presence and meaning of immobilities in our communities. As far as our busy lives are concerned, we have been moving around the city, trying to work hard, and bring something to our families. While such motions and departures are important, it seems that we have forgotten to recognize the reality of basic and constructive immobilities in our society. Mobilities can be construed as the appearance of immobilities. This means that we have been structurally tucked with our

motion-oriented habits and that we have forgotten how it is to be immobile – to stay. One example of this immobility is living as one community. This somehow explains why we are learning now what it means to have a collective destiny. That is why in staying at home, we are not simply sacrificing. We are somehow re-learning how it is to live closely with ourselves, our families, and immediate communities. This is one dimension that the plague in the novel and the pandemic is forcing us to be mindful of.

Finally, Rambert's self-oriented disposition in the novel foregrounds another reality in our pre-COVID-19 days: We have inundated our lives with ideas, projects, and concerns that have always been forward-looking. While anticipating the future is culturally and structurally wired, Camus, however, demonstrated that in a plague, such capacity needs to be desensitized. Rambert needed to understand Dr. Rieux's point that in a pandemic "Man isn't an idea."<sup>16</sup> This is the existential hurdle that Camus wanted us to overcome as well. This I think is also the premise that can be considered as we engage with ourselves, others, and the world right now. As we suffer from social isolation, illness, and death, our experience with humanity and with ourselves becomes more concrete. The idea of a human person is becoming less abstract. The novel and the pandemic remind us of our finitude and fundamental rawness when outstripped of things which Capitalism has rammed to our consciousness. As difficult as it is, the pandemic is helping us purge ideas that may no longer be needed and is aiding us to transition into more compassionate, grounded, and connected individuals. This is perhaps the desired end of the pandemic and is a key message in Camus' *The Plague*. Noting Rambert's transformation, he explained that: "Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen what I have seen, I know that I belong

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 149.

here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 188.