

The Responsibility to Save Bodies: Camus and Global Activism

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1—Introduction

Following World War II, Albert Camus was unwilling to accept that the communism of the Soviet Union represented a liberating humane principle; he thus found himself alienated from his friend Sartre and the rest of the French Left. However, this alienation did not drive him toward the other side of the emerging Cold War. He remained a strident critic of the capitalism represented by the United States.² Standing between the two great world powers in an era of increasing intellectual division, Camus was determined to be “neither victim nor executioner.” Living in this tension, he articulated a political position that returns political action to individuals, calling on them to serve as active counterweights to the ideologies of sovereign states that place national interest over human interest.

Camus’s position is striking because it is an early articulation of the politics of human rights, which does not gain traction for another twenty years in the 1970s with the success of Amnesty International and several other nongovernmental organizations.³

¹ This paper compiles and revises a series of online posts I wrote on Medium (<https://medium.com/@ajplyon>). It is an experiment in a different way of writing and cultivating a different audience. The format requires some post-linking repetition that is not fully eliminated in this draft—my apologies.

² Of course, Camus’s most profound alienation was from his home in Algeria. Camus found himself an increasingly isolated voice on issues of Algeria as the two extreme sides—France’s imperialist response and the rise of the Islamic FLN—came to dominate the debate on Algeria’s political status. For a re-evaluation of Camus’s position, see Claire Messud’s review of the recently translated *Algerian Chronicles* (“Camus & Algeria: The Moral Question,” *New York Review of Books*, Nov 7, 2013).

³ See Samuel Moyn’s *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Indirectly, this paper serves to show that Camus understood the postwar political problems in terms similar to Moyn. However, Moyn suggests that human rights in the postwar period are essentially only invoked in terms of self-determination and

Camus summarizes his postwar position by setting the total revolutions of twentieth century ideologies against his “modest political philosophy.” He writes, “My conviction is that it is no longer reasonable to hope that we can save everything, but we can at least hope to save the bodies in order to keep open the possibility of a future” (“Neither Victims Nor Executioners,” 261). To Camus, this is a modest position in that posits no ideological vision, only a practical commitment to human life and a hope that a new politics will develop in the future. Camus then invites others to join him in working to save bodies.

In this series of posts, I explore Camus’s political position and extend his argument by claiming that we have a *responsibility* to save bodies. I then begin to connect this responsibility to the present situation of nongovernmental actors in global politics. I focus on three important contributions and extensions of Camus’s postwar thinking:

- (1) Camus describes a political situation that, in his opinion, necessitates the creation of a community of globally linked individuals, who act politically based on the rights and responsibilities of individuals. This community is to counter the tendency of state ideologies to justify sovereign action without regard to the human cost of those actions. The community of individuals Camus envisions is meant to hold on in hope of a new politics. What Camus did not appear to realize is that this community *is* itself the new politics. The human rights regime and the network of global activists constitute a more substantive politics than he assumed.
- (2) Following from the first, Camus focuses on “saving bodies” as a practical and ethical starting point. The task of “saving bodies,” however, is more than mere survival; it begins an ethics that advocates for the practical amelioration of human suffering.
- (3) The responsibility to save bodies, then, serves as a practical grounding for many current global activists and it presents a model of responsibility that focuses on the assumption of risk for others independent of culpability. Affixing culpability often narrows not only the obligations to act but also the justifications for action. Understanding responsibility as the assumption of risk presents obligation as growing out of individual freedom and provides it with a broader relational justification for action. The risk-assumption model of responsibility better describes the practices of global activism.

decolonization. Camus provides at least one counter example—he focuses on individual rights against national politics.

2—Relative Utopia

In the series of editorials from 1946 that comprise “Neither Victims Nor Executioners” (NVNE), Camus combines his concern for the suffering with a new understanding of politics prompted by the rise of totalitarian ideologies and the advances of technology capable of effecting great harm quickly and efficiently. To Camus, the absolute character of these ideologies and the increasing scope and scale of their actions, enabled by technology, threaten our ability to think and to act with clarity. Camus’s commitment to save bodies is his response to this narrowing of political vision and the escalation of the consequences of our choices. By focusing on saving bodies in the present, he hopes to “keep open the possibility of a future” (NVNE, 261).

Camus develops the commitment to save bodies from his resolution that “I could no longer accept any truth that might place me under an obligation, direct or indirect, to condemn a man to death” (NVNE, 260). This position was immediately critiqued as being *utopian*—that is, utopian in the way people say it when they want to dismiss a position they think is *hopelessly* idealistic. Camus responds to the critique by rethinking the concept of *utopia* itself.⁴ He defines it as follows: “utopia is that which is in contradiction with reality” (NVNE, 261). That is, a utopian belief is anything that stands against what currently is. In this broader sense of utopia, Camus accepts the label but insists on a further distinction. There are *absolute utopias* and *relative utopias*; they are differentiated not only by degree but also by the relationship between the utopian desire and the present. An

⁴ On this point, Camus suggests an argument that Moyn makes the thesis of *The Last Utopia*. Moyn argues that human rights “win” because the ideological utopias of the 19th and 20th century *fail*, so human rights, which begins as something of an anti-utopia, finds itself as the last utopia standing. Camus also sees his position as rejecting the utopian visions of capitalism and Soviet-style communism. As with human rights, Camus centers his politics on the life and rights of individuals.

absolute utopia opposes the present in favor of a future social reorganization to come. A relative utopia is more measured; its opposition to reality focuses on the immediate alleviation of suffering caused by present injustices without setting it against a vision of a future utopia. In this way, the refusal to legitimize murder and the resulting commitment to save bodies constitute a relative utopian position because they, in opposition to present injustice, prioritize human life and reject the logic of absolute utopia that justifies suffering in the present in the name of a future society that will, in actuality, never come to be (the “no place” suggested by *utopia*’s Greek origin).

When critics accuse Camus of being utopian, they mean he ignores *reality* since—according to those hard-edged “realists” without imagination—our actions always risk causing others to suffer. Given this tragic and very real possibility, we must *necessarily* accept and justify those consequences. The realist position collapses risk and possibility with necessity and justification. It is not the case that when an action risks causing suffering that suffering should be justified. Suffering can remain a bad and undesired consequence of the action. A risk that when it occurs signals a mistake, not an inevitability. It is not to be accepted; it demands a rethinking of the action and its risks.

Camus recognizes the box his critics put him in. When they read, “I could no longer accept any truth that might place me under an obligation, direct or indirect, to condemn a man to death,” they interpret it as a utopia in which there is no murder—no death or suffering. It is this world without murder they dismiss as in-the-sky utopianism, and certainly that position would deserve that label, but *that* is not Camus’s position. He refuses to *legitimize* murder. He does not envision a world without murder and suffering; he simply refuses to commit to any “truth” (system of belief, ideology) that justifies the suffering it

might cause for the sake of the desired end. No belief should absolve a person for causing others to suffer. Thus, Camus's resolution is not that he will act only once he has the impossible certainty that his actions will cause no harm; it is that, if his actions do cause harm, the resulting suffering will remain an illegitimate and unjustifiable consequence. That the actions increase human suffering is a compelling reason to revisit and revise the underlying beliefs because suffering is a problem, not merely an *unfortunate* consequence made acceptable in the name of some greater good. The refusal to legitimize murder is a practical stand that refuses to subordinate means to ends, especially when human lives are those "means."

The language of means and ends is useful in distinguishing absolute from relative utopias. Whereas an absolute utopia accepts all means for achieving its particular ends, a relative utopia demands that the means remain as important as the ends. Camus argues that twentieth century ideologies were driven by absolute utopian visions—pursuing their ends by *total revolution*, no matter the cost.⁵ Under such logic, the fact of human suffering in the present is no longer important; the present violence will be redeemed in the future age when the revolution is complete and the new social order is established. Absolute utopian thinking can justify acts of great violence such as the Holodomor, the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33—a premeditated policy by Stalin's government to break the Ukrainian peasants' resistance to industrial collectivization of agriculture and Soviet rule. The Soviet response was justified because the Ukrainians were interfering with the "progress" of the Revolution. Estimates place the death toll between 2.5 and 7 million. The horrific scale of

⁵ *Total revolution* is the term Camus uses in *The Rebel*, published five years after NVNE. *The Rebel* is a philosophical and historical meditation on why "total revolution" is inhumane, always leading to the devaluation of the life of others for the sake of some desired future or of one's increase of power.

this policy illustrates Camus's worry about absolute utopian thinking—*anything* is justifiable in the name of the utopia to come. Furthermore, such thinking encourages “abstraction” in which a desired good is measured against an abstract cost—it just happens that “cost” is the loss of human life.⁶ The subordinating of human life to utopian ends, the abstraction that transforms humanity into a means is limited to the past. Today we speak of *collateral damage* in war. The term hides that our actions caused the death of human beings that were not part of the conflict. We refuse to call this by its name—murder—either because we are ashamed of our actions and loathe to claim responsibility for them, or we have completely accepted the abstraction of other people's lives into statistics.

So-called realists would have us believe that changing the present situation requires us to submit to the logic of absolute utopia, that change only comes if we are willing to reduce some to means to accomplish our ends. Camus's relative utopia serves as an alternative way to think about and to effect change in the world. It is utopian in that it opposes the present condition. However, that opposition does not derive from a commitment to a future utopia, but only from the conviction that the present is unacceptable. Here, perhaps, the language of means and ends meets its limit. Camus, it seems, must have an end in mind when he refuses to legitimize murder, or if not at that point, then certainly he does when he argues that this refusal commits him to working to save bodies. However, these claims are not the same type of “ends” as those of the absolute utopia. Relative utopian ends are those that are one with their means. The change to the

⁶ Here Camus echoes Kant, who writes, “In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity” (*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, §434). Clearly, under absolute utopian thinking, nothing has dignity and everything has a price (worth paying)—even human life.

present sought is accomplished in the act itself. For Camus, the commitment to save bodies does not require a world with all bodies saved, but a world in which *this* body or *these* bodies suffering in the present are saved because we are in a position to do so. In this way, a relative utopia immediately achieves its end in every successful action—the (slightly) better world it desires is made actual.

Even if we grant Camus’s argument about the logic of relative utopia, there remains a practical concern with his position that he refuses to accept any belief that would put him in a position to legitimize murder. Such a position, crafted to avoid the delusions of absolute utopia, may rob us of the motivation to act, leaving us in a practical paralysis that would result in accepting the status quo, the world as it currently is.⁷ In other words, the fear is that without having *hope* in the better world as promised by absolute utopias, people fail to find any particular action to be a compelling contribution to the good. They lack the motivation to act with purpose or even at all. Camus’s project is, in many ways, a working out of how to avoid such apathy and the irresponsibility that tempts those who refuse to submit to an all-encompassing answer. Camus embraces action by discovering the active element within his “negative” ethics.

3—Rebelling

Camus resolves to work to *save bodies* because such a position refuses to devalue the present suffering of others in favor of the promise of a utopian future that will never be. Camus calls his position a *relative utopia*; it is utopian in the sense that saving bodies

⁷ Thought for another day: Camus’s concern with not accepting the world as it is places him in the tradition of the French tradition of *moralistes*. Indeed, Voltaire’s rejection of optimism’s central claim that “this is the best of all possible worlds” in *Candide* should, in my opinion, be read as a rejection of philosophies that encourage the irresponsibility of merely accepting the world as it is—which is very much in line with Camus’s argument here.

stands in “in contradiction with [a] reality” in which people are suffering and dying (NVNE, 261). *Contradiction* is a philosophical term; I prefer *opposition*. To be utopian is to oppose the way things currently are. It is relative and not absolute because the opposition is not justified by a vision of a reordered world; it only claims that the present suffering is unacceptable.

Camus recognizes the essential negativity of his ethical stand. By *negativity*, I mean that the motivation for action begins with a desire aiming to negate the present, not to bring about something specifically new. Camus is moved to act by his refusal to accept *what is*. The challenge of a negative ethics is how to turn the oppositional stand into an affirmative set of practices. When *what is* is no more, is your need to act complete? Without the inspiration of a utopian vision of what is right or good, how does one know which actions are the best to oppose the unacceptable present with? And if one remains uncertain about which practices to adopt, are apathy and non-action inevitable?

Camus answers these questions and turns the opposition to the present into positive action by finding the affirmative grounds in his negative ethics. His desire to be “neither victim nor executioner” gains an affirmative character and political meaning in the central declaration of *The Rebel*: “I rebel—therefore we exist” (22).

On several occasions before publishing “Neither Victims nor Executioners” in 1946, Camus had paired “victims” and “executioners” in a way that sets up a tragic choice.⁸ He writes in his notebooks, “We are in a world in which we must choose to be either victim or executioner—there is no other choice. And the choice is not easy.”⁹ Phrased in the

⁸ In the introductory notes to NVNE, Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi traces Camus’s pairing of the victim and executioner around the time of the editorials’ publication (*Camus at Combat*, 255-7).

⁹ Lévi-Valensi cites this passage from the *Carnets* (*Camus at Combat*, 257).

“positive” of either/or, we are faced with a dilemma, forced to choose between two irresponsibilities. *Either* be a victim and irresponsible to yourself, allowing your life to be drained of meaning by refusing to respond to the violence done to you, *or* assume the role of executioner and be irresponsible to others, denying the dignity of others and reducing them and their lives to the mere means for serving your own ends.

By switching to the negative contrast of neither/nor, Camus opens the possibility that we need not choose one or the other. The double refusal becomes a third position that, admittedly, exists in tension with the two extremes. By refusing the false choice, we not only have a place to stand—a grounding for our actions—but we also establish a measure for our actions. This is affirmative; the refusal actually separates the acceptable from the unacceptable. Actions that without resistance allow our victimization or our complicity in the suffering of others must be rejected in favor of actions that affirm our individual dignity and shared humanity.

The link between an individual’s dignity and our shared humanity is captured in Camus’s declaration, “I rebel—therefore we exist.” The claim is political; the practice of rebelling connects the acting subject—“I”—to the community—“we.” It is worth expanding each part of the claim. Camus’s existentialist affinities are evident in this compressed statement. *I rebel* is the act of an individual. It recognizes that I have the freedom to act and live in the world—the set of givens that exist independent of my choices. Using my freedom to rebel sets me in opposition to the world as it presently is.

As opposition, rebelling begins as a negative act, known first simply by what it refuses to be. Lovers of the status quo and absolute utopians intervene at this point to dismiss rebellion as a purely negative phenomenon—it is *against* rather

than *for* something.¹⁰ However, this critique fails to recognize the affirmative dimensions that underpin rebellion. First, to oppose something requires that one first accept what one opposes as real; the world must be acknowledged as it is. Second, the act of rebellion affirms the individual (“I”) as an actor and not a passive victim in the world. The actor establishes a relationship between herself and the world. If, at this point, the relationship can only be described in terms of opposition—of being neither victim, nor executioner—it does not follow that it is not itself an affirmative—that is, real—position.

In rebelling, I take responsibility for us: *therefore we exist*. Opposing the world as we find it, rebellion lacks meaning unless it “founds its first value on the whole human race” (*The Rebel*, 22). Rebellion connects the individual’s respect for human freedom to a universal community of humanity whose existence is constituted and proven *through* the individual’s use of her freedom. Rebellion, thus, implies an existential responsibility: I assume responsibility for the human community because it exists only through my actions. This is true for each person who uses her freedom to affirm our freedom. If the rebel abdicates, the community disappears.

In linking the *I rebel* to the *we exist*, the individual’s act of rebellion implies the voluntary assumption of a practical responsibility that looks toward the future, not the past. In many cases, we operate with a retrospective model of responsibility in which responsibility derives from culpability. A person is responsible to the extent that her past

¹⁰ This argument is often made against countercultures that originate as critiques of the status quo. It is often made about the 1960s counterculture. In the last several decades, we have seen the same accusations made against the “antiglobalization” movement that gained public awareness at the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999. In fact, the label “antiglobalization” was a critical framing of the protests as only being “against” something. The groups involved have developed alternate descriptive vocabularies for their activism, including “alter-globalization” (not *against* globalization, only against *this* corporate globalization) and the global justice movement. Many of the activists in 1999 were also part of the Occupy movement, which arose in the aftermath of the economic collapse of 2008, and the critique of only being “against” things continued.

actions and the present consequences merit blame. The retrospective model works for many everyday situations, but it is inappropriate in the case of rebellion. For Camus, rebellion does not work on a calculus of the past: it takes the present injustice as given, and the rebel chooses to oppose it. Rebellion *begins* something. Accordingly, it requires a prospective responsibility, one that commits the individual in the present to the future. In prospective models, a person is responsible because she assumes the risk associated with something—in this case, opposing a particular injustice. Rebelliousness assumes the risk implied in creating the *we*.¹¹

Prospective responsibility is necessary in a world in which there are manifest injustices that lack specific agents who can be held culpable for causing or intending the suffering of others. To move beyond culpability and see responsibility as something that the individual takes on changes the focus of responsibility from simply punishing the guilty to the practical question of “Given an injustice, what is to be done now? And by whom?” The risk that the individual assumes arises from creating the relationship between you and I. If there is a *we*, then the injustices you face demand a response from me. Essentially that is what responsibility is—that which demands a response from someone.

Camus’s theory of rebellion and the concept of responsibility it suggests mirror the practical experience of many contemporary nongovernmental organizations. Rebellion is the refusal to accept the present as it is, and in rebelling, the individual assumes responsibility for others. Many nongovernmental organizations initiate relationships with

¹¹ I read Paul Ricœur’s *The Just* and his theory of the subject and responsibility as a contemporary extension of the values and ideas that I have been emphasizing in Camus’s work. For the most complete account of prospective responsibility, see Iris Marion Young’s *Responsibility for Justice*. She develops a “structural position model” that elucidates the structural elements that identifies one’s position in the global political economy. It does not focus on one’s culpability but on one’s positional advantages. Sen’s *The Idea of Justice* also emphasizes the need to consider advantage in such questions (286-290).

communities by taking responsibility, assuming the risk associated with a particular injustice for which that group is not directly culpable. For instance, a nongovernmental organization that works to bring drinkable water into a community that lacks it does so not because they necessarily polluted the river or wells, but because being deprived of drinkable water is an injustice, and the individuals in the organization chose—for whatever reasons—to assume the responsibility to remedy that injustice. The community of individuals Camus envisions in *NVNE* is composed of those who link their personal actions to a sense of responsibility for others. For Camus, these actions—this refusal to accept the present as it is—begin with the modest commitment to save as many bodies as possible.

4—Saving Bodies

Let me begin this post with a somewhat more informal introduction. The “responsibility to save bodies” has been in the back of my mind for several years now. As with many such ideas, it turns out that it has become something wholly other—its origins are lost. Before starting these posts, I would have sworn that Camus—on at least several occasions—used the phrase the “responsibility to save bodies.” Apparently he did not (and a quick Google search suggests nobody else has either). The connection between *responsibility* and *saving bodies* in Camus is certainly implicit, but not explicit. Even the notion of saving bodies is not as prominent as I had recalled. He uses a variation of the phrase no more than a half-dozen times, never systematically elaborating it. The disjuncture between my impression of Camus and his words reveals how much of my own thinking has crept into this concept over the years. In the rest of this post, I attempt to get a little clarity on Camus’s use of “saving bodies” in order to understand the significance of

elevating it to an everyday responsibility appropriate to a new politics for a globalizing world.

In “Neither Victims Nor Executioners,” Camus sets saving bodies against legitimizing murder. While certainly opposed, the two concepts are not simply negations of each other. If the issue is legitimizing murder, then certainly one could simply refuse to legitimize murder; it does not necessarily require one to *save* bodies. There is an active element in “saving” that remains under-explained in NVNE. Camus’s theory of rebellion and the ethical claim it implies—that every refusal is also an affirmation—is developed more fully in *The Rebel* several years later. For Camus, then, by refusing to legitimize murder, you affirm human life—an affirmation shown in your actions by respecting others and, to the best of your ability, saving the suffering and those at risk of dying.

One of the peculiar things about Camus’s call to save bodies is its emphasis on *bodies*—the body, not the person; and the biological, not the moral. The body is the first requirement of existence. There is no life without a body, and so all questions of meaning and a life worth living require a person to be first and foremost alive. While being alive does not necessarily mean that one is free, human freedom ceases in death.

The physicality of the human body counters the abstract character of ideology. The primacy of the physical body takes human beings *prior* to considering the beliefs and ideologies they subscribe to. Saving others removes political considerations from the decision about when to save bodies. It should not depend on what the suffering people believe or the possibility of persuading them of your own point of view. For Camus, hiding partisan bias behind humanitarian outrage is reprehensible. An anti-communist critic

criticized Camus for setting *State of Siege*, his play about totalitarianism, in Spain. In the critic's opinion Soviet communist totalitarianism was more extreme than that of Franco's fascist Spain. Camus responds by rejecting the partisan character of the critique, writing, "I will go on denying you the right to [attack the ambition to bear witness and to cry out whenever possible] as long as the murder of a human being elicits your outrage, apparently, only to the extent that the victim shares your ideas" ("Why Spain?" 301). The critic's selective outrage revealed his motivation to be politics, not humanity. For Camus, the claim to save bodies should not mask the executioner's judgment of who deserves to live. The guilt or innocence of the victims is, similarly, secondary to the value of life and the possibilities it opens.¹²

Camus's prioritization of the physical body independent of political beliefs takes human life at its most elemental, common, and ordinary first. In this way, Camus's saving bodies is similar to the anti-politics developed by Eastern European dissidents, such as Vaclav Havel and the Charter 77 movements.¹³ For both Camus and Havel, reclaiming the ordinary experiences of human beings—for Camus here, the body, and for Havel, truth—was the initial step in the fight against the totalizing ideologies of twentieth century politics. All political resistance—any political change not determined by the inhumane

¹² In NVNE, Camus starts his sketch of the "new social contract" between those who refuse to align with ideologies that legitimize murder with a shared commitment to abolish the death penalty (273). Camus was an activist against the death penalty; he lays out his reasoning in "Reflections on the Guillotine."

¹³ See Vaclav Havel, "Power of the Powerless" and "Two Notes on Charter 77" in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. On the similarities between Camus and Havel, see Jeffrey Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*.

principles of capitalism or Soviet communism—would be impossible without reclaiming a human, living space.¹⁴

Camus remains sensitive to the fact that while it is important to value human life apart from the person's beliefs, it would be wrong to argue that a living body and humanity are equivalent. In the conclusion to *NVNE*, Camus writes that while he has focused on speaking with a "reason that knows its limits," he does not want to "dispense with the powers of indignation and love" that remain necessary if people are to make a difference (*NVNE*, 274). Indeed, Camus's invocations of freedom and joy frequently contain an essential physicality. Joy is a bodily experience in the world, often in nature. This ideal is most clearly captured in the scene in *The Plague* when Rieux and Tarrou seal their friendship by swimming in the sea, outside the quarantine, on edge of Oran, the plague-ridden Algerian city (255-256).

In *The Plague*, the plague has both literal and moral significance. It is the bubonic plague, an epidemic that ravages the population of Oran, but for Tarrou it is also the moral contamination of people. The plague implies our guilt, our complicity in the death of others. For many of us, our silence allows the epidemic of human suffering to spread unabated.

In the novel, the struggle against the plague is an emergency that prevents Rieux, the overworked doctor, from attempting to understand the plague (if such a thing is possible). Instead, he focuses on trying to save bodies in the present even though he admits that the plague represents to him "a never ending defeat" (129). Sharing in Rieux's struggle,

¹⁴ The reaction against the colonization of personal space by the political, technological, and commercial continues to be one of the many forms of micro and macro-scale resistance in the present. A good recent example of this effort to defend the personal space of human interaction is the Reclaim the Streets movement.

the fight against the plague brings a diverse set of characters together. The narrator reflects on the nature of this solidarity:

Many fledgling moralists in those days were going about our town proclaiming there was nothing to be done about [the plague] and we should bow to the inevitable. And Tarrou, Rieux, and their friends might give one answer or another, but its conclusion was always the same, their certitude that a fight must be put up, in this way or that, and there must be no bowing down. The essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation. And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical (133).

One of the important themes of *The Plague* is that the preservation of human life—saving the greatest possible number of persons—can serve as a common conclusion no matter what the individual’s particular motivations and beliefs are.¹⁵

The nature of the commitment to save bodies is, at its heart, a concern with health. After watching a child suffer and die, Dr. Rieux rejects Father Paneloux’s description of them as both “working for man’s salvation.” Rieux corrects the priest: “Salvation’s much too big a word for me. I don’t aim so high. I’m concerned with man’s health; and for me his health comes first” (219). Camus’s thinking about a measured politics of relative utopia resonates here: saving a body is a clearer goal than saving a soul. Health is rooted in this world, and it is a precondition for the use of freedom.¹⁶ Health opens possibilities. Salvation implies redemption—the final, rather than the first, achievement. Salvation completes a person. Care for a person’s health expands the notion of saving bodies beyond mere life and toward a more robust sense of what saving a body entails. While Camus does at times focus

¹⁵ This intuition resonates with Amartya Sen’s *The Idea of Justice*, in which he develops his comparative view of justice that begins with shared understandings of what is unjust rather than on what justice is. For my understanding of the relationship between agency and Sen’s view of justice, see Antony Lyon, “Relational representation: an agency-based approach to global justice.”

¹⁶ Again, Sen’s capabilities theory supports this idea. On capabilities theory, see Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* and Martha Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism” and *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*.

on mere life (saving the dying), it is clear, looking at his lifework, that he more often has in mind a fuller sense of human life as matter of health, as free of suffering as we can make it.¹⁷

The intersection of saving bodies with Rieux's medical ethics is more than coincidental. The vocation of the doctor is easily aligned with the principle of saving bodies. In a conversation with the journalist Rambert, Rieux recognizes as much. Rambert asks Rieux what he meant by viewing the fight against the plague as an act of "common decency." Rieux responds, "I don't know what it means for other people. But in my case I know that it consists in doing my job" (163). Rieux is certain that his clarity of purpose in the midst of the plague is not a sign of his moral superiority or heroism; it is an effect of the coincidence of his vocation and the particular problem with which the town is faced.

While this is "fortunate" for Rieux, it leaves many of the other characters at a loss about how to respond to the plague. Eventually, all of them (excepting the misfit Cottard) begin working in Tarrou's voluntary "sanitary groups" to try to contain the plague as best as possible. Still, under the condition of the epidemic and the closed town, each person has an opportunity to work for the health of others—to save as many bodies as possible. The question that remains outside *The Plague* is what does this care ethic, this concern for health, this commitment to save bodies call on us to do?

¹⁷ Camus's "Misery in Kabylia" in *Algerian Chronicles* is the piece of journalism that gained him international notice. The series of articles is concerned with the many symptoms and sources of the famine and impoverishment of the people in the Kabylia region of Algeria and what measures can be taken to improve the conditions in the immediate and long term.

5—The New Social Contract

Saving bodies is a practical response to the suffering of others. As an ethical claim, it claims very little—only that human life is valuable. Life derives value from the possibility of a future and the unbreakable link between physical existence and any set of meanings an individual believes constitutes the good life. In this way, the security of life precedes all other questions of substantive meaning.¹⁸ The commitment to save bodies extends beyond mere life, recognizing the need to ameliorate suffering and to promote a person’s health to the best of our abilities. The community that shares this commitment to save bodies is a new kind of political community. It is not a nation-state—territorially bound, governed and policed by sovereign authority. It is, rather, a community of free individuals who come together within and across borders, united by what Camus calls a “new social contract” based on a “more reasonable set of principles” (NVNE, 273).

The community Camus envisions is strikingly similar to the network of nongovernmental actors working toward global justice that has emerged in the last sixty years. However, it is important not to conflate Camus’s aspiration with the historical phenomenon that followed. For example, Camus thought this new community would emerge from the partnership of labor movements and “international study groups” (NVNE, 273). While both have played a role in global activism, Camus did not foresee the independent power that human rights organizations and other nongovernmental organizations have come to play within the network. Camus does clearly understand that

¹⁸ It is not essential to agree on the specific details of a minimum that would constitute the “security of life.” The absence of absolute agreement and the presence of somewhat diverse interpretations of a meaningful life do not negate the shared quality of the value. Human social life—the world of activity—is not philosophy. Whereas philosophy remains paralyzed by *incompleteness*, people know that present injustice demands a response in the present. One step away from injustice is a *beginning* that can be shared by all who recognize the injustice. This basic conviction is at the foundation of *The Plague*.

this new political community must cut across state borders and globalize justice claims as the emergent network of nongovernmental actors has.¹⁹

As the original social contract tradition justified the nation-state as the preferred form of human community, so Camus's new social contract establishes a new community. Similarly, both social contracts focus on individuals as free agents, who join to defend certain rights, what is inalienably their own, and liberties, defending the space necessary to act freely. However, the unity that Camus's new social contract creates is not a unity under authority, as defended by Hobbes and Locke. It is more like the democratic existential unity of Rousseau's social contract. Those who join this new social contract unite themselves under a chosen set of principles. The unity exists through the practical sharing of the values.²⁰ To borrow Seamus Heaney's beautiful turn of phrase, this community is the "republic of conscience."²¹

Camus centers the values of the new social contract on the conviction that dialogue must again be opened between individuals, between cultures, and between civilizations. For Camus, dialogue requires a clarity in communication that combats the "confusion of terror." Without dialogue humanity is doomed to the vicious cycle of violence, legitimizing murder for the sake of ideas without regard for human life. Camus's presentation of the values of the new community is worth quoting at length. He writes:

¹⁹ I replace Camus's invocations of "international" with the term "global." While Camus uses the word "international" for this movement, it seems clear to me that he really means something closer to what we now refer to as "global" (connecting across borders irrespective of borders) in distinction to the "inter-national" (relations between states).

²⁰ What Camus's community of the "new social contract" lacks is *proximity*. For Rousseau, democratic activity requires a closeness, a thickly shared physical space. In the globalizing world, technology has expanded to produce new means of closeness that have made it possible to think of real communities that may lack many of the traditional physicality of proximity.

²¹ Seamus Heaney, "From the Republic of Conscience," in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996*. The poem was written to commemorate the anniversary of Amnesty International in 1985.

[L]et us imagine a group of people determined, in all circumstances, to set example against power, preaching against domination, dialogue against insult, and plain honor against wily cunning; a group of people who would refuse all the advantages of society as they find it today and accept only the duties and responsibilities that tie them to others; and who would attempt to direct teaching, above all, and, in addition, the press and public opinion in keeping with the principles of conduct I have just set forth (NVNE, 274).

This set of values reinforces the principle of saving bodies. Human life is threatened by a desire for domination and the peculiar blindness that afflicts human beings once the causal chain extends beyond the immediate. If you are committed to save bodies, you must constantly work to figure out how you—the way that you are living—contributes to or masks the suffering of others. Camus appears to set an impossible standard here: How can you live in society *and* “refuse all the advantages” that structural injustices build into society itself? It is important here to remember the distinction between an absolute and relative utopia. The absolute utopian demands the pure life; the relative utopian only that you keep taking steps toward justice—refusing the advantages a little at a time. Importantly, refusal is not an isolated act—to refuse one thing is to affirm another. Therefore, the refusal of the advantages at the same time affirms the duties and responsibilities that connect us to one another. While completely fulfilling these duties and responsibilities remains outside of our abilities, we have a place to begin—the responsibility to save bodies.

The responsibility to save bodies serves to ground the practices of global justice. It is a principle that includes humanity and affirms the value of life without committing to any particular thick conception of the good. The responsibility to save bodies also has the advantage of connecting individual rights (the right to life) to a practical humanitarian ethic (health promotion). The responsibility to save bodies suggests a set of possible

practices that *begin* the move away from suffering and injustice and, hopefully, toward justice.

6—Conclusion

In 1946, Albert Camus responded to postwar politics with a mix of pessimism and optimism. He clearly saw the great suffering that devotion to absolute utopian ideologies had caused. He also recognized that in a globalizing world, “There is no longer any such thing as isolated suffering, and no instance of torture anywhere in the world is without effects on our daily lives” (NVNE, 266). What Camus could not see was a clear response to these two modern facts. He succinctly summarizes the problem: “It is obvious to everyone that political thought increasingly finds itself overtaken by political events” (NVNE, 268).

In the midst of this overtaking, however, Camus allowed a small space in which hope could survive. He called on individuals, who like him believed that injustice must be opposed, even in a world where ultimate victory—perfect freedom, salvation, or justice—remains perpetually out of reach. While he did not know how many like-minded individuals would step forward and give up their private dreams in favor of the political need to save bodies, he believed that they existed and were asking themselves similar questions to his own. He thought if these people united under the new social contract, it might be possible to save enough bodies to bide our time until a new politics would be possible.

What Camus does not see is that this modest politics of the relative utopia, the uniting of those with a commitment to dialogue who assume the responsibility to save bodies, *is* the new politics he hoped for. Certainly this is not to say that the human rights regime, nongovernmental organizations, and the network of global activists have ushered

in a new political epoch, displacing the nation-state and absolute utopian ideologies. However, they have established and continued to grow a sphere for global, non-state political action. These communities of individuals, constituted by shared values, have challenged the monopoly on political action sovereignty reserves for governments. Michel Foucault, writing thirty years later, understands the ways in which the series of singular, practical interventions of the kind Camus advocated for—the opportunities to save as many bodies as possible—had become a new politics. In acting, they created a “new right” for individuals to intervene in global politics, and each act “uproot[ed] little by little and day by day” the governmental monopoly in international politics.²²

Camus calls us to practical humanitarian rebellion. The extension of this project would look at those who answered the call. The practical work of groups like Doctors Without Borders (Médecins sans frontières) and Partners in Health, to take two prominent examples, show the difficulty of figuring out what is possible and what works in this emergent global politics. The successes and failures of groups like this are rebellious acts that bring the global *we* into existence. This global community and its related right to intervene across borders continue to develop through every campaign that opposes the suffering of others with caring practices that link the meaningful life to the healthy one.

²² Michel Foucault, “Facing Governments: The Rights of Man” (translation my own).

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