

# **The Responsibility to Save Bodies: Camus and Global Activism**

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## 1—Introduction

As a writer, Albert Camus always felt double. In another time, he would have been happy as a modern Romantic, extolling the beauty of nature and life. However, he also believed that one could not turn away from the injustices in the world. Considering this double pull, Camus resolves, “Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever may be the difficulties of the undertaking, I should like to never be unfaithful to either one or the others” (“Return to Tipasa,” 203). Camus believes that suffering, particularly that caused by the deprivations of poverty and violence, is to be opposed. That there are those who are “humiliated” requires a response from us. This conviction is the root of Camus’s conscience and his commitment to work toward justice.

Camus’s conscientious stand against suffering alienated him from both sides of the emerging Cold War after World War II.<sup>1</sup> He was unwilling to accept that Soviet-backed communism represented a humane liberating principle, which alienated Camus from his friend, Jean-Paul Sartre, and the rest of the French Left. Camus also remained a strident critic of the capitalist democracy of France and the United States. Disavowing both Cold War ideologies in an era of increasing intellectual division, Camus was determined to be

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<sup>1</sup> Camus’s most profound alienation was from his home in Algeria. Camus found himself increasingly isolated 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](#)”).

“neither victim nor executioner.” He would neither remain silent nor be complicit in ideologies that justified or excused the suffering they caused people. For Camus, opposition required an active response. Individual had to counter their governments when they set national and ideological interests over human life.

Camus’s conscientious stand is striking as an early articulation of the politics of human rights, which do not gain political traction for another thirty years until the success of Amnesty International and several other nongovernmental organizations in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Camus did not view his position as part of a new politics. It was only a “modest political philosophy,” an ethical conviction without a fixed vision of the future. Camus 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). Camus hopes that a practical commitment to human life in opposition to the political ideologies of the time will keep the space open for a more humane politics to develop in the future. To make that possible, Camus invites others who feel similarly to join him in working to “save bodies.”

Camus did not live to see that his call to save bodies was part of the beginning of an emerging global community of connected individuals acting across borders in order to ameliorate the suffering of others through caring practices. Saving bodies was, for Camus, an effort to the hold line for humanity against terror<sup>3</sup> and death. He did not realize that the community of individuals who answered his call is the new politics he hoped for. In the

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<sup>2</sup> See Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Moyn’s historical argument about postwar political ideology and the ascendance of human rights aligns with Camus’s vision here. However, Moyn argues that human rights until the 1970s was only being invoked to support national self-determination and decolonization. Camus’s focus on individual rights *against* national politics twenty years earlier provides at least one interesting counterexample to Moyn’s historical narrative.

<sup>3</sup> For Camus, “terror” is an extreme fear felt when “persuasion is no longer possible” (“Neither Victims Nor Executioners,” 258).

seventy years since Camus wrote, human rights and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations have established themselves as political powers independent of the sovereign state. In the process, they have cultivated the fullest sense of saving bodies, arguing that human dignity requires not just life, but health as well. They have elevated *saving bodies* into a common responsibility appropriate for a globalizing world.

In this paper, I look closely at the connection between Camus's philosophy and his practical call to save bodies. I argue that implicit in Camus's ethics is a *responsibility* to save bodies. That is, the work to save bodies is a response to the recognition of human suffering. This responsibility is often elided because we do not see ourselves as culpable for the suffering of others. However, it is necessary to conceive of responsibility not as the assigning of culpability, but as the prospective assumption of risk for something. Grounded in the present fact of suffering and oriented toward the future, the responsibility to save bodies provides a clear ethical principle and a practical measure for humanitarian actors working toward global justice.

## **2—Relative Utopia**

In the nine editorials from 1946 that comprise "Neither Victims Nor Executioners" (NVNE), Camus combines his concern for the suffering with new convictions prompted by the rise of totalitarian ideologies and technology's capacity to effect great harm quickly and efficiently. For Camus, the combination of extreme ideologies and technology threatens our ability to think and to act with clarity. His commitment to save bodies is his response to this narrowing of political vision and the escalating consequences of our choices. Saving bodies is a practical way to stay focused on the present when so much political talk spoke in grand

historical terms that threatened mutually assured destruction. Camus hoped to “keep open the possibility of a future” (NVNE, 261).

The commitment to save bodies derives from Camus’s initial resolution not to legitimize murder. Camus writes, “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). He refused to accept a political situation that justified taking any human life in the name of some greater cause. No violent, political death is ever justified. His position was immediately critiqued as being *utopian*—that is, utopian in the way people say it when they want to dismiss a position they view as *hopelessly* idealistic. Camus rejects the critique by redefining *utopia* in a way suited to the times.<sup>4</sup> Camus defines utopia as “that which is in contradiction with reality” (NVNE, 261). *Contradiction* is a philosophical term; I prefer *opposition* for its practical resonance. To be utopian is to oppose the way things currently are.

Camus recognizes two ways to be utopian. You can subscribe either to an *absolute utopia* or a *relative utopia*. They are differentiated not only by degree but also by the relationship between the utopian desire and the present. The absolute utopian opposes the present for the sake of an ideal future. The absolute utopian seeks to replace the entire present system with a new one. The communist revolution is one example of absolute utopianism. For Camus, the total character of the absolute utopia is impossible, making it truly the *u-topos*, “no place,” that the original Greek suggests. The relative utopian is more

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<sup>4</sup> Camus’s redefinition of *utopia* mirrors the argument Moyn makes in *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 attempts to rescue utopia through redefinition; he does so by stripping the concept of its Romantic idealization, including the sense of utopian completeness, to which it was linked in fascist nationalism and communism. On the link between Romanticism and utopia, see Judith Shklar, *Against Utopia*.

measured; her utopian desire focuses on opposing the present *because* the present is unjust, not for the sake of a specific utopian future. Camus is a relative utopian. His refusal to legitimize murder and his resulting commitment to save bodies oppose present injustices and prioritize human life without needing to posit a particular idealized future society. It is enough that the present injustice is set to rights or at least ameliorated.

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. The realist assumes that given this tragic and very real possibility, we must necessarily accept and justify those consequences. That is to treat possibility and risk as the same as necessity and justification. However, to know tragedy or acknowledge possibility is not the same as moral affirmation. If an action risks causing suffering, it does not follow that the suffering must be justified if it occurs. Now, the actor might have to take responsibility for the resulting suffering, but that is different than justifying that suffering. The suffering can remain a bad and undesirable (though possible) consequence of one’s actions. Its occurrence is a mistake, not inevitable. Just because it happens, it may have to be accepted, but it need not be affirmed.

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 jump to a utopia in which there is no murder—no death, no suffering. They dismiss this world without murder as in-the-sky utopianism, and perhaps that position deserves the 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”—any ideology, system of belief—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. Camus's resolution does not imply that he will act only once he gains the impossible certainty that his actions will cause no harm. If that were the case, he could not advocate for saving bodies. His resolution means 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 will not subordinate means to ends, especially when human lives are those "means."

The language of means and ends is a useful way to distinguish absolute utopias from relative ones. The absolute utopian accepts any means for achieving his particular ends, whereas a relative utopian demands that the means are one and the same as the desired ends. Camus argues that twentieth century ideologies were absolute utopian visions that pursued their ends by *total revolution*, no matter the cost.<sup>5</sup> Total revolution looks to transform all aspects of society; consequently it opposes the present in every sense. The total revolution requires total social upheaval, resulting in an inhumane principle that devalues lives in the present for the sake of the desired future society. The absolute utopian believes that the present violence will be redeemed in the future age when the revolution is complete and the new social order is established. As a result, the fact of present suffering is no longer important. Absolute utopian thinking can justify acts of great violence such as the

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<sup>5</sup> *The Rebel* is Camus's philosophical and historical meditation on why total revolution always ends in suffering, death, and irresponsibility. *The Rebel* completes the line of thinking that NVNE announces. It was also the catalyst for Camus's final break with Sartre and the French Left.

Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33—a premeditated policy by Stalin’s Soviet government to break the Ukrainian peasants’ resistance to the industrial collectivization of agriculture and Soviet rule. The starvation and other deprivations that claimed between 2.5 and 7 million Ukrainian lives were publicly justified as the necessary means to advance the Revolution, which had by 1932 already become nothing more than a mask for tyranny. The horrific scale of this policy illustrates Camus’s worry about absolute utopian thinking—*anything* is justifiable in the name of the utopia to come.

In order for the absolute utopian to arrive at his conclusions, he must think in “abstraction”—translate everything into “means” and “ends.” A desired good (an end) is measured against an abstract cost (a means). It just so happens that the “cost” is human life.<sup>6</sup> Obscuring the loss of human life through abstraction is not limited to the past. Today we speak of *collateral damage* in war. The term hides that our actions cause the death of human beings that are not part of the conflict—they are civilians. 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. Paul Farmer makes a similar point about the humanitarian field of health care provision.<sup>7</sup> There is a drive to provide “sustainable” health options globally, which too often masks our unwillingness to pay for the care that is actually needed. Farmer summarizes, “It’s really the poor who are ‘unsustainable’ if they get cancer or suffer serious

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<sup>6</sup> This 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). Under absolute utopian thinking, human life has no dignity; the loss of a life is always a price worth paying to advance the utopia.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Farmer, [“Who Lives and Who Dies”](#)



injury.” There is an abstraction that sets the lives of poor individuals against the monetary calculation of the cost for care provision.

Camus’s relative utopia is an alternative way to think about and to effect change in the world. It is grounded in the conviction that the present is unacceptable, not in a specific commitment to a future utopia. Perhaps the language of ends and means finds its limit here? Camus must have *some* end in mind when he refuses to legitimize murder, or if not at that point, then he certainly does when he argues that this refusal commits him to saving bodies. While these claims do have “ends,” they remain at one with their means. The change sought is accomplished in the act itself. For Camus, the commitment to save bodies does not require a world in which all bodies are saved, only a world in which *this* body or *these* bodies suffering in the present are saved. The relative utopia immediately achieves its end in every successful action—the action makes the better world it desires actual.

Even if we grant Camus’s argument about the logic of relative utopia, we can be concerned that the refusal to accept any belief that puts one in a position to legitimize murder might lead to inaction. 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.<sup>8</sup> The fear is that without having *hope* in the better world promised by absolute utopias, people fail to find any particular action to be a compelling contribution to the good. One way to see Camus’s entire project is as a response to this anxiety. In all of his writing, Camus aims to reject the apathy and irresponsibility that tempts those who refuse to submit to an all-encompassing

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<sup>8</sup> Camus’s concern with not accepting the world as it is places him in the French tradition of *moralistes*. Indeed, Voltaire’s rejection of optimism is very much in line with Camus’s argument here. In the thorough satirizing of optimism’s central claim that “this is the best of all possible worlds,” *Candide* should be read as a rejection of philosophies that encourage the irresponsibility of merely accepting the world as it is.

answer be it God or ideology. Camus embraces action rather than apathy by uncovering the active element in refusal; he turns the “negative” ethical stance of the refusal into the ground for action.

### **3—Rebelling**

Camus moves beyond the merely critical and toward action when he recognizes that every refusal is also an affirmation. Camus’s refusal to legitimize murder and to remain “neither victim nor executioner” challenges him to find a principle of action that is more than negative, more than the rejection of the present, of *what is*. A negative or critical ethics frames itself around what is unacceptable. As such, it either ends when the present changes or survives by finding an affirmative principle to guide practice. Without the inspiration of a vision of what is right and good—a utopia—how does one decide how to best oppose the unacceptable present? And if one remains uncertain about which practices to adopt, are apathy and inaction inevitable? Camus works out the move from the critical to the affirmative in his theory of rebellion. Camus succinctly captures the move in *The Rebel* when he writes, “I rebel—therefore we exist” (22). From the refusal of individual rebellion, Camus constitutes an ethical community.

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> Phrased in the “positive” of either/or, we are faced with a dilemma of affirming that we are one or the

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<sup>9</sup> See Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi’s introductory notes to NVNE where she traces Camus’s pairing of “victim” and “executioner” in his work (*Camus at Combat*, 255-7).

<sup>10</sup> Lévi-Valensi cites this passage from the *Carnets* (*Camus at Combat*, 257).

other. The choice is tragic because both options are irresponsible ways to be in the world. *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* be an executioner, irresponsible to others—denying their dignity, reducing their lives to means that serve your own ends. Presented with the choice of being either victim or executioner, one is left to choose between two ethical dead-ends. You are forced to endure violence or perpetrate it. For Camus, the only ethical move is to refuse identifying with both.

The double refusal—to be *neither* victim *nor* executioner—allows Camus to escape the tragic affirmation and find the grounds from which to act. The double refusal becomes a third position. It is a tenuous but stable one, existing in tension with the extremes of the victim and executioner. The double refusal provides us with an ethical grounding for our actions and a clear measure of their limits. Actions are unacceptable when they replicate the roles of the victim or the executioner, when they passively accept our victimization or make us complicit in the suffering of others. The affirmation that exists between these two refusals is the inviolable dignity of individuals and our shared humanity.

In his theory of rebellion, Camus connects individual dignity and our shared humanity. He presents it in a condensed form in the declaration: “I rebel—therefore we exist.” The value of the community (“we”) is constituted by the action of the self-affirmation of the individual (“I”). *I rebel* is the act of an individual. It implies I have the freedom to act in the world, which is the set of givens that exists independent of my choices. I use my freedom to rebel, setting myself in opposition to the world as it presently is.

As an opposition, rebellion is a critical act, known first simply by what it refuses to be. Defenders of the status quo and absolute utopians who pin their hopes on an ideal

future only see rebellion in terms of this negative refusal—rebellion is only *against* rather than *for* something.<sup>11</sup> This dismissal of rebellion fails to recognize its affirmative underpinning. Most rebellion is not anarchic; its resistance to the present is based upon affirmative principles. Camus’s rebellion affirms the individual (“I”) as an acting subject and not as a passive victim in the world. The individual establishes a relationship between herself and the world. If, at this point, the relationship can only be described in terms of its refusals—of being neither victim, nor executioner—it does not follow that it is not itself an affirmative position. That is, the lack of a word to capture its affirmation does not necessarily obscure the clarity of what that position stands for.

Camus’s rebellion does not merely affirm that the individual can act; she does act, and the consequence of that action is that *we*, a community of shared humanity, exist. Rebellion’s opposition to the world as we find it lacks meaning, for Camus, unless it “founds its first value on the whole human race” (*The Rebel*, 22). Rebellion connects the individual to a humanity constituted and proven *through* the individual’s use of her freedom. It creates an existential responsibility since the human community exists only through one’s actions. If the individual ceases to rebel and slips into the roles of victim or executioner, then the community also ceases to exist. The individual’s use of her freedom affirms our freedom. If the rebel abdicates, the community disappears.

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<sup>11</sup> This tired argument is often made against countercultures that challenge the status quo. It is made about the 1960s counterculture, and in the last several decades, we have seen the same accusations made against the “anti-globalization” movement that gained public awareness at the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999. The “anti-globalization” frame came from the media and those critical of protests as only being “against” something. The activists have rejected the anti-globalization label and 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 these activists are 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 continues.

The responsibility implicit in the move from *I rebel* to *we exist* is rooted in the present and oriented toward the future, not the past. We often operate with a past-oriented model of responsibility; one that is retrospective and hinges on culpability. Retrospective models of responsibility view a person as responsible to the extent that her past actions and their present consequences merit assignable blame. The retrospective model works for many everyday situations, but it is inappropriate to a world in which manifest injustices are ever-present and yet elude assignment to particular agents.

The rebel's first point of opposition is the existence of the injustice, not its origins. It opposes the present, not the past. Rebellion *begins* something. The responsibility the rebel assumes is, accordingly, prospective. It is a responsibility that commits the individual in the present to the future. Prospective models of responsibility see a person as responsible when she assumes the risk associated with something, in the case of rebellion, for opposing a present injustice.<sup>12</sup> Using prospective responsibility, we can elaborate Camus's claim, "I rebel—therefore we exist." In the present, I use my freedom to rebel—to oppose an injustice—and in so acting, I assume responsibility for us. That is, I take on the risk associated with acting against the injustice for the sake of us—a community of shared humanity constituted around the opposition of this injustice.

Having recovered the affirmation in Camus's double refusal and expanded upon the prospective responsibility rebellion implies, it is possible to see one of the connections between Camus's project and contemporary global nongovernmental actors.

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<sup>12</sup> I see Paul Ricouer's *The Just* and his theory of the subject and responsibility as a contemporary extension of the values and ideas 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 shape one's position in the global political economy. It focuses on one's positional advantages, not on one's culpability.

Nongovernmental actors often find themselves in the position of the rebel. Like the rebel, many nongovernmental actors begin in opposition to a manifest injustice for which they are not directly culpable. Their intervention, their taking responsibility for ameliorating this injustice, is voluntary. As a generic example, a nongovernmental organization that works to bring drinkable water to a community that lacks it does so not because they polluted the river or wells, but because they believe that being deprived of drinkable water is an injustice. The individuals in the organization chose—for whatever personal reasons—to assume the responsibility to remedy that injustice in that particular community. And like the rebel, the nongovernmental actors constitute a new community—a new “we” that includes themselves and the community in which they work. The community of individuals that Camus envisions in NVNE is composed of individuals who refuse the present as it is and who connect their personal actions with a sense of responsibility for others.

#### **4—Saving Bodies**

Camus treats his ethical stand, his refusal to legitimate murder, as if it implies the commitment to save bodies. Camus’s understanding of rebellion provides the critical connection that makes the move not only possible, but also necessary. For Camus, the rebellious refusal is not about maintaining clean hands; it is a claim about one’s responsibility for others. So when I refuse to legitimize murder, I assume the responsibility to save others from it. It is not immediately clear why saving others should mean *saving bodies*, rather than any other way of thinking about human beings. Saving bodies is, for Camus, a liberating principle that is at once both the minimal *and* maximal action that we can take while maintaining our ethical refusal to legitimate murder. It is the minimal

because saving bodies intervenes at the point of necessity. The respect for the humanity in each of us requires that we are alive. However, this minimalism should not be mistaken as aiming only at preserving *bare life*. For Camus, saving bodies is a principle of health, which implies a responsibility beyond mere survival. It is also the maximal action because other conceptions of human beings require moral judgments that elevate certain lives over others. With the responsibility to save bodies, Camus seeks a common practical commitment that the broadest number of people can affirm. For Camus, saving bodies is not sufficient for assuring meaningful human lives, but it is the appropriate political intervention because by securing lives it keeps the possibility of meaningful lives open and avoids the narrowing of those possibilities by our own ideological presumptions. In NVNE, he reminds his readers that in saving bodies he has focused on a “reason that knows its limits,” but they should also not “dispense with the powers of indignation and love” that remain necessary if people are to make a difference (NVNE, 274).<sup>13</sup> In other words, saving bodies is what we share, but it is the beginning, not the end of our struggle for meaning.

Camus emphasizes saving *bodies* to draw attention to the physical, not the moral. The body is a need; it is the first requirement of existence. There is no life without the 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 fully free, human freedom ceases in death. Saving bodies, then, is the first step in liberation, and it is an intervention that takes place before moral and political disagreements fracture our common purpose.

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<sup>13</sup> Camus consistently argues that justice and love cannot be separated. They require one another. In “Return to Tipasa,” he writes, “the long fight for justice exhausts the love that nevertheless gave birth to it” (201).

The physicality of the human body counters the abstract character of ideology, and the emphasis on the body takes human beings *prior* to considering the beliefs and ideologies they subscribe to. The decision to save the lives of others should not be made based upon what the suffering people believe or the possibility of persuading them of your own point of view. For Camus, hiding ideological bias behind humanitarian “outrage” is reprehensible. One anti-communist criticizes Camus for setting his anti-totalitarian play, *State of Siege* in Spain. In the critic’s opinion, Soviet communist totalitarianism is more extreme than Franco’s fascist Spain. Camus rejects the criticism because of its partisan character; he responds, “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 reveals his motivation to be politics, not humanity. It is necessary to “condemn with equal force” the injustices of both sides of a conflict.<sup>14</sup> This is the position Camus took on Algeria, condemning both the French use of torture and the terrorist tactics of the National Liberation Front (FLN), the leading movement of the Algerian resistance. This position of condemning both sides left Camus with few allies at the time, but is now increasingly credited as a difficult, principled act of conscience.<sup>15</sup> For Camus, saving bodies should not mask the executioner’s judgment of who deserves to live. The guilt or innocence of the victims is, similarly, irrelevant to the value of life and the possibilities it opens.

Camus was active in the movement to abolish the death penalty; he sees it as another way to legitimize murder. He argues in “Reflections on the Guillotine” that the

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<sup>14</sup> Albert Camus, “Preface,” *Algerian Chronicles*

<sup>15</sup> James D. LeSueur’s “Albert Camus and the Anticolonials: Why Camus Would Not Play the Zero Sum Game.”



“right to live, which allows a chance to make amends, is the natural right of every man, even the worst man” (221). One of the main problems with capital punishment is that it closes the future to human beings. Capital punishment presumes with absolute certainty the correctness of our judgment upon a person. That judgment extends beyond the conviction for the crime to how that person will spend the future we deny him or her. To Camus, capital punishment cannot be part of justice because it lacks the compassion necessary when we recognize the limits of what we know. For Camus, the abolition of capital punishment is another front in the effort to save bodies.<sup>16</sup>

Camus’s move to save bodies is one of a number of 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts to reclaim ordinary, everyday spaces from the complete politicization of life evidenced in totalitarian politics. Camus focuses on the physical body in a way similar to the anti-politics developed by Eastern European dissidents, such as Vaclav Havel and the Charter 77 movements.<sup>17</sup> For both Camus and Havel, under totalitarian conditions, we must first reclaim the ordinary experiences of human beings. For Camus, the body is that experience. Camus often links human freedom and joy with an essential physicality. Joy is a bodily experience in the world, often in nature. Camus captures this in the scene in *The Plague* when Rieux and Tarrou affirm their friendship by slipping outside the quarantine on the edge of Oran to swim in the sea together (255-256). Havel recognizes the physical discipline of the Soviet-backed Czechoslovakian government. The green grocer *must* put the government sign—“Workers of the world, unite!”—in his window (“The Power of the Powerless,” 132). Having

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<sup>16</sup> Among the practical commitments that Camus outlines for the community committed to save bodies is the effort to abolish the death penalty (NVNE 273).

<sup>17</sup> See Vaclav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless” and “Two Notes on Charter 77” in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990* and “Anti-Political Politics.” On the similarities between Camus and Havel, see Jeffrey Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*.

lost the ability of the body to act in public, Havel turns to the “truth”—to the conscience—as the ground from which individuals under totalitarian conditions are to begin reclaiming their freedom. Only after establishing this human, living space separate from the totalizing political ideologies does resistance or a new politics become possible.<sup>18</sup>

Camus presents saving bodies as a liberating principle, but there are good reasons to have reservations about it. The objection to taking up saving bodies as our responsibility has been framed to me in two ways. First, many individuals are, in practice, reduced to their bodies to justify their marginalization. This argument has recently been put forward clearly and powerfully, focusing on the black body, by Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me*. Second, an early commenter on the paper was concerned that saving bodies leads directly to policies like the permanent detention of individuals in refugee camps. Both objections point to deep problems within our national and global cultures, but I think they are not, however, objections to the responsibility to save bodies. They are examples of what Camus is rebelling against: they point to politicizations of the human body that destroy rather than open the possibilities of human dignity and freedom.

Coates persuasively argues that American history is a history of the use and abuse of the black body. From slavery to the recent prominent cases of police violence and mass incarceration, blacks in the United States have been reduced to and contained in their bodies. This is dehumanizing; all accomplishments, experiences, and beliefs a black individual has can, in a moment, become irrelevant when she is perceived to be a threat. The “urgency” of the situation justifies reducing her to her body and using violence against

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<sup>18</sup> 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, which uses carnival tactics to reclaim spaces. See Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* on these newer protest tactics.

that body to end the threat and restore peace and order. Both Coates and Camus see the body as vulnerable, a fundamental site of violence when it is politicized. Camus's call to save bodies is not an attempt to reduce our humanity to our physical bodies; it is a claim that our humanity *begins* with our living bodies. It is the first step toward liberation. The body should be inviolable, and when a political order justifies violence against the bodies of its members, then individuals should refuse that order.

Similarly, the current situation of semi-permanent refugees camps is the product of a failed politics, one that takes the preservation of the body as the *end* rather than the beginning of restoring human dignity to those who are suffering from violence or catastrophe to such an extent that they flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. The refugee camp is an attempt to save bodies—to preserve as many lives as possible—and in that sense, the camps are mostly successful. The problem is that the political solutions that are supposed to allow the refugees either to return home or find asylum are nonexistent or inadequate. The result is that these refugee camps, designed to be temporary emergency situations, can become permanent. In that permanence, the refugees are suspended in a state of indeterminate detention with nowhere to go. This situation is manifestly unjust. However, it does not expose an injustice in the principle of saving bodies; it exposes the injustice of our politics. We as a global culture are unwilling to assist refugees *after* their bodies are saved. Saving bodies is, again, a beginning—it makes dignity possible, it does not fully restore it. The semi-permanent refugee camp shows that saving bodies is not a one-time intervention. It requires an ongoing relationship of care.<sup>19</sup> The responsibility to save

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<sup>19</sup> In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, Tronto argues the ethic of care has long been marginalized within the western liberal tradition. It belongs not to the free individual but to those who are

bodies may begin at the preservation of life, but it also incorporates an element of care that brings the individual's body to the point where freedom and dignity are real possibilities. Camus expands on this idea in *The Plague* as the doctor, Rieux, describes his effort to save bodies from the plague as an issue *health*.

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In *The Plague*, the plague has both literal and moral significance. It is the bubonic plague, an epidemic that ravages the population of the Algerian city of Oran, and for Tarrou it also symbolizes the moral contamination of people. The plague implies our guilt, our complicity in the death of others. For many of us, our inattention and silence allow 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" (*The Plague*, 129). The fight against the plague brings a diverse set of characters together to share the struggle with Rieux. 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).

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most contained in or reduced to their bodies, such as women, slaves, and servants. Refugees in their vulnerable situation should be included on this list of the marginalized.

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 practice despite the individuals’ differing motivations and beliefs.<sup>20</sup>

In *The Plague*, the commitment to save bodies is, at its heart, a concern with health. For Rieux, any purpose that, in this time of plague, makes claims on people beyond basic health is asking too much. After watching a child suffer and die, 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” (*The Plague*, 219). Salvation confuses one’s personal motivations, which differ from person to person, with the shared public practice of saving bodies. For Rieux the provision of health is of a different order than the various personal motivations, the values that give their lives meaning. Health can unite everyone because it precedes all particular visions of the meaningful life. Health is rooted in this world; it is a precondition for the use of freedom.<sup>21</sup> Health opens possibilities. Like rebellion, it *begins* something whereas salvation, for example, resolves something. Care for a person’s health expands the meaning of saving bodies beyond mere life and toward a more robust sense of what saving bodies entails. While Camus does at times focus on mere

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<sup>20</sup> The capacity to act in common even with different motivations resonates with Amartya Sen’s *The Idea of Justice*. Sen’s comparative view of justice begins with shared understandings of what is unjust rather than on what justice is. On the relationship between agency and Sen’s view of justice, see my “Relational representation: an agency-based approach to global justice.”

<sup>21</sup> 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*.

life (saving the dying), it is clear, looking at his lifework, that he more often has in mind the fuller sense of human life as health, as being as free of suffering as we can make it.<sup>22</sup>

The vocation of the medical doctor easily aligns with the principle of saving bodies. In a conversation with the journalist Rambert, Rieux acknowledges as much. Rambert asks Rieux what he meant when he said the fight against the plague is 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” (*The Plague*, 163). Rieux’s clarity of purpose in the midst of the plague is not a sign of his moral superiority or heroism; it is a consequence of the coincidence of his vocation and the particular catastrophe the town is facing.

While this clarity of purpose makes it easy for Rieux to know how he should act in the face of the plague, many of the other characters are at a loss for how to respond. Eventually, all of them (except the misfit Cottard) begin working in Tarrou’s voluntary “sanitary groups” to try to contain the plague as much 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, away from *The Plague*, is what does this care ethic, this concern for health, this responsibility to save bodies call on us to do?

In the seventy years since Camus wrote *The Plague* and called for the saving of bodies, a large community of nongovernmental humanitarian organizations have emerged who are attempting to live out the responsibility to save bodies. The practices and ideas of

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<sup>22</sup> Camus’s “Misery in Kabylia” in *Algerian Chronicles* is the piece of journalism that gained him international notice. The series of articles concerns the causes of both the immediate (famine) and the deeply rooted (poverty) sources of the “misery” in the Kabylia region of Algeria. For Camus, the humanitarian response to the famine—the impulse to merely save lives—was insufficient if it was not also coupled with long-term structural changes—that is, efforts to restore health to the community.

the community have and will continue to change—hopefully becoming more successful at saving bodies and ameliorating suffering. The work of the humanitarian organizations shows several critical insights about saving bodies. The first is that while life-saving emergency medicines are essential to saving bodies, they alone are not sufficient. Saving bodies requires access to regular health care. More recently, the field of global health equity has recognized the way that health cannot be considered separately from the sources that create the most human suffering. Paul Farmer puts it well: “Inequality and poverty get in the body a number of ways.”<sup>23</sup> One cannot think of saving bodies without also thinking about the conditions of poverty that compromise people’s health. To save bodies requires ongoing caring practices. It requires a new community committed to these efforts.

## **5—The New Social Contract**

Camus envisions saving bodies as a practical response to the suffering of others. It makes minimal ethical assumptions: human life is valuable, and suffering compromises and threatens to end it. Life derives value from the unbreakable link between physical existence and the capacity to act on beliefs about what comprises the good life. The security of life, in this sense, precedes all other questions of substantive meaning. It is not essential to agree on the specific details of a minimum that constitutes the “security of life.” The absence of absolute agreement and the fact of diverse interpretations of a meaningful life do not negate the shared quality of the value. 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

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<sup>23</sup> Public lecture, Paul Farmer at Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego, CA, April 9, 2014

*The Plague* and NVNE. Since suffering is the source of the problem, securing life requires the amelioration of suffering and, its practical twin, the promotion of people's health. The community that accepts the responsibility to save bodies—to secure life, ameliorate suffering, and promote health—is a new kind of political community. The community is not organized as a nation-state—territory-bound, governed and policed by a 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 the “more reasonable set of principles” he outlined throughout NVNE (273).

In many ways, the community constituted by this new social contract bears a striking resemblance to the network of nongovernmental actors working toward global justice that has emerged in the last seventy years. Camus concludes that global interconnectedness makes the model of national revolutions, like the French Revolution, a thing of the past (NVNE, 265). Political change must, therefore, come from individuals independent of sovereign governments. Camus seems prescient when he argues that these individuals must connect across borders, which “people everywhere know...are now abstractions,” and they must globalize justice claims (NVNE, 269).<sup>24</sup> Justice must be globalized because “[t]here 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). Communication technology has made the immediate presence of distant suffering an everyday reality that drives and challenges the success of social justice movements.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> I replace Camus's use of “international” with the term “global.” While Camus uses “international” for this movement, it is 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”—the relations between states.

<sup>25</sup> See Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*



While it is tempting to argue that Camus is prophetic here and laid out the blueprint for the global activist network, that would be a stretch. His vision of the new community of committed individuals is still shaped by the mid-twentieth century. Camus thought the community would emerge from a partnership of labor movements and “international study groups” (NVNE, 273). While both have played roles in global activism, they have not shaped it in the way that nongovernmental organizations have. Camus could not imagine the way that human rights and humanitarian organizations have developed as independent powers that serve as counterweights to sovereign governments.

When Camus invokes the *new social contract*, he rejects the idea that the nation-state, the product of the liberal social contract tradition, is the primary community of identity or citizenship. He also emphasizes the critical role that individual consent plays in effecting political change. Like the original social contract, the new social contract takes individuals as free agents, who join the community to defend certain rights and liberties. Rights are what inalienably belong to the human being and liberties require the defense of the spaces necessary to act freely. The unity created by Camus’s new social contract is not a unity under authority, as it is for 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, and the unity continues to exist only through the practical enacting of these shared values. One of the major distinctions between the communities of Rousseau and Camus is proximity. For Rousseau, democratic activity requires close proximity, a thickly shared physical space. In the globalizing world, technology has expanded to produce new means of connection and closeness that make it possible to constitute real communities even if they lack physical proximity. Without the

constraint of proximity, it is now possible to constitute a truly global “republic of conscience,” to borrow Seamus Heaney’s beautiful turn of phrase.”<sup>26</sup>

For Camus, the new community must again open the dialogue between individuals, cultures, and civilizations. Dialogue requires us to communicate with clarity to combat 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:

[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 the desire for domination and the peculiar blindness that afflicts human beings once the causal chain extends beyond the immediate. If you assume the responsibility to save bodies, you must constantly work to figure out how you—in the way you are living—contribute to or obscure 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?

This is the difference between an absolute and relative utopia. The absolute utopian demands the pure life; the relative utopian only that we take steps away from injustice. Refusal is not an isolated act—to refuse one thing is to affirm another. Refusing the advantages at the same time affirms the responsibilities that connect us to one another.

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<sup>26</sup> Seamus Heaney, “From the Republic of Conscience,” in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996*. Heaney wrote the poem to commemorate Amnesty International’s anniversary in 1985.

Accordingly, the refusal of injustice always implies a process, a series of practices in the world. And while perfectly fulfilling these duties and responsibilities remain beyond our abilities, we have a place to begin—saving bodies. We are in our lives “to set example against power.”

Camus’s values are evident in much of the work toward global justice. The responsibility to save bodies can ground these practices. It is a principle that affirms the value of life without committing to any particular thick conception of the good. It also has the advantage of connecting individual rights to a practical humanitarian ethic of promoting health. The responsibility to save bodies suggests a set of possible practices that begin the move away from suffering and injustice and toward justice.

## **6—Conclusion**

In 1946, Albert Camus gave a measured and hopeful response to a postwar politics that was justifying or ignoring great suffering in the name of utopian ideologies. Camus recognized that the suffering of others was no longer a case of “isolated suffering” but something that should press on the conscience of each individual. However, it was not clear how the sudden immediacy of the suffering of others might translate into real connections, into a new politics. Camus saw his call to save bodies and for a new social contract not as the solution to the problem, but as a first step toward one. The urgency in his call came from his conviction “that political thought increasingly finds itself overtaken by political events” (NVNE, 268).

In the midst of this overtaking, however, individuals could keep open a modest hope. Individuals, who shared his belief 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 they existed and were asking themselves questions similar to his own (NVNE, 273). 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.

In the seventy years since Camus wrote, the modest practices of these relative utopians evolved into a new politics. 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, forever displacing the nation-state and absolute utopian ideologies. However, they have established and continue to expand the spaces for global, nongovernmental political action. These communities of individuals, constituted by shared values, have challenged the monopoly on political action that sovereignty reserves only for governments. Michel Foucault, writing forty years after Camus, 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. Foucault argues that each act “uproots little by little and day by day” the governmental monopoly in international politics. In acting, they created a “new right” for individuals to intervene in global politics.<sup>27</sup>

Camus’s call to save bodies continues to find life in the practical work of nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that focus on health, such as Doctors Without Borders (*Médecins sans frontières*) and Partners in Health, to take two prominent examples. The history of these humanitarian organizations shows the difficulty of figuring

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, “Confronting Governments: Human Rights” (translation my own).

out what is possible and what works in this emergent global politics. Despite practical failures, the resolve to take responsibility for the suffering other remains. These organizations continue to adopt practices that seek to deliver a fuller sense of health to communities suffering from the deprivations of poverty and violence. Not in the commitment itself, but in the daily practices of these organizations and the communities in which they work a real global *we* is brought into existence that will continue as long as people oppose the suffering of others and respond with caring practices that link the meaningful life to the healthy one.

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