

Absurd Rebellion against Covid

Dominik Kulcsár¹

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has drastically changed how we lead our lives. One of the responses to the pandemic has been a passionate rebellion against the public safety and health regulations implemented to combat the Covid-19 virus. This paper seeks to examine the motivation behind this rebellion. This author proposes using the lens of the absurd, as developed by Albert Camus, to understand this rebellion. Camus stated that the human mind seeks unity and meaning in the universe. But the universe is indifferent to our desire for answers. This clash between our desire for answers and silence brings about the feeling of the absurd. Rebellion is one possible response to it. The unprecedented restrictions placed on our basic civil and human rights, coupled with massive disinformation campaigns and scientific skepticism, have brought about a feeling of absurdity on a global scale. Therefore, the absurd may provide insight into the rebellion against Covid-19 and its tragic consequences.

Keywords: freedom, Camus, absurd, rebellion, Covid-19, pandemic

The Problem of Freedom

In this paper, I will discuss the rebellion that the world witnessed in response to the public safety and health measures that were taken against Covid-19. I will draw upon the work of the French philosopher and writer Albert Camus, who contended with the problems of the absurd and of revolt. What is the thing in the name of which a person rebels? People rebel because someone or something is restricting their freedom and this encroachment awakens the spirit of revolt. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we contended with a rather puzzling interpretation of freedom: the notion that one is free to do what-

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ever one wants because one is free to do so.² The consequences that others have to suffer because of this are of lesser or no concern. Since this interpretation enjoys a far-reaching acceptance, I will examine first the possible source from which it sprang during the Covid-19 pandemic and then the rebellion it awoke.

When we talk about freedom, we usually think along the lines that freedom is the ability to act autonomously or express oneself, and this action and expression are not restricted by outside forces. Since we live in a society, freedom becomes more complicated because communities and states are composed of a myriad of autonomous people who go about their business in their everyday lives. What we do inevitably affects those around us. Sometimes, the effects of our choices are almost imperceptible; at other times, they can mean the difference between life and death. Freedom and citizens' lives are regulated and protected by civil and human rights. A good example is the Fourth Article of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen: "Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law" (Declaration of the Rights of Man, 1789). One of the underlying conditions of freedom is that this person does not harm or restrict others by their conduct. Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin held that one could not be free as long as others do not enjoy the same freedom: "Every enslavement of men is at the same time a limit on my own freedom. I am a free man only so far as I recognize the humanity and liberty of all men around me. In respecting their humanity, I respect my own" (Bakunin, 1970, p. 9).

When the pandemic hit, governments worldwide were quick to impose severe restrictions. Measures such as mask-wearing, maintaining social distancing, and washing hands sound fairly moderate and easy to comply with. But city-wide lockdowns and quarantines meant massive restrictions on civil rights such as freedom of association and movement. Thousands lost their jobs; children were forced to stay at home because schools were closed; the rapid growth in the number of infected people put an unseen pressure on healthcare systems, hospitals, and by extension, medical workers.³ In short, this existential upheaval has fundamentally changed the way we live our lives due to a lack of preparedness and coherent and timely response. Many people complied with these measures. Masks became a regular part of our lives, Zoom meetings introduced a new way of working and enabled

² This interpretation of freedom is not new. What is new is the scale of its acceptance on all societal levels, especially during the Covid-19 crisis, when the lack of personal responsibility could put the lives of others in mortal danger. For example, a person may query the point of wearing a mask at all, arguing that they won't wear a mask because they believe in natural immunity, or that Covid-19 is just a flu, or that everyone will be infected eventually.

³ These are only a few examples. A complex description of the pandemic is beyond the scope of this investigation.

students to continue their education from the safety of their homes. After several months, new types of vaccines were rolled out and, despite initial skepticism, have proven to be effective tools in providing immunity against the virus. While many complied, there were those who openly refused to do so, whether by denying the existence of the virus or by ridiculing the severity of safety measures. They rebelled against Covid-19 and the measures taken to fight it. I argue that they did so in the name of freedom. Although arguing for their right to be free from restrictions, Covid deniers and rebels unjustly transgressed the rights of others and limited their capacity to choose. In doing so, they disregard the later part of the fourth article of the French Declaration. Their freedom became the highest priority, and their rebellion's deadly consequences have been either ignored or downplayed. With the official death toll of the pandemic measuring in millions, it is necessary to examine this rebellion.⁴ What can provoke such a strong response in a person that they decide to conduct themselves in a way that can either kill or endanger the lives of those around them and even kill the rebels themselves? The drastic change in our daily lives, coupled with the unprecedented restriction of civil rights, all contributed to the experience of the absurdity of existence. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus investigated the phenomenon of a world suddenly losing its meaning. For that reason, I propose to use his philosophy of the absurd to understand this problem of freedom and the subsequent rebellion.

The Pandemic of the Absurd

Camus famously starts *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the line: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (Camus, 2004, p. 495). Why suicide? Camus thinks that the question of whether it is worth living or dying is more important than any other and its importance lies in the action that the question entails. We can choose to die at any moment and, in continuing our lives, we express a certain value judgment: that life is indeed worth living. How does one begin to ponder such a question? I can kill myself by admitting that the world has no meaning or, on the contrary, I can kill myself by proclaiming that it has a meaning but that I must sacrifice my life to further some goal.⁵ People who rebelled against restrictions to curb covid either consciously exposed themselves to the infection or outright refused to believe that the virus existed. They did not wish to have their freedoms

⁴ In a report published in May 2022 by the World Health Organization, the official death toll of the pandemic has been estimated to be close to 15 million in the years 2020 and 2021. The report takes into account those who died directly of Covid or indirectly due to preventable causes because of the enormous strain on public health systems. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2022-14.9-million-excess-deaths-were-associated-with-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-2020-and-2021>

⁵ For example, martyrdom.

restricted. Such a course of action seems to defy reason, but reason alone is not sufficient in answering the question of suicide. As Camus wrote: "I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying)" (Camus, 2004, p. 495).

Like other existentialists such as Kierkegaard or Jaspers, Camus believed that the human mind is at a loss when trying to understand the world. "In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger" (Camus, 2004, p. 497). Such was the atmosphere when the measures were first implemented. All of a sudden, we could no longer go out or meet the people we care about. Official announcements were often confusing or contradictory. Regular testing against Covid was required to enter the workplace. Accompanying this experience was severe anxiety and dread about the possibility of getting the virus; the paranoia was only amplified by the fact that some cases were asymptomatic. Becoming infected with Covid-19 was, in a strange way, reminiscent of the game of Russian roulette: a person may be asymptomatic or experience only mild symptoms, such as fever and a loss of smell or taste, or they may suffer from damaged lungs, risk being placed on ventilator support, and even die due to sepsis or respiratory failure. This unpredictability gives rise to the absurd.

The absurd is the break, the tension between the human mind and the universe it lives in. "This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (Camus, 2004, p. 497). The human mind utilizes reason and, by its nature, seeks to explain the world to itself, but the world evades such efforts. One of Camus' examples is that we can know a person by the way they act or by what they have done, but at his core, "a man remains forever unknown to us and [...] there is in him something irreducible that escapes us" (Camus, 2004, p. 501). Another example involves recognizing the daily routine of our lives, whereby we get up in the morning, go to work, mingle with colleagues, get back home, participate in social activities with our friends and go to sleep. This cycle continues over and over again by force of habit until one day, we recognize this cycle precisely as the habit that it is and the question of "*why?*" appears. "It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows" (Camus, 2004, p. 503). In such cases, we look at the world, divested of the routine, and see the mechanisms behind it. Such was our situation with lockdowns, when we suddenly found ourselves alienated from what we saw as normal. "The strict lockdown led to a sense of time 'just continuing' as an undifferentiated perpetuation of one moment to the next, from one day to another" (Babarskienė et al., 2021). The absurd also awakens the consciousness when it is exposed to death, whether ours or someone else's. We generally accept death as something that will happen at some point in the future, but that we do not need to worry about since it is not here yet. For all of us, the pandemic has burned away the the-

ater set, and, apart from seeing our daily routines for what they are, it has had us all experience the dreadful destiny common to all. When Meursault in *The Stranger* contemplates his future, he sees death as the distant horizon that gives perspective to his entire life and takes away the importance of any future plans he may have had: “Throughout the whole absurd life I’d lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living” (Camus, 1989, p. 122).

What we have described are instances that awaken the feeling of absurdity, but not the absurd itself. Neither the world nor our existence are absurd. What is absurd is the clash between the natural need of the human mind for unity and the world it finds itself in. “Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal” (Camus, 2004, p. 506). Or, as John Foley writes: “to explain the world ‘in terms that humans care about,’ in ways that make sense ‘with respect to human values’” (Foley, 2014, p. 6). But the universe remains silent.⁶ It is our natural tendency to unify the world—to overcome the alienation we feel whether by tipping the scales with faith in God or by the absolutization of reason as something that can explain everything. But the meaning we ascribe to the world, and the values we try to assign to it, are not given to us by any metaphysical authority. There is no universal guarantor. We are the sole creators of values and their upholders. Our tendency to unify the world is a tendency to resist the absurd and commit what Camus considers to be a crime of the mind, a “philosophical suicide,” which occurs by way “of suppressing the absurd by denying one of the terms of its equation” (Camus, 2004, p. 532). We live with an a priori expectation of the future. We make our plans and organize our activities around the goals we establish. Covid-19 has, like Camus’ “dark wind,” swept away our future plans and highlighted the figure of death on that distant horizon, amplifying our only true certainty. Suicide also breaks the absurd. Killing oneself means crossing the distance between oneself and the fatality that awaits. That the universe has no transcendent meaning does not mean, however, that life itself is not worth living. In fact, as Camus says, it allows one to live a fuller and richer life. By renouncing hope, whether in some future utopia or in the promise of an afterlife, one can “live without appeal” (Camus, 2004, p. 535). The rebels against Covid are doing the contrary. By desiring a return to the pre-pandemic life, free from restrictions and mandates, they are willing to cross the line separating the present and the future, and in the process, are willing to let other people die. Voluntary infection, combined with faster spreading, may lead to the collapse of the health care system, burnout among medical workers, and to hospitals crashing.

⁶ The description of the universe as silent is in itself one example of describing something in “human terms.”

These rebels try to unify the disparity between our current situation and their desired state, which is the “end of the pandemic.” To bring back Camus’ sentiment, their idea of living is worth dying for. They do so in the name of freedom. One of the counterarguments that may be raised is that the rebels may believe that they are doing this for the freedom of others. By ending the repetitive cycle of testing, vaccination, lockdowns and quarantines, society may return to some sense of the normalcy and routine that once existed.⁷

The absurd leads us to a reevaluation of freedom. Camus was not interested in metaphysical liberty but in knowing whether one’s actions are free if the conditions of the absurd are accepted. “Now if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action” (Camus, 2004, p. 538). Knowing that death will come, actions in the present gain more weight and importance, and one is no longer tied to past notions of freedom. “Death and the absurd are here the principles of the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live” (Camus, 2004, p. 540). We have mentioned before that, by maintaining the absurd premise, we forsake the idea of a universal guarantor. But what do we base our conduct on if there is nothing to anchor our values? Taking the absurd to its extreme, “one can be virtuous through a whim” (Camus, 2004, p. 547). Such a conclusion seems to imply nihilism. Camus indeed illustrated this by creating several absurd characters whose actions were downright destructive. His most evident example of an unhinged nihilism springing from a realization of the absurd is the mad emperor Caligula. After the death of his sister, the Roman emperor is driven mad by the clash between his desire to bring her back and the impossibility of such an act. He realizes that “men die; and they are not happy” (Camus, 1962, p. 19). Since there is no higher principle, all actions are on the same level, including murder. With death being our only certainty, Caligula takes on the role of God and starts a massacre that spills across his empire. He spreads his discontent with the absurd everywhere, reminding everyone of the threat of impending death by committing both random and systematic acts of violence. However dark such a picture of the absurd may be, Camus did not adhere to it. What *The Myth of Sisyphus* was meant to illustrate was the range of possibilities that can emerge when one considers the question of the absurd to its logical conclusion. As Robert E. Meagher shows: “The works of the absurd or Sisyphus Cycle were, as we have called them, experiments in truth, experiments that ultimately fall short, not as works of art but as counsels to live by” (Meagher, 2022, p. 89).

This problem is picked up in *The Rebel*, where the absurd itself lays a foundation for human solidarity. Even though the pandemic broke the hab-

⁷ Seeking reasons that might give this rebellion some legitimacy is not the goal of this investigation.

its of our daily lives, it has yielded some positive results, since some people “thrived during the pandemic and liked the situation because they could focus on things that were important to them and enjoy new opportunities” (Babarskienė et al., 2021). While some people positively adapted to Covid changes, discontent grew among people who had enough of restrictions. The arrival of vaccines escalated this polarization. Many people quickly rejected them, claiming that they were hastily developed, not fully tested, and dangerous. This was made easier because governments had lost the trust of the general public in their pandemic responses. Some political parties and public figures used the argument of freedom in their efforts to undermine Covid regulations. This laid the groundwork for conspiracy theories that proposed that vaccines are new instruments of control that governments want to use against their people. Conspiracy theories quickly and easily provided a way out of the chaos of the pandemic for some and helped to restore some sense to the world. But conspiracy theories, by providing quick and clear answers that suit people who want to affirm their own position, are but other ways by which the human mind commits a philosophical suicide.

In response to the absurd of the Covid-19, the rebels rallied behind the notion of freedom that gave them some sense of meaning and stability. Let us now examine their rebellion.

Rebellion against Covid-19

In *The Rebel*⁸, the chief problem is a justified murder. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the murder is a matter of indifference since all actions are leveled and measured only by the end point of life. But the very premise of the absurd suggests a different solution. The absurd is possible only when both aspects that give rise to it are maintained—human life and the world. If we destroy one, we destroy the other. Thus, the absurd mind cannot agree to the murder because it would destroy itself. From this position, Camus derives a value that serves as the basis for all further conduct. “But it is plain that the absurd reasoning thereby recognizes human life as the single necessary good, because it makes possible that confrontation, and because without life the absurdist wager could not go on” (Camus, 2000, p. 10). If we recognize that there is no universal guarantor and that our reason alone cannot give us the answers, we must remain faithful to that contradiction born out of our need for unity and the world’s silence. And from the moment we derive from the absurd reasoning the single value of human life itself, we reject absolute negation, so vividly sketched in *Caligula*. Strong displays of solidarity were

⁸ Camus divided his works into cycles. Each cycle has a main philosophical essay, theater plays and a novel. Each cycle is represented by a myth: Sisyphus for the absurd cycle, and Prometheus for the cycle of revolt.

visible during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, ground-level associations formed independently from the state to ensure that people were not cut off from their essential needs. Some practiced voluntary masking even after Covid measures had been lifted, and persistently kept to social distancing and avoiding people when they suspected they were infected.

If a person commits suicide, they express a certain value judgment—that life is not worth living. But suicide is an individual act. Anyone wishing to destroy others along with oneself must also commit murder or orchestrate a collective suicide. “It can be achieved only by absolute destruction, of both oneself and everybody else” (Camus, 2000, p. 11). When people rebel against pandemic measures, they also express value judgments. Those judgments can, for example, be that Covid-19 is a hoax or that the virus is not very serious. This judgment comes from an autonomous decision to act in the way that they see fit. This is their interpretation of freedom; they believe in their right to decide for themselves, and that no one, regardless of the consequences, should tell them what to do. Some may recognize that the virus can cause harm and yet argue that this harm is unavoidable, and that the faster people get Covid, the faster everyone can return to normal. Some may consciously deny the existence of the virus and carry on in the way they want to see fit. In an age of social media where certain public figures enjoy massive reach and influence over their followers, their decision on how to react to the measures and to Covid-19 may well mean the difference between life and death. By spreading lies or misinformation, or by using their platform to legitimize harmful behavior, they recognize deniers and rebels. Those that freely decided to become infected filled up hospitals. Thus, many oncological patients, patients in need of urgent surgeries, and people suffering from respiratory problems and auto-immune diseases were unable to receive the care they needed. Their freedom was denied. While rebels advocate for freedom, that freedom quickly loses any legitimacy since one person’s right to infection becomes superior to the right of others to remain free from mortal danger. To return to Bakunin’s sentiment, one cannot be free if others are not. Willing to risk one’s death and, in the process, not heeding the consequences that action may bring is tantamount to choosing both suicide and murder. The overwhelming death toll of the pandemic in such a short time seems to prove this. We have established why people rebel and in the name of what they do so. But *who* is the rebel?

The one who rebels is the one who says “no” while at the same time saying “yes.” The “no” means that there is a certain boundary in the rebel that is not to be crossed. At its core, rebellion contains a tension between freedom and justice. “He rebels because he categorically refuses to submit to conditions that he considers intolerable and also because he is confusedly convinced that his position is justified, or rather because, in his own mind, he thinks that he ‘has the right to...’” (Camus, 2000, p. 1). The “yes” is ex-

pressed in recognition of that internal boundary. The Covid rebels were right in their assessment that the restrictions do indeed violate their rights. While civil rights were restricted, this was done in an effort to protect lives. When the rebels have enough of the oppression, their mind shifts. They do not merely wish for the oppression to stop. "He exceeds the bounds he fixed for his antagonist and now demands to be treated as an equal" (Camus, 2000, p. 2). So far, we can agree. The fact that oppression stops does not automatically mean that the rebel is respected. In the demand for respect, equality, and freedom, the rebels wager everything in their struggle for recognition, up to the point of being willing to die for it. The rebellion itself is not necessarily evil. What matters is the intention behind it. Do I rebel for the sake of others or just for myself? Camus thought that true rebellion is in the name of a value that is common to all of us. "We see that the affirmation implicit in every act of rebellion is extended to something that transcends the individual in so far as it withdraws him from his supposed solitude and provides him with a reason to act" (Camus, 2000, pp. 3–4).

Unlike other existentialists, Camus believed that there is some inherent human nature because we are all mortal creatures and death will come for us all. Revolt against destiny is part of the absurd reasoning. But how can we rebel against a virus? We revolt against the injustice of death.⁹ That is why the spirit of rebellion is also awakened when we see others suffer. Their suffering becomes our suffering. Because of this, rebellion can actually be a positive force by illuminating an aspect of ourselves that we may not usually be aware of. Rebels against Covid-19 may feel that their struggle is in the name of others so that some normalcy returns to society. It is possible that Covid-19 is here to stay and will never be eradicated. This may very well be due to incoherent and chaotic responses by states and also because of those who refused to comply or grew annoyed with the never-ending restrictions.¹⁰ But that does not mean that we should give up the struggle. There are people with respiratory problems, others who suffer from auto-immune diseases or from autism and, therefore cannot wear masks: they are the vulnerable. If we rebel, it is them we should have in mind.

Individuals with their misconception of freedom do believe that there is some objective truth but do not trust official institutions to be bearers of this truth. In their rebellion against the pandemic measures, they want their own freedom to be recognized, but they refuse to recognize the freedom and the rights of others. "While people are keen to dismiss the objective sphere as containing anything true, they assert the truth of their own individuality. A part of this involves the validation of this truth by others in the objective

⁹ In *The Rebel*, Camus puts forth two forms of rebellion. Metaphysical rebellion is waged against the universal injustice of the human condition. Historical rebellion sees the rebel trying to fill the void left by the divine by means of political order.

¹⁰ It is undeniable that the lockdowns did their share of harm, for example by forcing school-age children to stay at home.

sphere” (Stewart, 2021). Forgetting the impulse that gives birth to rebellion, the actions of the Covid deniers and rebels, lead to indirect murder or at least manslaughter. They may believe that they are in the right or that they are rebelling out of solidarity, but this does not change the results. The solidarity they may feel with others is not extended to all of humanity. “Man’s solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and rebellion, in its turn, can only find its justification in this solidarity” (Camus, 2000, p. 10). The vulnerable groups essentially become a necessary sacrifice in the mad rush to reach a faster end to the pandemic. The absurd is destroyed, and life along with it.

Conclusion

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the motivation behind the rebellion against Covid-19 measures. The pandemic has created an atmosphere where Covid deniers feel that their freedom was unjustly taken from them. This was due to the collective experience of absurdity when statewide restrictions were imposed to combat the spread of the virus. We have presented a self-contradictory notion of freedom, one that the Covid rebels rallied behind. In some cases, the value of human life has revealed itself in outpourings of solidarity among people who refused to cause others to suffer. On the other hand, we saw people who were angry, tired, and desperate, in many cases rightfully so, and this dissatisfaction produced a rebellion that, despite its initial premise, evolved into a blind rush to return to the way things were before. And once the solidarity inherent in the revolt is forgotten, the rebel becomes “the doctrinaire revolutionary whose blind pursuit of utopia leads to a uniquely modern form of horror” (Foley, 2014, pp. 58-59). While the scope of this investigation is limited due to the complexity of the problems presented, our modest aim is to open a way to reckon with the tragic consequences of our modern crisis.

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