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## Literature: A Useful Tool for the Philosophical Counselor During a Pandemic

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### Abstract

The urgency of the question, “How should I live?” is experienced most acutely in times of stress such as the pandemic through which we are currently living. It is just one example of agonizing times which human beings must endure and make sense of. The times demand that philosophical counselors dig more deeply into their resources in order to best meet the situations with which their clients are confronted. Although we have the entire history of philosophical texts at our fingertips, how many of them can we call on to help our clients think clearly about how one should live in the midst of a pandemic? A supplement to philosophical texts is well-written novels. Both literature and philosophy pursue the question of how one should live, but novels can be especially helpful in exploring more deeply the issues clients face in these stressful times. Four novels which deal with pandemics and which provide excellent platforms for further thought are discussed: *The Plague*, by Albert Camus, *Nemesis* by Philip Roth, *Horseman on the Roof*, by Jean Giono, and *An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen. Their plot lines and existential themes are presented in a way that will help counselors understand not only why they might want to refer their clients to them, but also help to ensure they can make the best possible use of them.

**Keywords:** *existentialism, limit situation, literature, novels, pandemic, philosophical counseling*

### Introduction

Throughout his or her life the truly intelligent and conscious person engages regularly with the question, “How should I live?” The urgency of that question is experienced most acutely in times of stress, such as the current pandemic. Although seemingly unique, this pandemic is just one example of stressful, agonizing times human beings must understand and endure.

These kinds of times demand that philosophical counselors dig more deeply into their resources in order to best meet the situations with which their clients are confronted. Although no one would wish a pandemic on anyone, the state of affairs created by it has the potential to be especially ripe for helping clients to work through various existential and moral dilemmas and to become stronger spiritually. Along with the necessary sympathy we are trained to extend to our clients, we have the entire history of philosophical texts at our fingertips, many of which can be helpful. But how many of them concretely address how people should and could live in the midst of a pandemic?

In this article, I will suggest that a supplement to philosophical texts is well-written novels. Both literature and philosophy pursue the general question of how one should live, but novels can be equally good—if not better in some ways—resources to help clients explore more deeply and broadly the issues they face in these seemingly unprecedented and stressful times. In order to encourage their use in philosophical counseling, four novels which deal with pandemics and which provide particularly good platforms for further thought and discussion will be presented: *The Plague*, by

Albert Camus, *Nemesis* by Philip Roth, *Horseman on the Roof*, by Jean Giono, and *An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen. This paper lays out the plot lines of each novel and explicates their existential themes. This will help counselors to understand not only why they might want to refer their clients to at least one of these literary works, and it will also help to ensure that both the counselor and client are able to make the best possible use of them.

Well-written novels draw from concrete and deeply felt experiences of life. That makes them especially suited to address life's particularity and complexity. Certain questions and problems are actually more naturally and fruitfully pursued through literature than they might be through philosophical texts. Although they do require reflection and understanding in order to make the best use of them, when we make the time to do so, they can move us closer to the leading of a good life.

What illuminating and truthful situations does each novel present? What possibilities are offered or denied? What does that mean for a human life? Novels often are a compelling supplement to philosophical texts in helping to answer these questions. First, they are empirical, taking their evidence from the experiences of life. They are also practical, as the author aims to find a conception by which humans can live. Built into their structure is a certain conception of what matters, a pursuit of truth in all its forms. Committed to the sympathetic study of alternative formulations of life, they evoke comparisons and offer a greater sense of individual freedom.

Literature is a horizontal extension of life, bringing the reader into contact with events, locations, persons and problems he may not have otherwise met. It is also a vertical extension, giving the person an experience that is often deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in the reader's life. Much of actual life goes by without that kind of heightened awareness. It is, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived. Because literature evokes a deep and sympathetic investigation of life and what matters, it can, like a pandemic, show us, and our clients, how to live. (Nussbaum, 1990)

A pandemic can be known existentially as a limit situation—an intensified state of the condition of being mortal brought about by such experiences as death or suffering due to an accident or illness, the pain of divorce or losing a job, among other things. These situations are unavoidable. They are plights that pose challenges because no matter how hard we might try, there is no way to escape from them, and they don't have immediate resolutions. As a result, we feel alienated from ourselves, from others, and from life. We realize we cannot shape our lives and reality to our own expectations, even though we want to, and even if we try our best to do so.

Because of the above factors, limit situations mine the complexities of our inner lives. They have the potential to give rise to questions that are intimately connected to our way of life and conduct. Each of the following literary works uses the limit situation created by pandemics to explore the resolve of human beings when their own durability and the durability of their institutions is under attack by an invisible, inscrutable and deadly force. Each one communicates a theory of cosmic justice that has to do not with the outcome of events, but with the assumption of responsibility the main characters take within those events. (Jaspers, 1997)

The novels I discuss have come to seem eerily prescient. They foretell, in many of their crucial, practical details, the lines of stress that the coronavirus pandemic is revealing world-wide. All the

events typical of plague communities—obsessional attention to signs and symptoms, vulnerability to misinformation, stigmatization and isolation of suspect families and groups, the scapegoating of ethnic groups, the poor and the homeless, social distancing and quarantines, the shutdown of borders, and flight from hot-spots and epicenters, are well represented. Each literary work illustrates the psychopathology of populations under attack by diseases whose transmission are ill-understood, as well as the character that certain individuals can develop under those conditions. Through them, we can be enabled to transcend the immediacy of the moment and address the moral choices at hand.

### ***The Plague* by Albert Camus**

Albert Camus (1913- 1960), was a French philosopher, author, and journalist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. His literary works bring both existential and practical concerns into focus. The absurdity of life, the inevitability of death, and a commitment to individual moral freedom and responsibility are easily recognizable existential concerns Camus believed people should embrace. (Deranty, 2019)

“The Plague” can be thought of as a parable. Within it, Camus is concerned to show the plague as any form of disaster, suffering or terror which afflicts mankind and to illuminate how negative situations incurred thereby can be overcome. The plague also represents death, which is commonly thought of as the enemy of human beings. As long as we are alive, we tend to deny it and to fight against it, but it is always with us. This parable of the plague illustrates ways we can rebel against death by finding meaning in life.

“The Plague” is constructed as a journal of events as they occur, day by day, in the city of Oran, Algiers in the mid 1940’s. When the story opens, Oran is just beginning to be beset by the plague. At first rats come out of the sewers and die in the streets. No one understands why this is happening. It is when the townspeople start dying of horrible symptoms that the town’s doctors begin to realize what has fallen upon them. Just like our current pandemic, the problem is compounded due to the initial denial of it by the authorities and the newspapers. Unprepared, the city is quickly overcome and then put under quarantine because of its contagion. Cut off from the outside world and misinformed, just like so many people in the 2020 pandemic, the average citizen is helpless to meet the situation.

Townspeople react to the terrible visitation in different ways, according to their belief and character. The circumstances become a kind of laboratory for studying their attitudes. The priest, Father Paneloux, first regards the plague as a scourge of God against the wickedness of modern life. Later he views it as a test of Christian acceptance of life’s terrible sufferings. For the journalist, Rambert, stuck in a city not his own, it means separation from the woman he loves. For the rebel, Tarrou, it becomes the occasion to realize his passion to correct injustice. For the shady character, Cottard, the plague provides an opportunity for escaping justice and practicing black market activities. As for Dr. Rieux, the story’s narrator, due to his strong character he was able to do what needed to be done. By his charitable extensions towards others, he dispels the townspeople’s extraneous fears and helps establish essential relationships among them.

Much of “The Plague” is allegorical. One example of this is the character, Tarrou, the rebel. The rebel constitutes a very important figure in more than one of Camus’ literary works. He is the man who, when pushed to a certain point, says “no.” This “no” bounds the irreducible substance of his integrity, of his own notion of his untouchable and uncontrollable individuality. He does not wish to deny others their integrity, he merely wishes to establish his own (Fowler, 1965).

One of the very moving passages in the novel describes the death of the child of the town’s judge, Othon. Death, of course, occurs on almost every page of the book, but this death is the center of all the deaths in it. Through this death of a completely innocent victim, the event challenges the reader’s religious beliefs. At the same time, because all epidemics are essentially the result of destructive human decisions that leave us vulnerable to viruses, it raises the problem of social evil in its most acute form. Perhaps most important of all, Camus here insists that politics must concern itself with the fate of the victims and not just with crass assertions and consolidation of one’s power.

Everything Camus wrote and said came out of his own experiences with the concrete and the tangible. He maintained that on this earth there are both pestilences and the victims of them. It is up to us, as far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences, be they bacillus-like ideologies, pollution, over-crowded cities, poverty, or any other social catastrophe. In every predicament, Camus exhorts us to take the victim’s side, which can help us to reduce the damage done by any pestilence. He maintained that this is how one attains the peace of innocence, of health, and of life itself.

By the end of the novel, the plague has run its course. Camus, however, wants to remind us that the truths of the tale he has told have not, as we so painfully know today. His is only a record of what had to be done and what will have to be done again in the future. As we know now, the plague never dies or disappears. It can lie dormant for years. This is because it is not simply a bacterium or a virus, rather it is human nature that brings it forth time and again. Therefore, individually and collectively, we must refuse to bow down to all pandemics, both current and future. When they do occur, Camus encourages us to fight against their continuing onslaughts and the terror they bring, striving with our utmost to be healers in whatever situations they cause us to face. (Spendor, 1948)

Camus turns his parable of the plague, which is a natural force, into a more far reaching parable of the evil which man wreaks on man. For that reason, it is easy to see in the plague of Oran the plague afflicting the modern world. For Camus, a plague represents any kind of excess. Excess is a disease which sows the seeds of destruction and domination. Our task is to not unleash them on the world; it is to fight them in ourselves and in the other. While he knew that people carry traces of hatred, he also hoped those traces could be disarmed as cultural antibodies. Shared consciousness, which can be gained through great literature that is read by many, is a healing force. Camus had the dream that his book, now coming from the past, could be a healing force, a kind of serum for the future. (Camus, 1948)

### ***Nemesis* by Philip Roth**

*Nemesis*, written in 2010 by the Pulitzer prize winning author, Philip Roth, is a taut, tense morality tale that portrays the panic, guilt, suffering and misdirected rage unleashed during a polio outbreak. It, too, touches on important themes relevant to our 21st century pandemic. “What does it mean to live by one’s good character—or not?” “What kinds of choices fatally shape a life?” “How

does the individual withstand the onslaught of circumstance?" These are only a few of the important philosophical issues Mr. Roth raises in this work. (Coetzee, 2010)

The story opens at the beginning of the summer of 1944, when an outbreak of polio threatens to maim, paralyze and kill the children of a closely-knit Newark, New Jersey Jewish community. The main character, Bucky Cantor, is a vigorous, 23-year-old teacher and playground director. Dutiful, honest, and seemingly level-headed, he has pulled himself up by his bootstraps. The main plot pivots on what seems a tiny moral error Bucky makes. His poor judgment turns out to cause his fatal fall, his passage into personal disaster.

Primordial and irreparable trauma caused by the early death of Bucky's mother and having a jail-bird father left Bucky in a vulnerable state that isn't easily recognized by himself or others. His apparent goodness and developed competence hides it. However, when he has to face the greater challenges with which the polio epidemic confronts him, his fragilely constructed world view crumbles. It is then easier to see that without the unconditional love of his mother, and with a criminal for a father, Bucky had to grow blindly from childhood into adulthood. This is a part of his moral bad luck that contributes to his making poor choices a number of different times in the story.

During his first summer working as a playground director, polio begins to ravage Bucky's community, and his playground. He wonders why God would allow innocent children to die of such a terrible disease. Then, he faces a romantic crisis when his fiancée begs him to quit his job in order to join her at the camp where she works. Ignoring his sense of duty to his charges, Bucky agrees. Immediately he regrets his decision as a violation of his ideals of truthfulness, strength, courage and sacrifice, but he goes ahead and quits his job anyway and leaves for the camp in the Poconos. An outbreak of polio occurs soon after he arrives at the camp. One camper dies, many more become ill, and Bucky himself becomes a victim, feeling guilty and blaming himself for having brought polio to this once pristine camp.

The novel ends thirty years later with a chance encounter between Bucky and one of his playground charges. This gentleman, Arnie, also contracted polio and survived. While catching up on their lives, Bucky reveals that he ended up not marrying his fiancé, insisting instead that she leave him to find the non-crippled husband he felt she deserved. After bouncing around from job to job, he procured one with the post office and settled into a lonely, embittered life.

Bucky remains stubbornly convinced that he was chosen by a cruel God to oversee the decimation of a playground and to carry polio to the camp. He also believes it would have been irresponsible to go forward with his plans to marry which would have, in his mind, condemned his fiancé to live a limited life for his sake. The curtain closes, tragically, on a man who, several times in his life, stood on a moral precipice and yet did nothing to save himself from falling. (At this point it is worthwhile to mention that poor Bucky could have benefitted greatly from seeing a philosophical counselor!)

Guilt is one of Bucky's frames of mind that opens the door for a number of fruitful dialogues with clients about this common existential dilemma. He feels guilty because he cannot enlist to fight in World War II due to his poor eyesight. He feels guilty when he leaves the playground for summer camp outside the city, deliberately leaving the kids of whom he is in charge. He feels guilty because he believes that he is the carrier who brings polio to the summer camp. When he contracts polio,

he tells his fiancé to leave him because he feels guilty about being a burden to her. He makes the majority of his decisions based upon his feelings of guilt. Can he, should he, stop feeling guilty? What would enable him to forgive himself?

Our current pandemic is rife with opportunities to feel guilty. “Why do I continue to live while others around me die?” “How does it happen that my circumstances allow me to live relatively comfortably during this pandemic while other people are suffering economically and spiritually?” “What, if anything, should I do about the situation?” *Nemesis* can aid you and your clients in exploring these and other questions which surround existential dilemmas concerning guilt.

In the beginning of the novel, Bucky has an unexamined belief in God. He also has ideals of courage and sacrifice which were handed down to him from his grandfather. Once the epidemic strikes, his belief in God and his ideals seem to fly out the window. When two of his students die, he grows bitter towards God, questioning the idea that any good deity would inflict such horrors on the world. As more people are crippled and die, Bucky grows increasingly bitter, viewing God’s actions as cruel, capricious, and vindictive.

All epidemics magnify the presence of death, which we cannot defeat. Still, we must cope with their deadly consequences. It has been said more than once that the cause of epidemics has everything to do with humankind’s failure to accept the reality of illness and death. We produce the fatal consequences inherent in denying our mortality, which is our shared human fate. Are we, ourselves, prepared to accept the reality of death – our own, and others’? Though we should prepare for death throughout our life, a pandemic constitutes an opportunity to know how prepared we really are.

Bucky’s situation is reminiscent of Job’s. Both are sincere men whose faith was challenged by undeserved misfortune. Many spiritual questions raised by Bucky’s confrontation with the polio epidemic parallel ones that are raised today because of the current Covid situation. “Would a benevolent God allow this kind of suffering?” “Why doesn’t God answer our prayers, stop the pandemic, save those whom we love?” “We are good people; why doesn’t God intervene for us?” “Why did God create polio or covid-19 in the first place? What is He trying to prove?” (Budick, 2014)

Bucky provides philosophical counselors with a case study of a classic example of weakness of will. He knew what he should do, but somehow, each time, he just couldn’t bring himself to do it. How is it possible that he, and we, can knowingly act against our own interests? Like Bucky, are we rational agents or are our decisions dictated by more primitive forces, on whose behalf reason merely provides rationalizations? These are examples of the kinds of valuable questions *Nemesis* raises. (Roth, 2010)

### ***The Horseman on the Roof* by Jean Giono**

Jean Giono (1895-1970), a French writer and film director, published *Horseman on the Roof* in 1951. As in the other three literary works discussed in this paper, a pandemic provides the opportunity for Giono, and his readers, to make an inquiry into the nature of happiness and into how one should live. The general answer, illustrated in a series of picaresque episodes in which the main character becomes involved, is that one should live in accordance with all the forms of good functioning that make a complete human life. This notion of good human functioning is revealed

as Angelo, the hero of the story, brings his evolving picture of it to the situations in which he finds himself, which he views as an opportunity to exhibit his moral strength, even when others don't.

Unlike *The Plague* and *Nemesis*, *Horseman on the Roof* offers almost no development of character, nor is there any attempt at complex psychological realism. The reader's experience is largely a matter of getting to know two principal figures who carry the symbolic weight of Giono's meaning. The story takes place in 1832 in Provence during a cholera epidemic. It recounts the travels and escapades of a young Italian hussar and chivalrous romantic, Angelo Pardi. His colonel's commission, bought for him by his mother, causes Angelo to feel tremendous pressure to prove himself worthy of his rank through his physical and moral strength. Although his wanderings provide him with many of these kinds of opportunities, they also teach him many harsh lessons about the various facets of human nature.

Angelo, whose name means angel, is a higher being in the sense that his strong moral convictions make him superior to those around him. He exhibits complete sincerity, selflessness and idealism. He constantly makes good choices. He has an innate sense of justice. He believes in the primacy of individual conscience. He does not fight without cause. He meets challenge after challenge successfully. In addition, his cheerful self-confidence, his willingness to risk his own life, and his eager but unsuccessful attempts to save victim after victim are admirable. He has the habit of questioning his own actions and motivations and giving them thoughtful consideration. Always looking towards the highest good in every situation, he has what could be called a "rooftop view of life."

Angelo's benevolence and humanity become ever more evident as he expresses his thoughts and reflects upon them, and then engages in actions that are true to himself while being sympathetic to others. He has a commitment to confront complex situations head on. With all that in mind, his actions constitute those that a person of practical wisdom would perform. His is a case of moral growth while in the midst of a pandemic, of learning to reason and to act like a mature man, rather than a fearful child. His exemplary character gives us something to aim for as we strive to face our pandemic as valiantly as he did his.

Towards the end of the novel, Angelo meets an elderly doctor. Something of an alchemist, the doctor helps to make the symbolic intentions of this work clearer. Having retired, he has moved to his mountain chalet where he meditates and appreciates nature. Through a lifetime of studying literature and philosophy and through clear-sighted observation, the good doctor has concluded that humanity is consumed by vanity, pride, and jealousy. When faced with the possibility of dying from cholera, people no longer care about their own family, much less anyone else. Suddenly they realize they are going to lose everything and are asking themselves if what they thought of as living is really all that worthwhile.

The doctor concludes that cholera is not a disease. Rather it is a burst of selfish pride that explodes everything, a light that reveals the other side of things. The victims can no longer avert their gaze from death nor from the awful truth of their lives. In those moments when cholera is seizing them, the victims come to understand that all they have done in order to be stronger, or more handsome or more seductive than death is of no use, and that their prayers, appealing looks, and charm are of no help to them.



In the end, the victims express either great agitation of the soul or a sort of annihilation of it. It is a deeply tragic moment. Facing something they had refused to face until now—a clear demonstration of their nothingness, that pride does not allow them to live any longer—they fall into extreme states of agitation. They wish only to die which, inevitably, they do.

The doctor concludes that the people who survive cholera do so because they have been willing to face a place in themselves that others have denied. It is that place where passions, errors, and fear reside. In doing so, they gain strength and fortitude, enabling them to forge on with their lives with integrity and compassion.

Knowledge of why a person dies of cholera depends on knowledge of how they lived. Each person has loved, hated, and suffered. No trace of all of this is to be found in an autopsy, yet within it all lies the key to his or her death. We come to know that a person's success in not succumbing to cholera represents a just and appropriate reward for his noble approach to life (Pinaud, 2016).

The bottom line in facing this pandemic is “How can I survive?” Giono's answer resembles that of the Stoics—your best chance is through living a virtuous life and striving towards the highest good. This novel invites many opportunities to think about and to discuss with one's clients how that that might be enacted by them. (Giono, 1951)

### ***An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen**

Individuals who defy society because of their moral convictions and hence suffer for their independent and unbending stands are not unfamiliar phenomena. We recognize them as our prophets, religious reformers, and whistle-blowers. One such individual was dramatized with great ingenuity and clarity by Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) in his drama, *An Enemy of the People*, which takes place during a typhoid outbreak. With its themes of pollution and health hazards due to greed, and the environmental degradation that ensues, its message is as relevant today as it was at the end of the nineteenth century.

The story concerns itself with a small-town doctor in Norway, Dr. Thomas Stockmann, who discovers that the public baths in the newly built spa are contaminated by typhus. When he tries to reveal the scandal, he is almost run out of town because his revelations would threaten its tourist industry. The climax of the play occurs when the townspeople declare Dr. Stockmann to be their enemy. He winds up defeated, but not before indicting the town in its own tragedy.

Dr. Stockmann, a good-spirited and generous man, plays the role of an enlightened and persecuted minority of one confronting an ignorant, powerful majority. A scientist whose loyalty is to the truth rather than to any political party or ideology, he is, in the beginning of the story, blind to the nature of his society. As he starts to realize its power to condemn him, rather than being weakened by this revelation, he is strengthened.

Though his convictions alienate him from the town's people, Dr. Stockman valiantly faces his enemies, all of whom are influenced by popular opinion. Despite fierce threats against his family's fortune and safety, he stands by his commitment to do what is correct, insisting that a community must base its existence on what is true and right, not on iniquity and self-deception. Although

alienated by others, he does not become dejected. He suffers materially, but not morally. His overall sense of spiritual well-being is derived from his sense of having overcome temptations and threats, and having stood by what is right. Throughout it all, he remains a man standing for, and committed to, moral rectitude.

In contrast to Dr. Stockmann, all of the townspeople have in common a firm dedication to their own self-interest, even when it is at the expense of the common good, which it almost always is. The Mayor, who happens to be Dr. Stockmann's brother, is more concerned with his own reputation and his power than with the truth of the situation and what should rightfully be done about it. The newspapermen are also corrupt, their devotion to their own interests taking precedence over any devotion to truth or concern for others. Readers will readily recognize that same devotion in many of our politicians and newsmen today.

Another related issue is that of social responsibility, which Dr. Stockmann embodies and which his opponents do not. Social responsibility demands that the truth must not be hidden, diluted, or altered, even when it goes counter to the wishes of the majority. When it comes to social responsibility, it doesn't matter what others think or want. What matters is what is right, even if there is only one person to defend it.

One has only to think about the current fights occurring over the wearing of masks and the maintaining of sensible social distancing to understand how confused many people still are about what being socially responsible entails and why they might want to exercise social responsibility. They are befuddled about what is in their best interests—to be “free” or to reasonably constrain themselves? Ibsen's concern over this issue can help clients grapple with it as they think through how to resolve it for themselves.

Ibsen also makes a point of showing us that authoritarianism does not always come from political leadership. It can also come from private citizens, corporations, and special interest groups. (Heiberg, 1967) Even in a democracy, the great danger of the pressure to conform exists despite the legal assurance of freedom of expression. Just think of the power a corporation like Tesla has when they fire workers who don't feel comfortable going back to work until the situation proves to be safer than it is.

In the play it is the townspeople, not the police, who nearly run Dr. Stockmann out of town. Likewise, in our times it is often the social and cultural milieu one has to guard against. Would your alienation from others because you did what was right (a la Dr. Stockmann) be preferable to the shame you might feel because you yielded to the dictates of a prevalent opinion? Would you shun Chinese people, believing them to be responsible for the corona virus pandemic?

*An Enemy of the People* brings up another issue being raised again today. Just like the townspeople vilified Dr. Stockmann, who used scientific means to support his warning about the infestation by typhus, there are many people today who vilify the scientists who have sounded the warning bell in regards to the coronavirus and even go so far as to deny their findings. Superstition runs rampant during pandemics. The possibility of discussing the use of reason alongside or against emotion and intuition presents itself in this timeless drama.

Last but not least, Ibsen presents us with a universal and timeless situation which many are loath to discuss—the genuine dilemma with no satisfactory solution. The baths at the spa are obviously dangerous and must be closed. However, the closing of the Baths will also destroy the town's economy. Tourists will no longer come to “take the cure,” leaving many people out of work. Is it better for a few to die so that many are not out of work? (Ibsen, 1897)

That question also dominates decisions about if and for how long the current corona virus shut-down should occur. If businesses and public events are allowed to resume their normal activities before the wave of the pandemic has passed, many more people will die than otherwise might. On the other hand, many people are out of work and unable to pay their bills and buy groceries as long as the shut-down lasts. It is the unresolvable nature of this dilemma between social responsibility and a robust economy that dominates both the play and our current pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

The various pandemics that have erupted since the beginning of the twenty-first century—SARS, Ebola, avian flu, the corona virus—have raised troubling issues for everyone regarding our unexpected vulnerability. Although everyone would like these issues to disappear, and the sooner the better, prominent features of modern life, such as population growth, climate change, rapid means of transportation, the proliferation of megacities with inadequate urban infrastructures, warfare, persistent poverty, and widening social inequalities, maintain the risk. The threat is real. (Snowden, 2019)

The perennially most important question, “How am I to live?” becomes ever more important to focus on as the characteristic fears and anxieties to which human beings are prone mount in these unprecedented, yet not unfamiliar, times. “Beyond psychotropic or recreational drugs, what are my defenses against such dis-ease?” “How prepared am I to confront the challenges we are all facing?” “What habits can I adopt or strengthen to help me maintain my nobility while promoting the good in the world around me?” These are the kinds of questions philosophical counselors welcome!

They are also the kinds of questions that have arisen in dialogues in which I participate with my clients these days. They are what led me to think more deeply about how and in what ways literary works could support philosophical texts. In essence, I wanted to have a cogent reason I could give to myself and to my clients about how another self-help tool, in this case various literary works, could help them to go through this pandemic, and beyond, with greater wisdom, courage and grace.

One basic reason, it seems to me, comes from the understandings of self-psychology. The earliest and most basic way in which we come to know who we are and what reality is is through the process called “mirroring.” It occurs when our caretakers, through their intonations and gestures, give us feedback about ourselves and the world around us. Psychologists tend to focus on early childhood when they talk about the importance of accurate mirroring for the development of a self that can function well in the world. But, throughout our lives, in order to know ourselves and the world we live in, we need accurate mirroring. How other people respond to us is one way to get it. Literary works offer another, often more sophisticated, form of mirroring, making it an important tool in our quest to know ourselves. (Siegel, 1996)

It is only natural then that while we are searching for the truth of things, we look for corresponding realities to help us find it. Literary works provide forthright and illuminating examples of reality which clients can compare with their own and to the reality of others. The understandings they gain will aid them in knowing which truths they consciously want to give assent to, and which ones they don't.

In these times, knowing one's truth is no longer a luxury confined to ivory towers. As the literary works we examined all show, it is a critical necessity for all who wish to survive and flourish. Although everyone knows that pandemics have a way of recurring in the world, we still find it hard to believe it when they come crashing down on our heads, like the one that has crashed upon us now. As philosophical counselors, we are fortunate to be able to help our clients not only to believe and to accept what is happening, but also to help them find their own way to noble solutions within the reality they face. With all that is currently so difficult to deal with, we are fortunate to have both philosophy and great literature as beacons of light which glow brightly, even in the dark of human suffering.

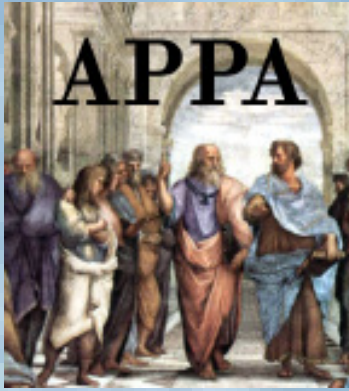
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# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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