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Albert Camus and the Absurdity of Life

Philosophy and Death

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December 13th, 2024

According to Albert Camus, the problem of suicide is the only “truly serious philosophical problem” because it addresses the fundamental question of whether life is worth living. It confronts the ultimate existential dilemma and forces individuals to grapple with the meaning and purpose of their existence. He uses the myth of Sisyphus to explore the concept of the “absurd” in human existence. Sisyphus, a Greek king, is punished by the gods and forced eternally to push a rock up a hill, only for it to roll back down again. Over and over again. But despite the futility of this task, Sisyphus finds meaning and happiness in his defiance of his absurd fate. In this essay, we will speak about the absurdity of Sisyphus’s situation and what it reveals about the absurdity of human life—as well as the core dilemma that lies within absurdity itself. And finally, we will speak about why Camus ultimately describes Sisyphus as “happy” despite the fruitlessness of his eternal fate.

Although the gods punished Sisyphus, his penalty lies within the weight of the rock and not with the gods. It is in his acknowledgement of the absurdity of his situation where the answer lies. He is fully aware of the pointlessness of his efforts, yet he continues to endure and persist. Once the rock rolls back down, he walks down to get it again without hesitation. In these moments, when he is walking back down to get the rock, he has time to reflect on his situation, and this is where the real tragedy of the situation lies. It is because now, without that weight of the rock, he has to embrace the absurdity of what he is about to do again. Is it not similar to that time before you fall asleep when you become conscious of the moment, and the reality hits that you will do it all again tomorrow? Camus even asks, “What is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of life necessary sleep?” (p. 12). This is how the absurdity of Sisyphus’s situation reveals the absurdity of human life. If we live each day and each moment trying in vain to get that rock over the cliff, in other words, to finally achieve our everyday efforts once and for

all, for it only to start again? It begs the question, what have I really accomplished? When all of my daily efforts return to this moment before I fall asleep? Why do I never feel further along or like I've made any true progress? It's absurd to think that we are all doing all this, knowing that we will keep doing it every day until we die.

Camus explains that absurdity can neither be resolved nor accepted but "continually rejected" (pp 34-35). Understanding the meaning behind absurdity and the absurdity of the world that Camus is trying to convey is crucial. Absurd is not a separate characteristic of the world; it simply is. Absurdity emerges from the relationship that humans have with the world. It unavoidably lies in the impossible, in the unfulfillable tension of the human and the world. How could one ever resolve or accept an element that lies within the imprint of human existence? Camus says, "The Absurd is not in man, nor in the world, but in their presence together" (p 34). Then how are we to continually reject it? Camus tells us that it is in rejection, in that revolt, that is where the meaning of absurdity lies. We know that our lives are absurd; each of us (some more than others) knows that it is all pointless. And so what? This is what Camus is trying to convey. He's not speaking of hopelessness or hope, or despair or encouragement; it's about refusing to reconcile yourself. But then we must ask ourselves, what keeps us here? What keeps us moving the rock up the hill?

By pushing that rock up the hill every day, Sisyphus is undergoing an act of defiance. But it is not a practiced or natural act, nor is it this fortuitous cause. But the defiance of his action is acting in a world where the action will fall flat, making no meaning. The point is that despite all of this, there still remains action and resistance to the fact of the absurdity; you will keep waking up and starting again, and you will keep pushing that rock. And this brings us to why Camus ultimately calls Sisyphus happy. It is ultimately the absurdity of his existence from which

happiness derives. Sisyphus's victory over everything is his ability to exist and not become lost in the moment; to be conscious of the pointlessness of it all. But the happiness comes from more than that. He has freedom in his actions. He has chosen this because he can exist and feel happiness and joy without hope or hopelessness. To summarize, it is within his act of defiance against the absurd that ultimately grants him a sense of freedom and happiness. He is able to find this sense of liberation in the sheer meaninglessness. This story of Sisyphus serves as a metaphor for the human condition, highlighting the tension between the inherent meaninglessness of life and the human impulse to find purpose and create one's own meaning.

On these terms, I understand why Camus sees Sisyphus as happy. There is this sense of peace when happiness can be found in the pointlessness of it all. Perhaps to have a point or no point does not contain so much of the weight of existence as so many of us think it does. We must all intrinsically feel that no matter what we do, achieve, or pursue, this feeling of hollowness will inevitably return. I like how Sisyphus accepts this and that he can almost surpass the meaninglessness and, in turn, make meaning. He found the meaning of life to be living. I remember this story my dad used to tell me about a conversation between an American and an Indigenous Fisherman. The American stops the fisherman on his way from the Sea. The Fisherman holds one medium-sized fish, enough to feed himself and his family. The American says, "Where are you going"?

"Home to eat this fish and feed my family. Then we'll watch the sunset."

The American says, "Why don't you get here early in the morning tomorrow?"

"Why would I?"

"So you can catch more fish."

"Why would I do that?"

“So you can hire people to help unload your boat and bring it to the market. Then you’ll be able to afford a cannery and trucks to export the fish and perhaps purchase the market itself.”

“Why would I do all this?” says the Indigenous man.

“So you can relax and enjoy the sunset, not have to work so much.”

There is an absurdity to life that is a little hilarious. But when the toiling is clear and direct, and the results are in front of you, does it not seem less absurd? Is the “average workman” whom Camus describes, therefore making it exponentially more absurd for themselves? Although Camus describes that Sisyphus is happy in defiance and is conscious of the absurdity (despite the workman of today), how much absurdity is being unnecessarily created? Does the absurdity need to be there for happiness to come? There is this pattern of telling a parable story to make us realize different but oh-so-similar points. Like *The Alchemist*, the Indigenous Fisherman story, Sisyphus and his rock. What are they all trying to tell us? To live simpler, laugh in the face of the absurdity of existence, and realize that all we could ever want is in every present moment? Throughout them all, though, there is a common theme. We can discover a sense of freedom and contentment by living authentically without this constructed burden of expectations or pursuing a grand purpose. Let us embrace life's absurdity (or non-absurdity), push our metaphorical rocks with laughter and defiance, and find happiness in the act of living.