

# The Joy of Sisyphus

by

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At the end of his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus concludes that Sisyphus is happy for no other reason than the improbability of his situation. While such a favorable judgment is wholly expected from the master of the absurd, it is not the only possible one. I too believe Sisyphus to be a jaunty fellow, though for altogether different reasons. To begin, one must admit that Ulysses' description of Sisyphus in Hades is not sympathetic to either pollyannaish thesis:

And I saw Sisyphus at this endless task raising his prodigious stone with both his hands. With hands and feet he tried to roll it up to the top of the hill but always, just before he could roll it over to the other side, its weight would be too much for him, and the pitiless stone would come thundering down again onto the plain. Then he would begin trying to push it up the hill again, and the sweat ran off him and the steam rose after him. [The *Odyssey*, Book XI]

Here is the price Sisyphus pays for his passion for life on earth, a passion that led him to be disrespectful to the gods, to shackle Death, and to ignore Pluto's demands that he return to Hades after a temporary release to journey home and chastise his wife. But doesn't it strike you as it does me that these are all actions worthy of a king, which Sisyphus was? And perhaps even worthy of one of those larger-than-life demigods of the ancient Greeks? If so, may we not wonder from the outset whether the penalty meted out to our champion against Death was unjust or excessive if just? Yet since Ulysses' record three millennia ago, this endless task has become synonymous with chronic futility---though we may wonder again whether it is not simply another exaggerated tale by a well-known Grecian braggart.

In the Hades of Pluto, everywhere there are fires and multitudes of souls fitted with tailor-made or bizarrely inspired torments. Take Titylus, son of Gavia, or if you will the less estimable Tantalus, son of no one willing to accept parentage. By command of Zeus, Titylus's failed dalliance with Leto has earned him the continuous removal of his liver by two vultures. The crime of Tantalus is known only to himself and Pluto. His payment is to tread water in a lake from which he is unable to drink. Pluto's domain is clearly hell, and one would be hard-pressed to choose its least dolorous occupation---though Titylus and Tantalus are of the shared opinion that compared to having one's liver vivisected while alive or being thirsty though always wet, pushing a pebble around is possibly heaven.

Camus states that nothing specific is known about Sisyphus in the underworld. Nonetheless I believe that we may conclude that he derives at least some benefit from his labors. Sisyphus is never sick---Pluto makes sure of that---and assuming that he wishes such a boon, he is as endless as his task. Nor has he any need of exercise to keep fit. And finally there is the escape he enjoys from earthly duties and from family that all men crave from time to time, though perhaps not for eternity.

It seems then that Sisyphus suffers not alone and his circumstances are not without advantage. But what of the work itself? Does the stone ever wear out (and thereby become lighter for at least short periods)? How long is the upward journey? [Ulysses calls the obstacle a hill, Camus a mountain.] How long does he have to retrieve the stone? [Camus says one hour.] Is he starved and dehydrated as well? Is the air cooler on top of the hurdle? Does he get breaks? May he talk to his friends? To passers-by? And most importantly (both Camus and I believe), what does he think about during the downward trip? Camus's answer is that Sisyphus fills his "hour of consciousness" with the extent of his wretchedness, which is so absurd that he, like Oedipus, concludes that all is well with the world.

I believe that we can deduce three entirely different scenarios. First, every cycle of pushing and retrieving the stone is exactly the same in every particular; second, there is a good deal of variation from one cycle to the next; and third Sisyphus doesn't care either way and only thinks of the pain (which is in no practical sense uplifting). The last of these options is of course unbecoming the King of Cornith and thus can be dismissed outright. The importance of distinguishing between the first two is this: if the first, Sisyphus need not think of the work and can spend his time meditating or otherwise developing his mind (to achieve, for example, spiritual enlightenment); if the second, Sisyphus always has something at hand (other than his worries) to meditate on and free himself from total boredom---he could (I modestly suggest) study the behavior of any birds that he regularly encounters.

Camus then is mistaken at both turns: Sisyphus is on the one hand misery itself or on the other hand master of his thoughts if not his days by contemplating something outside of himself---or even nothing---but certainly not his preposterous condition.