

## Albert Camus' Redemption of Sisyphus

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### Abstract

The legend of Sisyphus is one of the most well-known Greek myths. Upon showing scorn and indifference towards gods, Sisyphus was condemned to a life of eternal torture. The Greek god Zeus punished him with the most severe ordeal imaginable. Sisyphus was tasked with pushing a boulder up on a mountain and then watch it roll back down again. He was to repeat this process again and again, incessantly. The futility of his labour seems meaningless; however, Albert Camus lends value and meaning to the incessant toiling of Sisyphus. Camus perceives the tale of Sisyphus as a parable which mankind could learn from. He compared Sisyphus' labour with the monotony and recurrence of our everyday life. Like Sisyphus, we too are condemned in a meaningless abstraction of a world where we undertake the same tasks again and again. In the face of this absurdity, one may lose hope altogether by falling prey to existential dread and consider life unworthy of living. However, Camus implores mankind to draw hope from Sisyphus. Just as he makes his descent upon witnessing the rolling down of the rock, he is stronger than his fate. Camus states that his acceptance of the absurd is in fact his greatest rebellion against it. It is his willingness to descend down the mountain and roll the rock up again that makes the absurd bow down in front of him.

**Keywords:** Sisyphus, Absurd, Albert Camus, Meaninglessness, Existentialism

### Introduction

Sisyphus was the infamous king of Corinth who revelled in torture and terror. It is believed that he killed his visitors as a means of showcasing his might. His subjects feared him and he enjoyed a godlike reverence in his kingdom of Corinth. His insolence knew no bounds and he stooped so low as to seduce his own niece. His downfall began when his avarice grew limitless. He angered the Greek gods when he revealed the whereabouts of Zeus to the river god Asopus. Zeus had kidnapped Asopus' daughter, the nymph Aegina, and had taken her to his kingdom. Asopus, in search of his daughter, implored Sisyphus for help. Sisyphus agreed to help him only if the river god would grant him a spring in the middle of his kingdom. Asopus complied and Sisyphus told him where Zeus had went.

This action of Sisyphus angered the gods beyond measure. For Sisyphus, it was nothing more than a mercantile transaction in which he had received a divine spring in return. His indifference towards the gods and his greed for personal gain paved an irredeemable way towards eternal misery and pain. Upon Zeus' instructions, Thanatos (God of Death) tried to chain Sisyphus down. However, the cunning of Sisyphus prevailed and he tricked the God of Death and managed to escape an apparently inescapable fate.

Not only that, after he orchestrated his own death in an attempt to escape Zeus' wrath, he played yet another trick, this time, however, on the Queen of the Underworld – Persephone. Sisyphus convinced her that his wife had not given him proper burial rights. Persephone allowed him to return to the land of the living in order to punish his wife. He promised Persephone that he would return to the underworld upon the fulfilment of his task. He had no intention of keeping his promise.

Upon escaping death twice, Sisyphus considered himself invincible. His cunning and sharp intellect were no match for neither men nor gods. His conceit incurred the fury of Zeus who abandoned him in the deepest abyss of the underworld and rendered upon him a punishment so severe that eternity itself bowed down to it.

He was condemned to roll a giant boulder up a mountain. The punishment does not seem so severe upon initial glance. However, it was not the task itself that was terrifying but the repetition of undertaking the same task that made it a hopeless prospect. Just as Sisyphus would reach the zenith of the mountain, the boulder would roll down to the base. Sisyphus would then descend the mountain and start the entire process again. And again, the boulder would roll down and again Sisyphus would make the descent and carry out the same futile task again till the end of time. There was no respite from the futility of his existence and his actions.

### **Albert Camus' Interpretation**

It is difficult to perceive an optimistic facet in the tale of Sisyphus. His punishment had left no room for hope. Albert Camus addressed the bleak nature of the punishment ordained by the gods in his essay titled *The Myth of Sisyphus*. "They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour" (Camus 589). He understood the absurdity that governed Sisyphus' incessant toiling. "His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing" (590).

Despite the bleakness of it all, Camus endowed hope and meaning to Sisyphus' labour. He ventured as far as to imagine Sisyphus happy in his dreary existence. According to Camus, one could draw parallels between the inexorable punishment of Sisyphus and mankind's futile search for meaning in a cold and indifferent universe. The recurrence of Sisyphus' actions were symbolic of the monotony of human existence.

Camus argued that a contemplative reflection of Sisyphus' existence could lend hope and courage to mankind. He saw Sisyphus as a symbol of humanity toiling day in and out towards a vast nothingness. Sisyphus had nothing to gain by his task of rolling the rock up on the mountain. He did not hope for an escape from his misery. He was aware of the futility of his existence and yet he performed his task every moment of the day without any form of respite. Camus applies the same philosophy to the futility of human existence. His Absurdist notion agreed with the fact that the universe was indeed meaningless and any attempt to create meaning in a meaningless world was the epitome of futility. However, he was aware that mankind needed some form of meaning to carry on with their lives. In the absence of meaning, life became too much of a weight to bear. Thus, Camus argued that an Absurdist creates his own individual meaning as a form of rebellion against the absurd. An Absurdist

did not cave in to the religious or spiritual meanings, which Camus labelled as weaker truths eventually leading to a philosophical suicide (520). An Absurdist was aware of the futility of his own meaning and had made peace with the fact that his meaning would annihilate with his own death. Nothing could transcend the absurdity of the universe. And that very knowledge and its acceptance was the greatest rebellion against the absurd.

In Sisyphus, Camus witnessed a champion of his Absurdist thought. Sisyphus rebelled against the futility of his existence through the only possible avenue – by accepting it. Rather than succumbing to existential dread, Sisyphus found value and significance in the recurrence of his actions. Mankind too must see the absurdity and recurrence of life in the same light, according to Camus.

Camus, however, focuses on one particular point in Sisyphus's journey which interests him more than anything else. It is when Sisyphus is at the summit of the mountain and he sees his rock rolling back down again. In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes, "It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me (590). At this point, rather than being reduced to despair and mourning, Sisyphus makes his descent. He accepts his dreadful existence and becomes stronger than the wretched fate ordained to him.

Camus argues, "At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock" (591). Camus successfully manages to transcend the legend of Sisyphus into a parable of existential rebellion. Sisyphus, despite his eternal condemnation, does not bow down in the face of futility. And this is what Camus hopes for mankind to strive for when faced with existential dread. One has to find his own meaning in the futility of life's recurrence. One has to accept the absurd nature of the universe and celebrate it, for that is the only way one could rebel against it.

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