

OUR SISYPHUS

Jeffrey Gordon
Southwest Texas State University

*The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.*¹

The words are, of course, Albert Camus's. They were first published in 1942. Since then, this voice—at once both lyrical and austere, personal and oracular—and the ancient image he calls up in these lines have become permanent parts of our modern consciousness. Like all the images that capture and create the character of our age, Sisyphus is always there for each of us. In the intimate space of our imagination, we can turn to him at will, and with only the slightest effort, we will find him as before—solitary, weather-beaten, resigned, without illusion. I want to make that effort now, not to disturb Sisyphus in his labors, nor to uproot him surely, but to try to be precise about a matter which is, perhaps, fatally elusive of precision, to try to make explicit the significance of this figure whose implicit significance has haunted us now nearly four decades. Let us turn to Sisyphus, then, as we might turn, one aimless afternoon, to some old photographs of a person close to us, perhaps even of ourselves, in the hope that we might find in them something we had missed, some expression or gesture that inadvertently reveals the essence of a life.

But we must be silent now, for the figure is emerging. There is the hill, and it is morning, a slight chill in the soundless air. The landscape here is treeless, the land covered only with broken rock and scattered brush. A wide path of sterile earth has been cut in the thick brush of the hill. And there, at the base of the hill, the rock—grey, mottled with holes, enormous. Slow, laborious breathing is audible. The rough hand comes into view, the flesh thick, sun-burnt, heavily veined. It finds a jut on the rock to grip. And now the weather-worn clothes, the thick trunk and powerful back. And here at last the face of Sisyphus—our own face, of course, or the face of one of our own personae, the eyes squinting against the sun, hair dishevelled. He takes his hand from the rock and brings it to his side. Perhaps he is not quite ready yet, perhaps he needs a moment longer of rest. He stands motionless, eyes turning up. What is he gazing at? The summit of the hill, every square inch of which he has seen a million times before? What could he hope to discover there? Is it the cloudless sky that has his attention? Is he noting the progress of the sun? Does he seek in reflection on its course some inspiration for the renewal of his labor? He continues to stare without expression.

We can afford to leave him for a moment.

The legend abounds in perplexities, or at least this is true of that retelling of the myth that has made it so important to us. Camus calls Sisyphus "the absurd hero." This is, then, the best that we can hope to be, for our lives, too, according to Camus, are absurd. But why should we believe this? Surely it is ludicrously illegitimate to conduct an imaginative exercise in which we strip a life of all that could possibly make it worthwhile, then appeal to this figment of ours as proof of the futility of human existence!

If we are tempted to see in Sisyphus's eternal rock-rolling a revelation of the emptiness of our own labors, we should be easily dissuaded from this when we consider what little alteration is required to transform this myth from the perfect image of meaninglessness to a perfectly serviceable conception of a *meaningful* life. All we need do is to introduce some point, some minimal, common, everyday point to his labors, such as any one of our lives abounds in, and the transformation is accomplished. Assume, then, that Sisyphus rolls not one rock, but many, that he does this only part of the time, perhaps even most of the time, but that the rest of his hours are spent building great rock monuments, or dwellings, or places of worship. Or say, again, that he merely rolls rocks, that he contributes nothing to these creative enterprises except the service of his brawn, but that through this labor he supports a wife and several children whom he loves. Add any harmless diversion to his life, so that we may think of him as enjoying some moments of happiness, however few, and even this is enough to alter the aspect of desolation in the original myth. But what actual human life cannot boast these or comparable features in abundance? Why, then, should Sisyphus speak for *us*? Why is his heroism—if heroism it be—*our* most valiant possibility? In what way are our situations even remotely comparable to that of Sisyphus?

Camus was, of course, aware that no actual human life repeats identically the fate of Sisyphus. "Proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious," as Camus wrote, he is a mythic figure, after all; there is never any question of that. Nevertheless, he is supposed to dramatize the essential truth of our own condition, and just now we are having difficulty seeing how this could be so. Have we not our plans and projects, our loves and triumphs? Is there not a rich diversity in our lives? In what respect, then, is Sisyphus ourselves?

"Yes, yes," we can imagine Camus's voice responding, as he contemplates with us the still motionless Sisyphus. "We have our losses and our victories, and there is the sun and the cool sea wind and 'the grave evening demand for love' exalted by our poets. These are not small gifts, and they are all we shall ever know of treasure. But there are moments when the heart desires more. There are times when our outrage at earthly misfortune can be stilled only by the certainty of an ultimate justice. There are times

when we wish to celebrate all that is, for human joy is no respecter of bounds: it is its nature to encompass everything. But manifest realities make us the fool of such sentiments. What is true of our joy is true of all our deepest emotions: they are innocent to the fact of limits. And so there are times when it is natural for us to hope that the grass in the field sways to our sorrow, that the stars quietly acknowledge our grief. There are many hours in a life when it is necessary to know that there is a witness to our acts and our hearts less fallible in its solicitude than our whimsical brothers. Justice, communion with all that is, the knowledge that some intelligent and benign awareness guides the cadences of the universe—these are the ultimate yearnings of men. Unity and clarity—these are what we ask for in our stillest moments. But these demands must go unheeded. The heavens that we see Sisyphus gazing upon now are our heavens, too, and they are empty. Our triumphs are a jot in time, having all the consequence of one of Sisyphus's climbs. The flurry of an active life is an idle wandering."

This, then, is supposed to be our answer. Our lives are like Sisyphus's inasmuch as we, too, face what Othello called a "marble heaven." And it is supposed to follow from this that all the rich adventures of our lives are, like the single pointlessly repeated act of Sisyphus, gestures in futility. But, then, has this legend only to do with the loss of God? Is the myth of Sisyphus merely an appendix to the history of the death of religion? What of us who have gone beyond this, beyond not only the claims of faith, but even their temptations, those of us for whom the question of God's existence is not an urgent matter, but a tired and tedious irrelevance? How can Sisyphus speak for us?

"Many who believe they have rejected God," we can hear Camus responding to us wearily, "have in fact revived him in another form—in the form of some ultimately arbitrary axiom or set of conceptions that orders their lives, confers necessity on their acts, and allows them to savor the illusion of achievement. As for those who claim to have no need of God, what can we do except smile at their bravado and hope it takes no more dangerous form? For who can witness certain realities and not wish devoutly that things could be otherwise, or lacking this, that there might yet be some ultimate redress? Who has not experienced the chaos of human love and its consequent isolation and not wished for a love that could not fail us? Who has not experienced a joy so profound that he imagined all of nature to declaim her affirmation, and then within an instant watched her recoil into the treachery of her indifference? Those who claim to have transcended the need for God fail to understand the extent to which they have succumbed to lesser certainties."

Sisyphus takes hold of the rock again and braces his shoulder against it. He rolls his eyes and clenches his teeth. His face reddens. The rock begins to move.

"Justice, communion with all that is, the knowledge that some intelligent and benign awareness guides the cadences of the universe"—these were your words, Camus, were they not? But does it follow from the absence of these, from the fact that these demands are not met, that our lives are without significance, that they are reduced, as you say, to "idle wanderings"? Why should I believe this to be so? And even if I knew that a benevolent awareness informed the universe, would this be sufficient to keep my life from being absurd? If my own earthly ends are not enough to confer meaning upon my life, why should the certainty of an ultimate design be able to accomplish this? What would God's purposes have to be in order that they be capable of saving my life from futility? And in virtue of what design, in turn, will these purposes of God's derive *their* significance? Even granting that our mortal purposes are negligible, what allows me to stop my quest for meaning with the purposes of God? What assures me that there is not a yet higher scheme in terms of which God's designs, too, are negligible?

Camus raises his hand in a mock gesture of fatigue, then smiles. "Like all questions of value, this is finally a matter of aesthetics. I see from your expression that this disappoints you. If you think I say this to diminish the stature of these issues, you have not thought enough about the similarity between our moral and our aesthetic categories, and about the extent to which the ideals that guide a life have their source in powerful images. Significances are cheap. It is rightly said that people may find meaning in anything. There are people who believe their life has significance because they share the descent of an Einstein or of the presiding Pope. Those with more insight recognize in such convictions a gesture of desperation. There are men driven by the dream of achieving power over other men and who later congratulate themselves on their dominion of flatterers. What more need be said of these men than that they live in bad taste?

"It comes to this and this only: if the world of meaning exists for man alone, then it is not large enough for our profoundest feelings, which make the opposite assumption. The riddles you propound are no riddles at all. It is not necessary that we know with precision God's purposes for man, nor that we be able to adduce proofs of their ultimate significance. If God is to be the object of our worship and not merely of our respect, it may well be necessary that we *not* know, that his purposes remain to a degree beyond us. But the precise character of God's design is not the issue here. What we need to have clarity about is a more humble matter: we need to know that our lives are the concern of an awareness deeper and more beneficent than any we encounter among men, and the God of traditional orthodoxy, were he to exist, would have served well enough for this purpose. We need to know that we are not adrift in space, exiles and wanderers, but that the universe is akin and responsive to us, alert to our joy and anguish. Lacking

this, whatever the merit and joy of our achievements—and these can be great—there is a vacuum, a hollowness in our lives which will assuredly make its presence felt in a quiet moment, however fervently we have sought to fill it.”

Sisyphus is now mid-way in his task. His foot has slipped and he has lost some ground. The veins in his neck are prominent. His face strains and his body seems awkward and heavy as he works to regain his footing. In this moment he does not at all appear a figure of nobility. He secures his position again and thrusts his weight against the rock. Again, the rock begins to move.

In whatever stage of his labor we turn to Sisyphus, we confront nothing but perplexities. Sisyphus, so Camus teaches, is I, myself, at my bravest, my most heroic. But how am I to understand his nobility? And if I do not understand this, how can I emulate him? Even if I accept Camus's depiction of the parallel between my own life and that of Sisyphus, even if I grant for the sake of argument his insistence on the equal absurdity of our lives, how can Sisyphus's response be a possibility for me?

In fact, the myth seems to be a cheat, and this becomes clear the moment we turn to this matter of Sisyphus's vaunted “triumph.” Yes, I *can* understand Sisyphus's victory. What I cannot understand is how this defiance of his can be a victory for me. If we *can* comprehend Sisyphus's nobility, it is because we have abandoned the very condition of his absurdity! For Sisyphus, after all, the heavens are *not* empty. They are peopled with those gods who have condemned him to his rock and whom even now he defies by refusing that illusion of eventual mercy that would make him their slave. “A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other—along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and *The World as Will and Representation*—into a shrilly squealing piglet at slaughter,” so a recent writer tells us, reflecting on the subjugation of one's mind by his body under the hand of his torturer.⁷ But Sisyphus does not squeal. He does not wince in pain. The strain in his face as he pushes his rock is not the strain of torment. His is the nobility that honors a rebellious past by embracing all its consequences. However long we may observe him, we will not hear Sisyphus cry out in agony or despair. For this would demonstrate that he had not overcome his hope: this would be to give the gods their victory.

But the point is that any way we turn this picture of Sisyphus's nobility, one feature of it remains essential, and that is the presence of these gods. But if the point of similarity between Sisyphus's condition and our own—the point which was to make the myth *our* myth, the symbol of our lives and their noblest possibility—was to be the emptiness of the heavens, we are forced to conceive his nobility in some other way or to abandon it as nonsense. But what can become of Sisyphus's defiance once all traces of the

gods are erased from his cloudless sky? What sense can be made of a stance of rebellion against a non-existent God? Must we not agree with a contemporary author who finds Sisyphus's posture of revolt vain and self-pitying, an exercise in histrionics altogether inconsistent with the very inconsequentiality of his and, hence, our own condition?⁸ Is Sisyphus's largeness the grandeur of delusion?

“Look at Sisyphus,” Camus cries, pointing to the burdened figure now completing his climb. “Do you find any sign in these eyes that he believes he is being observed, that he is performing this task for the benefit of others, whether mortals or gods? His gods are not the God who can silence either his or our yearnings, and therefore nothing need be made of them. If these hunched shoulders can teach us anything, it is what few props, what little cooperation of the world is required in heroism. Sisyphus is alone with his rock and this hill, and he is without illusion as to where he will be tomorrow.”

“What sense, then, can we make of his defiance? What can it be that he defies? He defies the temptation to hope. He revolts against the worn patterns of human frailty. Say he simply defies the odds against his withstanding this poverty. And what could possibly motivate such resolve? Does he seek to embolden posterity with his example, or to provoke a non-existent God? Neither of these, surely, for he is alone, and he does not delude himself to the contrary. The sole witness to his rebellion is his own consciousness, and what he achieves is the only triumph available to a man who does not lie. Shoulders bent against his rock, hands clotted with clay, he stands for history and eternity for the ability of a man to surpass the indignity of his circumstances. Is it, then, posterity, after all, with which he is preoccupied? No, not at all, for it is a matter of profound indifference to him whether this history is recorded. It is enough for him that it *could* be written, and that if it were, it must say this of him: succumbing neither to hope nor to despair, solitary and humble, Sisyphus endured with lucidity.

“Shall we call this vanity? Histrionics? An empty posturing that fails to appreciate the cosmic insignificance of his plight and of any response he might have to it? I think this is short-sighted. No one appreciates this insignificance better than this weather-worn man. But in this barren landscape, where every day he is confronted repeatedly with the incorrigible meaninglessness of his acts, the measure of his courage is, nevertheless, the precise proportion of his disillusion, and this is immeasurable.

“Look at him now at the summit of his hill. He is at rest again, gazing at the sky. He has turned for a moment from his rock that rests close beside him. In only a moment the gravel will give way and the rock will begin to shift its position. It is happening already. Look closely at his eyes as he listens with—yes, fondness—to this gentle clatter. This is what there is for him, and thenceforth, he shall make it sufficient to his needs.”

Camus stops. There is crushing and clattering as the steadily accelerating rock tosses gravel in all directions. Sisyphus has already begun his descent. His eyes are focused straight ahead, and they are smiling.

NOTES

1. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 88.
2. Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).
3. Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 22.