

Reimagining Sisyphus

Philip Villamor rethinks Albert Camus' famous rock'n'roll parable.

The gods condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of a mountain. It is an unending sequence of events: he arduously pushes the rock up the mountain, the rock rolls back down, Sisyphus follows it back down and then begins the task again. Yet if one believes Albert Camus, Sisyphus must be imagined as happy nonetheless.

Camus tells his readers that there are different opinions as to how Sisyphus became the futile laborer of the underworld, so we may imagine Camus also being open to other interpretations of his absurd hero's state of mind after death. But Camus' own portrayal of this mythic mortal will not allow me to imagine Sisyphus as happy about rolling a rock up a hill for eternity.

First, the events that ended with the decree of the gods to seize Sisyphus and lead him forcibly back to the underworld and his rock does not reflect a man in love with *struggle itself*.

Near death, Sisyphus orders his wife to throw his body into the middle of the public square. She does. Upon awakening in the Underworld, Sisyphus strikes a deal with the gods. He obtains permission to return to Earth to chastise his wife for her obedience, as it was so contrary to human love. Camus accepts this stated motivation at face value, though the traditional interpretation of the story suggests we should not. Given his history, one might say that there was never any doubt that Sisyphus would break this deal. Camus says that once Sisyphus returns to the world, enjoys the water and sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wants to go back to the infernal darkness, and goes on the run from the gods. The popular assertion is that he never did want to return; he always had in mind his freedom and love of the beauty of the mortal world.

Nonetheless, he is eventually tracked down by Hermes, who forcibly leads him back to the underworld and then to his rock. Camus imagines an underworld where the gods are even more careless in dealing with Sisyphus than before: they allow him to push the rock unattended, watch it roll down, and trust that he is going to go back down after it to push it up again. Imagining this perfunctory punishment gives Camus the opportunity to ponder the pause of Sisyphus at the top of the mountain, and assert that his conscious decision to return to the struggle for its own sake makes him the absurd hero. Well, myths are made to breathe life into ideas, but, given the nature of Sisyphus, I imagine things a bit differently.

True, Sisyphus evidently had not gone about his life making things easy for himself: a certain levity in regard to the gods involved him in more than a few struggles before his final punishment. But the struggle itself was not the motivation for his behavior during his life on earth, or even in his brief stint in a relatively tolerable afterlife prior to his punishment.

I can't imagine Sisyphus loving the idea of the struggle. Therefore, if one imagines Sisyphus being punished with pushing a rock up a mountain, one also ought to imagine someone there to watch him do it, probably cracking a whip to make him race down after the rock instead of allowing him to ponder how he is stronger than the rock on the way back down. Then I imagine Sisyphus scheming on the way up as to how he will eventually bribe, blackmail or simply bewitch his guard into providing him with another opportunity to return to earth.

Above all else, Sisyphus loves the sunshine and the freedom to come and go and do as he chooses. He is not about to be satisfied for one moment, let alone *happy*, with the notion of unceasing effort. He would be hopeful, as many of us are, of an opportunity to cease the

struggle he sees no good reason for, and some day to be at peace enjoying the beauty of Earth. Camus would have us believe that Sisyphus's adopting an attitude of scorn can somehow result in joy, because it is *his* scorn. But there is no triumph in accepting such circumstances. Sisyphus wasn't satisfied with his first chance at an afterlife, which didn't include pushing a giant rock up a mountain. How are we to believe that he would so readily accept his fate now that he has been given such a pointless task? No, the myth of Sisyphus teaches a higher fidelity which celebrates the wonder of life and tells us to never give up hope. In a previous bout with the gods, he told the nymph Aegina's father of Zeus' abduction of her and managed to escape punishment for years through his scheming. This indicates a love of life and a refusal to accept what would seem to many a hopeless circumstance.

Simply being psychologically stronger than a rock is not enough for such a man. One can be sure that if there were no one ensuring that Sisyphus pushes the rock then he would not do so. No matter what conditions we imagine, he would be scheming how he can enjoy the beauty and freedom he had before. I fancy Sisyphus watching his rock roll back down the mountain, and running like hell down the other side toward the figure of Zeus he sees in the distance, promising Zeus he knows a girl just like Aegina who would love to be his mistress.

Like many a mortal, Sisyphus has hope. He has hope precisely because of the beauty and freedom he has had time to experience on earth, and has developed a belief (the truth of which does not matter) that, somehow, there must be a way to make the experience last forever. He will not accept, even if the gods themselves set out to persuade him, that he's not worthy of a higher destiny.

There is no shadow without light, and it is essential to know the light. The hopeful human says, "No. There are some things I will not accept. I am worth more, and life must be more than action for action's sake." The struggle toward the heights is not itself enough to fill a human heart. One must imagine Sisyphus hopeful, and more human.

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