

The Myth of Sisyphus

Sisyphus is the absurd hero. This man, sentenced to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain and then watching it roll back down, is the epitome of the absurd hero according to Camus. In retelling the Myth of Sisyphus, Camus is able to create an extremely powerful image which sums up the intellectual discussion which comes before it in the book. We are told that Sisyphus is the absurd hero "as much through his passions as through his torture. 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 toward accomplishing nothing." (p.89). Sisyphus is conscious of his troubles, and this is the real tragedy. If, during the moments of descent, he had some hope that he might still succeed, then his hard work would not seem such a torture. Sisyphus is clearly well aware of the level of his own misery. It is this clear recognition of his destiny that transforms his agony into his victory. It has to be a victory for as Camus says:
I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (p.91).
Sisyphus' life is transformed into a victory by concentrating on his freedom and his knowledge of the absurdity of his situation. The ideas behind the development of the absurd hero are present in the first three essays of the book. In these essays Camus looks the problem of suicide. In a shocking, unnerving manner he opens with the bold statement that:
There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. (p. 3). He goes on to discover if suicide is a real answer to the human who is unhappy with life. Or if life is worth living now that god is dead? The discussion begins and continues not as a metaphysical cobweb but as a well reasoned statement based on a way of knowing which Camus holds is the only epistemology we have at our command. We know only two things:
This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction. (p. 14)
With these as the basic certainties of the human condition, Camus argues that there is no meaning to life.

He disapproves of the many philosophers who "have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living." (p.7) Life has no absolute meaning. In spite of the human's irrational "nostalgia" for unity, for absolutes, for a definite order and meaning to the "not me" of the universe, no such meaning exists in the silent, indifferent universe. Between this yearning for meaning and eternal verities and the actual condition of the universe there is a gap that can never be filled. The confrontation of the irrational, longing human heart and the indifferent universe brings about the notion of the absurd. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. (p.21) and further:

The absurd is not in man nor in the world, but in their presence together...it is the only bond uniting them. (p. 21)

People must realize that the feeling of the absurd exists and can happen to them at any time. The absurd person must demand to live solely with what is known and to bring in nothing that is not certain. This means that all I know is that I exist, that the world exists, and that I am mortal.

Doesn't this make a futile pessimistic chaos of life? Wouldn't suicide be a legitimate way out of a meaningless life? "No." "No." answers Camus. Although the absurd cancels all chances of eternal freedom it magnifies freedom of action. Suicide is "acceptance at its extreme", it is a way of confessing that life is too much for one. This is the only life we have; and even though we are aware, in fact, because we are aware of the absurd, we can find value in this life. The value is in our freedom, our passion, and our revolt. The first change we must make to live in the absurd situation is to realize that thinking, or reason, is not tied to any eternal mind which can unify and "make appearances familiar under the guise of a great principle," but it is: ...learning all over again to see, to be attentive, to focus consciousness; it is turning every idea and every image, in the manner of Proust, into a privileged moment. (p. 20)

My experiences, my passions, my ideas, my images and memories are all that I know of this world - and they are enough. The absurd person can finally say "all is well". I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also debilitate me at the same time. They relieve me of the weight of my own life, and yet I must carry it alone. (p. 41)

Camus then follows his notions to their logical conclusions and insists that people must substitute quantity of experience for quality of experience. The purest of joys is "feeling, and feeling on this earth."

This statement cannot be used to claim a hedonism as Camus's basic philosophy, but must be thought of

in connection with the notion of the absurd that has been developed in the early part of the essay. Man is mortal. The world is not. A person's dignity arises from a consciousness of death, an awareness that eternal values and ideas do not exist, and a refusal to give in to the notion of hope or appeal for something that we are uncertain of.

In the following essays, Camus presents examples of the absurd person. We are given Don Juan, the actor, and the conqueror as examples of people who multiply their lives in an attempt to live fully within the span of their mortality. But more important is the creator who is discussed in the essay "Absurd Creation". "The absurd joy par excellence is creation." For in creating a work of art the creator is living doubly in as much as his creation is a separate life. "The artist commits himself and becomes himself in his work." Works of art become, then, the one means for a person to support and sustain a lucid consciousness in the face of the absurdity of the universe.

The present and the succession of presents before an ever conscious mind, this is the ideal of the absurd man. (p. 81)

Art is for Camus an essential human activity and one of the most fundamental. It expresses human aspirations toward freedom and beauty, aspirations which make life valuable for each transient human being. Art defies that part of existence in which each individual is no more than a social unit or an insignificant cog in the evolution of history.

In The Myth of Sisyphus then we find the philosophical basis for the stranger, the doctor, and the judge-penitent. This is the starting point of Camus's thought. Camus is concerned here as in his other works with persons and their world, the relationships between them, and the relationships between persons and their history. In The Myth of Sisyphus he opposes himself to the rationalism of classical philosophy which seeks universal and enduring truths or a hierarchy of values which is crowned by God; he believes that truth is found by a subjective intensity of passion; he maintains that the individual is always free and involved in choice; he recognizes that persons exist in the world and are naturally related with it; he is deeply concerned with the significance of death, its inevitability and its finality. The absurd is a revolt against tomorrow and as such comes to terms with the present moment. Suicide consents to the absurd as final and limitless while revolt is an ongoing struggle with the absurd and brings with it man's redemption.

One can see now why Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is conscious of his plight: it was his scorn of the gods, hatred of death, and passion for life that won him the penalty of rolling a rock to the top of the mountain forever, and he does not appeal to hope or to any uncertain gods. His is the ultimate absurd,

for there is not death at the end of his struggle. All is not chaos; the experience of the absurd is the proof of man's uniqueness and the foundation of his dignity and freedom. All that remains is a fate whose outcome alone is fatal. Outside of that single fatality of death, everything, joy or happiness, is liberty. A world remains of which man is the sole master. What bound him was the illusion of another world. The outcome of his thought, ceasing to be renunciatory, flowers in images. It frolics - in myths, to be sure, but myths with no other depth than that of human suffering and like it inexhaustible. Not the divine fable that amuses and blinds, but the terrestrial face, gesture, and drama in which are summed up a difficult wisdom and an ephemeral passion. (p. 87)

One could do worse than to consider the myths-retold in the works of Camus.