

Absurdity and *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Few writers articulate existential anxiety as eloquently as Albert Camus, the famed French absurdist philosopher of the twentieth century. In his 1942 essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”, he asserts that life, in all its manifestations, can be nothing but a nonsensical and chaotic experience. The world is incomprehensible to us and fundamentally meaningless, and any effort to understand it through logic, science, or morality is futile. As he proclaims, “That universal reason, practical or ethical, that determinism, those categories that explain everything are enough to make a decent man laugh ... A horde of irrationals has sprung up and surrounds [us] until [our] ultimate end.” Our philosophies, our social expectations, and our grand visions are hopeless attempts to avoid, rationalize, or otherwise obfuscate the senselessness and indifference of the universe. Accordingly, absurdity represents the tension between our innate desire for meaning and the unassailable meaninglessness of existence.

Daunting as the absurd may be, however, we cannot dance around its presence for long. No matter how rock-solid our values, no matter how stubborn our determination and vigor for life, we all must eventually question the foundations of our existence. We may become conscious of the absurd at any time - in the middle of an office shift, during a relaxed vacation to Italy, or late at night in the comfort of a dorm - but once the awakening occurs, we can no longer return sincerely to unconsciousness. In particular, Camus presents an anecdote of a wage laborer who unfalteringly follows a monotonous industrial routine, but for whom “... one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness.” Weariness, he claims, calls upon an individual’s consciousness, producing “the gradual return to the chain ... or the definitive awakening.” One can return to nonthinking, but Camus argues that such a life is a mirage, for “nothing is worth anything except through [consciousness].” On the other hand, if one does choose to confront reality in its absurdity, there can only be two outcomes: “suicide or recovery.” Here one makes the decision to live or die. Thus, if we are to lead fulfilling and authentic lives, and indeed to exist at all, we must face the intractable question of “Why?”

At IMSA, which perpetually engages us students in a competitive and high-stress academic environment, Camus’ inquiry is particularly significant. We, like the worker, cannot go through the motions - pursuing the next spotless transcript, the next prestigious internship, and the next national award - without eventually questioning the purpose behind our actions. In our weariness, we will inevitably discover that terrifying truth at the center of it all: we have no purpose whatsoever. Many of our wants are either tied to the welfare of our body, which simply demands that we have a secure, comfortable existence with food and shelter, or societal expectations, which impose standards of behavior and worth that are utterly foreign to us. In response, we set our eyes on material goals, thinking that we will finally feel fulfilled when we edge out the competition and conquer our spoils. But we find that these laurels bring us no joy except for the brief validation of an arbitrary, faceless, and alienating system.

This exercise in vanity erodes us. We can numb ourselves momentarily with work and play and sleep, but during lonely nights spent in introspection, the anguish returns. The greatest anxiety one can know is to stand before the mirror and not recognize the unfamiliar canvas staring back. Camus expresses, "This discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this 'nausea' ... is also the absurd." As we pursue the impersonal and the asinine, grasping blindly for meaning and identity where there can be none, we become inhuman like the universe surrounding us, and in our reflection, we recognize that we are nothing but a collection of atoms destined to die. We have no soul, no love, no dreams. No motive acts behind our lives but the fear of death that wills us not to succumb to despair - to suicide. This realization is the confrontation with absurdity.

We cannot even know if the values and passions dear to us are genuine or dependable. As Camus argues, "No code of ethics and no effort are justifiable *a priori* in the face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition." Even if we want desperately for our values to hold true and to consistently embody our virtues, reality will disappoint us. Our projects may end in failure; we may harm those we wish to help; we may sabotage our moral compasses. Our existential desires strain against absurdity but cannot surge past it. And above all stands the absurd certainty of death, which ensures that "All the pretty speeches about the soul will have their contrary convincingly proved." Because existence is ephemeral, morality and fulfillment are destined to disintegrate before the creeping sands of time. Therefore, we cannot surrender our consciences to the "spirit of nostalgia" that deceptively promises the familiar comforts of human values and hopes. We can only throw ourselves at the absurd and attempt to reconcile it with our need for happiness and achievement.

The answer to "why?" now appears more elusive than ever. Shall we lay ourselves limply upon the ground and wait to die, or shall we continue to struggle in vain for answers that remain maddeningly insoluble? At the crossroads between life and death, neither choice seems sensible. But Camus warns us against resignation and the specter of suicide that looms closely behind. They are tempting choices in the face of insurmountable absurdity, but not honorable or happy ones. Camus maintains that only by accepting feelings of absurdity can we affirm the value of living - value that, in spite of absurdity, always holds true. He writes, "There can be no question of masking the evidence ... It is essential to know whether one can live with [the absurd] or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die of it." We must continually embrace the absurd and trudge forward in defiance of it. "Being able to remain on that dizzying crest is integrity," he declares, "and the rest is subterfuge."

To Camus, no character embodies this existentialist spirit as fully as Sisyphus, the tragic figure from Greek mythology who is condemned by the gods to roll a boulder up a mountain for eternity. Each time he approaches the peak and may at last enjoy fulfillment, the boulder slips and rolls back down. His work is truly meaningless, and his immortal existence is reduced to an

endless, infernal misery that promises no reprise, not even in death. Through his punishment, Sisyphus perpetually encounters the absurd. The gods, like the universe and the march of time, are indifferent to his suffering. No matter what values he ascribes to his life, no matter how much effort he exerts, no matter what hope he clings to, his work is invariably worn down to nothing.

How does Sisyphus overcome the despair that must accompany such a hopeless situation? Critically, he does not seek to escape absurdity; he embraces it lucidly. Camus expresses, "I see that man going down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour is like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is his hour of consciousness." Grasping the futility of his toil, Sisyphus abandons hope and "concludes that all is well." Thus, the joy in life lies not in accomplishment or fulfillment, but rather in "the struggle itself toward the heights." In other words, Camus argues that true happiness can only be achieved by encountering existence - the good, the bad, the impassioned, the mundane - and, in spite of its meaninglessness, welcoming it. We should not count on being remembered, nor should we count on fame or fortune or anything else. We should simply relish in the world as it is, because through the absolute acceptance of all painful realities and outcomes, the universe cannot hurt us even if it is absurd. Camus calls this attitude "revolt", and in it, he finds an indefatigable passion for life. As Sisyphus gnashes his teeth, takes the boulder against his callused shoulder, and lowers his head once again, Camus concludes that "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

Revolt in Action

To discuss the idea of revolt in concrete terms - and to ease myself out of this obnoxiously melodramatic tone - let's discuss how Camusian philosophy applies in our everyday lives. Consider for a moment the college application process. Our college acceptances are the cumulative product of many years of hard work, and not just during high school, but during the entirety of our lives. We millions of students across the world have poured years of hope and ambition into getting into our dream colleges, and as of the day I'm writing this section, our last major decisions have finally come out. In the aftermath of late March, culminating in Ivy Day, we have walked away from the application process with our dreams dashed or with results beyond our most far-fetched fantasies.

Of course, I firstly wish to congratulate each and every one of you for the immense amount of work you've put in, and for everything you've accomplished at this school so far. I'm going to briefly contradict the argument I'm about to put forth and offer this bite of truth: *if you are an amazing person (and you are), you are going to do amazing things in college and beyond.* The work you've put in *will* lead to great achievements, I promise. This pays remembering not only for us seniors but for all you bright-eyed underclassmen as well. Don't sweat it! Everything will turn out just the way it's meant to be.

That being said, I know it's been difficult for everyone who hasn't gotten the results they wanted. There are plenty of horror stories about students who applied to dozens of schools and got rejected by every single one. In response to such unfavorable results, it's easy to feel as if everything that you've done so far has been in vain. So arises an anger at the world: why wasn't my work rewarded? Why has the world evaluated me unfairly? Why, after all this toil, has the boulder thumped and clunked its way back to the bottom of the mountain?

This sounds familiar. When the universe has frustrated our efforts despite our hard work and the overwhelming hope we clutched to before decision day, we are encountering absurdity. Rationally, if you believe in an atheistic and materialist universe where no grand schemes of fate or fortune operate above us, there's no reason why the world ought to reward us. We could be crushed by a falling anvil tomorrow or the sun could explode for no reason at all, and still the universe would be working just as intended. Let us repeat: existence is fundamentally frustrating.

If we take a brief excursion to the /r/ApplyingToCollege and /r/CollegeResults subreddits, we can find many dejected users grappling with this absurdity. Like us, these online students are extraordinarily qualified and outrageously hardworking. They come from all walks of life and all regions of the globe. Do these people deserve to achieve their grandest college dreams? Absolutely. Did all of them achieve those grand visions? Certainly not. As one student lamented,

With a 1570 SAT, 4.0+ weighted GPA at high rigor, seven leadership positions, 750 volunteer hours, a selective HYPISM research internship, major national news coverage, shotgunning 25+ colleges - I couldn't even get into a T50?¹

Another forlorn user expressed,

I'm trying to be grateful that I got into some good schools at least, but it's really hard and I just feel like [crap] rn. I just kinda built up really high expectations for myself subconsciously I think, because for almost my entire life I've always been told how smart/gifted I am. Even in my toxic and competitive school, so many people have told me I'm the smartest person they know (please don't think I'm bragging here, I know it sounds like it but I'm just ranting).²

One particularly introspective student contemplated,

1

https://www.reddit.com/r/collegeresults/comments/tu9t9w/girl_with_a_36_1570_gets_her_dreams_crushed_by_26/

2

https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/tte2a8/is_anyone_else_taking_college_decisions_worse/

imagine how sad and meaningless ur life has to feel if the only reason u wake up in the morning is in hope of receiving a 40 word email containing ur college admission decision that helps u determine ur self worth for a random 15 minutes of fame from ur stressed friends and random relatives.³

Here's a rather appalling glimpse into the psychological consequences of the American college industry - but that's a discussion for another day. Our main focus right now is exploring how we can apply Camusian philosophy to overcome disappointment. Evidently, these users have faced the incredibly demoralizing reality of unfulfilled expectations, and because all of their efforts seemed to be in vain, they see less reason to continue trudging forward. The world, as it stands, appears infuriatingly irrational and inconsiderate. If that's the case, then why do anything at all? And beneath that question lies another: why even live if it's all pointless anyways?

We've once again stumbled across the Camusian dilemma of suicide. Let's go about answering it. Recall that revolt is the acceptance of the universe as absurd, frustrating, and incomprehensible while continuing one's labor in spite of these propositions. This supposedly gives life meaning in the face of overwhelming hopelessness. What we ought to do, then, is to accept that our college decisions are more likely than not going to be unsatisfying. We should also acknowledge that, broadly speaking, even if we did everything perfectly in life, things still might not turn out the way we want them to.

However, what's most important is that we continue doing those things which are important to us even if hope is a mere phantasm. Though our lives are far less tedious, each of us lives like Sisyphus. We're condemned to push this boulder whether we like it or not, our bodies and minds cordoned into schools soon after birth and later into workplaces until we're too frail to labor any further. Unfortunately, that's just the way the world works. But we mustn't give in to absurdity. Even if we were in the most desperate and horrible of situations, we can still take pleasure in the monotonies and even miseries of life. Discover the exquisite crevices and bumps on your stone, feel your legs and arms grow toned and powerful, and ingrain the pristine flakes of snow swirling around the distant peak into your mind. Is this not beautiful? Is this not worth living for?

Now, Camus' absolute pessimism is still somewhat confounding to me. Unabashedly hoping while nonetheless acknowledging the possibility of failure hardly seems irresponsible or cowardly to me, even though he insists that any "nostalgia for unity" between the absurd and human hope is "subterfuge". His preoccupation with the acceptance of truth in its absurdity is a common strand in existentialism but not one I find

3

https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/lunr70/nothing_to_do_except_freak_out_about_college/

compelling. I think it's perfectly fine to want things to turn out well just as I think it's perfectly fine to believe in fate, even if those beliefs aren't necessarily justifiable.

There's something to be said about the immediate experiential value of hope as a feeling: a subjective and unqualifiable state of mind that positively affirms the meaning of life. Better to allow oneself to feel hope and to articulate a vision of good living, which would enable us to pursue those activities that provide us with the most satisfaction, than to wage the unending war with absurdity that Camus favors. Sisyphus' mindset is a strong asset to be sure - one that we ought to exploit when we find ourselves standing on that terrifying precipice - but is it so bad to indulge in positive emotion? If hope makes life seem worth living, then it's served its purpose. It can drive us to do far more good than we otherwise would, and it hardly makes a difference on a personal basis whether or not the reluctance to deal with absurdity is self-deception.

Criticisms aside, Camus' philosophy persists in its poignancy because it sets forth a powerful affirmation of life when all is lost. In a politically and economically catastrophized France after World War II, absurdism revitalized those downtrodden millions whose lives were acutely redefined by German occupation and the wanton bloodshed of war. It provided a reason to rebuild the crumbling ruins of Paris traumatized by the horrors of fascism. And though this year's college application process is far less dramatic than the reconstruction of postwar Europe, we can nonetheless find reassurance in a Camusian perspective. For even if everything fails, merely the act of pouring one's soul into life and relishing in it to the fullest offers enough pleasure to last an eternity. As you roll your boulder, stop wondering whether or not it'll tumble back down. Instead, simply try your best and take pride in your efforts. That alone is enough, and that alone will give you reason to imagine yourself happy.