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# Against Camus: Sisyphus and Political Doomerism

Sebastian Brumfield Mejia

“If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days.” —Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

## The Problem of Doomerism

Doomerism, a radically pessimistic attitude of political fatalism, has become pervasive among younger generations in the West. The reason is twofold. The constant deluge of seemingly absurd political crises (e.g., climate change, global conflict, identity-based oppression, economic precarity, mass shootings, hyperinflation, etc.) drowns the masses in anxiety and despair. Set adrift in vast digital oceans, we struggle to moor ourselves to affirming communities, much less organize political sea changes to wash away the source of the crises. Consequently, doomerism arises from soul-crushing confrontations between our political impotence and despair.

When our only certainty becomes absurdity, all of us (especially doomers) must seek more stable existential ground. To discredit doomerism and renew collective purpose, I will first look to the myth of Sisyphus—as told by existentialist philosopher Albert Camus—whose absurd heroism epitomizes Western cultural understandings and expressions of futility. I will then critique Camus’ interpretation, arguing that his conclusion of Sisyphus’ happiness despite his eternal futility is necessarily false. In this case, Camus’ Sisyphus cannot help us affirm our seemingly impotent yet politically desperate lives. Finally, I will argue that our meaningful differences with Sisyphus present serious implications for our efforts to overcome doomerism.

## Ellipsis

### His Immortal Coil

In Camus' version of the ancient myth, the Greek gods condemned Sisyphus for his hubris in defying Death.<sup>1</sup> As punishment, Sisyphus must roll a heavy boulder up a mountain which inevitably tumbles once he reaches the top. Crucially, he must repeat his futile task for all eternity—time is no escape. Camus claims that Sisyphus' rock is not his true burden. Rather, he argues that “if this myth is tragic, that is because its hero [Sisyphus] is conscious” of his own impotence yet must persist in earnest (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 121). The inherent contradiction between Sisyphus' purposeful intentions and purposeless actions makes his fate *absurd*.<sup>2</sup>

Despite his absurd, eternal punishment, Sisyphus does not remain a tragic hero for Camus. Against fatalistic interpretations, Camus strangely (and famously) concludes that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 123). To explain Sisyphus' unlikely affirmation of life, Camus writes:

Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. . . . If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 121).

Sisyphus' consciousness is a double-edged sword. His fate represents a punishment if he wills the impossible: success or defiance of his task. However, Sisyphus may wrest control over the meaning of his fate from the gods by changing his attitude towards it. To do so, Sisyphus must first take re-

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1 Indeed, Camus writes that “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” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 120). Camus also mentions numerous other tales in which Sisyphus craftily provokes and defies the gods.

2 For Camus, the *absurd* is “the only bond uniting” (*Basic Writings of Existentialism* 462) people and the world which arises from “the disproportion between [one's] intention and the reality [one] will encounter” (*Basic Writings of Existentialism*, 462, 461). Put simply, Camus' concept of absurdity describes the tension between one's need for life-meaning and the world's refusal to provide it. Using Sisyphus' fate as an example, Camus takes absurdity to be the fundamental condition of human existence.

## Ellipsis

sponsibility for his eternal burden—he must make “his rock . . . his thing” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 123).

By claiming his fate, Sisyphus denies the gods’ power over him and “makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 122).<sup>3</sup> Through scorn, Sisyphus may deny his suffering; through joy, he may affirm suffering.<sup>4</sup> Both attitudes ultimately enable his mental transcendence of physical impotence.<sup>5</sup> Camus concludes that Sisyphus must be happy, if only because Sisyphus wills his rock upward every day.

### Freedom and Finitude

Upon publishing his essay, Camus intended for Sisyphus’ affirmation to guide people grappling with the absurd atrocities of WWII, including the Holocaust and nuclear warfare. Much like Sisyphus’ nascent ascent towards the mountaintop, collective hopes for global peace and prosperity post-WWII still appeared within reach.

Now, in our post-industrial, post-internet, post-pandemic, post-ironic, post post-post present moment, those hopes feel hollow. Like Sisyphus on the mountaintop, we watch helplessly as our political progress slides backwards. Though Camus challenges us to affirm life as Sisyphus does, we must question how his eternal fate, chosen attitude, and sense of responsibility bear on ours. I will present a few brief objections before concluding that Sisyphus’ absurd heroism cannot alleviate doomerism.

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3 Here Camus—who was influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche—echoes the spirit of the latter’s infamous declaration that “God is dead” (*The Gay Science* 109).

4 What does it mean to affirm or deny one’s life? If affirming one’s life means willing it exactly as is (not in spite of suffering but partly because of it), then denying one’s life means negating its essential aspects like suffering. Willing the denial of life isn’t without its advantages, however. Resentment and regret can be powerful, sustaining forces to motivate people through suffering. As Nietzsche writes, “one still prefers to *will nothingness*, than *not will*. . . .” (*On the Genealogy of Morality*, 123).

5 In 1944, Jean-Paul Sartre strangely wrote, “Never were we freer than under the German occupation. We had lost all our rights, and first of all our right to speak. They insulted us to our faces. . . . They deported us *en masse*. . . . And because of all this we were free.” Like Sisyphus, Sartre—who spent nine months as a Nazi prisoner of war—found escape from his absurd suffering through scorn. Though the Nazis controlled his body, they could not control his attitude.; For this reason, Sartre considered willing the denial of one’s life as the ultimate source of transcendent freedom.

## Ellipsis

By comparing Sisyphus' fate to ours, Camus fundamentally distorts the human condition. When Sisyphus looks backwards, and "contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him," he sees the will of the gods, not his own. However, our actions are not predetermined as his are. Unlike Sisyphus, we have the potential to develop over time through our constrained (yet willing) choices and actions. Though neither Sisyphus nor we can hope to escape suffering or achieve our purposes permanently, our semi-free human condition enables us to transform our lives and domains in non-trivial ways.

Camus inappropriately characterizes Sisyphus as necessarily happy. How could one measure feelings across eternity? Mortal emotions like happiness demand temporality: they are ephemeral, contingent, and cyclical. Consequently, Sisyphus—whose eternal fate makes him immortal—necessarily lacks the kind of emotional life we possess. Absent contrasting emotions, Sisyphus' happiness loses its characteristic positivity.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, resignation represents the only attitude Sisyphus *could* have towards his fate, and a resigned Sisyphus is no hero, absurd or otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

Even if Sisyphus' emotional life could compare to ours, adopting an attitude of scorn or joy does not resolve doomerism. Mere attitudinal freedom may console an eternal prisoner like Sisyphus. For most people, however, a free mind in a trapped, suffering body causes agony, not relief. Given the immense pressure to make our finite lives meaningful, Camus' solution to imagine Sisyphus (and by extension ourselves) happy appears trite.<sup>8</sup> Worse,

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6 Sigmund Freud conjectures that "When any situation that is desired by the pleasure principle is prolonged, it only produces a feeling of mild contentment. We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things" (*Civilization and its Discontents*, 43). In a footnote, he quotes Goethe, claiming he "warns us that 'nothing is harder to bear than a succession of fair days'" (*Civilization and its Discontents*, 26).

7 Karl Löwith makes this critique in response to Nietzsche's similar concept of *eternal recurrence*. Löwith argues that acceptance of metaphysical fatalism prompts one to cease willing anything contrary to one's fate (*Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, 79-80). Applied to Sisyphus' condition, he can affirm life only by resigning himself to his fate.

8 In presenting his concept of *eternal recurrence* (which heavily influenced Camus' absurdist thinking/existential thinking in *The Myth of Sisyphus*), Nietzsche describes the pressure to take responsibility for the meaning of one's life as "the heaviest weight" (*The Gay Science*, 194).

## Ellipsis

it may represent a form of philosophical quietism which claims we can be happy so long as we stop struggling.

Sisyphus never acts freely, so his claim to responsibility is superfluous and self-deceiving. If some suffering is within our control rather than absurd, then Camus leads us astray by only encouraging responsibility for our attitudes but not our actions. We (and only we) have the power to change our world; we must not abandon hope and responsibility so quickly.

### Overcoming Doomerism

After the long walk down, we leave Sisyphus at the mountain's base. The ultimate lesson of his divine punishment is this: absurd attempts to control fate resign one to further absurdity. Yet many of our worldly political problems lie within our control. Overcoming doomerism requires us to anticipate their causes and build collective power to meaningfully address them.

Without necessitating *strong* ideological commitments (yet with strong evidence), we can justly hold racial capitalism and imperialism responsible for many of our most daunting political crises.<sup>9</sup> Climate change is the effect of corporate resource extraction enabled by states. The same insatiable lust for wealth and power that sustains corporations also drives capitalist imperialist states (like the United States) to instigate global conflict with perceived exploitable or competitor states.<sup>10</sup> Systematic, centuries-long identity-based oppression in the United States (and in various forms elsewhere) persists because it remains the most expedient method to conserve wealth and power for the exclusive, dominant group(s). Periodic precarity and hyperinflation are the inevitable results of instabilities inherent in capitalist economic systems. Finally, ideological extremism—particularly among conservatives and fascists—motivates terroristic mass shootings.

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9 The doomer political concerns I mention are not exhaustive and mostly center on Western perspectives (though also Western causes). Since doomerism is an especially Western (and American) phenomenon, this bias seems appropriate.

10 Look no further than the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, which NATO provoked to extend their sphere of influence. As reported by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, the United States also covertly sabotaged the Russian-owned Nord Stream natural gas pipelines to reduce European dependency on Russian energy and force dependency on American energy and greater support for Ukraine instead.

## Ellipsis

Despite claims to permanence by our prevailing political systems, alternatives are not merely possible, but inevitable. A basic survey of history reveals the fundamental impermanence of political regimes toppled by out-matched revolutionaries, natural catastrophes, and internal mismanagement. Economic systems (e.g., bonded and chattel slavery, feudalism) also fade. Sustainable fusion power—which would solve our global energy crisis and reduce climate-changing emissions—is on the horizon. Renewed Cold War conflicts suggest approaching multipolarity between international blocs. And so on. Where there is change, there is hope.

All of these seemingly absurd political issues are traceable to human causes. In fact, many of them depend on the combined wills of relatively few (yet immensely powerful) people. These issues only seem absurd once we lose sight of our power to address them; we cannot expect to succeed as atomized individuals.<sup>11</sup>

To regain control over our political lives, we must take responsibility for what we can directly affect—ourselves, our neighborhoods, our communities—and gradually expand into an unstoppable combined force.

Expecting perpetual progress or lamenting perpetual failure is absurd; both are temporary and cyclical. For each rock raised, another will tumble down and demand our labor. To dignify our suffering and affirm the totality of our lives, we must endeavor to lift our burdens once more—this time, together.

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11 If the American culture of atomized individualism is not intentionally designed to make the masses feel isolated and impotent against systemic forms of exploitation and oppression, then it at least does so consistently and effectively enough to warrant suspicion.

## Ellipsis

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