

Sisyphus in Hades

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Abstract

The somewhat mythological King Sisyphus of Corinth in Greece was the subject of a unique punishment issued by an angry Zeus. Sisyphus was condemned to roll a giant rock up a mountain in Hades. That rock would then roll all the way back down just before they reached the top, requiring infinite repetitions without any reward. That's the skeleton of this story, but there is much more within his mythological life relevant to modern science and philosophy.

King Sisyphus was said in ancient lore to be a trickster and ruler who angered the Olympian gods, and was thus condemned by Zeus to a unique perpetual torture inside Hades. Here below are the main "divine" actors in his story leading to his suffering with that giant boulder. From this quasi-historical point of origin we can begin our modern speculations:



“Sisyphus was the king of Ephyra (Corinth) in Greek mythology. He was the son of King Aeolus of Thessaly and Enarete. He founded Ephyra, which he ruled over as its first king. His spouse was the nymph Merope, with whom he had four children; Glaucus, Ornytion, Almus, and Thersander.

Violation of Xenia

“Although Sisyphus helped its city become a commercial hub and invested in navigation, he was a sly and deceitful person. In numerous occasions, he violated the Xenia, the concept of hospitality and generosity shown to travelers and guests, by killing them, so he could prove that he was a ruthless king. These violations made him fall in the eyes of Zeus, who was in charge of promoting the Xenia. Another time that Sisyphus infuriated Zeus when he told the river god Asopus where his daughter Aegina was - Zeus had previously kidnapped her. In return, Asopus created a spring to flow on the Acropolis of Corinth.

Gods' Revenge: Sisyphus and Thanatos

“The now furious father of gods decided to punish Sisyphus for good. He asked Thanatos, personification of death, to take him and chain him in the Underworld. When Thanatos went to Sisyphus, the king asked how the chains actually worked; Thanatos agreed, but Sisyphus swiftly managed to chain Thanatos instead. With Death now in chains, no mortal could die and go to the Underworld. After a while, the situation aggravated, and the god of war Ares, unhappy that his wars were no longer interesting as no one died, released Thanatos. He then trapped Sisyphus and gave him to Thanatos too.

Sisyphus and Hades

“Another version of the story has it that Hades was sent instead of Thanatos, and it was him that was tricked and

chained by Sisyphus. As a result, people could no longer make sacrifices, and the sick would no longer find peace as they couldn't die. All gods told Sisyphus they would make his life a living hell if he didn't free Hades, and he reluctantly agreed.

Sisyphus and Merope

“Before surrendering though and dying, Sisyphus told his wife Merope to later throw his lifeless body in the middle of the city square, as a test for his wife's love for him. As a result, his body ended up on the banks of the river Styx. Sisyphus, now in the Underworld, told Persephone, queen of the underworld, what had happened, and told her to release him and send him back to the living, so he could punish his wife. Persephone agreed, and Sisyphus went back to the realm of the living. He found his wife and scolded her, but he then refused to return to Tartarus. In the end, the god Hermes took him and dragged him there.

“Zeus, fed up with Sisyphus' tricks and cunning as well as his hubris - believing he was more cunning than Zeus - punished him to eternally push a boulder uphill. However, as soon as he would reach the top of the hill, the boulder would roll off and Sisyphus had to push it back again.”

Source: <https://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Mortals/Sisyphus/sisyphus.html>

Sisyphus Through the Eyes of Albert Camus

We can either imagine the journey Sisyphus took as an ancient fable unrelated to our modern era – or we can see his journey for what it was: an odd opportunity to mix meaningless absurdity and clever opportunity. Somehow, this mixture summarizes the thrust of human history as we heedlessly approach what could be the self-extinction of our own species, or not.

A prominent 20th-century essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was written by the great French Nobel Laureate for Literature (won in 1957), Albert Camus. Camus lived mostly in Algiers during the Second World War, but he was thinking about Sisyphus in 1940. He is considered with Sartre to be among the greatest post-WWII Existential philosophers.



Camus was also an avowed atheist, which is not surprising considering how the Roman Catholic Church absolutely failed to keep the peace both in WWI and WWII. Nevertheless, Camus' perspective on Sisyphus, the alienated man, is ethically value driven, which is so important for our century's psycho-cultural alienation, even within our own families.

His alternately cold and impassioned view of the Sisyphean question goes beyond the obvious example of a task that can never be completed. Camus was interested, after the rock started to roll back down, in what went on inside Sisyphus' head while he was walking alone down the steep slope to confront his absurd physical fate yet again.

His meditation on Sisyphus, published in 1942, is just eleven pages long, now within a collection of his essays translated into English in 1955 by Justin O'Brien. That meditation is the essence of what Camus had to say on this unique story, as he died a passenger in a car crash in 1960, an appropriately absurd way to exit.

This is Camus' 1955 translated explanation on Sisyphus walking down the mountain:

"The fundamental subject of "The Myth of Sisyphus" is this: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face. The answer, underlying and appearing through the paradoxes which cover it, is this: even if one

does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate. Written fifteen years ago, in 1940, amid the French and European disaster, this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism. In all the books I have written since, I have attempted to pursue this direction. Although “The Myth of Sisyphus” poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert.”

Excerpt From: Albert Camus. *“The Myth Of Sisyphus And Other Essays.”* iBooks.

Sisyphus Through 21st-Century Eyes

Humans claim to be continually trying to better themselves both individually and socially. Nevertheless, there is a common theme linking the treacherous times of Sisyphus to the vast and obscene carnage of the two world wars; and now to the omnicidal end that could come without warning from global thermonuclear war.

I used to think the average level of working intelligence among today’s adults is only at the third-grade level. I hereby withdraw that harsh observation, as it is a big insult to small third graders. The same harsh assessment of being less than we can be applies to all earlier audacious eras. Therefore, it is prudent to ask what if anything can be done now before *Homo sapiens* becomes *Homo extinctus*.

It is appropriate to return to our mythical wannabe god, who fancied himself even smarter than Zeus. Zeus bluntly tried to put an end to this mocking puny human. However, his penalties only proved that among all thinking creatures Sisyphus was superior in some ways even to Zeus as a trickster.

The Options for Sisyphus

Let us carefully put aside our well-deserved skepticism about the mythical life and afterlife of Sisyphus, as presented above. We do this because Sisyphus is in a hard place of Zeus' design, and appears to be stuck inside an eternity of meaningless toil.

Let us evaluate his situation, to see if there is any wiggle room for this bold man to live and create: The classical story ends with Sisyphus starting out on his endless loop of pain, brief relief, and more pain. Grand things are never this tidy.

As Camus envisioned, his free walk downhill offers Sisyphus time to potentially reclaim his mental agility and self. This unique opportunity occurs because if Zeus had first lobotomized the poor miscreant, there could be no victory over a Sisyphus-as-robot. For Zeus' punishment to mean anything, Sisyphus must remain a whole man with a whole brain, even while physically imprisoned inside Hades.

Almost every person on this planet has a set of options and opportunities. We select among the seemingly possible, and then seek to actualize what we can. At the end of our limited days the physical inevitable occurs: We die and that's that; or we go up/down to our permanent afterlife.

The ancient Greeks were right there with other Bronze Age myth makers when it came to tribal gods: hellish realms below, and heavenly realms above, providing death without total death. Does this sound familiar inside most of today's religions?

Sisyphus in Hades suspected his time atop *terra firma* was over after Zeus really condemned him. Nevertheless, a brilliant trickster always looks for loopholes. Amazingly, he had already trapped at least two major gods before Zeus' final rage, so maybe more mischief could be done even while condemned.

For a start, that journey of man and rock to the elusive top might be modified. Sisyphus could have pushed the rock to either side just before it was scheduled to roll back down. That twist would shift the rock's downward trajectory, amounting to a minor additional insult to Zeus. Sisyphus probably would know that Zeus would not respond to such minor adjustments, which would nevertheless be a big deal within the absurdity of his thankless task.

Having done that trick a time or two, Sisyphus could next go bold and push the rock toward the left or right at the very bottom of the mountain's incline. That way he and his rock could reach the previously impossible opposite side. Once on the other side he would learn if the grass is truly greener on the other side of the fence, so to speak. This bottom path is also an optional action without penalty, because he was already penalized, and at least Sisyphus would have something to show Zeus he still had free will, which cleverly repudiates the absurdity of his task.

Camus wrote his essay in the early 1940s, years before the Nazi extermination camps were fully documented. There were many cases where heroic condemned Jews and others made a last gesture of their transcendent worth. Even though the gas chambers or bullets would claim them swiftly, these spiritually excellent people witnessed to their core value as evolved human beings – which is more than we can say for their robotic, racist executioners.

It is time for this essay to end. We all have much to do to help keep alive the beautiful promise of our precious species, and all the millions of other species we have influenced. Sisyphus shows us a way for optimizing even the worst existential scenario. Let us all envision Zeus as Nature, and thereby much is revealed.