

The Absurd Life

By Jina Kim

The myth of Sisyphus, despite its ancient Greek origins, is still well-known to this day. Stories vary, but the key points are similar. Sisyphus possessed a clever and mischievous nature. Some stories say he cheated Death, while some stories say he discovered a scandalous secret of the gods. His numerous successful attempts in trickster behavior angered the gods, which led to Sisyphus' notorious punishment of eternally pushing a boulder up a mountain. Repetition to no avail is a discouraging, hopeless endeavor to say the least. One can only imagine the torture Sisyphus must feel. To Albert Camus, however, Sisyphus represents something different: Sisyphus is, in fact, a hero that has figured out, in his meaningless repetition, true satisfaction. Like Sisyphus, the protagonist in Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder* finds true satisfaction through meaningless repetition. Like Sisyphus, he is an absurd hero.

In his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus", Camus discusses absurdity, the harboring of contradicting notions. Camus examines the absurdity that arises from the contradiction of two truths: a) human beings' fundamentally desire a higher purpose or greater meaning in life and b) the universe has none to give us. For example, he refers to the feelings of absurdity that rise in "weariness" of following routine (Camus 5). This weariness triggers the question of "why", leading us to ponder meaning in banality. The absurd faces us when the two truths confront each other. Camus urges for an acceptance of the absurd by living with the purposelessness, rather than overcoming or avoiding it, a phenomenon he calls "philosophical suicide". He explains the various ways people attempt to overcome the absurd. Belief in a god, belief in an undiscovered meaning in our day-to-day actions, and even a belief in ethics all imply a higher purpose for humans, a more profound reason for our small existence. Unlike many other philosophers, he also rejects rationalism—the role of reason in finding meaning or unity in the universe—believing that the universe is so fundamentally irrational and diverse that one truth could not possibly explain it. Instead, he asks the readers to focus on truths of experience, truths that we know to be true, such as the truth that human knowledge is limited. According to Camus, we must not try to understand truths outside of our experiential knowledge, stating that "this ignorance explains everything and that this darkness is [our] light," (Camus 14). Instead of trying to find meaning—religious, rational, or otherwise—his idea is to simply accept the absurdity in our futility, to acknowledge this contradiction and to live accordingly.

Camus argues that there are three consequences to living an absurd life: revolt, freedom, and passion. Although the opposite may seem true, Camus claims that a life without meaning is worth living. Revolt would be to accept our mortality without the "resignation that ought to accompany it," (Camus 19). Through revolting against what seems to be the obvious assumption about a meaningless life—that death is the better option—, accepting absurdity opens many possibilities for life. With this revolt, one is able to find freedom and passion. Rather than a metaphysical freedom, a liberty to choose a role or a purpose, Camus contends that the only

freedom we can truly know is the freedom we experience. This freedom is indifferent to concerns for the future and requires “a desire to use up everything that is given,” (Camus 21). Values, preferences, preconceived notions all must be fearlessly abandoned, allowing one to live passionately in the present. To satisfy this absurd freedom, Camus encourages for “not the best living, but the most living” (Camus 21), a kind of living that focuses on quantity over quality and that acts as each moment in life moves one to.

In the last section of his essay, Camus elevates Sisyphus to the status of an absurd hero. He imagines Sisyphus’ thoughts as he pushes the boulder at the edge, watches it return to the original point from where he will have to repeat his toil, and then returns himself. Camus identifies this “pause” as an “hour of consciousness” (Camus 23). These moments happen as often as the moments of his suffering and in these moments, Sisyphus is triumphant. As he is descending the mountain, he is contemplating his fate, conscious of it and all that it entails. This awareness, torturous but simultaneously accepting of his circumstances, is what makes him superior. Although Sisyphus is aware of the tragic nature of his fate, Camus clarifies that Sisyphus is joyful. As he poetically states, “crushing truths perish from being acknowledged,” (Camus 24). Sisyphus’ acceptance of the absurdity of his situation takes away the god-like power it holds. He finds true satisfaction in it; “one must imagine Sisyphus happy.” (Camus 24).

Tom McCarthy’s hero initially struggles with the notion of a larger purpose. Upon his acquisition of sudden wealth, he searches for something to do with it. Catherine’s suggestion of using the money to aid a humanitarian cause and Greg’s suggestion of spending the money on himself pique his interest faintly and momentarily, but he does not pursue either route, finding them irrelevant and unsatisfying. His confrontation against absurdity quickly arises and unfolds throughout the novel. The hero’s confrontation against absurdity is characterized by a “tingling,” a “serene and intense” feeling (McCarthy 44). The first time he feels this tingling is when he first hears about the 8 and a half million pounds he has just come into possession of. While trying to get in contact with his lawyer about the large sum of money, he stops in the middle of the road near his home, an area which the police had blocked off and “laid siege on” while looking for someone (McCarthy 9). He is standing in the marksmen’s sightlines and recalls the wind he feels immediately before his life-changing accident. This triggers the tingling. The next tingling he experiences is outside of the Younger and Younger building. In a set of random actions, he opens his palms outwards and starts asking passers-by for change. He does not want or need the spare change; he “just [wants] to be in that particular space, right then, doing that particular action.” (McCarthy 44). The last, most intense tingling in the novel occurs during the bank heist. The hero has tricked his entire staff into committing a real bank robbery instead of a re-enactment. As the situation escalates, one re-enactor is shot and the rest are realizing everything is real, which causes the hero’s tingling to “[bursts] its banks”.

These three instances all display a confrontation with absurdity that the hero does well not to avoid. With the initial tinglings, the hero has been making sense of his new life and new money. He looks for purpose in the sudden change. He considers using the money for

humanitarian aid and he considers spending it all on himself, all while attempting to understand the world around him. His search for a deeper meaning in the events that has happened to him display the first truth of absurdity. His desire to search for meaning is fundamentally human, according to Camus. It is an impulse that is exacerbated by the drastic change he experiences, and the need to understand his place in the universe after such a change or find a reason for his suspiciously meaningless accident brings uneasiness. The first tingling, occurring in the midst of his existential pondering, represents this impulse, shown in the rise of his last memory before the accident. This memory seems to express his frustration in stopping short—like the memory itself—of finding a reason for his near death, and his deeper desire to understand this inexplicable event. Because of these concerns, he struggles with the feeling of inauthenticity, but also is nowhere near learning a deeper truth about his existence. The second tingling seems to represent the beginning of his slow realization on how to deal with absurdity. Asking for spare change, especially given his newfound wealth, serves no purpose whatsoever. He finds contentment in eliminating understanding and simply acting on instinct. The action of begging seems to be the first thing that pops into his mind upon seeing his outstretched hands. Perhaps something about it reminds him of the way people beg for change. By defaulting to action instead of thinking or understanding intention, he confronts the absurd. He knows he does not understand, and in this moment, he takes a step closer in realizing he does not want or need to understand; it is not within his capacity to understand. This realization leads him to turn to repetition—habitual action, rather than intentional action—to feel fulfillment.

The hero's obsession over authenticity could be attributed to his confrontation of absurdity as he endlessly searches for a way to live in satisfaction. His idea of realness or authenticity aligns with Camus' idea of focusing on truths of experience. The hero chases a seamlessness in action—something that just happens, like Robert DeNiro lighting a cigarette in a film or the refrigerator door opening without catching. It is a pure action that excludes thought or doubt. To the hero, the purity of this action represents authenticity, as opposed to an action muddled with overthinking and over-understanding. Camus' value in experience is similar. Camus insists on accepting only what we experience as truths. He argues that knowledge, at least human knowledge, is limited and the only things we can know as truthful is what we individually experience. His view is that there is a purity in truths derived from individual experience—what we do and can conclude with certainty based on these actions—that is authentic because it is not muddled with metaphysical purpose. The emphasis on individual experience is crucial for facing the absurd. Since Camus says humans should face the absurd by abandoning efforts to understand universal truths, experience, with its focus on action, is vital for living meaninglessly. The hero's chase for seamless action, authenticity or truthfulness, and its elimination of purpose serves as the role of experience in facing absurdity.

This leads to the last tingling. His fixation of authenticity leads him to turn to repetition, a routine-like experience. The routine is important because it is the epitome of mindless action or experience. The repetition is used by the hero as a tool to continuously search for satisfaction in his confrontation against absurdity, a way to fixate on the answer he is looking for. The last

tingling happens after attempting various ways of repetition and is marked by an intensity unlike the previous re-enactments. The reason for this is the hero's achievement of authenticity and successful acceptance of absurdity. Camus discusses the consequences of applying the absurd life. The hero's real bank robbery displays these consequences. The first consequence, revolt, is the living of the meaningless life. It is accepting one's mortality without regret, fear, or the desperation to leave a mark, and it is accepting that human life has nothing more to it other than what it seems. The bank robbery scene is when the hero truly accepts this absurdity. In a real bank robbery with life-threatening weapons, he faces his mortality, but does not allow it to dictate his actions. Moreover, the robbery is a compilation of meaningless actions. There is no motive for money, for power, for notoriety, or for a certain higher mission, emphasizing the hero's revolt against expectations of life. In fact, there is no grand reason for the robbery. It is nothing more than what it seems, but the hero seems to enjoy this nothingness. Furthermore, the hero elevates the authenticity of meaninglessness by removing the imitation aspect of re-enactments, leading to the second and third consequence.

Freedom is found in indifference to the future. Passion is found in abandoning all the aspects of our lives that actively plan for the future. Humans have a tendency to think about the future more than the present. We spend our present doing things to build our futures; our present is wholly dedicated to the future. Shaping our lives around the future, according to Camus, all relate to our desire for purpose. In following these paths, we are only avoiding the absurd and will fail in finding true satisfaction. With these requirements, the hero has certainly found freedom. His unhinged and irresponsible use of money fulfills this category. The hero is not afraid to "use up everything that is given" (Camus 21). In his stock investments, he continually refuses his broker's reasonable advice to spread out his investments into multiple sectors. His singular insistence on keeping his investments pooled in only the telecommunications and technology sectors present a lack of concern for the future. Although there is a high risk of him losing his money and thus, a high risk of him not being able to maintain his fortune in the future, he refuses to concern himself with it. He also spends money relentlessly in the increasingly larger scale re-enactments, employing almost a whole corporation with re-enactors, managers, caterers, designers, and more. He does not shy away from giving people raises when he feels they have played an important part in fulfilling his vision, nor does he shy away from giving large bribes. The ridiculous amount of funds that contribute to the bank robbery, from decorating the re-enactment space to paying off pilots for an escape route, represent this passionate freedom. His treatment of money as a seemingly bottomless resource emphasizes that he is not tethered to his future, but rather that he is unwaveringly free in the present. His lack of concern for ethics seems to be an expression of freedom as well. By Camus' argument, ethics and the practice of it imply a higher purpose. To be ethical is to allow a standard of morality to govern actions; it takes away the purity of action in and of itself by adding meaning. Morality implies a deeper purpose because it is putting something, another person or an idea, above the self through kindness or consideration—for the greater good. Furthermore, the idea of right or wrong is unifying. It is not something that can be agreed alone; it is something a group of humans, an entity greater than the

individual and the individual experience, decides together. So, the less ethical an individual is, the more effectively they are practicing the absurd life. Throughout the novel, the hero does not seem to be concerned with ethics. He has his “liver lady”, an old woman, picking up trash bags indefinitely, sometimes even asking her to do it at half speed purely to satisfy his own chase for authenticity. He cuts off his friend Greg for the sole reason that Greg bores him. He has no problems bribing police officers and government officials for trivial matters. Towards the end of the novel, he orchestrates a bank robbery, kills a man, explodes a plane full of his employees, and hijacks a plane. None of these actions, especially the extreme ones, regard the future. He does not worry about how these actions might affect him. Naz also plans an escape route for him after the bank robbery, but the hero does not seem particularly interested in escaping, enough for the readers to believe that not having an escape route would be equally enticing to him as long as he is able to complete the robbery. The hero leaves behind all sense of morality in a way that exudes passion. The more the story progresses, the more bold he is in his rejection of morality, highlighting the passion with which he practices his freedom. The bank robbery with its authentic crime is the pinnacle of his lacking morals and excessive spending, and therefore, a moment of true absurd freedom and passion.

Like Sisyphus, the unnamed protagonist of Tom McCarthy’s novel is an absurd hero. For him, the “hour of consciousness” comes in the plane at the end of the novel. He has requested the pilot to continue flying back and forth and is thinking about the events that have occurred, including the re-enactments, the murders, the plane explosion. In this moment, he registers the magnitude of what he has done, but he also fully embodies the idea that there is nothing deep to understand about life. He casually thinks about the possibility of the universe exploding and the airplane running out of fuel, and then returns to the present. He simultaneously accepts mortality, in the eventual end of either himself or the universe, and futility, in all the events that have led him to this moment. Despite the magnitude of this revelation, he simply returns his thoughts to the present. He has achieved the absurd life. One must imagine the hero happy.

Works Cited

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