

CHAPTER EIGHT

CAMUS, MYTH OF SISYPHUS, SELF-KNOWLEDGE

We hear Socrates' unequivocal preference for death in the *Apology*:

I would rather die having spoken after my manner, than speak in your manner and live...The difficulty, my friends is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness (literally, unbalance); for that runs faster than death. (*Apology* 38e-39b)

We read Camus' first sentence within the *Myth of Sisyphus*, the first chapter, "An Absurd Reasoning" 2,400 years later:

There is only one truly serious philosophical problem: suicide.

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide...Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.

Socrates contended that the reputed wise men of the Athenian society substituted practical knowledge predicated upon external goods for human wisdom, or self-knowledge. These external goods, effected by applied, or practical knowledge provided crafts-people control over craft materials, poets control over metered words and politicians control over laws. However, the Athenian "teachers" taught that rhetorical explanations effected this control and, therefore, substituted such rhetorical knowledge for virtue of the soul.

Self-knowledge is the only knowledge humans have, says Camus, all other knowledge is constructed upon self-knowledge.

Camus reiterates this complaint, twenty-five hundred years later. Twentieth century scientists, the reputed

wise men of contemporary, Western society have substituted the technical knowledge which secures rational "control" over external reality for human wisdom, the self-knowledge, that internal knowledge through which humans may achieve self-control. This technical knowledge provides scientists apparent control over the laws of nature, permits politicians control over nations of people and empowers business men with control over world food, manufacturing and money markets. This contemporary technical knowledge

takes the place of knowledge of the human being's cultural history, self and virtue. Camus sums up this substitution in a succinct statement:

You (scientists) describe it (the world) to me and you teach me to classify it. You enumerate its laws and in my thirst for knowledge I admit that they are true. You take apart its mechanism and my hope increases. At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multi-colored universe can be reduced to the atom and that the atom itself can be reduced to the electron. All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know. Have I the time to become indignant? You have already changed theories. So that science which was to teach me everything ends up in a hypothesis, that lucidity flounders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art. What need had I of so many efforts? (*p. 15*)

American poet, e.e. cummings provides us a similar reflection upon human reason, at once revealer and deceiver:

life is more true than reason will deceive
(more secret or than madness did reveal)
deeper is life than lose: higher than have

- but beauty is more each than living's all

multiplied by infinity sans if
the mightiest meditations of mankind
canceled are by one merely opening leaf
(beyond whose nearness there is no beyond)

or does some littler bird than eyes can learn look up to silence and completely sing? futures are obsolete; pasts are unborn (here less than nothing's more than everything)

death, as men call him, ends what they call men
-but beauty is more now than dying's when
(*i six non lectures, p. 86*)

The knowledge which occidental science promises becomes an illusion as well as a lie.

Cummings described the "it," about which Camus spoke, earlier in his *i six nonlectures*, a series of

Harvard lectures within his work “i am santa claus” where one of the disputants, Death, dressed as Santa Claus says:

In this empty un-understanding world anyone can sell knowledge; everybody wants knowledge, and there’s no price people won’t pay to get it.

Later, another disputant, a woman, weeping says:

Knowledge has taken love out of the world and all the world is empty empty empty: men are not men any more in all the world for a man who cannot love is not a man, and only a woman in love can be a woman; and, from their love alone, joy is born -joy! Knowledge has taken love out of the world and all the world is joyless joyless joyless. Come, death! for I have lost my joy and I have lost my love and I have lost myself.

(Enter Santa Claus, as Death)

You have wanted me. Now take me.

Twenty-five hundred years earlier, we hear Socrates say: “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Camus reintroduces Socrates into our twentieth century world through Sisyphus.

Sisyphus means “most wise” and is a myth, so Camus becomes our counterpart of the Delphic Oracle, just as Socrates was to the sixth century B.C. Athenian. Sisyphus is a symbolic Socrates, but this time he is not engaged in the up-hill struggle to convince the 501 judges of the Athenian court that self-knowledge is better than wealth, honor and reputation, rather, he, as chained is pushing a “shameless stone” up a hill. However, the stone drags Sisyphus back down to the valley floor, after he successfully pushes it to the top—thus, Sisyphus begins the effort all over again, as an eternal punishment for bringing fire from Heaven, presumably the spark of reason, to human beings.

Knowledge takes love out of the world, says e e cummings.
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We find that Greek Sisyphus is traceable to the Hittite Sun-God, Tesup. The “shameless stone” is a symbol for a sun-disk; the hill up which he rolls the stone is the vault of Heaven. Biologically, we experience the sun rise daily only to “fall” nightly; life begins with birth, then “falls” back to the earth at death. Our human lives begin through the “dawn” of reason, only to die through the self-reflective awareness of ignorance as people question us about our knowledge. Camus’ question, therefore, becomes:

Does its (life's) absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide? -- this is what must be clarified, hunted down, and elucidated while brushing aside all the rest. (p. 7)

The hope he speaks of is the control offered by our applied knowledge of the external world by

(Occidental) "Our reason has driven all away. Alone at last, we end up by ruling over a desert".

contemporary science. The suicide he means is the end of human curiosity, our wonder at mystery as found in cultural myth. Contemporary science, as understood by Camus, seeks to replace our questions ("whys") with answers ("whats"). Camus sharpens the necessity to answer this question as he succinctly states the situation within the essay, "Helen's Exile":

Modern philosophy places its values at the end of action. They are not but are becoming, and we shall know them fully only at the completion of history. With values, all limit disappears, and since conceptions differ as to what they will be, since all struggles, without the break of those same values, spread indefinitely, today's Messianisms confront one another and their clamors mingle in the clash of empires. Disproportion is a conflagration according to Heraclitus. The conflagration is spreading; Nietzsche is outdistanced. Europe no longer philosophizes by striking a hammer, but by shooting a cannon. Nature is still there, however; she contrasts her calm skies and her reasons with the madness of men. Until the atom too catches fire and history ends in the triumph of reason and the agony of the species. (pp. 136-37)

Camus lived through the first and second world wars. His father was killed, in a battle skirmish within the Argon forest, nine days after the first world war armistice, that war to end all wars. Camus faced the fact that the occidental human's desire to know, as developed and extolled by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of English, French and German thought, had enshrined scientists as a secular "priesthood" ordained to end hunger, stop war, separate truth from error, guaranteeing human beings control of nature. Foremost among these priests was Bertrand Russell, as evidenced by his *The Problems of Philosophy*. Camus rejected this emphasis upon scientific knowledge as the ultimate perfection of human species through reason. Indeed, he describes the world resulting from such an effort:

We have preferred the power that apes greatness, first Alexander and then the Roman conquerors whom the authors of our textbooks, through some incomparable vulgarity, teach us to admire. We, too, have

conquered, moved boundaries, mastered heaven and earth. Our reason has driven all away. Alone at last, we end up by ruling over a desert...History explains neither the natural universe that existed before it nor the beauty that exists above it. Hence it chose to be ignorant of them. Whereas Plato contained everything - nonsense, reason, and myth - our philosophers contain nothing but nonsense or reason because they have closed their eyes to the rest. The mole is meditating. (*pp. 135-36*)

Camus reduces the question whether or not life is worth living to the question: is reason the best of being human? Is the knowledge which reason produces the best product of human intelligence? We humans look to reason as the hope for control over nature, other men and the conquest of truth. Yet, this very hope results in frustration, says Camus, in two respects: first, truth eludes control by and conquest of reason. The best that reason can achieve is a number of “trues” which even reason must use as approximations or analogies. Camus calls them “myths” we must use so we can understand.

That science that was to teach me everything ends up in a hypothesis, that lucidity flounders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art. What need had I of so many efforts? The soft lines of these hills and the hand of evening on this troubled heart teach me much more. I have returned to my beginning. I realize that if through science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot, for all that, apprehend the world. (*p.15*)

Secondly, this very best of human results in the worst, that is, we become so enamored of reason's reasons that we wind up worshipping reason, ignoring everything else, such as sunsets, the sea and the self for whom reason is an instrument of knowledge and knowledge is a pathway to love. Camus contends that “the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human mind and the unreasonable silence of the world.” (p. 21) Human reason must speak truth, rather than listen to **Truth** speak to us. We would rather hear ourselves than listen to **Truth**. Our very urge within reason for unity results in our reason divorcing us from unity, condemning us to diversity:

The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation...In this particular case and on the plane of the intelligence, I can therefore say that the Absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have meaning), nor in the world, but in their presence together...There can be no absurd outside the human mind. Thus, like everything else, the absurd ends with death. But there can be

no absurd outside this world either. And it is by this elementary criterion that I judge the notion of the absurd to be essential and consider that it can stand as the first of my truths... And carrying this absurd Logic to its conclusion, I must admit that the struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation) and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest). (pp. 22-23)

Human reason both frees and enslaves human beings.

Camus is struck by a simple fact of language analysis: human reason both frees and constrains us.

There exists an obvious fact that seems utterly moral: namely, that a man is always a prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them. One has to pay something. A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it.

Camus, therefore, contends that **the philosophical problem** is suicide, namely, “judging whether life is or is not worth living?” Camus’ reflection upon the absurd gives him “an opportunity to raise the only problem to interest me: is there a logic to the point of death?” (p. 7) Again, some 2,400 years earlier, Plato considered this question in the *Phaedo*, as Socrates’ friend, Cebes tries to persuade Socrates to permit him to bribe his jailers and escape with him before Socrates must take the hemlock that evening:

Camus claims that human reason can not know, notwithstanding human efforts to do so. Thus the “cosmos” knowledge constructs is really “chaos.”

The lovers of wisdom know that when philosophy receives the soul, she is fast

bound in the body, fastened to it. She is unable to contemplate what is, by herself, or except through the bars of her prison home, the body; and she is wallowing in complete ignorance. Philosophy sees that the fearful thing about the imprisonment is that it is caused by lust, and the captive herself is an accomplice to her own captivity. The lovers of wisdom, I repeat, know that philosophy takes the soul in this condition gently encourages her and strives to release her from this captivity, showing her that the perceptions of the eye, the ear and all other senses are deceptive, persuading her to be aloof from the sense perceptions and to use them when she must...to trust only in herself and to the real existence which she of her own self apprehends...(Phaedo 82 e - 83 b)

“The captive herself is an accomplice to her own captivity”. We humans, says Camus, seek to know. We seek unity with Truth through knowledge of nature, ourselves and “God”. Yet, observes Camus and Plato, our very search for unity occasions diversity. Our very desire to know discovers the awareness of ignorance. Human reason cannot penetrate the wall and the our human soul cannot escape “captivity”; yet, the our very effort intensifies our desire. Reason offers the human being the greatest promise to escape and to succeed, but then betrays both because it discovers something that it does not or, cannot know.

Of whom and of what indeed can I say: ‘I know that!’ This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction. For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. (*p. 14*)

What do humans do now?

Why, we pretend, build verbal walls and conceptual worlds. Many of us do and then we seek to live within

Human reason’s very effort to know confronts and then resolves itself into ignorance.

our idea world, but reality has a way of penetrating our appearances. Frustration builds as a result of our efforts to live within a conceptual world, while being confronted with living within the real world. So, thoughts of suicide arise in the human mind. After all, our highest human power is reason; if our finest achievement is knowledge; if our pride is the power this knowledge gives us over the world, other human beings, indeed, ourselves through the discipline it gives our actions and the successes within the world of nature and humans; if its use results in separating us from himself and others; then, if reason and its product, knowledge are worthless because none of them provide us humans the conquest of truth, the possession of love or, indeed, self-knowledge what is there to live for?

Camus announces a simple need:

I want to know whether I can live with what I know and with that alone. I am told again that here the intelligence must sacrifice its pride and the reason bow down. But, if I recognize the limits of the reason, I do not therefore negate it, recognizing its relative powers. I merely want to remain in this middle path where the intelligence can remain clear. If that is its pride, I see no sufficient reason for

giving it up... It is a matter of living in that state of the absurd. I know on what it is founded, this mind and this world straining against each other without being able to embrace each other. I ask for the rule of life of that state, and what I am offered neglects its basis, negates one of the terms of the painful opposition, demands of me a resignation. I ask what is involved in the condition I recognize as mine; I know it implies obscurity and ignorance; and I am assured that this ignorance explains everything and that this darkness is my light. (*pp.* 29-30)

We humans, conjectures
Camus, turn to our bodies.

“I had the habit of living before I had the habit of thinking.”
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Hopefully, we humans can use our **physical is** to achieve have unity with nature, other people and (god?). Hope for this deep seated unity grows in us. Yet, death faces us as inescapable, thus, dashing our hope to achieve unity through physical living.

But, what does life mean in such a universe? Nothing else for the moment but indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given. (*p.* 44)

Two examples, each contraries, face Camus as possible unity through physical seeking: the pleasure seeker, exemplified by Don Juan or the pain dealer, exemplified by the Conquistador. But, reasons Camus, both end up by killing the body, their own, others' and earth's. Humans-as-actor offers Camus the unity-example which we seek but are frustrated in finding:

Through an absurd miracle, it is the body that also brings knowledge...I should never really understand Iago unless I played the part...There, too, the great dramatic work contributes to this unity of tone. This is where the actor contradicts himself: the same and yet so various, so many souls summed up in a single body. Yet, it is the contradictor itself, that individual who wants to achieve everything and live everything, that useless attempt, that ineffectual persistence. What always contradicts itself nevertheless joins in him. He is at that point where body and mind converge, where the mind, tired of its defeats, turns toward its most faithful ally. (*pp.* 60-61)

“I had the habit of living before I had the habit of thinking,” states Camus. The key to Camus' “only serious problem of philosophy,” therefore, is our self-reflection upon being human, reflection upon

ourselves, rather our bodies as actor. (One recalls Shakespeare's succinct summation of human life: "All the world's a stage and man is but a player.")

One recognizes one's course by discovering the paths that stray from it. (p. 83-4) Thus, I ask of absurd creation what I required of thought - revolt, freedom and diversity...To create is likewise to give a shape to one's fate. For all these characters, their work defines them at least as much as it is defined by them. The actor taught us this: there is no frontier between being and appearing. (p. 46)

"The actor taught us this: there is no frontier between being and appearing."

In other words, humans cannot tell when they have passed from the habit of thinking into the habit of living and vice versa. No road, no warning signs exist. The sad fact is that what we frequently think we know, we come to find out we do not know; what we thought was knowledge is merely a false hypothesis, or opinion! Yet, the actor knows.

e e cummings parallels Camus: the world of made is not the world of born.

Camus has found the one model through which we humans can attain that which the

scientific emphasis upon reason could not. We had used our reason as the sole instrument of our happiness, but now we **act**, we humans are more actors than scientists. Yet, accepting this actor model means that the human being must accept the absurd and that which fate has dealt us:

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 an illusion of another world. (p. 87)

A fascinating, similar idea and expression is found in e. e. cummings, poem # 73:

pity this busy monster,manunkind,
not. Progress is a comfortable disease:
your victim (death and life safely beyond)

plays with the bigness of his littleness
 -electrons deify one razorblade
 into a mountainrange;lenses extend
 unwish through curving wherewhen till unwish
 returns on its unself.

A world of made
 is not a world of born-pity poor flesh
 and trees,poor stars and stones,but never this
 fine specimen of hypermagical
 ultraomnipotence. We doctors know
 a hopeless case if-listen:there's a hell
 of a good universe next door;let's go
 Camus continues:

The outcome of this 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 fact, gesture and drama in which are summed up a *difficult wisdom* and an ephemeral passion. (Italics mine; p. 87)

Sisyphus, like Socrates climbed the mountain of knowledge but found only a vision of wisdom – one was found guilty and the other fell back to the bottom; both tasted the limitations of being human.

The following chapter within the *Myth of*

Sisyphus is that of the same title because the actor par excellence is drawn from the Greek world of mythology, namely, Sisyphus, the “most wise,” tied to a stone and condemned to roll that stone up a hill in Hades for eternity because he stole fire from heaven and gave it to men in the form of reason. Thus, the *Myth* reintroduces Socrates into the contemporary world and is the key which unlocks Camus’ solution to his original problem about suicide and to the place of self-knowledge in the solution about us living humanly.

If we interchange human reason for Sisyphus and Tesup—after all, human life rises and falls in terms of the rise and fall of human reason. Reason is our human sun which illuminates the darkness of ignorance,

and we look to reason for warmth and light, as the wise guide for our actions. If we also interchange knowledge attained by reason for the “shameless stone”—after all, knowledge is passionless, thus, shameless, that is, forthright and all-right and knowledge is that light whereby we humans guide our journey through life. If we furthermore interchange our human desire to conquer total knowledge for the hill top—after all human beings seek that first principle, ultimate Truth beyond which no further search is necessary and the possession of which brings that peace and happiness the human continuously seeks, then the *Myth* takes on a new meaning.

The light that was once our knowledge becomes the shadow of our wisdom.

However, if we finally substitute Socrates and his being chained to self-knowledge for Sisyphus and his stone, then the *Myth* becomes self-explanatory. [If we reread the “cave scene” within Plato’s *Republic*, we see a distinct similarity. The man who presumably “slips” his chains by turning around (reflecting), leaves the cave, sees the sun and then returns to tell his former prisoners what he has seen, only to be killed by them, compares to the Greek god Sisyphus within Camus’ *Myth*.]

Let us substitute so we may acquire a deeper and longer understanding. Compare Sisyphus, literally, “the very wise one” with Socrates, the Oracle’s wisest of men. Socrates spoke in favor of human wisdom, a humble or human knowledge, the knowledge of the learner, not the knower, that “knowledge” of the lover, rather than that of the knower. Now, this Socratic wisdom is a **descent** in two senses: first, we come down a step from what we think we know to knowing what we did not know. Secondly, we move from the “outside,” knowledge of other to “inside,” knowledge of self. Therefore, we come back down to earth, into our body and soul, achieving direct contact with ourselves, rather than the indirect contact afforded by knowing other things or by knowing ourselves through concepts or the opinions of other people. This same descent occurred within *The Death of Ivan Ilych* when Ivan slipped down a rung on the ladder, bruised his side and discovered an internal pain which he had been ignoring.

Note that just as Ivan chose to live, so Sisyphus decided to stay on earth, as Graves interprets the *Myth*, because he did not want to return to the immortal realm of the gods once he “had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, arm stones and the sea...” (pp. 88-9).

Camus, as well, decided that he would reject suicide as an alternative to living with the frustration that his rational desire for unity and Truth faced because “I had the habit of living (in the body) before I had the habit of thinking (in the mind)”. Socrates, also, decided to stay in Athens, rather than accept exile, because it was his home. Also, Lao-tzu tells man to be mindful of the female which he identifies with the valley, a place of descent and fruitful- every mountain, after all, has its roots in a valley, just as all knowledge had its beginning in a question. Ivan also accepts his descent into the pain of having been **other** and falls through the sack which had covered his true **being** and finds freedom and life. So, we could describe the Socratic “midwife” effort as an attempt to bring man from the “hill” of his knowledge achievements to the valley floor of self-knowledge and the value of his soul and virtue as a preference to wealth, honor and reputation.

Like Sisyphus, again struggling to push the stone of knowledge back up the hill, so the Socratic human being strives to know again, yet, we become aware of our lack of knowledge even in reflecting upon the knowns that we have achieved. So, our every known slides back down to the awareness of ignorance again. (Another “slide” might be described as the effort all of us must make to apply our “knowns” to ourselves, socially and personally; So we discover that our “knowns” must be relearned again!)

Just as Sisyphus paused, and reflected upon his actions, so we humans recognize that self-examination is our continuous mortal agony. Perhaps we could say that we live as condemned to a life of self-reflection in order to learn who, how and why we are? We can no more stop self-reflection as we can stop death. Indeed, each of our acts of self-reflection are an act of dying because each reflection discovers something about ourselves we did not want to know or have not known. The consciousness that humans have of our process from knowledge to awareness of ignorance affords us both pleasure and pain; namely, what we thought we knew, we find out we did not know. We experience a simultaneous humility and exhilaration.

Socratically, we humans are literally chained to know that which we does not know. Human perfection consists in being aware that we are imperfect. Camus calls this **absurd**, yet, none the less real and he observes:

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than the rock. If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. (p. 89)

The final realization is:
the human appetites, whether
to know the truth, to seek

Humans find that they are
demigods, half brute animal and
half spiritual angel, a mixed bred.

good or to possess beauty, exceed our grasp, or what's a heaven for? We humans are neither animal, or unconscious, or God, Absolute Consciousness. We are humans, conscious of our unconsciousness! Plato's *Myth of Diotima* again makes sense; we are literally demi-gods, half-animal and half-God! We humans are more lovers than knowers, children of Poros, the God of Plenty and of Penia, the Goddess of Need.

Camus' classic comment is: "I had the habit of living, before I had the habit of thinking" so he dismisses suicide as an unrealistic suggestion of human rationality unable to accept human reality. Thus, our body provides one extreme to us, unconscious animal, the mind another extreme, pure consciousness. Camus seeks the middle, the actor, conscious of the unconscious role. Our balance lies between body and mind, namely, living as embodied spirits and a spirited bodies. Our agony or pain is our conscious awareness of being embodied; yet our ecstasy or pleasure is our body's joy of being spirited body! We have but one choice: self-knowledge because such leads to the love of wisdom which provides balance and peace, namely, and literally philosophy. Humans are not knowers of truth, or scientists, nor are we theologians, or knowers of God, we are merely philosophers, lovers of wisdom.