



Sit down, Sisyphus

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I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the  
night sky and laid myself open for the first time to  
the benign indifference of the world.

*The Stranger, Albert Camus*

I am a god  
Even though I'm a man of god  
My whole life in the hands of god  
So y'all better quit playing with god  
Ain't no way I'm giving up. I'm a god

*I am a god, Kanye West*

The setting is in ancient Greece 2560 years ago. The sun is brutally burning down onto a wide barren landscape. It is empty except for a straight pointed up hill which seems to be about hundred meters high. A big boulder and a man almost same in height are on the foot of the hill. The man is naked and his body has the shade of the soil underneath his bare feet. It is not clear if the color is created by the sun or if it is dirt and dust covering his old skin. The man's muscles are tensed and as we look closer we can see the veins lifting up his skin in the shape of little pipes and describing the pattern of a wild river landscape of hot blood onto his wide chest and arms. As he lifts up his hands and places them flat on the dark grey cold surface of the stone boulder his eyes are fixed upon the top of the hill. Slow and almost unnoticeable for the human eye the boulder moves upwards. The man goes by the name of Sisyphus.

The path which brought him to the foot of this hill is the path of a traitor, cheater and liar. Through out his entire life Sisyphus born into monarchy has mastered the craft of manipulation. Even after his death he managed to manifest himself as a problem for the inhabitants of the Mount Olympus and the Hades - the places of the eternal in the Greek mythology. Since the gods were aware of the opportunistic behavior of Sisyphus and its contagious potential they decided to put a punishment upon Sisyphus.

In similar examples of previous wrong doers these punishments have taken on the form of physical harm as in the case of Prometheus. He stole the fire from the Mount Olympus and made it accessible for the common people who so far had to depend on the sun only for light and warmth. Prometheus soon found himself being made immortal by Zeus and chained upon on a rock. An eagle was assigned to pick out a piece of his liver everyday at noon. Since Prometheus was immortal his body would recover over night. Unfortunately being immortal didn't made him immune to physical pain.

Never ending suffering was also the basic theme of Sisyphus punishment. But since his field of crime was located in betrayal and manipulation Sisyphus suffering should be psychological not physical. Zeus gave him the task to roll a boulder up onto the peak of a hill. This assignment was already challenging enough concerning the weight of the stone but Zeus even put a twist on that. Every time Sisyphus would almost reach the top of the hill the boulder would roll away from him back to its starting point. So Sisyphus was forced to walk back and start his endless endeavor all over.

2500 years later the french author Albert Camus wrote a book called "The myth of Sisyphus" in which he elaborates on the ultimate philosophical question in his eyes: "How do humans deal with the absurdity in life?".

The book is structured in four chapters and in the last Camus uses Sisyphus as a role model for a human who understands the absurdity in life and accepts it. "One must imagine Sisyphus to be happy."<sup>1</sup>

It is the spring of 2008 in an high school located in former east germany. The school has a humanistic profile and next to be taught how to read ancient greek and latin, to understand the influences of philosophy in literature and history is an important milestone in the education of every student. The philosophy class room is occupied by students of the senior year. It is only three months until those teenagers will graduate and leave the school behind them. Normally the philosophy class is penetrated by lively discussions and students grinding their sometimes extremes opinions onto each other. But given the circumstances of the upcoming exams everybody seems to be preoccupied in their minds. The teacher uses this time of introversion to make a relapse through philosophic history by using her own reflection as a focal point for the selection.

She starts to talk about the connection of greek and french philosophy and uses Albert Camus book as a reference by quoting exactly the before mentioned sentence: "One must imagine Sisyphus to be happy." A boy who hasn't been very attentive during the lesson so far raises his voice. "Why would he be happy?" The teacher is confused for a moment due to the interruption. She planned to present her monologue for the entire timespan of the lesson. But eventually she starts to explain to the student that for Camus Sisyphus is a human who understands the absurdity of life and is able to accept it. But the confused look on the students face is not clearing up. "Doesn't that just mean he gives up?" The teacher is starting to get noticeably annoyed and a small discussion between her and the students starts. The discourse doesn't go anywhere, since the students are missing the knowledge to ground their irritation about Camus statement with theory but also they are not willing to accept the reasoning of the teacher. As the teacher moves on, the last statement of the boy gets ignored.

"Sisyphus should sit down and enjoy the sun."

### Walk on Sisyphus

With each step the peak of the mountain becomes sharper and its details are presenting itself in front of Sisyphus eyes. The dust and dry earth seem to fade away into a almost unnoticeable gradient of fresh grass and flowers in dark violet color. The wind moves the flowers in the slow rhythm of the sea and brings fresh air into Sisyphus lungs.

But his muscles are sore and the bare hands are still cramped into the uneven surface of the boulder.

The stone starts to move slower with every second Sisyphus endeavor continues. His strength is depleted. But even with the collections of his last reserves the stone stays put now. Almost as if the rock is physically connected to the surface of the mountain it is suppose to move on.

Sisyphus fingers are taking unnatural shapes on the surface of the rock as he tries to prevent what he knows is about to happen. But there is nothing that can stop what is about the happen.

As if the steepness of the mountain increases the boulder slowly starts to move into the opposite direction. Sisyphus collects his last energy but the for a lost cause. The stone rolls back to the foot of the mountain evolving into the size of a pea in the eyes of Sisyphus.

Camus wrote "The myth of Sisyphus" in Paris in the dawn of the second world war. As a former member of the communist party in his native country Algeria Camus naturally stepped into the french resistance against the Nazi regime which had Paris under occupation. He became the editor of the underground newspaper "Combat" and contributed articles as well as he shaped the form of the newspaper towards his believes. Camus humanist approach is deeply grounded in his poor upcoming from an illiterate widow who worked as a housekeeper as well as his studies of philosophies in Algeria. During his time as a student at the university the two main influences in contemporary philosophy were Existentialism and Phenomenology and they would suffice as the holding pillars in the construction of Camus world view. Camus work gets often characterized as part of the existentialist body but he distinguished himself sharply from their ideas.<sup>2</sup>

While it is not smart to reduce the meaning of "The myth of Sisyphus" to Camus autobiographical background those notions will help to understand its metaphors and the theory of Absurdity which was first expressed in this book and got afterwards widely spread and developed by other philosophers, like Sartre and Kirkengard. Camus agreed on the concept that there is no naturally implied meaning to be found in live itself, which is the ground and soil the existentialist believe grows upon. But he didn't think that therefor it is the purpose of the individual to define those meanings themselves. For Camus humanity lives in a constant contradiction in which it tries to define meaning and create emotional and relatable substance but eventually realize that those don't bare any content after all.

"The absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."<sup>3</sup> The world the individual is placed in is indifferent towards its actions, it does not react and nor does it consider. Therefore Camus finds his starting point of "The Myth of Sisyphus" in the concept of suicide. Since we don't matter we don't need to be. For Camus suicide is a logical reaction towards this understanding but he also admits that it is not a very rewarding nor worthwhile answer. He does not want to be seen as an advocate of suicide but wants to understand how we actually can live with the contradiction between the human effort of finding meaning and its actual lack of it in the result of our actions. Camus therefore supports the method of coping as the concept to strive for. The absurdity in our meaningless existence stands as the ultimate truth for Camus and the acknowledgment of this verity serves as the only possible reaction.

Baring this concept in mind for Camus Sisyphus becomes the role model for the absurd human. Sisyphus functions as a metaphor for the pointless efforts of everyday lives in factories and offices. The image of the man working at the assembly line seems to be the perfect resemblance. These men's work only describes an endless repetition of memorized hand movements and is disconnected to the final product like the stone being rolled up a mountain in an absent minded manner but never finding its final place.

This theory of alienation of assembly line workers was first described by Marx and became a basic theme in the development of communism. "The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious." In the last chapter of "The Myth of Sisyphus" Camus does not concentrate too much on the act of rolling up the stone since it creates for him the mere metaphor to the working class of his time. But Camus is interested in the time between the moment of the stone rolling down and Sisyphus conscious decision of walking back until he reaches the foot of the mountain only to repeat the task. Different to the punishment of Prometheus which expressed itself out of the physical pain due to get ripped out his own liver the true tragedy of Sisyphus starts when he is exempt from his physical labour. Sisyphus now begins to understand the absurdity of his faith and accepts it and therefore puts himself above it. Camus suggest that Sisyphus might even finds glee in his misery for as long as Sisyphus is not pursuing happiness he is able to find it. Happiness and the acceptance of the absurdity of life are closely linked in the eyes of Camus. When the human realizes that there is no hope he therefore fulfills the impact of the human tragedy. Tragedy is not a pessimistic perception in Camus eyes. As long as Sisyphus has hope he deceives himself. But through the recognition of his tragic faith he accepts his inabilities and limitations and Sisyphus starts to accept who he is and realizes what he is capable of. Tragedy is only negative in contrast to hope for something more, something better. But the moment you abandon hope you are the tragic hero.

## Sit down Sisyphus

To understand why the student could not accept Camus statement regarding Sisyphus means to understand what has changed in the structure of their environment and how it has infiltrated their perspective. The generation of the students is walking under the name of "The Millennials" and includes a range of children being born between the years of 1985 and 1999. The concentration hereby lays on Western European Citizens, born into the middle class.

The cultural and historical analysis of a generation requires upon an effort and commitment which would overtake the size of this essay and also needs some distance to get a full range of its significants. But three major influences are already clear to see today. In the first place the Millennials are a generation born and raised in a time of crisis and the collapse of political ideologies, secondly they are the legacy and result ideas of the previous generations as "Baby Boomers" and "Generation X" and third they became the first generation which implies internet naturally in their daily life and interact as natives with the digital world.

"One must imagine Sisyphus happy" Camus said.

But the boy answered:

"Sisyphus should sit down and enjoy the sun."

The students of that philosophy classroom started their life in the dawn of the a new rejoined Germany. The Berlin Wall had been opening its gates as they were still pampered by their mothers. But with the start of this united Germany it was also the end of the communist ideology which first collapsed in the DDR but soon would spread over East Europe and describe the end of the Soviet Union as a Super Nation. The idea of Communism had been declared as an unrealistic concept which ended up monitoring their own citizens. Many of those students got front row reports about that from their parents. The United States of America and with it the idea of Capitalism were crowned maybe not as the winner of the cold war, but as its only survivors. But as the Millennials grew up two planes would fly into the World Trade Center which results in a domino effect. This chain of reactions includes the invasion of the Iraq as well as a massive investment in Pro American Peace Propaganda at the same time. As the last stone of the chain is falling the USA are trapped in their own ideologies.<sup>4</sup>

So far the United States have been functioning as a living advert for the capitalistic way of live.<sup>5</sup> But soon the USA would develop from a country with cultural influence in the 90's and the proudest and loudest flagship of the ideal way of life to a symbol of hubris and the target for the hatred against economical imperialism. With rising research about the climate change and its reasoning in the non ecological side of mass production also capitalism and the idea of endless economical growth started to get questioned. Those uprising doubts have found their justification in the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and the start of the next great depression in 2008.

As those students grew up ideologies broke down around them. But contrary to the rebuild of the world trade center those students ideologies would never have been replaced with new concepts. The old ones just had proven their insufficiency. How did that change the behavior of the Millennials? "Our enemies are no longer known to us. They do not exist on a map. They're not nations, they're individuals. And look around you. Who do you fear? Can you see a face, a uniform, a flag? No."<sup>6</sup> When the head of the MI6 has to give a report about the value of the secret service in "James Bond Skyfall" she does not only draw an image of the underworld of crime in that movie but also how our society has changed. The generation of the Millennials does not believe in hierarchies or pyramid systems anymore but sees itself as individuals who do not operate after or for political ideologies. The result was a naturally implied political pragmatism in this generation. Instead of trusting into an ultimate plan or even solution, politics is seen as a shape shifting concept which is to live with but not to live for. The trust and therefor interest goes down visible through declining voter numbers all through the western society. This is a development which happened in Germany once before in the 20's. A period described as Biedermeier. Because of the betrayal of ideologies in the first world war citizens took themselves out of politics and concentrated on themselves, their homes and families. The exclusion from politics resulted in a time which was a cultural prosperity especially in fields as furniture and fashion design as well as film.

These are tendencies also put onto the generation of the Millennials which "The Times" has dedicated an entire issue in 2008 running under the title "Generation Me". The main essay in the magazine describes an egocentric and narcissistic approach of the Millennials based on a personality study from Yale University in 2006.<sup>7</sup> But what is often seen as narcissism and self sufficiency is more a self determination. The Millennials have for once learned from their parents which belonged to the "Baby Boom" generation and secondly took on a trend which already started to develop during "Generation X". Money and financial independency is not a guarantee for a whole rounded life. The "Baby Boom" era started with the end of second world war and was born into ever rising economical prosperity. In that time the financial status became the focus point in their perception of a successful life. But too many of the Millennials grew up with absent parents, got directly influenced by the rising divorce rates and saw the health decline already with the age of 50 of their Mothers and Fathers. Even though not everyone must have experienced a burn-out or an early stroke in their families it still received a powerful voice in the ongoing debate of the western social development. As the "Engagement Index" of Gallup shows: every fourth person in Germany terminated their job internally already and 61% are just doing their work by the rules.<sup>8</sup> As a result of the "Baby Boom" way of living a shift of values started to occur in the ideas of the Millennials. Rather than to strive for financial independency the Millennials are looking for self realization on every layer of life. As Kerstin Bund puts it in her essay "We are young we need the happiness" from 2014: "We don't slave ourselves

to jobs, but as long as we are convinced of an issue [...] we are determined. We are looking for a sense, self realization and demand time for a our families and friends."<sup>9</sup> This demand for self realization and free time is what in other studies and essays is referred to as narcissism and selfish tendencies of the generation of the Millennials. But it is also grounded in the Millennials believes that only a person who drives for a balance between their work and social nature is capable of living up to their full potential in a working environment as well as on a personal level. Work and personal life are seen as equal components of being and often are not separated anymore since the uprise of technology and the implication of internet in daily life have also influenced modern work atmospheres. This is detailed described in the book "Nine Shift" by William A. Draves and Julie Coates which concentrates on the influences of the internet on working places and education.<sup>10</sup> Next to the the network structure taking over the usual pyramid build up of companies, Draves and Coates concentrate on the upcoming necessity of collaboration and the new social infrastructures which are evolving due to social media and the quicker ways of communication through the internet. "The Millennials want to take over responsibility but don't have the drive for a leadership role. Their interest lays in the topic but not in the power of controlling it."<sup>11</sup>

## Sisyphus in between positions

The fast pace of communication which the internet and with it the raising implication of transparency provides results in a difficulty of establishing hierarchies since power relations are shifting constantly. Financial success and knowledge are not a guarantee for leadership roles but more and more are self representation and social skills are required. This generation describes a conglomerate of individuals who understand that it is in their own selfish interest to work together. And they embrace it more than any generation before.

This shapes the Millennial to a fast moving and quickly adjusting generation who believes system is not directed outwards anymore to general idea systems but more inwards to assure their own whole rounded existence.

As the boulder reaches the foot of the mountain Sisyphus arms are still raised in the air as if he hadn't realized that his quest had failed yet again. But slowly the tension is loosing in his fingers. With even lower pace Sisyphus arms are descending into a resting position. As he stands there his eyes are still fixed upon the top of the mountain which seems so close now. In this moment Sisyphus a man so full of strength and determination seems to be made out of stone by himself. With the speed of the moon circling around the earth Sisyphus turns his back towards the violet flowers. Half way in the movement Sisyphus has to his right the fresh air cruising up his neck and to left the mountain going down in endless path all resulting back to a giant bolder same in height as him. This moment seems to stretch into eternity. But then one step at the time Sisyphus walks down. And the peak of the mountain turns slowly into a blur of blue, green and violet.

As I researched for the essay I wanted to find out why my classmates and I disagreed so profoundly with Camus statement. But as I was reading about Camus theory of absurdity I found myself agreeing with most of his concepts. I applauded him for reasoning that there was no meaning to be found in our actions towards a bigger purpose. My head nodded towards Camus when he elaborated on the idea that there are moments in life in which the full impact of the absurdity hits us. The doubt started to come up in my head that our opportunistic behavior towards Camus was a mere outburst of pubertal energy towards our teacher rather than a deep and profound split of perceptions. But as I read the story of Sisyphus over and over again I still could not find my peace with that one statement. "One must imagine Sisyphus to be happy."

Camus formulation implies that we have no choice in believing differently. If Sisyphus is not happy in his own awareness by accepting his faith then absurd awareness does not bring happiness. But that implies that the this declination of hope and the confrontation with your own faith would just serve as another solution for happiness again. Therefore it is not a straight line from A to B on which the acceptance of absurdity results into happiness. But we are looking at a triangle in which the acceptance leads to happiness which misleads us to hope again. We are running from all the time on the outside of the triangle and are never able to see all the three edges at the same time. It is the philosophical equivalent to a dog chasing its own tail. With his final sentence Camus marks happiness as the premise of his book. To believe his statement about the connection of happiness and the acceptance of

absurdity requires of us that we have trust in the concept of genuine happiness in the first place. Camus made clear that hoping for a better path and a different life is misleading us in accepting the reality in front of us. But in the eyes of a Millennial his direction towards genuine happiness also just present again leap out of reality. After all the concept of Camus to accept absurdity functions again as another concept for a final solution towards "The way of living". As mentioned before it is never advice able to reduce the work of author only onto his biography. But the historical context is delivering some evidence which help us to understand his theory. Living in Paris under an omnipresent Nazi regime, surrounded by political activist Camus must have felt full of force but without any power to move. Being aware as Sisyphus was on his way from the top of the mountain to its beginning Camus also was unable to make a significant change towards his situation. At the time being conscious did not equal being able to make a change on your situation. Camus had the believe in the ideologies and that there was a certain way to live for but the world was indifferent towards his believes.

But Millennials don't buy into the idea of an ideology anymore. Millennials don't move in linear ways towards one direction. They make hooks and curves. Go small steps into one way only to follow up a point into a totally contrary direction. The Millennials lost their idealism but that enabled them to free themselves from linear movement and obtain their network structure.

This network structure in combination with their pragmatism makes it difficult for the Millennials to direct themselves as they are not facing as a collective towards one direction. The Millennials describe a fast moving network structure which is capable of quickly adjusting on it's surrounding. But there also lays a great risk. Since their structure creates itself out of a lot of individuals who move in random patterns contained by the frame work of its surrounding. They see, they analyze and they adjust. But this only works as long as they don't need to build force. As long as they don't need to create shield.

Soon new formed ideologies will emerge from the ground. Ideas sprung between collected minds which have a new way of living - another grand solution.

But even if this new ideology will cause harm towards the millennials their only way of reacting is adjusting. This generation moves fast forward towards whatever.

So when Camus says:

One must imagine Sisyphus to be happy.

The Millennials has to say:

For Sisyphus to live he has to become the stone.

We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven,  
that which we are, we are;  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

*Alfred Tennyson, Ulysses*

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