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Perfectionism and Non-Perfectionism in Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*

1

Non-perfectionist theories of the meaning of life take lives to be meaningful even if they do not reach any form of perfection or show any outstanding achievement. For example, Kurt Baier argues that considering only lives that reach perfection to be meaningful amounts to adopting overly high standards, and “is as illegitimate as if I were to refuse to call anything tall unless it is infinitely tall, or anything beautiful unless it is perfectly flawless [...]. We do not fail every candidate who is not an Einstein” (Baier 2000, p. 127). In his view, “judging human lives by the standards of perfection [...] is unjustified” (Baier 2000, p. 129). Robert Audi points out that doing great things, being authentic in some special way, or pleasing God may be “necessary for a *kind* of meaningfulness or perhaps for a certain high degree of meaningfulness of the general kind I have in mind; but they are not necessary for every instance of that kind” (Audi 2005, p. 335; Audi’s emphasis). David Schmidtz (2001, p. 173) writes that “now the point is no longer to prove myself and make my place in the world but to understand the place I’ve made, respect the meanings it can have, and just live.” And Peter Singer (1993, p. 334) claims that ordinary activities, such as stamp collecting, can also endow life with meaning. Non-perfectionists do not deny that people who have reached some perfection or attained some exceptional achievements (such as Gandhi, Meister Eckhart, Einstein or Mozart) may have more meaningful lives than many “ordinary” people do; but they deny that *only* such luminaries can have meaningful lives. Perfectionists as regards the meaning of life, on the other hand, consider lives that do not show some outstanding achievements or have not reached some form of perfection not to be meaningful.¹ Richard Taylor, for example, claims that a meaningful life must exhibit creative power, which he understands as “no common possession” since

¹ Thus, “perfectionists” and “perfectionism” are employed in this paper differently from the way in which they are used by Thomas Hurka (1993). For Hurka, a perfectionist moral theory is one that starts out from a notion of the good (or perfect) life, and stipulates that people should do the most they can to reach that ideal. Perfectionists in Hurka’s sense need not be perfectionists in the sense discussed here since they need not expect of themselves to ever achieve the perfectly good life and thus need not chastise themselves for not having done so.

it must bring forth something no one else ever has (Taylor 1987, p. 682).² Robert Nozick points out that “a significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world – it leaves traces” (Nozick 1981, p. 582; see also pp. 594–95). And William Craig argues that “if there is no God, [...] life itself is absurd. It means that the life we have is without *ultimate* significance, value or purpose” (Craig 2000, pp. 41–42; emphasis added). Craig assumes that anything without ultimate significance, value or purpose is meaningless (“absurd” in Craig’s terms). A non-perfectionist as regards the meaning of life would reply that having no ultimate significance or value and having no significance or value at all are two different things. One’s life may be significant even when it is not ultimately so. Like perfectionists, non-perfectionists, too, think that some lives are not meaningful; but while perfectionists posit a very high threshold of meaningfulness, demanding towering achievement or perfection, non-perfectionists accept a much lower threshold that allows many more people to be seen as having meaningful lives. Many non-perfectionists are unclear, however, on where the demarcation line between meaningful and meaningless lives should be drawn, and how such decisions can be justified. As Thaddeus Metz points out, the view that meaning has to do with perfection “is attractive at least for being simple, and rival views have yet to specify in a principled and thoroughly defended way where to draw the line at less than perfection. What less than ideal amount of value is sufficient for a life to count as ‘meaningful?’” (Metz 2008, par. 30).³

I have up to now discussed only contemporary, analytic theories of the meaning of life. But it is interesting to apply the perfectionism/non-perfectionism distinction also to traditional, non-analytic theories. Many existentialist theories, such as those of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Sartre, seem to be perfectionist. But how should we consider Camus? At first sight, Camus seems to be a non-perfectionist since many of his works celebrate the simple pleasures of ordinary people. After a closer look, however, I think that Camus’s attitude emerges as complex, since his works include both non-perfectionist and perfectionist elements. Here I will focus only on his *Myth of Sisyphus*, considering to what extent it should be seen as advocating a perfectionist view of the meaning of life.

² Taylor seems to contradict himself on this point, claiming later that he is not praising “something rare, the possession of only a few,” but rather a “capacity [...] sometimes found in quite mundane things” (Taylor 1987, p. 683). It is not clear to me how the tension between these assertions can be resolved.

³ Metz presents this as a consideration that should be taken into account, but does not commit himself to supporting it.

The non-perfectionist elements in *The Myth of Sisyphus* are easy to note. In his 1955 preface to the book Camus mentions that it “attempts to resolve the problem of suicide [...] without the aid of *eternal* values” (MS, v; emphasis added). Likewise, he takes what he calls “conquerors,” who have found a correct way of coping with the absurd, to do so through awareness of their *limitations* and strong friendship, emphasizing that both are transitory (MS, 88–89). And the main thesis of the book sounds highly non-perfectionist: there are no absolute values we can rely on, and hence our life is absurd, but this does not mean that we cannot live worthy lives. Camus is famous for the concluding sentence in his essay, that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy,” although Sisyphus’s condition is far from being perfect (MS, 123). Camus may even be interpreted as advocating radical non-perfectionism, since he claims that even Sisyphus’s condition – which most non-perfectionists would consider to be well below the threshold of meaningfulness, if not a paradigm of meaninglessness – could be seen as good and worthwhile.

I will argue here, however, that other aspects of the essay present a different picture. *The Myth* shows an uneasy tension between perfectionism and non-perfectionism and, all in all, presents a more perfectionist than non-perfectionist message.

2

Camus famously starts out his essay by discussing suicide, which he takes to be the only “truly serious philosophical problem” (MS, 3). He relates suicide to the phenomenon of the absurd and mentions, among other expressions of the absurd, alienation (MS, 12–15), aging, which he calls “the revolt of the flesh” and describes as uncontrollable and advancing notwithstanding our will (MS, 13–14), and death (MS, 15–16, 18). Yet another issue on which Camus elaborates is the failure of our mental capacities to achieve absolutely clear and unified knowledge. Our desire to understand is an urge to find eternal relations as well as one principle that will unify and explain everything (MS, 17). However, there is a tragedy here: eternal relations cannot be discovered, and thus the appetite for the absolute cannot be satisfied; we have to remain in the absurd condition. Camus emphasizes that the world itself is not absurd; the absurd has to do, rather, with the difference between the high demands of the mind, on the one hand, and what the mind can find in the world, on the other (MS, 21). But although the absurd relies to a large degree on our own mind, Camus believes that it has an inescapable character, since “the mind’s *deepest* desire [...] is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity”

and the urge for the absolute is “the *essential* impulse of the human drama” (MS, 17; emphases added).

Why, then, is failing to notice the absurd so common? First, some of our mental capacities lead us astray. Camus distinguishes between two types of mental capacities. The first type includes the learned and classical dialectic (*la dialectique savante et classique*; MS, 4; MdS, 100), blind reason (*la raison aveugle*; MS, 20; MdS, 112; see also MS, 51; MdS, 136), and idea (*l'idée*; MS, 116; MdS, 191), while the second type includes intelligence (*l'intelligence*; MS, 20, 65; MdS, 112, 146), thought (*la pensée*; MS, 116; MdS, 191), understanding (*la compréhension*; MS, 65; MdS, 146), common sense (*le bon sens*; MS, 4; MdS, 100), and sympathy (*la sympathie*; MS, 4; MdS, 100).⁴ While mental capacities of the second type allow us to discern the absurd, those of the first type, which tend to universalize and explain everything, conceal it (MS, 20–21). Second, the general culture and social order are obstructive to acknowledging the absurd: “everything is ordered in such a way as to bring into being that poisoned peace produced by thoughtlessness, lack of heart, or fatal renunciations” (MS, 20; see also MS, 58). Thus, both intellectual and social factors lead us to overlook the absurd.

Those who do manage to acknowledge the absurd, however, have only completed the preliminary stage on the path toward the attitude to the human condition that Camus advocates: “the return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep represent *the first steps* of absurd freedom” (MS, 59; emphasis added). Once the absurd has been acknowledged, there are correct and incorrect ways of coping with it. One wrong way is to acknowledge the absurd and its discontents yet find strength and happiness in maintaining hope (MS, 31, 58). Another is just to accept the absurd and its pains, and live with those difficulties in despair (MS, 31). Yet another wrong reaction is to pretend that the absurd is not there either by succumbing to “the force that leads [...] back toward the common path of illusion” (MS, 102), or by adopting what Camus calls “philosophical suicide.” According to Camus, this latter way has been adopted by philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Shestov, and Husserl, who admit that it is impossible to find anything as absolute as the mind demands, but then – against all evidence – problematically assert that the mind can have its requirements satisfied (MS, 32–50). Finally, one may commit suicide, the theme with which the book begins.

⁴ Translation modified. O'Brien problematically translates both *compréhension* and *sympathie* as “understanding.” Note, however, that “thought” (*pensée*) has also a wrong, smug mode that conceals the absurd (MS, 116); and while “reason” (*raison*) has negative connotations for Camus, “reasoning” (*raisonnement*) has positive ones (see, e.g., MS, 64, 66, 95).

All these are wrong ways of engaging with the absurd. Although the terms “authenticity” and “inauthenticity” never appear in *The Myth*, David Sprintzen (1988, p. 45) has argued that indulging in hope should be seen as a condition of inauthenticity for Camus. I agree, but suggest that not only hope, but also all the other incorrect ways of reacting to the absurd (such as living in despair, suicide, “philosophical suicide”), as well as failing to even notice the absurd in the first place, may be seen as types of an inauthentic existence in *The Myth*. Authenticity, for Camus, is found in acknowledging the absurd and the bitter pain it produces yet proudly *defying* this situation. This revolt differs in kind from almost all political revolts since these usually arise in the expectation that suffering will end, while the absurd hero entertains no such hopes.⁵ This rebellion does not aim to terminate what it revolts against but only to continuously defy it (MS, 54).

Camus discusses, then, three basic conditions. The first is that in which the absurd is not acknowledged (henceforth, *nonabsurd*).⁶ The second is that in which the absurd is acknowledged, but not reacted to correctly (henceforth, *absurd*¹). The third is that in which one acknowledges the absurd and defies it in the way that Camus advocates (henceforth, *absurd*²). Camus sees the nonabsurd and absurd¹ as the undesirable human conditions and absurd² as the desirable one. He portrays it in highly positive terms, and considers it to make life good and valuable:

Revolt gives life its value (*donne son prix à la vie*). Spread out over the whole length of an existence, it restores its greatness to that existence. To a man devoid of blinders, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with the reality that transcends it. The sight of human pride is unequalled. (MS, 55; MdS, 139; translation slightly modified).

Camus describes absurd² as a superb human condition. He claims that “there is no higher destiny” than being in it (MS, 123). Although painful, it is also joyous (MS, 70, 93, 121, 123); harmonious (MS, 92); intense and passionate (MS, 52, 64, 95, 102, 117, 118); lucid (MS, 21, 51, 68, 117); free from barriers, conventions, and images (MS, 58, 59, 66); and allows one to experience the world in a powerful, abundant way which Camus calls “excess” (MS, 82, 117). Furthermore, when in the state of absurd² one does not experience the future; instead, “the present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man” (MS, 63). Interestingly, many of the positive qualities of absurd² are the direct opposites of the negative qualities of the nonabsurd condition. For example, in the

⁵ Rebellling against the absurd, then, could itself be seen as an absurd behavior on a meta-level. But Camus does not follow this direction.

⁶ I prefer “nonabsurd” to “preabsurd” since one can fall back “toward the common path of illusion” (MS, 102), that is, to the nonabsurd condition, even after the absurd has been acknowledged.

nonabsurd condition we are alienated from the world, “perceiving that the world is ‘dense,’ sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us” (MS, 14), while in absurd² we are in harmony with the universe (MS, 92). Aging, in the nonabsurd condition, relates to our tendency to “live in the future: ‘tomorrow,’ ‘later on,’ ‘when you have made your way’” (MS, 13), while in absurd² there is no future, but only a succession of “presents” (MS, 63). In the nonabsurd condition we sense limits since we are aware that our urge for the absolute cannot be fulfilled (MS, 17, 51, 66). However, in absurd² there are no barriers (MS, 58) and “a world remains of which man is the sole master” (MS, 117). While in the nonabsurd condition one lacks familiarity with the world and, thus, an adequate conception of one’s environment (MS, 17–20), absurd² is typified by lucidity (MS, 21), and Camus says of Sisyphus, even if metaphorically, that “a face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself” (MS, 121). Camus may be alluding to such contrasting pairs of characteristics when he writes “By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death” (MS, 64).

Camus’s characterization of absurd² as a superb human condition is an important part of *The Myth*. Camus describes in the essay the wrong ways of living, and then presents his own version of the good life, characterizes it as superb, and recommends that we adopt it. *The Myth* is first and foremost an essay about the good life. Thomas Nagel has argued that Camus merely shows us how “we can salvage our dignity [...] by shaking a fist at a world which is deaf to our pleas, and continuing to live in spite of it” (Nagel 1979, p. 22). But *The Myth of Sisyphus* is not just a piece of advice on how to endure in a hostile world or an explanation of why one should persist, despite everything, rather than commit suicide. Camus describes in this essay what he takes to be a very desirable state of being; he portrays his notion of the good life, just as Aristotle does, for example, when he proposes the notion of the contemplative life, or Spinoza when he discusses the third degree of knowledge. Because *The Myth* starts out with the problem of suicide, that is, the question of why one should not commit suicide, it may at first seem that it aims only to explain why we should persist in a meaningless world. But the full reply to the question, Why not commit suicide? is that committing suicide would be wrong since human existence, although painful, can be very good, if only one follows the ideal that Camus posits.⁷

⁷ Nagel is also wrong in describing Camus as coping with the absurd only with defiance and scorn (1979, p. 22); this description misses the positive elements in absurd². Nagel characterizes the defiance and scorn as “slightly self-pitying” (1979, p. 22). He does not, however, explain why he believes them to be so.

Note, however, that in Camus's own terminology, absurd² makes life *worth living* but not *meaningful*. Camus distinguishes between the two notions, and aims only for the latter. Thus, he points out

Hitherto [...] people have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth, there is no necessary common measure between these two judgments [...]. One kills oneself because life is not worth living [...]. But does that insult to existence, that flat denial in which it is plunged come from the fact that it has no meaning? (MS, 8–9)

Camus even suggests that it is *better* to have a life that is not meaningful (as he uses this term), but is worth living: “At this point the problem is reversed. It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning” (MS, 53; see also MS, 58, 102, 117).⁸ But although according to Camus's own terminology absurd² should not be called meaningful, in the terminology of most laypersons and writers on the meaning of life it would be described as meaningful, since it inserts great value into life and makes it worth living.

3

However, reaching absurd² is not easy. First, it requires a decision (MS, 60). But beyond the initial decision, experiencing absurd² demands hard, ongoing work. It “calls for a daily effort, self-mastery, a precise estimate of the limits of truth, measure, and strength. It constitutes asceticism” (MS, 115; translation slightly modified). Camus also mentions sacrifice (MS, 21), “unfailing alertness” (MS, 113), discipline and “doggedness” (MS, 117). Moreover, being in the absurd² condition is difficult because one is required to invest all that effort *without* posing the condition as an end. Hence Camus does not wish to refer to it as an “ideal”:

The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man. But the word “ideal” rings false in this connection. It is not even his voca-

⁸ Indeed, defying the absurd could not be seen as meaningful by Camus because, in this condition, one does not deny or obliterate the absurd but rather admits it while rebelling against it, and the absurd is the opposite of meaningfulness. Nevertheless, in two places Camus contradicts himself and presents absurd² as making life meaningful. Thus, he says of absurd² that “man's fate henceforth assumes its meaning” (MS, 21). Likewise, he has the conqueror, one of his illustrations of the absurd hero, say “this world has a higher meaning that transcends its worries, or nothing is true but those worries” (MS, 86; see also 88).

tion, but merely the third consequence of his reasoning. Having started from an anguished awareness of the inhuman, the meditation on the absurd returns at the end of its itinerary to the very heart of the passionate flames of human revolt. (MS, 63–64)

Aiming to be in absurd² would be self-defeating since one would then not be living a life of no appeal or hope. Likewise, one would then not be engaged in an act of proud revolt against a painful condition but, rather, in an instrumental, constructive, nonabsurd activity. One should, therefore, invest effort in being in the condition that Camus envisages, and yet at the same time in some sense not try to achieve it.

Moreover, even if attained, absurd² is easy to fall from; Camus presents it as an unstable condition. There is a force that “leads [people] [...] back toward the common path of illusion” (MS, 102). Camus is unclear about the mechanisms that undermine absurd², but mentions the impossibility of eluding hope forever (MS, 113), the debilitating power of one’s human environment (MS, 58), the destructive effect of accustomed routine on the spiritedness of one’s activity, and the tendency to treat means as if they were the ends (MS, 103).

Thus, acquiring absurd² is not easy. One may well miss the absurd in the first place. Then, even once the absurd is noted it is difficult to attain absurd². And finally, even if absurd² is attained it is easy to lose it. Perhaps this is why Camus refers to this blissful condition as “so obvious yet so hard to win” (MS, 52), or writes that “obeying the flame is both the easiest and hardest thing to do” (MS, 64–65).

4

The interpretation of the general argument of *The Myth* proposed here clearly differs from that of Stephen Eric Bronner, who claims that “Camus presupposes precisely what he wishes to defend in his meditation on suicide. His critique rests on circular reasoning, a tautology” (Bronner 1999, p. 43). But if what has been suggested above is correct, Camus’s “meditation” is primarily on the good life rather than on suicide, and is not at all circular or tautological: he presents a question as regards the value of life, then presents the reasons why, perhaps, there is a place for suicide (life is meaningless), and then explains why suicide is wrong after all (if one endorses absurd², life becomes splendid – even if still painful – and thus worth living). Camus does not simply assume that life is worth living and then just repeat or explicate this assumption, but rather presents new information, which may be accepted or rejected, about an option which, if followed, is supposed to improve life considerably and, thus, make living desirable.

Likewise, the understanding of *The Myth* proposed here differs from that of Robert C. Solomon, who claims that in this essay “the logic often gets lost and confused” and the arguments “are ultimately incoherent” (Solomon 2006, pp. 39, 58). As the discussion above shows, however, although Camus’s language is poetic, emotional, and sometimes imprecise, and although he occasionally contradicts himself (on relatively minor points), his general argument is coherent, clear and reasonable. One may, of course, disagree with Camus or criticize him (as I shall do shortly). But his argument is not confused or incoherent.

The interpretation presented here also takes Camus to be making *universal* claims about human existence. However, as David Sprintzen points out, *The Myth* also includes expressions that support a subjectivist reading. Camus mentions, for example, “the relative character of this essay” (MS, 5, n. 2), and although he criticizes mysticism he writes that mystical devices “are just as legitimate as any attitude of the mind” (MS, 33). Likewise, Camus claims that the term “philosophical suicide” “does not imply a judgment. It is a convenient way of indicating the movement by which a thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself” (MS, 41), and that while Western thought aims to accept the world, Eastern thought chooses “*against* the world. That is just as legitimate and gives this essay its perspectives and its limits” (MS, 64, n. 6. Camus’s emphasis). On the basis of such claims, Sprintzen suggests that Camus “is seeking to diagnose a malady [...] from which he and many of his contemporaries suffer. [...] He is not claiming that those who do not suffer from that malady are wrong” (Sprintzen 1988, p. 46).

However, this seems to me to be an overly subjectivist interpretation of *The Myth*. Expressions such as “the mind’s deepest desire,” “the essential impulse of the human drama,” “I judge the notion of the absurd to be essential” (MS, 31; see also MS, 22), or “a man is always a prey to his truths” (MS, 31) suggest that Camus takes himself to be making *universal* claims about human existence. The number of universalist and essentialist expressions in the essay exceeds by far the number of subjectivist ones, and the latter can be interpreted as asserted by Camus in generous disdain, as a scientist would concede that those who do not subscribe to valid argumentation and scientific methodology need not accept her conclusions and may find worth in astrology and crystals. Thus, although Camus accepts that there are other ways of seeing what he talks about, they seem to him to be “enough to make a decent man laugh” (MS, 21) and typical of those who suffer from “everyday sleep” (MS, 59). Admittedly, Eastern thought is an exception for Camus: he treats it respectfully rather than disdainfully, and points out that while Western thought tends to accept the world Eastern thought tends to negate it. However, Camus writes that this difference is inconsequential since “when the [Eastern] negation of the world is pursued just as rigorously [as the Western acceptance of the

world], one often achieves (in certain Vedantic schools) similar results regarding, for instance, the indifference of works” (MS, 64, n6).

5

As the foregoing interpretation of *The Myth of Sisyphus* shows, much in Camus’s theory of the good life is perfectionist. The condition we should be in, absurd², is a rare and difficult condition to attain; it is not one that many have reached or could reach. Moreover, after having been attained it could hardly be maintained; “falling” from it to everyday existence is almost inevitable. Again typical of perfectionist theories of the meaning of life, absurd² is described in superlative terms. True, absurd² includes also much pain and frustration. But the radically negative aspects of this condition do not erode the joy and excellence to be found in it to create some moderate, in-between position. On the contrary: achieving excellence and joy in the context of pain and notwithstanding it renders this state of mind all the more impressive. Camus is not discussing here, as non-perfectionists would, the condition of people who live moderate and normal yet sensitive and productive lives and thus also meaningful ones. Rather, the positive and negative aspects of absurd² coexist in conflict in all their extremity, forming a two-faced condition that is extremely good even if it also includes much suffering.

Admittedly, Camus sounds fairly non-perfectionist when he talks of those who achieve absurd² as knowing their limits and not trying to transcend them (MS, 51, 66, 70, 88–89). But “knowing one’s limits” is for him a difficult and rare achievement performed by those who “in the precarious interval in which they take their spiritual stand enjoy all the wonderful ease of masters. And that is indeed genius” (MS, 70). Furthermore, Camus refers to those who achieve absurd² as “absurd heroes,” and his prime illustration of the rebellion is a mythical figure, Sisyphus, who performs a great feat (MS, 119–23). The other illustrations that Camus presents, Don Juan (MS, 69–77), the actor (MS, 77–84), and the conqueror (MS, 84–90), also have special and extreme lives rather than ordinary ones. They do not compromise but, typical of perfectionist thought, want “all or nothing”:

I know that one can compromise and live in the world while believing in the eternal. That is called accepting. But I loathe this term and want all or nothing. [...] The individual can do nothing and yet he can do everything. In that wonderful unattached state you understand why I exalt and crush him at one and the same time. (MS, 86–87; see also 27)

Like other perfectionists, Camus not only presents his ideal of the good life as both excellent and difficult to attain and maintain, but also presents the non-ideal,

everyday condition as objectionable, referring to it, for example, as “everyday sleep” (MS, 59). This attitude towards non-ideal, everyday life is apparent also in Camus's depiction of Sisyphus's meaningless punishment as illustrative of our lives. As Jeffrey Gordon points out, Sisyphus's life might well cease to seem meaningless to us if we were to learn that he aims to use the stones he pushes to build beautiful temples, or that he pushes rocks uphill in order to support a family whom he loves. But “what actual human life cannot boast these or comparable features in abundance? Why, then, should Sisyphus speak for us? [...] Have we not our plans and projects, our loves and triumphs? Is there not a rich diversity in our lives? In what respect, then, is Sisyphus ourselves?” (Gordon 2008, pp. 184–85).⁹ Since the lives of most of us include many meaningful elements that Sisyphus's life lacks, his exceptionally barren existence does not seem to be a good parable for ours. As Gordon points out, our lives seem similar to that of Sisyphus only if we accept that, in comparison to various absolutes, all that we do or achieve is futile and repetitive. But to accept this is to accept a perfectionist attitude toward the meaning of life.

Camus describes in perfectionist terms also the urge that sets us in the process whose end (if we are lucky) is absurd². According to him, what renders our lives absurd are (among other factors) aging, death, and the failure to identify eternal relations and to achieve unified knowledge of everything under a single principle. Put differently, Camus claims that our lives are not meaningful because we are not above time, because we do not have complete control over our bodies, because we are not immortal, and because we do not have absolute knowledge. But this is typical of perfectionist views of the meaning of life. Non-perfectionists would point out that these are very high standards for meaningfulness, and that it is wrong to expect human beings to fulfill them. Non-perfectionists would also suggest that people can have meaningful lives even if they do not achieve any such measures of perfection, because perfection is not necessary for meaningfulness. True, Camus holds that although we can never fulfill our aspirations to overcome time, achieve immortality, or attain perfect knowledge, we can still live well, moreover better than we would have lived had we attained all those impossible goals, if only we attain absurd². But, as shown above, absurd² is very difficult to attain. Moreover, he describes these perfectionist aspirations as essential to humans and suggests that they cannot be discarded: even in absurd² one remains in a state of “insurgent nostalgia” for the absolute (MS, 38), and the pain of failing to attain those overly

⁹ Gordon points to Richard Taylor (2000, pp. 167–70) as having already suggested somewhat similar variations on Sisyphus's story.

high standards never disappears, so that Camus writes that “the important thing [...] is not to be cured, but to live with one’s ailments” (MS, 38).

A non-perfectionist as regards the meaning of life would suggest that there is no need to accept Camus’s initial claims about our essential perfectionist needs nor, therefore, any need to accept his views about the frustration we feel when they are not fulfilled. It is not necessary to “proceed beyond nihilism” (MS, v) since there is no reason to accept nihilism in the first place. Camus describes us as “born in the desert that we must not leave behind” (MS, 27–28) and in which we may learn to live well. But non-perfectionists would suggest that we are not born into that “desert” at all. Rather, some of us are educated or otherwise enticed to enter it, and would do well just to leave it by rejecting perfectionist suppositions as regards the meaning of life. Camus, too, is one of those who, by presenting perfectionist ideals, entices some people to enter into a desert they need not have gone to in the first place, and then tries to teach them how to survive, and even excel, there with pain and glory. But there is no need to accept his initial advice and follow him into that desert, or, if one is already there, to remain in it. Non-perfectionists would hold that most people may well continue with their good, moderate lives, and enjoy the considerable value and meaning that can be derived from them by way of decency, warm personal relationships, contributions to others or the enjoyment of everyday beauty, which are all meaningful without being perfect.

The Myth of Sisyphus, then, has in it an interesting blend of both non-perfectionist and perfectionist elements. On the one hand, the book suggests that we can never reach perfection and that we can live worthwhile lives without it. Moreover, it argues that even lives that are restricted, painful, frustrating, and flawed also in almost any other way, such as that of Sisyphus, can be joyous and good. But on the other hand, Camus takes lives that have not reached perfection to be absurd and frustrating. To cope with this frustration (which is never overcome) and experience life as worthy and good, he envisages difficult and uncommon achievements that only few can attain and that endow us with peak experiences. There is an uneasy tension between perfectionist and non-perfectionist elements in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, but the book seems to present more of a perfectionist than of a non-perfectionist theory of the meaning of life.¹⁰

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