

Job: A Christian Sisyphus? Humor and the Triumph of Human Experience

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Two stories lie at the base of this paper, the mythical story of Sisyphus (especially as interpreted by Albert Camus) and the biblical story of Job¹. These two well known stories may not seem at first glance to have anything specific in common, and when viewed in the context of the potentially redemptive power of humor², even less so. It would in fact be almost improper to call either of these texts³ 'humorous', let alone 'funny'. However, given the wide range of possible meanings for the concept of 'humor', limiting that term to the meaning of 'being humorous', 'being funny' or just 'comic' is not only unnecessarily limiting and restrictive, it probably makes it impossible for humor to be seen as having any redemptive power at all⁴.

1 This article develops a paper entitled "The Laughing Sisyphus" that was originally presented at the International Conference "DEUS Ridens - The Redemptive Power of Humor in Religion" held on 20-21 April 2009 at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). I would like to acknowledge the helpful critique made by Professor Lydia Amir and the encouragement received from Dr. Jessica Milner Davis while I was working on this study. I can only express great gratitude for their help and encouragements.

2 As mentioned above, this was the theme of the conference.

3 I use the Italian version of the Bible (La Bibbia di Gerusalemme 2002: 18th edition) and the text of Camus' essay given in *The Myth of Sisyphus -- and Other Essays*, New York: Vintage Books, 1959, throughout. For references to ancient literature I have used Italian versions available to me, giving chapter and verse rather than page references, so that the exact phrases can be found in other versions and different translations if desired.

4 The etymology of the word humor is generally accepted as showing that the contemporary meaning of the word, that is, anything that is humorous, is of recent date. Originally the word humor

What follows, therefore, is based on the wider view of the meaning of humor which embraces the feeling of happy amusement as well as the perception of the ridiculous, which will allow me to treat the theme of (the absurdity of) suffering which lies at the heart of both stories. Using this meaning, I will attempt to show how Camus might have come to consider Sisyphus as a 'happy' man (although he himself did not offer any definition regarding the nature of this happiness), and then I will try to demonstrate why Sisyphus might also be considered capable of laughter in his happiness.

Despite the fact that the story of Sisyphus and the story of Job come from completely different traditions⁵. I will compare Sisyphus' situation with that of Job and try to show that, in a certain sense, both Job and Sisyphus confront extreme forms of suffering in a fundamentally absurd situation that for both men implies a simple choice between victory or defeat. In these circumstances, it seems to me, both figures can conquer the absurdity of their situation only by humor⁶. I must clarify from the outset that my reading of *The Book of Job* is a Catholic (Christian) one⁷ and my commentary should be interpreted accordingly.

was linked to the 'moisture' (humid) or the fluids of animal bodies (as such, 'humor' was a temperament or fixed type of behaviour that was linked to relative imbalance in the four bodily fluids eg 'ill-humor' or bad temper). Only in the 19th century did the word humor gain its present signification of anything amusing and funny. Some authors are convinced the word humor is also etymologically linked to the word 'humus' (see Stephen W. Gilbert 1996, for example). This idea, however, is nowhere to be found in standard etymological dictionaries and Gilbert himself accepts it is an elusive connection.

- 5 One an ancient myth from the Greek classical tradition and the other an ancient text from the Jewish tradition.
- 6 Some authors, whether writing from a Christian position or not, see *The Book of Job* as a 'comical' book. William Whedbee, for example, has argued that it contains at least two fundamental features of comedy: the perception of incongruity and the basic plot line in which all leads to a happy ending. Whedbee cites the playwright Christopher Fry as claiming that *The Book of Job* is "the great reservoir of comedy" (Whedbee 1977: 32).
- 7 Of course Job is not principally a Catholic-Christian 'figure', but my reading can be considered as lying within the Christian tradition of Job interpretations, starting with the Church Father, Gregory the Great. It follows that on certain points my reading of this Bible text might be seen by some readers (from a Jewish background, for example) as 'doubtful'. However, claiming exclusivity in the interpretation of archetypal 'figures' like Job, as is unfortunately sometimes done in the name of narrow scholarship, is unnecessarily restrictive and risks a pedantic form of scholarship.

This way of considering humor does not easily accord with standard theories of humor and laughter⁸. These, such as the Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory or the Release Theory, consider humor as deriving from life in its 'normal' and 'general' aspects, whereas here I am considering human life in its most 'ab-normal' or ambiguous situations, in which generalist theories are less likely to be relevant. My way of considering humor thus sees humor as a possible response to one's consideration of one's proper or ideal life and to the frequent contours of ambiguity taken by this same life. I am considering humor as it can occur as an exceptional human response to suffering; humor as a sign of utter acceptance of life as it is in all its forms, including the most ambiguous and 'self-threatening' situations, an acceptance without any illusions. As such, we shall see that the happiness of Sisyphus, as imagined by Camus, cannot be regarded as simple or 'normal' happiness. It is an extraordinary kind of happiness that has (in the realm of cognition) come to terms with the utter and complete absence of (normal) happiness. The same goes for the kind of laughter I propose as conceivable and appropriate in such circumstances.

As Morreall and other theorists have pointed out, not all forms of laughter go naturally together with happiness and vice versa. There is a kind of laughter (black or sarcastic) that does not bring any form of happiness and the same is true for happiness in its turn. Indeed, just being happy does not necessarily mean that one must laugh (I note in passing that happiness and being happy are not definitionally exactly the same thing). In the extreme form of laughter and happiness with which I am concerned, absurd laughter may be linked with absurd happiness, because, I would argue, the happiness brought forth by the conscious, cognitive awareness of an absolute lack of happiness paradoxically can give rise to a laughter born of the absolute absence of anything to laugh at. Such a form of laughter can occur precisely because there is absolutely nothing left to laugh.

Interestingly, this is the laughter that expresses the extreme form of Bergson's view in his theory of laughter, *Laughter: An Essay on the meaning of the Comic*,

8 John Morreall's valuable discussion of these and other theories in his book *Taking Laughter Seriously* (especially chapters 2, 3 and 4) treats each theory and its 'flaws', concluding that not all forms of humor and laughter can (or should) be classified this way (Morreall 1983: 4-58). I do not propose an all-embracing new theory of humor; in fact, dealing only with the borderlines of what can be considered humorous, I believe I am treating here an aspect of laughter and humor not often touched upon.

that all laughter requires “an[a]esthesia of the heart” (Bergson 1911: 3). It is the laughter of complete indifference or lack of emotion (Bergson 1911: 4)⁹. Thus I consider that Camus’ gift of happiness to Sisyphus based on this quality of acceptance and indifference to his lot may logically be in complete accord with my supposition that laughter might accompany his happiness, the two experiences being considered almost one and the same. This is in fact a happy laughter, or more precisely laughter of happiness despite extreme circumstances, and, as I will attempt to demonstrate, it is this response which links Sisyphus with Job.

1. The myth of sisyphus

Ever since Homer in *The Odyssey* described the situational predicament of Sisyphus (Homer 2006: vv. 593-599)¹⁰, many stories have been advanced to explain why Sisyphus received the punishment he did. Some traditions hold that Sisyphus informed on Zeus who had kidnapped a beautiful girl. According to this tradition Sisyphus told the father (Asopo) of the girl (Egina) that Zeus had taken her. (Apollodoro 1998: I, 9, 3; Pausania 2005: II, 5, 1). Other traditions tell the story that Sisyphus escaped from the underworld using cunning and highly astute planning. (Teognide 1989: I, vv. 702-713; Sophocles 2003: 625; Alcaeus 1999: fragment 38). Still others tell of a Sisyphus who hated his brother so much that in order to fulfill an oracle predicting his brother’s death, he fathered a child on his brother’s daughter so that the child from the union (as foretold by the oracle) could kill the hated brother. When this daughter of Sisyphus’ brother, however, found out what the oracle had foretold, she killed all her offspring (Igino 1998: 60). Some later sources also refer to Sisyphus, but as these later readings of the myth are considered to be mere re-interpretations, they are of no particular interest to this

9 Such laughter is quite similar to Milan Kundera’s laughter, in the view of Guido Vanheeswijck (Vanheeswijck 1993: 150): “Here it is described as a wisdom-laughter which goes against (normal) culture; the laughter that in an unreserved way acknowledges the groundlessness of all striving and the lightness of our existence” (my translation).

10 See Homer, *The Odyssey* (Arlington: Richer Resource Publications, 2006) XI, vv. 593-599: “And then, in his painful torment, I saw Sisyphus striving with both hands to raise a massive rock. He’d brace his arms and feet, then strain to push it uphill to the top. But just as he was going to get that stone across the crest, its overpowering weight would make it change direction. The cruel rock would roll back down again onto the plain. Then he’d strain once more to push it up the slope. His limbs dripping sweat, and dust rose from his head”.

paper¹¹. Whatever the given reasons for the punishment of Sisyphus, all traditions agree that he received the famous punishment of having for all eternity to push a huge rock up a mountainside without ever quite achieving the task, because the rock repeatedly falls back down the slope whenever the top is within reach.

While my initial hesitation about the essential 'humorouslessness' of this myth needs once again to be acknowledged, it is important to note that at least one 'interpretation'¹² of this myth can be found that dwells upon the humor innate in this mechanical, repetitious and unrewarding task, namely its re-visitation by Albert Camus' in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It is only in the final part of this essay that we find four pages explicitly dedicated to the topic. Here first of all we should note that all characteristics of the ancient versions of the myth are present, although the reason for Sisyphus' punishment is left open for speculation. The nature of his punishment however is identical: constrained for all eternity to push a huge rock up a mountain without ever making it to the top. There is, however, a small change present in Camus' text, a very small one and almost unnoticeable, seemingly added as an afterthought at the end of the last sentence. The line runs: "il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux" ("one must imagine Sisyphus happy") (Camus 1959: 91).

I believe it is neither impossible nor illogical to add that one should therefore also imagine Sisyphus *laughing*. The justification for this is that the Sisyphus described by Camus finds himself in an 'emotionless' (thus happy) state and therefore is fully capable of the kind of pure intellectual response to absurdity and the inversion of reason which Bergson saw as releasing the kind of laughter which has emotion as its enemy. Just like the absurd, laughter cannot exist beyond the pale of what is strictly human. But, as already noted, its release usually occurs in the absence of feeling or an 'an[a]esthesia of the heart'. Sometimes this simply debars empathy with the targets of the laughter, but the matter is more profound than that. In fact, Bergson wrote:

11 One of the more interesting re-interpretations is found in a Renaissance text that tells the story of a Sisyphus 'hotel-manager' who kept on murdering his guests by stoning them to death. This would seem to justify why this Sisyphus received his own famous punishment (see Giovanni dei Bonsignori, *Ovidio Methamorphoseos vulgare*, printed in Venice by Zoane Rosso for Lucantonio Zonta on MCCCCLXXXVII a dē X del mese di Aprile, Libro IV, Capitolo XXXI, De Sisypho).

12 It is difficult to call Camus' re-visitation of this ancient Greek myth an 'interpretation', as he does not in fact offer a fully-fledged interpretation of the myth. He interprets Sisyphus' punishment without mentioning what Sisyphus did to deserve it and does not give any new explanations beyond those that can be found in the ancient writings on Sisyphus.

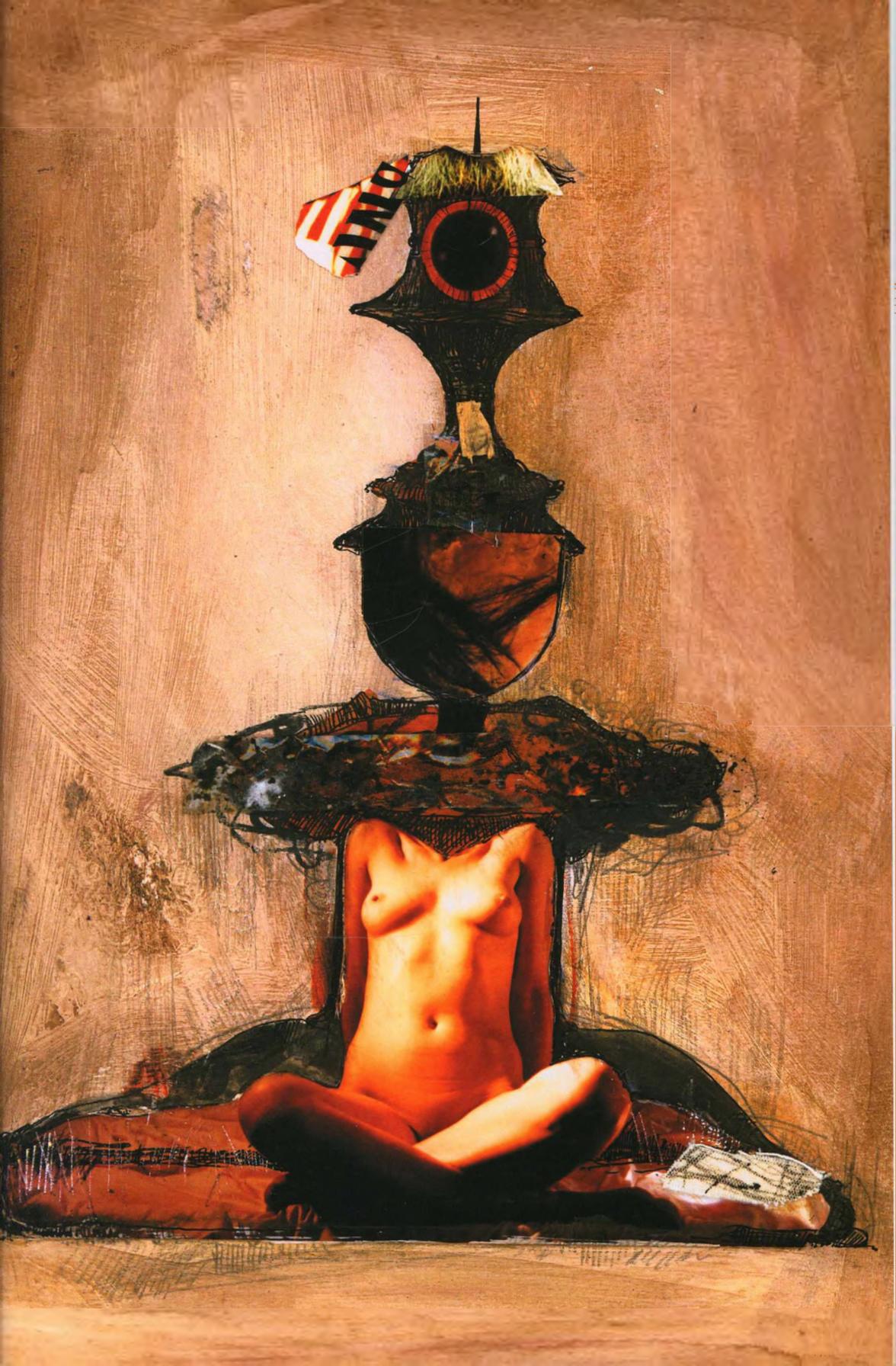
It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. ... [W]hereas highly emotional souls, in tune and unison with life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, would neither know nor understand laughter. (Bergson 1911: 4)

I shall return to this extension to Camus' words later, but clearly the Sisyphus described by Camus finds himself in a very similar 'emotionless' state to that described by Bergson.

2. The laughing sisyphus

Camus' re-visitation of the myth of Sisyphus is an essay of a very peculiar nature, as is demonstrated by its reception by the reading public. It took 13 years before the text was translated into English and then it was only after translations of both *l'Étranger* and *La Peste*, two of his most famous novels, had created a certain reputation for the author in the English-speaking world. Even so, reviews of *The Myth of Sisyphus* were not very positive. *The New Yorker* (April 14, 1956, 174) wrote that "it is all very high powered and confusing", while according to the *Yale Review* (Spring 1956, 46), "Camus has an 'interesting' mind, one that momentarily attracts because of its penchant for expressing epigrammatically lucid reasons for holding improbable beliefs". Grudging admiration came from *Saturday Review* (Oct. 8, 1955, 14) whose reviewer wrote that "it is a difficult ideal of life, and maybe too narrow and thwarting a one, but it is also one that one cannot help but admire". There is no doubt that Camus' ideas are challenging and invoke contemplation of extreme positions in life. I am not concerned here to interpret, however, but to *comment* upon certain aspects of this essay. This is not an attempt to write *on* Camus, but an attempt to extrapolate from his text the possible reasons for why Camus could have imagined Sisyphus as happy.

As already mentioned, only a very small section of the essay is dedicated to the mythological figure of Sisyphus. These last four pages come after an intriguing philosophical reflection about committing or not committing suicide in a highly 'hostile' and frustrating world. Camus, in fact, describes his essay as a text that deals "with an absurd sensitivity" (Camus 1959: 2) and he elaborates that "the absurd..., is considered in this essay as a starting point" (Camus 1959: 2). He explains that for him the absurd is the 'moment' of "confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 1959: 21). Furthermore, in these crucial four pages, Camus does not in any way offer a



6. *Lichtarz 2*, technika collage+druk cyfrowy, 50x70 cm, Halina Fleger

possible interpretation of the whole myth but only of Sisyphus' punishment and suffering. So it seems improbable, even incredible, that he would have tried to imagine Sisyphus happy, even (as I would add) laughing (a happy laugh because of the formal equivalence between happiness and laughter in the condition of absurdity). But he did, leaving us to try to understand how this could be.

Although Camus never exactly mentions what 'being happy' means, I believe explanation is provided by the context, that is, by the situation in which we find Sisyphus placed – for all eternity. It is precisely the impossibility of any possible future happiness that enables Camus to start re-claiming happiness for his hero. If the register established by all our 'normal' behavior or experience applies to the future, then life has to continue to change and all 'normal' and past patterns will return and recur. However, under this new constellation of governing factors for Sisyphus, change is ruled out: hoping for future absence or presence is no longer applicable and the present is all. How then does the hero respond?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary first to look at the other 'absurd' characters present in this text. Since Sisyphus is portrayed as an 'absurd hero' (Camus 1959: 89), the essential characteristics of the 'lesser' absurd heroes must also be present in Sisyphus. Following this line of thought, it is possible to individuate four fundamental and essential characteristics indicated by Camus that would render Sisyphus able to be happy and, even, as I suggest, to laugh. These four characteristics can be grouped into two pairs.

A first quality seemingly fundamental for Sisyphus' ability to be happy and laugh is what could be called the characteristic of acceptance. But this is not just any form of acceptance and for that reason a second characteristic should be addressed at once; that of consciousness. In fact, both these qualities are present in all of the other absurd heroes found in the essay: Don Juan (Camus 1959: 51-57), the conqueror (Camus 1959: 62-67), the traveler (Camus 1959: 59), the actor (Camus 1959: 57-62) and the true artistic creator (Camus 1959: 69-77).

All these minor characters are fully conscious of their life (-style) and conscious of (i.e. they 'know' as Camus puts on various occasions), the 'dangers' and 'limits' of their lives and enterprises. At the same time, however, they fully accept their proper 'limitations', which amounts to a third characteristic qualifying the first two. So, if valid for the 'lesser' heroes, these qualities will also hold for Sisyphus, the true hero of what Camus views as the absurdity of life. Thus we can say that for Sisyphus to be able to be happy he has to be conscious of his own life and situation but at the same time able to accept his own limits. Sisyphus must "accept life

without appeal" (Camus 1959: 75)¹³, or in other words, he has to be capable of reasoning lucidly while noting his proper limits¹⁴ (Camus 1959: 36).

Beside these first two fundamental characteristics and their qualifier there is a second pair. Being conscious of one's proper life and accepting its limits is not sufficient since Sisyphus does not just have to "accept life without appeal", he must also, according to Camus, be "deprived of [all] hope" (Camus 1959: 67). This being "deprived of all hope" is important not only for Sisyphus' ability to be happy or to laugh, but also for Camus' philosophy in general. In fact, it is the fundamental aspect that, according to Camus himself, distinguishes his philosophy from existentialism. What all existential philosophies suggest, when confronted with the absurd is, according to Camus, escape (Camus 1959: 24).¹⁵ But in suggesting escape, they also keep their 'belief' in hope and ultimately "want to be cured" (Camus 1959: 29). According to Camus, this is nothing more than "philosophical suicide" (Camus 1959: 31), and in his view, accepting the deprivation of hope is key.

Such 'deprivation' is not however to be identified with despair (Camus 1959: 67). No-one can be happy or laughing at the same time as despairing. In fact, we can therefore see that probably the most important characteristic for why Sisyphus is able to laugh is one which almost naturally emerges from the absence of all hope: it is *revolt*. Without any hope of cure or salvation, Sisyphus must nevertheless consistently be dissatisfied with and reject his condition, although without any form of unrest or rebellion (Camus 1959: 23)¹⁶. Although this characteristic of 'mental revolt' might seem at first to be in contradiction of the characteristic of acceptance, this is not the case. Despite the smallness of the difference between the

13 Interesting confirmation of this insight comes from another contemporary reading of the myth of Sisyphus, also outside the philosophical sphere. In *Sisyphus: The Old Stone – A New Way, A Jungian Approach to Midlife Crisis*, Verena Kast confirms that "for a myth to endure, both the collective and individual must be able to identify with it. Thus it must express an essential human condition. ...[i]t must illuminate some fundamental life experience." She goes on to tell the story of an old lady who was able to accept in the end that "in the eternal repetition she [could] perceive....that she is on intimate terms with life"(Kast 1991: 18; 26).

14 The fact that for Sisyphus to be happy he must both 'accept life without appeal' and 'reason lucidly, noting his proper limits' re-confirms the connection with laughter. As Bergson said, for a person to be able to laugh, they must have a thoroughly calm and unruffled soul (Bergson 1911: 4).

15 Camus adds here: "Through an odd reasoning, starting out from the absurd over the ruins of reason, in a closed universe limited to the human, they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them".

16 Again, these two aspects (being deprived of all hope and revolt) underline the addition of 'laughter' in its Bergsonian interpretation.

characteristic of 'mental revolt' and the characteristic of acceptance, the distinction is nonetheless fundamental. The quality of revolt is in fact strictly related to the situation in which one finds oneself, whereas the characteristic of acceptance is related only to one's personal limitations. Thus Sisyphus has to accept himself, especially his own personal limitations, and he has to accept them completely (that is, he has to accept that his strength is what it is and that pushing the rock up the hill will strain him to his limits)¹⁷. Nevertheless, he must revolt against the situation in which he finds himself to be compelled to perform the task, a situation against which he cannot actively protest, nor hold any hope that anything will or even should change.

We can thus conclude that Sisyphus is happy and even able to laugh because of these four essential and fundamental characteristics which are simultaneously present in his experience of life: consciousness, acceptance, deprivation of hope and 'mental revolt'. For Sisyphus to be able to laugh, according to Albert Camus, he needs to be conscious of his own life-(style) and limitations, and these same limitations need to be accepted in full. On the other hand he needs to lack any form of hope without being desperate, that is, he needs to revolt against his present condition. He needs to revolt against the situation he finds himself in. For others to be able to laugh and be happy in an absurd situation, they, like Sisyphus, will need to possess these same four fundamental characteristics.

3. The book of job

It seems justifiable to observe that, whereas Camus' text *treats* the absurd, *The Book of Job* seems to *be* absurd¹⁸. Certainly it is quite unrealistic: in fact God is

17 To clarify these essential conditions (because accepting one's limitations is intended beyond the vague sense that holds for everybody), it is helpful to turn to Camus' description of another absurd character, Don Juan. Don Juan is, for Camus, not the completely romantic lover always in pursuit of a better experience; he is simply the "ordinary seducer", the "sexual athlete" (Camus 1959: 53) who only wants quantity and numbers. But Don Juan *knows* this and that is why he laughs when one of his many conquests says that finally he has been given love. He has not finally been "given love", but simply sex 'once more' and he knows it: he is conscious of his limitations and accepts them. The same goes also for the traveler-figure discussed by Camus. The traveler *has* to travel, he will never find rest; but he knows this, and as a 'true' traveler (not just a once-in-while traveler), he accepts that he will always have to travel.

18 The terminology of James A. Wharton who wrote, "Particularly among modern people who dismiss both the quest for God and the quest for some larger meaning in human life as absurd, [this

represented as having a nice chat with the Satan, asking him where he has been and what he has done. But, even more absurd seems to be the fact that God accepts Satan's request to Him. One could even think, as Carl Gustav Jung seems to have done, that God becomes unsure of Job's faithfulness because He is influenced by Satan, (Jung 1984: 19-20). Be that as it may, it is striking how in this narrative God simply hands over to Satan all that is dearly beloved by Job so that he can destroy it, in order to prove in the end that He, God, is right as usual, and Job will continue to revere Him¹⁹.

It is not however the aim of this paper to judge whether *The Book of Job* is absurd or not. What is important is that there is a strong element of the absurd present in this ancient Jewish text (whether or not we wish it to be there is a completely different issue)²⁰. Its presence points immediately to some convergence between Sisyphus's situation and that of Job's. Just like Sisyphus, Job is locked in an absurd situation beyond his control. Like Sisyphus again, Job seems to be being punished for something unclear and his punishment seems no less harsh than the one received by Sisyphus. Job loses all his wealth, his family and in the end even his health. Is it then possible to imagine, as we were able to do with Sisyphus, that Job might also attain a state of happiness and laughter?

Surprisingly enough, all four characteristics present in Camus' text and required to enable Sisyphus to be supposed as happy and laughing even in his absurd condition, are in fact present in the story of Job, and three of them even appear in a very similar manner. Regarding the first couple (acceptance and consciousness), we can without difficulty discern that Job is perfectly conscious of his life situation and that he wholly accepts his limitations. The first time Job is confronted with his 'friends' referring to his precarious situation he expresses bitter complaint about his present condition: "Why give light to a man of grief? Why give life to those bitter of heart, who long for a death that never comes, and hunt for it more than for

book is nothing [more than] the absurd 'drama' of Job. Job has accused God of being a cosmic bully who cares nothing at all about human notions of justice and righteousness" (Wharton 1999: 157).

19 This also seems to be the tenor of Robert Frost's re-visitation of *The Book of Job* in *A Masque of Reason*. According to Frost, God explains his reasons for 'torturing' Job with the following words: "I'm going to tell Job why I tortured him, and trust it won't be adding to the torture. I was just showing off to the Devil, Job..." (Frost 2002: 484).

20 It is not important whether one is religious or not in order to see the absurd aspect to *The Book of Job*. As mentioned above, both Wharton and Robert Frost easily connect the story with the same sense of absurdity which is felt by the religious. Isn't Job himself capable of being seen as the personification of all religious people when confronted with an acknowledged absurdity?

buried treasure?" He continues, "Why give light to one who does not see his way, whom God shuts in all alone? My only food is sighs, and my groans pour out like water. Whatever I fear comes true, whatever I dread befalls me. For me, there is no calm, no peace; my torments banish rest" (*Job* 3: 20-21; 23-26). At the same time however as he is completely conscious of his situation, he fully accepts his personal limits and limitations. He acknowledges that he is 'imperfect' as a human being (*Job* 9: 32-33) and (third characteristic), he knows that he did not in fact deserve his suffering because he has never strayed from God's way. Job makes this perfectly clear the second time he responds to his 'friends', when he specifically asks them to show him exactly where he had failed: "Have I said to you, 'Give me something, make some present for me at your own cost, snatch me from the grasp of an oppressor, ransom me from the grip of a violent man'? Put me right, and I shall say no more; show me where I have been at fault" (*Job* 6: 22-24). Job even reiterates his innocence some time later to God Himself: "[Y]ou know very well that I am innocent..." (*Job* 10: 7). In fact, almost every time he begins to speak, he asserts his innocence (*Job* 13: 18, 23; etc.). So far we can say that Job, just like Camus's Sisyphus, reasons lucidly and notes and accepts his proper limits. Further, the characteristic of revolt is clearly present and easily identifiable throughout *The Book of Job*.²¹ While Job continues to hold on to his belief in God, he outspokenly rejects his present conditions (*Job* 10: 7), even accusing God on certain occasions of being too harsh, even unfairly severe²² (*Job* 10: 6).

Thus three out of the four conditions seem clearly fulfilled. For the fourth characteristic, that is, deprivation of all hope but without falling into despair, this

21 Hugo Van Hooreweghe also holds this view. He writes in the introduction to the Dutch translation of Jung's *Answer to Job* that "Job represents perhaps much more the man who, from his stricken existence, revolts than [he does] the suffering man that tolerates everything that strikes him" (Van Hooreweghe 1998: 7) (my translation).

22 Abraham Joshua Heschel is also of this opinion: "[A]nd Job dares to question the fairness of the Almighty" (Heschel 1955: 268). Another interesting interpretation of whole Book of Job, and especially of Job's revolt, can be found in the work of the late Italian poet David Maria Turolto. Marco Cardinali, Italian theologian and commentator on Turolto, states that for Turolto, "until Job has a family, owns houses, has friends and richness, Job doesn't talk, as if he didn't exist. He starts existing from the moment all is destroyed.... Job starts existing the moment he starts talking, and he starts talking when he is completely alone, abandoned by all. For Turolto in fact 'believing is entering in conflict', a lacerating conflict like the one that opposes Job and God..." (Cardinali 2002: 107).

seems to be present in the same way as in Camus' text. It is perfectly clear on more than one occasion that Job has given up all hope for his earthly life, crying out, "[W]here then is my hope? Who can see any happiness for me?" (*Job* 17: 15). But here problems with the comparison creep in: Job has given up hope, but the hope he has given up is merely hope about (t)his earthly life; he has not given up *all* hope. In fact, the more that hope about earthly life is given up, the higher rises his hope for a better life in the next world²³. Thus efforts to establish a parallel with Sisyphus seem to be in vain. If Job had not been so conscious of his own situation or had refused to accept in full his own limits, the case might be different but on the issue of hope, there seems to be a fundamental problem in drawing a resemblance between Job and Camus' Sisyphus. Indeed, following Camus' own line of thought, we could say that like the existentialists, Job desires to be cured and saved; and this, as noted earlier, is (according to Camus) tantamount to philosophical suicide.

4. God's intervention

If *The Book of Job* ended with Job hoping for eternal salvation, this study would have come to its conclusion. In the last chapters of the *Book*, however, God Himself enters the scene. First of all, God is definitely not happy with the views expressed by Job's friends. They still firmly cling to the old tradition which sees all suffering as forms of punishment for the sins mankind has committed. "Can you recall anyone guiltless that perished?" is a question asked by one of Job's friends. And he continues, "Where then have the honest been wiped out? I speak from experience: those who plough iniquity and sow disaster, reap just that. Under the breath of God they perish: a blast of his anger, and they are destroyed..." (*Job* 4: 7-9). Job does not agree with this explanation of so-called divine justice; and God himself confirms the correctness of Job's disagreement, saying, "I burn with anger against you [Eliphaz of Teman] and your two friends, for not having spoken correctly about me as my servant Job has done" (*Job* 42: 7). But despite this, God is not pleased with Job either.

23 According to some interpretations, this hope located in the next world extends to the proclamation of the resurrection of the body. *Job* 19, 26 ("After my awakening, he will set me close to him, and from my flesh I shall look on God"), is the verse that most closely approaches this point, from a Christian perspective.

Although God's intervention is rather enigmatic²⁴, this paper's context of considering the redemptive power of humor allows us to offer an interesting interpretation which is somewhat divergent from the traditional ones given for His divine words. Job's refusal to accept that all suffering is a result of sin clearly does not anger God. Nor is the source of His anger His rejection of Job's efforts to argue with Him as an equal. Traditional interpretation has claimed the reason for God's anger to be strictly an epistemological one, with the fundamental issue being Job's knowledge (or, more accurately, Job's 'not-knowing'). And in fact God starts His first interrogation with questions addressing Job's lack of knowledge of *how*: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Tell me, since you are so well-informed" (*Job* 38: 4), and "[H]ave you any inkling of the extent of the earth? Tell me all about it if you have" (*Job* 38: 18).

Regarding Job's suffering, the same epistemological problem exists (the problem of his limited knowledge): the fact is, Job did not take his suffering all that well. This was because he did not simply accept his suffering for what it was and as it was; rather he wanted to know *why* he was suffering. Seemingly, it is this 'why-question' that 'angers' God; not because He does not have the answer, but simply because Job is not in any position to ask the question. The answer cannot in fact be given to mankind (as yet)²⁵. Thus to provide the answer to the 'why-question' would effectively strip Job of his humanity by giving him access to the viewpoint and knowledge of God. And without humanity, there would be neither any possibility of his suffering, nor any possibility of being happy and laughing during that suffering.

6. Conclusion

For Albert Camus, it was of fundamental importance that we should imagine the tragic hero Sisyphus as being happy, even, as I have added, imagine him with a smile on his face. In certain confrontations, both small and large, between man and the world that surrounds him, it is often just a little spark that sets in motion the

24 As John E. Hartley points out, "Yahweh ignores Job's complaints and avoids making a direct response to his avowal of innocence, and contrary to the friend's expectations, he does not reprove Job for some wrongdoing" (Hartley 1988: 487). Space does not permit deeper examination here of different possible interpretations of the passages in which God speaks.

25 Robert Sutherland claims in fact that God will answer this 'why-question' on the day of the final judgement (Sutherland 2004:10).

process by which we become aware of the absurdity of it all. The absurd baffles us while it underlines the utterly unreasonable and inexplicable silence of the world that surrounds us. The only means available to mankind to engage with and confront this absurdity is to act like the happy Sisyphus portrayed by Camus, that is, consciously to accept oneself and one's situation while at the same time being in active revolt by finding it laughable and expressing that with a smile on one's face.

Of course *The Book of Job* is a text that in some senses is not so much concerned with reflections on human pain and suffering – it is rather principally concerned with the fact that the fundamentals of human existence go beyond reason (Cardinali 2002: 105). In most cases, just as in Camus' work, these fundamentals are therefore very closely linked to the absurd. For a moment it seemed possible to imagine Job with a similar smile on his face. But despite the parallel absurdum that the two heroes must cope with, it turned out that trying to imagine a smiling or happy Job, similar to Camus' Sisyphus, was not easy. Job seems to have wanted too much and the four essential conditions holding good for Camus' hero are not so readily fulfilled by the Biblical character. He wanted to know why he had been thrown upon the tender mercies of the absurd. But God's reproof of Job pointed him a way out of this impasse, whether he took it or not.

Neither Sisyphus nor Job are actually reported as laughing in their precarious situations. But just as Camus asked us to try to imagine Sisyphus happy (therefore capable of laughter), I think it is possible to imagine that Job *ought to* have been happy and laughing in his plight. Such happiness would have redeemed the pain he felt because, just as with the laughter of Sisyphus, the laughter would have taken on a divine quality. It is in such moments that mankind can touch the divine.

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Job: A Christian Sisyphus? Humor and the Triumph of Human Experience

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Over the past decades humor and laughter have come to be accepted as serious topics in academic research and a number of diverse theories on humor and the role of laughter have been developed. These theories, however, consider laughter mainly in its daily aspects or in normal life situations. Starting from Albert Camus' concept of the happy Sisyphus, this paper considers whether the figure of Job, who seems to inhabit a comparably absurd situation, could also be considered as happy, even laughing. The paper concludes with a distinctive reading of the divine words found at the end of *The Book of Job* that may be fundamental in linking Sisyphus with Job.

Keywords: *Sisyphus, Job, Camus, absurd, happiness, laughter.*

