**One must imagine ‘the academic’ happy**

Maurizio Toscano

*Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne*

**Abstract**

*In a recent article, Ansgar Allen (2015) draws our attention to one consequence of the continuing attack on education by the “reductive powers of commodification, audit, managerialism, performativity and that abstract beast, ‘neoliberalism’”. He notes that: “Educators are quitting the profession rather publically today, writing embittered, valedictory articles and emails, ranging so far as the recognisable form of a suicide note”. The hostile academic climate, coupled with the option of ‘academic suicide’ as one means of escaping it, recalls the philosophical project Albert Camus sets up in The Myth of Sisyphus (1975/1955). Recall its opening sentence: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide” (p. 11); and later: “Living under that stifling sky forces one to get away or to stay. The important thing is to find out how people get away in the first case and why people stay in the second case” (p. 32). Camus responds to the question of ‘staying’ or ‘getting away’ by evoking the mythical figure of Sisyphus: “All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols” (p. 110). This paper explores whether a fruitful philosophical comparison can be drawn between the contemporary academic-educator and Camus’ reading of the Myth of Sisyphus. It seeks to address the question of whether ‘education’ is for the academic worker the Sisyphean torment, the ‘stone’ or the very idol that ought to be silenced.*

Keywords**:** Camus, Sisyphus, Metaphysics, Nietzsche

**Reflections on the possibility of suicide**

Albert Camus opens his extended essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* with the following provocative statement: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide” (Camus, 1975/1955, p. 11). On reading this proclamation, at least two asymmetries in nature suddenly came to mind. The less immediately recognisable asymmetry in nature could be expressed in the following way: the capacity to commit suicide helps distinguish us from the vast majority of (if not all) other living beings. That is, the phenomenon of suicide is largely restricted to human beings, and even if we were to grant the fact that other beings behave in ways that resemble suicide, say in the form of mass beaching of dolphins or whales, nonetheless there appears a distinctive degree of thought, awareness, consciousness and intentionality about suicidal acts that only human beings bring to such acts of self-annihilation. This asymmetry raises philosophical questions about suicide that I wish to connect in this paper to contemporary academic life, for it may be that this distinction between humans and non-humans may be the source of what gives humans, and academics in particular, a sense of meaning and happiness – or suffering. So let me begin by expressing more explicitly what aspect of suicide may best account for this non-human/human asymmetry. Self-annihilation, it seems, requires a ‘self’ not only to be annihilated but also a ‘self’ to act as the agent of its own annihilation. We might reasonably object to this simplified version of the asymmetry between human and non-human beings on the grounds that it introduces a commitment to a Cartesian duality that we may prefer not to carry along with us in any demarcation of humans from other life forms. That is, if we accept that there are two ‘selves’ – on the one hand the ‘self’ as the subject (or mind) that is capable of the suicidal thought and on the other the ‘self’ as the object (or body) that is the target of such a suicidal thought – then the capacity for suicide in humans might be reduced simply to the special capacity that humans have for suicidal *thought*, and since suicidal thought is just a species of thought more generally, we might claim that it is not the ‘suicidal thought’ itself that distinguishes us from other living beings, but rather the capacity for thought *per se*. Pressing home this point; since we share biological bodies with other living beings and these other beings do not in general commit suicide, then we might argue inductively that the suicidal tendency cannot rest in anything biological unless it arises from something resembling that most peculiar of human organs – thought.

Yet, this cannot be the full story, for even Descartes’ famous *cogito ergo sum* is nothing more than a proposition of (egotistic) existence, and therefore seems to say little directly about the ego’s awareness of non-existence, the latter which we might reasonably take as necessary for suicide to succeed *qua* suicide and not just accidental or natural death, say. It is worth pointing out that the existential certainty Descartes gains in discovering his own existence *in* *thought* comes at the price of him ever knowing whether his existence is temporally bounded, either by a state of non-existence some time in the past, or some time in the future, or both the past and the future. Descartes’ ego is thus a timeless being. He cannot consult for instance his (or any other being’s) body for signs of his temporal finitude: after all he has adopted a style of skeptical meditation that gives him no option but to doubt what we mere mortals (or rather we who are aware of our own mortality) take as fair interpretations of our encounters with our bodily decay – namely, interpret them as signs of impending doom. Can this ego not test out the temporal limits of his existence by having a suicidal thought? This too is not possible since any thought, suicidal or otherwise, is rendered through the sceptical method, a way of confirming rather than rejecting existence. Non-existence for the Cartesian ego can only come from a state of non-thinking. Suicidal thought, for the Cartesian, helps to secure one’s ongoing existence but cannot be used to put temporal limits on that existence.

What we can glean from this excursion through Cartesian duality is the realisation that thought alone is impotent in bringing about its own annihilation. The thinking ego can only access self-annihilation through a coupling with an entity other than itself. This *other* may be the body, or it may be nothingness. It is the openness to other then, that gives rise to the possibility of suicide. This links very strongly with Emmanuel Levinas’ dictum that the eyes of the *other* call out “thou shalt not kill!” in a face-to-face encounter (Levinas, 1969). Otherness brings out an originary awareness of the capacity to murder. Thus suicide is possible because otherness presents us with another being to murder, including that ‘other’ that is the ‘self’.

Perhaps a description of suicide that captures well both the impossibility of the thinking ego to annihilate itself and the mutuality of murder and otherness is found in part of David Foster Wallace’s now famous Kenyon Commencement Address:

Think of the old cliché about [quote] the mind being an excellent servant but a terrible master. This, like many clichés, so lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses a great and terrible truth. It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in: the head. They shoot the terrible master. (Wallace, 2005, p. 4)

Wallace’s use of the distinction between “master” and “servant” here is important for two reasons. As stated earlier, suicide, as a form of murder, requires the presence of the other, so the master-servant relationship here underscores the intuition that otherness does not arise in pure form but always as a relationship of mutual co-existence. Were this not the case, then otherness would be susceptible to the methods of philosophical skepticism and we would return to where we started – the impossibility of suicide. The second, and more important feature of Wallace’s statement is that the master-servant relationship captures the possibility for an asymmetry or distinction. Put another way: for as long as the ethical relationship between master and servant is symmetric, both the master and the servant are bound in equal measure – and not bound in equal measure – by the dictum “thou shalt not kill”. Murder and suicide are only possible when such an ethical symmetry is broken. The master and the servant can live in peace, as the lion and the lamb do in biblical verse, but only while one does not claim superiority over the other – superiority by any measure! What might constitute the proper distinction between human and non-human forms of life (or indeed non-living entities) then, is the capacity to project such asymmetries onto a cosmos that may be free of them. We can identify this projection of asymmetry the capacity to posit values. This last point brings us into contact with Nietzsche’s view of metaphysics and the role nihilism and values plays in the historical journey to overcome it. As Malcolm Bull puts it:

Although Nietzsche does not repudiate nihilism, he anticipates that in the future it will take another form. He argues that ‘the universe seems to have lost value, seems “meaningless” – but that is only a *transitional stage*’. What lies beyond it is ‘a movement that in some future will take the place of this perfect nihilism – but presupposes it, logically and psychologically’. The movement is the one that Nietzsche describes as the revaluation of all values. The presupposition of this is that ‘we require sometime, *new values*’, but not values of the old kind that measure the value of the world in terms of things outside it, for they ‘refer a purely fictitious world’. Nietzsche’s revaluation of values demands more than this, ‘an overturning of the nature and manner of valuing’. (Bull, 2011, pp. 43-44)

The positing of values, the imposition of a hierarchy or asymmetry in our ethical relationship with otherness, may betray a metaphysical commitment if taken in the sense in which it occurs prior to Nietzsche’s “*transitional* *stage*” cited above. If what makes suicide possible is the asymmetry introduced by metaphysics – even, but perhaps especially the metaphysics of positing values – then it is possible that metaphysics itself is implicated in the distinctions we draw between human and non-human beings. More importantly, the death of this distinction requires the death of humans – or, following Nietzsche, a transition of humans towards being superhuman. Suicide then (and murder too) does not allow us to overcome metaphysics, but rather is a sign of an ongoing commitment to remain human, that is, remain distinct from and superior to other living beings.

Our first insight into the question of suicide has yielded the result that suicide is an act that testifies to, rather than rejects or overcomes, the metaphysical tendency towards positing values, which in turn creates an asymmetry between master and servant – regardless of what we take as the entities that hold the positions of master and the servant in that relationship. If we accept for the moment that the break in symmetry in one’s relationship with other (in Levinas’ sense of *other*) is brought about by metaphysics, we might wonder what it is that accounts for the other asymmetry that Camus explores. Namely, why is it that so few people come to the conclusion that life is not worth carrying on with? Moreover, the intuition that metaphysics has a role to play in suicide also makes legitimate the questions of why homicide is more common than suicide and even why killing animals (or other non-human forms of life) is considered to be murder by so few of us. Expressed another way: if metaphysics is what drives us to murder or to commit suicide, why do so few take up either of these possibilities? Is it because acting in the full grip of metaphysics is a very rare occurrence? Or is it that that metaphysics not only provides a pathway into death but also a means of living a life. As Camus puts it:

I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them reason for living (what is called reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). (Camus, 1975/1955, pp. 11-12)

If we cannot be too premature in identifying murder and suicide as the only tracers of a life lived or terminated in the name of metaphysics, then instead we might look to the conditions of life (as it is experienced) to find clues as to the kind of ‘climate’ that make metaphysics and its consequences seem necessary, whether manifested as murder, suicide or simply carrying on with a life of suffering. In Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus* this climate appears rather poetically in his evocation of the oppressive desert skies of North Africa as a metaphor for the existential condition of the absurd: “Living under that stifling sky forces one to get away or to stay. The important thing is to find out how people get away in the first case and why people stay in the second” (Camus, 1975/1955, p. 32). If we are to examine philosophically what the contemporary academic life affords by way of exercising metaphysical commitments (through life, murder or suicide), then we ought to first be able to describe the conditions of academic life. How do we best describe the “stifling sky” under which academics find themselves today?

It would be impossible in this essay to outline all that was said or written by way of the contemporary academic climate. Much ink has already been spilled concerning the influence of neoliberalism and the age of accountability on universities, and we may be sure that there are just as many accounts that are yet to find themselves put down in print or openly discussed by members of the academy. There is, therefore, little hope of providing in this paper an overview of this “stifling sky” of contemporary academia that is sufficiently detailed as to be defensible and yet broad enough to strike an immediate accord with the experiences of most academics. Nonetheless, I do not take this as a major impediment, for I think there is something illuminating in focussing on the accounts given by those academics that form a peculiar minority within the academic community. Namely, those academics that have committed what one might call ‘academic suicide’. By ‘academic suicide’ I mean the act of leaving the academic profession because the conditions of the academy have become intolerable for that individual: a self-annihilation of life within the academy – a cutting off from the life-support-system that is deemed necessary for survival as an institutionalised academic. I admit that this is privileging the voices of the few that leave academic over the voices of the vast majority that choose instead to stay. I have chosen these voices ahead of the others deliberately, but not because I want to supress the good news stories of those who have nothing critical to say about the current academic environment and so feel no compulsion to leave it. I want to present the accounts of the ‘victims’ of academic suicide because these accounts have a meaning and significance beyond their mere logical content, beyond their status as simply narratives about the ‘state of the world’. These very public accounts, often in the form of suicide letters, are more than just arguments: they are expressions; they are gestures that have no analogue in the expressions of those who have chosen to stay.

The type of significance I am investing in the accounts of those who commit academic suicide is the kind that Stephen Mulhall (1990) finds in his interpretation of Wittgenstein’s treatment of the famous duck-rabbit illusion. He takes Wittgenstein to be saying that when someone says “I see a rabbit” (or “I see a duck ”), this should be taken as an *expression* of the sudden dawning of some aspect of the picture (or world) as opposed to taking “I see a rabbit” (or “I see a duck ”) as a proposition that has a truth value that can be assessed by looking for a corresponds between it and the world. With this distinction in mind, I want to present the accounts of those who have committed academic suicide not as propositions that are meant to capture the best correspondence with the ‘truth’ about the academic climate, but rather as expressing those aspects of that academic climate that have dawned upon them. This means simply inviting the reader to take these as expressions (perhaps of exasperation, or absurdity, or clarity, or bewilderment, etc.) rather than data that can be compared, analysed or corroborated with the accounts of those who have remained in academia.

There is another, deeper reason why we might restrict ourselves to reading academic suicide letters as expressions rather than propositions or arguments. If I were to use the accounts as data or propositions whose truth-value can be determined by the degree of correspondence with the truth, then I would already be operating within a domain that takes as given the metaphysics of truth-as-correspondence. Since my inquiry is directed towards the role of metaphysics in academic suicide, I want to postpone for as long as possible this and other metaphysical commitments – as difficult, or as futile as that may be.

*Academic suicide letters*

In light of the motivation described above I want simply to present the following three excerpts from publically available ‘academic suicide’ letters as expressions (rather than accounts) of the academic climate from which they felt they had to flee (by terminating their academic careers).

The following extract is from a letter by Constantina Katsaris that was published in *The Gaurdian* on the 23November 2013.

For the past few years I have been tormented by inconsistencies in university values and how they put them into practice. Universities in the 21st century no longer aspire to become beacons of knowledge, even though they would like to promote themselves as such. Instead, they are trying to turn into large corporations. Their customers are students, their product intellectual property…I found myself caught up in the most absurd situation. On the one hand, I could not conduct any meaningful research as I was working more than 60 hours per week on teaching and administration. On the other, I could not help my students fulfil their dreams; that is, I could not provide them with the right type of education that would allow them to get decent employment in a post-economic crisis. On top of everything else, I felt that I was increasingly removing myself (not just my work) from the real world and the people outside academia who still had an intense interest in my subject area…The decision to leave my institution – and academia – became the obvious solution. (Katsari, 2013)

The next extract is taken from an article written by Eric Jarosinski for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on the 30 June 2014.

In the spring of 2013, with the clock running down and the writing very much on the wall, I decided to withdraw myself from tenure consideration at an Ivy League research university. In other words, I quit before I could be fired. I’d grown tired of the low-stakes, high-anxiety bitterness of academic politics; weary of performing the performative weariness of academic writing; severely depressed by the severely depressing German literature I had once happily endured. All in all, pretty routine academic despair for anyone fortunate enough to land a tenure-track job. For the scores of adjuncts out there, as we all know, the situation is far worse. (Jarosinski, 2014)

The final account is taken from a ‘Diary’ entry written by Marina Warner in *The London Review of Books,* 11 September 2014.

Suddenly, the watchword from management was ‘Teaching, Teaching, Teaching’. We would all have to teach more. Personal arrangements, flexible and part-time contracts were no longer in force. My agreement with the university was for 70 per cent research, 30 per cent teaching. But that was the past. A Tariff of Expectations would be imposed across the university, with 17 targets to be met, and success in doing so assessed twice a year. I received mine from the executive dean for humanities. (I met her only once. She was appointed last year, a young lawyer specialising in housing. When I tried to talk to her about the history of the university, its hopes, its ‘radical innovation’, she didn’t want to know. I told her why I admired the place, why I felt in tune with Essex and its founding ideas. ‘That is all changing now,’ she said quickly. ‘That is over.’) My ‘workload allocation’, which she would ‘instruct’ my head of department to implement, was impossible to reconcile with the commitments which I had been encouraged – urged – to accept…I was asked to take a year’s unpaid leave instead, so that my research could still be counted. I felt that would set a bad precedent: other colleagues, younger than me, with more financial responsibilities, could not possibly supervise PhD students, do research, write books, convene conferences, speak in public, accept positions on trusts or professional associations, and all for no pay…Eventually, after a protracted rigmarole, I resigned. I felt I had been pushed. (Warner, 2014)

**The mountain and the plain**

I want to turn to what might be perhaps the simplest possible rendition of the myth of Sisyphus. The mortal Sisyphus is condemned each day, for eternity, to push a large boulder up to the summit of a mountain only to have it roll down to its starting position at the day’s close. This arduous, monotonous, pointless and never-ending activity was served on Sisyphus as punishment for his ongoing attempts to cheat the gods – particularly the god of death. There are many elaborations on this conclusion to the myth, for sure. Sisyphus’ ‘criminal’ attempts to overcome the limitations imposed by the pantheon of gods, for instance, are so clever and audacious that we really ought to include them in any standard telling in order that we might appreciate fully the nature of the punishment the gods chose for him. However, for this paper, the simplicity and finality of this minimal account of the myth helps bring to our attention an aspect of the myth that might otherwise remain submerged in the drama of Greek mythology. Instead I want to draw attention to what we might best describe as the topology of the world in which Sisyphus is expected to see out the rest of eternity. I do so with the view to considering what insights might be gained from exploring the counterfactuals of the myth.

What appears like a rather obvious point to make about the landscape in which Sisyphus serves out his sentence is that it is not flat; it contains at least one mountain – precisely the mountain that is required for the story to make it the tragedy that it is, to give it the gravitas and moral force that is familiar to us. Given that the evolution of the myth, through its telling, re-telling and re-writing over millennia has not done away with the necessity for *the* mountain as a narrative trope, we might assume that there is something particularly special, or at least metaphysically enduring, about the role the mountain plays in Sisyphus’ fate. Yet, the story could have been told otherwise. It is quite possible to imagine Sisyphus’ punishment taking place in a flatter landscape: the metaphysical equivalent to the Flemish countryside rather than the Alps or perhaps the landscape of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* in which the only mountain of note is Purgatory, which rises from the earth towards the heavens. The gods could have insisted that Sisyphus move his boulder each and every day from one location to another in a flat, featureless and infinite landscape: playing out for eternity a kind of mindless Brownian motion wherein the direction and extent of movement on any given day was at the stochastic mercy of the gods. While we might concede that this planar version of the story might preserve the sense of repetitiveness in the original account, there is a residual and uneasy feeling that this kind of punishment does not quite come up to meet the standard of retribution we think the gods had in mind. The flat landscape in this alternative version of the myth is just too bland to be tragic: there is no gain (to the gods) without the pain (of Sisyphus). Are we justified in taking this flat world as less tragic than one that has high and low grounds?

I would suggest that what makes the second re-telling of the myth of Sisyphus more tragic than the original is the very absence of any privileged direction or location that can be afforded by its flatland topology. The brutal and featureless horizontality of this flat landscape makes every location as good, or as bad, as any other – regardless of whether for Sisyphus the location is a starting point or a destination. Likewise, in a world without a Pole Star as a navigational fixture, each and every daily setting-out is directed towards the same anonymous nothingness as the day before: a nothingness that cooperates with the chaotic negation of any possibility of securing a distinction between the proximal and the distant.

This alternative world for Sisyphus is, as it turns out, remarkably available to us. It is, after all, the world of contemporary (scientific) Cosmology if we recall that the cosmological principal to which many physicists subscribe describes a visible universe that (on large spatial scales) is both homogeneous (that is, has the same properties everywhere) and isotropic (that is, looks the same in all directions). Such a comparison between the cosmological landscape and a re-imagined field of torture for Sisyphus, however, is as misleading as it is instructive. It is instructive in so far as it allows us to engage with the possibility of existing in pure ‘noise’. Here I’m using the term noise with the sense of contrast that is captured in the scientific concept of signal-to-noise. That is, the purely isotropic and homogeneous landscape would render meaningless the condition of any entity within it because there is no salient points of distinction – in location, direction, elevation, etc. On the other hand the topographical analogy with the cosmological principle is misleading in the sense that it is exclusively defined spatially. For while our universe may be spatially isotropic and homogeneous, this aspect of ontological monotony is counteracted by having an arrow of time defined by entropic processes and phenomena. That is, while there may be no high and low ground spatially, we are aware that processes and phenomena tend from states of high order (useful forms of energy) to states of disorder (less useful forms of energy). Put simply everything in the universe decays, tends to irrevocable disorder and chaos. This suggests that the flatland re-telling of the myth is not topologically flat after all, so long as we chose to include its temporality. That is, hills and mountains will nonetheless spontaneously appear to Sisyphus if we allow him to remain a being that is aware of his continuation as a distinctly temporal being. Moreover, whether the result of the arrow of time (defined formally as the second law of thermodynamics), or the ‘direction’ that we cannot help but read into Heidegger’s idea of *throwness*, it is difficult to imagine how this vertical axis can be sustained without some sort of break in symmetry. Gravity is asymmetric – it only pulls, it does not push: water runs down hill under the influence of the gravitational field. Large, round boulders will do likewise and require work to move otherwise. And yet, gravity can also be a friend to those who embrace the fall or those who let themselves go.

**Human and Superhuman**

In re-locating the myth of Sisyphus into the bleakness of a flat, homogeneous and isotropic cosmos, we have rediscovered as it were that Cartesian ego that we discussed previously. That is, the ego that could only lay claim to certainty-in-thought at the expense of any assurance of temporal finitude. This ego could, recall, be brought into the (our) world by acknowledging the presence of other and henceforth being open to the possibility of death. This acknowledgement brings forth simultaneously a mutuality predicated on the capacity to kill and be killed. The *point* that was once the ego now becomes a smudge, a smear that has extension: an ethical di-pole. The ‘perfect’ symmetry of the singular ego can endure but cannot live, for although it can know of its existence it knows nothing of the limits of that existence. In the flatland version of the myth of Sisyphus told above, the isotropic and the homogenous ontology can give over to an undulating landscape brought about by an acknowledgment of time and the acceptance of decay unto death: an alpha and an omega. But there is nothing in the di-poles of self-other or high-low that give us any reason to think of death as murder or suicide. Killing becomes murder, and suicide becomes self-murder, only if we posit values that give to one pole the status of the sun and to the other pole that of the planets, or to make the higher ground the preferred culmination of our journey through life. Even that ethical ‘life’ that is inaugurated by the acknowledgment of the other, is not immune to such projections: there is the good life and the better life, the better life and the best life. The history of metaphysics is the history of breaking the ethical symmetry of self-other. Metaphysics brings to every di-pole, to every gradient, a preferred direction: and this metaphysical arrow makes possible death-as-murder, death-as-suicide, life-as-suffering and life-as-overcoming-suffering.

We began this paper by reflecting on a distinction or asymmetry between humans and non-humans that seemed to arise out of the possibility of suicide. The discussion above brings this distinction much closer to what Nietzsche expressed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* when he states that: “Man is rope stretched between animal and the superhuman – a rope over an abyss” (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 18) and later when he adds: “What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal: what is loveable in man is that he is an over-going and down-going” (p. 18). Animals can kill and be killed, but only humans can think of ‘killing’ or ‘being killed’ as amounting to murder or suicide. Metaphysics is the bridge that takes us away from animality: but as long as we think of the ‘other side of the bridge’ as better than animality, we remain forever stuck. We continue stubbornly to hold on to the suffering that defines us as humans – a suffering that comes from the absurdity of the asymmetry metaphysics introduces. This is why Nietzsche’s prophesy about the superhuman ones is not a re-description or yet another metaphysical break in symmetry – it does not imply that being superhuman means being a better human but rather to become a more ethical being. Moreover, being ethical here does not mean a return to animality, to being creatures that live, kill and are killed. Being superhuman is about the kind of primordial acknowledgment of other that would be inclusive of non-human forms of life and indeed even non-living entities. This is a world with ontological extension and plurality, for sure, but one without the break of symmetry induced by metaphysics (it is not, for example, a world that places the gods above angels, angels above humans, humans above animals and animals in turn above inanimate beings).

**Academic happiness**

We might say that the originality and genius in Camus’ reading of the myth of Sisyphus is located in his concern for the protagonist, not at the stage of the story when he is rolling the boulder up the mountain, but instead at that moment when he is about to set off down the mountain to reclaim his rock. Camus writes:

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step towards the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock…If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious…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. Sisyphus…knows the whole extent of his wretched condition…There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (Camus, 1975/1955, pp. 108-109).

What is striking about this passage is the direct comparison between the “workman of today” and Sisyphus. For as long as we take Sisyphus as human, or merely a figment of the imagination, we miss the opportunity to see Sisyphus as the superhuman prophesied by Nietzsche. If we take up the thesis that Sisyphus is superhuman, then what distinguishes man from the superhuman is the degree to which each respective being (or way of being) is conscious of his own metaphysical commitments. The “workman of today” becomes conscious of metaphysics’ symmetry breaking “only on rare moments”, and when he does, he becomes open to the possibility of a life of suffering, murder and suicide. At these moments, man most distinguishes himself from animals, but at the same time distances himself most from the possibility of a self-other relation whose symmetry is not broken by metaphysics. The academic that becomes aware of the absurdity of the academic climate will remain steadfastly human as long as he holds on to the asymmetry, say, between the academic ideal and the academic reality. When the university of ‘the good old days’ comes to appear – by virtue of metaphysics – superior to the ‘neoliberal university of today’, academic suicide becomes not only a possibility but also an expression of the metaphysics that makes it possible. What we ought to say of the person who commits academic suicide is that they are human, and if we say that they are superior or inferior humans, we are disclosing our own humanity – our own metaphysical commitments.

Sisyphus’ superhumanity comes from a different kind of consciousness, or properly, acknowledgment. Sisyphus rejects the solipsism of the Cartesian ego and embraces the call of the other. Rather than denying the symmetry breaking that metaphysics introduced into the world of self-other, he instead acknowledges it completely. Only then, by being fully human, can he make humanity the bridge that spans animality and superhumanity. As Camus puts it, “…crushing truths perish from being acknowledged” (Camus, 1975/1955, p. 109). Acknowledgment, rather than knowledge or egoistic thought, is what secures our humanity, but more importantly, opens the possibility of being superhuman. Acknowledgement of metaphysics is what silences the gods (i.e. the metaphysical):

All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. (Camus, 1975/1955, p. 110)

If we are to imagine Sisyphus as happy it is because his complete acknowledgment of suffering allows him to reach the superhuman space made available through the call of the other. When Camus says the rock is his [Sisyphus’] thing, we should take this as a self-other world whose symmetry is unbroken precisely because it is fully acknowledged.

Every academic has the possibility of happiness, but only through a complete acknowledgment of the metaphysics at play in academia. Such acknowledgment may find expression in the act of academic suicide, but only if it takes one into that ethical space free from an asymmetric master and servant relationship.

**References**

Allen, A. (2015). Forcing a smile: the plight of today’s educator. Discovery Society, 1 February, Issue 17.

Bull, M. (2011). Anti-Nietzsche. London: Verso.

Camus, A. (1975/1955). The Myth of Sisyphus. (J. O’Brien, Trans.). London: Hamish Hamilton.

Jarosinski, E. (2014). Diary. Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/article/failedintellectual/147353/

Katsari, C. (2013). Leaving academia: Life beyond university. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/nov/22/leaving-academia-life-beyond-university

Levinas, E. (1969). Totality and Infinity: An essay on Exteriority. (A. Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh, PN: Duquesne University Press.

Mulhall, S. (1990). On Being in the world: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on seeing aspects. Abingdon: Routledge.

Nietzsche, F. (2005). Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A book for Everyone and Nobody. (G. Parkes, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wallace, D. F. (2005). This is water: 2005 Kenyon Commencement Address. Retrieved from http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf

Warner, M. (2014). #failedintellectual. Retrieved from http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n17/marina-warner/diary