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The fear of death in Epicurean ethics: Sisyphus as a figure of terror?
A comparison between the views in Absurdism and Epicureanism.

Structure

1 Introduction	3
2 Main part	4
2.1 The concept of fear of death in Camus	4
2.2 The Epicurean view of the fear of death	5
2.2.1 Risk as a requirement of ataraxia	5
2.1.2 Sisyphus as an allegory of the fear of death	6
3 Summary and outlook	7
List of sources	8

1 Introduction

If we look at England's 19th century prisons, it quickly becomes clear why the concept of penal labor there can be considered revolutionary. Firstly, because the prisoners there were forced to perform work that merely involved changing the numbers on a counter as part of a new concept of punishment. Secondly, because the operation of the crank attached to the *crank machines* used for this purpose is ironically referred to in English as a *revolution*. However, the lack of recognizing an individual purpose in life is not only evident during the execution of punitive activities, but is also an integral part of everyday life for some people: according to a YouGov survey in 2015, around a third of workers in Germany perceive their own work as pointless - but return to work with expected regularity. And although many a death-delaying measure in Germany defies a clear living will, no doctor has ever been convicted of prolonging life. The question arises as to why death is so frowned upon as a way out. Probably no other character from local folklore demonstrates the unpleasantness of the painful treadmill as impressively as the figure of Sisyphus, eternally toiling and tortured by himself. His figure, as taken up by the absurdist Albert Camus, paradoxically carries an urge to live that seemingly defies all extrinsic logic - and thus becomes the hero of the absurd. In this context, Epicureanism is concerned with an art of dying that demonstrates both the irrationality of the fear of death and the rationality of life.

This essay is dedicated to a possible connection between these approaches and attempts to answer the following question: Does the mythological figure of Sisyphus in Camus embody the same warning against the fear of death as Sisyphus in Epicureanism? To answer this question, the function of the fear of death in Camus will first be explained on the basis of Sisyphus and in connection with the absurdist concept of dealing with mortality. This is followed by an examination of the view of the fear of death represented in Epicureanism. To this end, Epicureanism's claim to life is first examined in more detail. This is followed by an outline of the function of Sisyphus in Lucretius' argument against the fear of death. Finally, parallels and contradictions between the views will be worked out.

2 Main part

2.1 The concept of fear of death in Camus

In his work "The Myth of Sisyphus", Camus famously paints a picture of a happy hero who draws his strength in life from his unbending belief in a self-chosen purpose. Driven by the goal of outwitting death and thus mocking the gods who have placed him in his fate as a punishment, Sisyphus defies the concept of an imposed state of life. However, there are indications that the bravery of Sisyphus hinted at by Camus conceals a despair from which the tragic hero decides to give meaning to his finite existence:

"His contempt for the gods, his hatred of death and his passionate will to live have brought him the unspeakable torture in which his whole being labors without accomplishing anything." (Camus 2022, 142).

This shows the relationship between the figure of Sisyphus in Camus and the fear of death. It is the acceptance of the fact of his mortality which - coupled with the desire for his life's task - forces him to cling to life and to search for meaning in his torment. His fear of death leads to Sisyphus being forced to search for meaning. Camus, however, praises this state, because Sisyphus' urge to live is not based on a generally recognized rationality of sacrifice for a higher goal, but on the absurdist consideration that life has no recognizable meaning and that it is up to the individual to construct this meaning. In this context, Camus does not consider suicide as a way out to be desirable at all, but rather as a second-rate way of dealing with the absurd for those who do not determine the meaning of their existence through conviction, but rather out of habit, and thus do not exploit the absurd potential of their lives (cf. Camus 2022, 17f). However, it would be deceptive to regard suicide as a promising capitulation to the absurd, since, in contrast to the continuation of existence, it cannot always be forced: "The judgment of the body is always as valid as that of the mind, and the body shuns annihilation. We get used to living before we get used to thinking." (Camus 2022, 20). Camus' Sisyphus, however, stages the first-class option of developing his own sense of life. He can thus be seen not only as an advertising figure for forbearance in the face of the circumstances of one's own existence, but in particular as a warning against the impending confrontation with the fear of death, which makes the rejection of a search for meaning unbearable.

2.2 The Epicurean view of the fear of death

2.2.1 Risk as a requirement of ataraxia

In order to understand whether and how the mythological figure of Sisyphus is able to embody a comparable warning message for the members of the Epicurean school, we will first examine the relationship between death and the claim to life in Epicureanism. In his letter to Menoceus, Epicurus describes a kind of discipline that can enable man to face his life - in the face of his own mortality - with composure: "The wise man, however, neither refuses to live nor fears not to live. For he does not dislike life, nor does he think that not living is an evil. Just as with food he chooses the most pleasant and not always the largest quantity, so also with time he enjoys not the most extended but the most pleasant." (Long / Sedley 2006, 174). From this statement emerges an observation that is relevant to the discussion of the imperfection of a fearful life in Epicureanism that takes place in this essay: Epicurus calls for the pursuit of a balanced and moderate way of life, the goal of which is not the accumulation of transient pleasures, but a fulfilled life in peace of mind. As a consequence of this Epicurean view, the necessity of a constant search for meaning manifests itself, as rejecting the symbolic tightrope of ataraxia means either falling into the abyss of immoderation or into the gorge of the unbearable. The idle balance thus becomes indispensable for those who strive for a fulfilled life. The risk of life is linked to the acceptance of uncertainty.

On the other hand, those who reach for the hand of death with a firm will would be blessed with the certainty of both falls and uncertainty. It could therefore be assumed that death is connoted in Epicureanism in such a way that a swift voluntary demise is preferable to the risk of walking the tightrope. However, the progressive walk on the tightrope of perfect life is a noble endeavor compared to the search for a quick way out. For Epicurus goes on to describe how bad it would be for those who advise the born to "[...] pass through the gates of Hades as quickly as possible" (ibid.). Epicurus asks rhetorically why the proponent of this life-negating view does not then bid farewell to life himself (cf. ibid.). For those who have committed themselves to the perfect life and confirm this by continuing to live, there is therefore no need to put an end to their own existence. Such a search for fulfillment, which is based on the liberation from

desire and pain, by no means derives its meaning from the power of disposal over the length of life, "[...] because it is the same thing to care about living well and dying well" (ibid.).

2.1.2 Sisyphus as an allegory of the fear of death

One objection to this perspective would be that by constantly reflecting on one's own life, the individual could come to the conclusion that a foreseeably short and fulfilled life is preferable to an unforeseeable future dwindling in gloom. Despite all the glorification of the perfect life, one would not do justice to Epicureanism if it were said to be a philosophy of the perfect world in this context. For if one strips away Epicurus' ideas of turning away from the shortening of one's own life around the premise of already secured ataraxia, one arrives at a sincere enthusiasm with which Epicureanism refutes the threat posed by the uncertainty of life. In his argument against death, Lucretius also addresses those who are unable to recognize the meaningfulness of turning to the search for ataraxia. To this end, Lucretius makes use of the figure of Sisyphus, who arose as a link between eternal torment and this world. He writes about the mythological figure: "For to pursue the vain and unattainable goal of unrestricted power and to endure ever harder toil without slackening, that is the struggle to push a stone up the mountain, which then nevertheless rolls down again from the highest peak and hurries downwards towards the flat plain" (Long / Sedley 2006, 177).

It is therefore not the fanatical indulgence in an unattainable future that is supposed to carry people through life. Sisyphus symbolizes in his struggle, which is ultimately only due to his own reluctance to die, that it is not the hereafter that is to be feared. Rather, our present is as shattered by the same fear of the unknown as Sisyphus' laborious existence, which is why his torment is "[...] only a projection of the moral horror of this life" (Long / Sedley 2006, 179). Sisyphus' ordeal becomes a memorial for the forced continuation of life out of defiance against death. In its confrontation with mortality, Epicureanism attempts to liberate man from his clinging to life only for the sake of life. At the same time, however, it rejects the idea of suicide, as the desperate forcing of life should not be replaced by death, but by the bold search for ataraxia. Sisyphus steps -

to find the lowest common denominator with Camus - as a frightening figure in the face of a desperate search for meaning. However, the cautionary character is not limited here to the impending confrontation with the fear of death and the consequences of refusing to search for meaning, but is expanded to include a warning against careless brooding over unrealistic goals in life. Camus' perspective is thus largely immanent to the Epicurean claim, but is made more precise by a specific concept of successfully finding meaning - which is absent in the absurdist view.

3 Summary and Outlook

This essay was largely able to bring together the views on the fear of death described at the beginning. While Epicurus' seeker ideally recognizes and understands his desideratum, ataraxia, Camus' seeker must face the possibility of never being touched by the realization of the meaning of life. Anyone who understands the latter and nevertheless decides to go on living faces up to the absurd in a level-headed way, but in doing so denies the purpose of an intentional search for meaning and declares himself willing to claim an assigned - habitual - meaning as his own. Epicurus, whose search for ataraxia requires constant devotion, resists the temptation of this thought. Sisyphus unites Epicureanism and absurdism insofar as the character, driven by an indomitable sense of life and the associated absurdity of dying, rejects suicide as a way out of life - even a painful one - and sets himself this task. However, the nuances in the role of Sisyphus, which was always a central motif in this essay, are more pronounced than initially assumed: Given the arbitrariness of a perfect life as well as the finality of non-being in death, it is practically impossible to construct a suitable ideal figure for the perfect man in Epicureanism. The possibilities of realizing a self-chosen meaning of life are too diverse, and the veneration of a dead person who has only overcome perfection to become a heroic figure by calmly crossing the border to non-being would probably be too magical and ritualistic. It therefore stands to reason that a personified projection surface in Lucretius embodies more of a warning - against the fear of death - than a role model for a successful life. The situation is different with Camus, for whom the differentiation between frightening figure and hero leads to the limbo of the symbolism of an ideal, which can be summarized excellently with a saying: It's not easy, but it's easy.

List of sources

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