Is striving for a career in academia in the 21st century absurd?

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In Albert Camus’ philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* he uses the phrase "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" to encapsulate the idea that life can still have meaning despite its inherent absurdity. Camus described absurdity as a confrontation, an opposition, a conflict, or a “divorce” between two ideals. Specifically, he defines the human condition as absurd, as the confrontation between man’s desire for significance in a silent and cold universe. According to Camus, the myth of Sisyphus, who is condemned by the gods to ceaselessly roll a boulder to the top of a mountain only to have it roll back down each time he reaches the top, is a metaphor for the human condition: a perpetual struggle without hope of success.

Camus argued that Sisyphus is the absurd hero precisely because his situation is so hopeless and his fate so meaningless. Yet, by embracing his fate and the struggle itself, Sisyphus transcends his punishment and finds a form of happiness in his labor. Camus suggests that, like Sisyphus, one must find value and contentment in the struggle itself rather than the outcome. Thus, the statement "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" serves as a powerful assertion of human resilience and the capacity to find meaning in life despite its apparent futility.

The absurd condition can be recognized by those striving for a career in academia, particularly in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields in the 21st century. Especially, the pressure to publish academic research has intensified as technology and the internet have made it possible to access the near complete body of published human knowledge. This accessibility has pushed researchers towards a landscape where one must constantly publish "novel" research to stay relevant, as it has become increasingly feasible to check whether supposed research has already been conducted.

This presents a conundrum. Even a year of not publishing any papers would result in a decrease in citations and relevance [citation needed]. However, the body of research is so large that the majority of time in conducting research is the task of a thorough literature review [citation needed]. Of course, historical literature will not change, and a researcher is free to write about their narrow specialization, but this often leads to a career with narrow relevance with no real significance. The researcher’s condition is paralleled with Camus’ description of the human condition.

Thus, Researchers desire for significance towards a silent and cold environment and one striving for a career in academia in its current environment seems absurd. To be relegated to conducting experiments, writing papers, being asked for revisions, get a brief sense of relief when it is published, only to have the pressure to continue is as absurd as Sisyphus' labor to push a boulder up a hill, have it roll down, and to push it again. While for some researchers, there is joy in the process, for many, the cycle feels overwhelmingly futile.