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Anné H. Verhoef

a School of Philosophy, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
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Sisyphus, happiness and transcendence

Anné H. Verhoef
School of Philosophy, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
anne.verhoef@nwu.ac.za

What is the relation between transcendence and happiness? What type of transcendence can still be part of the concept *happiness* in our modern age? To answer these questions, I analyse the myth of Sisyphus from the existentialist perspective of Albert Camus, and investigate whether Sisyphus is (or can be) ‘truly’ happy and what role transcendence plays in this kind of happiness. This prompts a question about the relation between the concepts *transcendence*, *meaning of life*, and *happiness*. Taking Sisyphus as an exemplar, I argue that, although our contemporary culture has a flattening tendency regarding transcendence, various types of transcendence remain inextricably related to happiness.

**Introduction**

Albert Camus asserts in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that there is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide – ‘judging whether life is or is not worth living’ (Camus 2005: p. 1). This is also our question, especially if we assume that we face the same predicament as Sisyphus, the same fate of ‘bare repetition’ (Taylor 1987: p. 675). In other words, if it is also my lot to be condemned to a futile activity all my life, if the world is meaningless, then the question is not only what makes me want to live, but also whether and how I could be happy. In reaction to Camus, one might claim that the assumption that life is absurd, without meaning and without God or transcendence, is not necessarily true. There might be a transcendent that gives meaning to life, and this sense of meaning could be related to happiness, understood as an emotional state of well-being that is characterised by pleasant emotions such as joy. In this paper, I will consider the possibility of such a relationship between happiness, meaning and transcendence. However, I will restrict the scope of my argument to the Sisyphus myth, insofar as this myth represents something of the secularisation of the modern Western world (with its rejection of transcendence) and of the link between (post)modernism and life’s absurdity. Camus’s existentialist interpretation of the myth is relevant here because he imagines Sisyphus to be happy with his fate. The second part of the article investigates whether this concept of happiness might be ‘true happiness’ and the third part explores how this happiness might be related to transcendence.

**Sisyphus’s predicament**

Sisyphus betrayed the gods and was condemned to push a rock up a hill only to see it immediately roll back down to the bottom, forcing him to begin again – a maddening task for all eternity. In Camus’s interpretation of this myth, Sisyphus is not only seen as personifying the absurdity of...
human life, but also as happy – ‘one must imagine Sisyphus as happy’ (Camus 2005: p. 119). Camus observes that '[o]ne does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness [...] Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable’ (2005: p. 118). But how can Sisyphus be happy while repeating the same futile task, accomplishing nothing?5

Camus claims that Sisyphus can be happy, not by ignoring the meaninglessness of his task, but by being conscious of it. His logic is that one requires a particular quality of consciousness in order to be able to say one is happy. According to Camus, this moment of consciousness comes for Sisyphus when he accomplishes his task and watches the rock rushing down the hill.6 At that moment, he feels fear in realising that he is lost in this world, imagines that things could be otherwise, and feels anxious about his fate – in short, he experiences anguish. The anguish is like an ‘awakening'; it is equivalent to surveying one’s life and asking ‘why?’.7 Before this awakening the ‘everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future [...] In truth he acts as if he were free, even if all facts make a point of contradicting that liberty’ (Camus 2005: p. 55).

The feeling of weariness after accomplishing the tasks of everyday life initiates the question ‘why?’. When one feels weary, according to Camus, one ‘seeks for the unity of mind and the world, seeks for the absolute to gain balance back, to be in agreement with the world’ (Oktar 2013: p. 331).8 The problem with this unity or agreement is that the world is silent and does not provide a rational answer, and consequently ‘man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world’ (Camus 2005: p. 26).9

To see that the world is limited (in that no answer comes from it) and that we do not have knowledge of it (it remains a mystery for us) is for Camus the reality of the absurd man, his awakening to his limited freedom. It is the ‘return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep [which] represent the first step of absurd freedom’ (Camus 2005: p. 57) and at the ‘end of awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery’ (Camus 2005: p. 11). In this desperate state of realising the absurdity of life, Sisyphus chooses to live; he chooses courage and reason. Courage ‘teaches him to live without appeal and to get along with what he has’ and reason ‘informs him of his limits’ (Camus 2005: p. 64). To choose ‘recovery’ is for the absurd man thus not an escape into an illusion of life as ‘not absurd’ (meaningful), but consciously accepting the absurd.10

Sisyphus chooses to carry on with this absurd life – but what is the point of living if there is no reasonable meaning to life? Is suicide not a better alternative? This groundless affirmation of life by Sisyphus (and by implication, by existentialism) is problematic: if there is no reason for life’s affirmation, no meaning in life, how can there be happiness? Happiness will only be available for the ‘happy fool’.8

5 This is an important question because in Camus’s description of the everyday life of a person we share very much the same fate as Sisyphus. Camus explains that we rise, go to work, work the morning session, have lunch, work the afternoon session, go home, have dinner, sleep and then we rise the next day and repeat the same pattern. Camus (2005: p. 117) writes: ‘The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks and this fate is no less absurd’.

6 The moment of consciousness does not come at the stage of pushing up the rock (in this act he might be able to avoid the question of whether pushing this rock is his only possibility), but as soon as the rock rolls down (which reveals some other possibilities, because he is not occupied with the rock anymore). Camus (2005: p. 117) defines this later stage as the ‘pause, the hour of consciousness’, which Sisyphus cannot avoid. In this moment of consciousness there is for Sisyphus a specific consciousness of freedom (possibilities), which is also a consciousness of anguish.

7 This ‘why’ is inseparable from the absurd because it is when the absurd is being faced that the feeling of anguish is triggered. To face the absurd is to ‘realise the difference between natures of freedom that one thinks s/he has and the nature of freedom that is manifested through anguish’ (Oktar 2013: p. 331). The absurd is not elevated to the absolute by Camus, though, because that would mean that he makes sense of the world and he would thereby contradict himself.

8 Camus has the same point of view as Wittgenstein, who writes that, ‘to be in agreement with the world [...] is what “being happy” means’ (Wittgenstein 1984: p. 75).

9 Kant (1949: p. 214) calls this longing, or Verlangen, the human’s ‘entire object of a pure practical reason’. This demand for a totality of meaning is interconnected with our longing for happiness, according to Riceur (1965: p. 66).

10 Camus (2005: p. 64) writes: ‘Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure with the span of his lifetime’. It is in accepting his absurd task, making the rock his own, without any illusion, where Sisyphus’s greatness lies (Meiring 2013: p. 5). Ruud Welten (2014: p. 17), in turn, has a different interpretation of Camus’s view of Sisyphus. Welten notes that for Camus it is not so much about the absurd, but rather about the rebellion it causes. This view links to Foley’s, which will be discussed at the end of this article.

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The question thus remains whether Sisyphus can be happy if he consciously accepts this groundless existentialist life affirmation amidst the absurd. On the one hand, it seems that such an acceptance of the absurdness of life can bring him happiness, because it means he will not fear death as the destroyer of meaning. Wittgenstein (1984: p. 74), for example, observes that ‘a man who is happy must have no fear. Not even in the face of death. Only a man who lives not in time but in present is happy’.

Sisyphus is a candidate for such ‘fearless happiness’, because as Camus (2005: p. 29) remarks, there ‘can be no absurd outside the human mind […] like everything else, the absurd ends with death’. The absurd man\(^\text{11}\) should thus have no fear of death, because he sees the world as a limited whole in a timeless present.\(^\text{12}\) On the other hand, it seems that there must be more to happiness than not fearing death and accepting the meaninglessness or absurdity of life. In other words, we seek a broader, positive understanding of happiness that can incorporate our whole life (our relations, our emotions and our rationality), and that is not merely the absence of fear. This kind of happiness might be open to the possibility of meaning in and of life. It is not unusual to think of happiness and meaning in life as being interdependent. Wittgenstein, for example, makes a connection between happiness and the purpose of existence (Oktar 2013: p. 334), and Ricoeur (1965: pp. 64–68) also emphasises this interdependence between happiness and meaning of life.\(^\text{13}\)

It might therefore be too early to conclude that the absurd man, or the fearless Sisyphus, is happy, because to be happy might also require some conception of life’s meaning. The problem is that Sisyphus rejects the possibility of any such meaning, by embracing absurdity.

Yet, there is a way out of this dilemma for Sisyphus. Oktar (2013: p. 335) explains that when Camus’s absurd man comes face to face with the absurd, he probably experiences feelings of being fallen, fear, alienation, strangeness and isolation – ‘the same feelings those who long for God’. The absurd man chooses in this situation to live without God, without appeal, and chooses to live with his own courage and reason. He has the consciousness that there is no absolute meaning of life that is independent of him,\(^\text{14}\) and that ‘it is me giving meaning to the world’ (Oktar 2013: p. 335). Sisyphus has to assign his own meaning to life, and Camus argues that Sisyphus does this by accepting the absurd, by recognising and embracing his fate. If, for example, Sisyphus thinks that there is no purpose of existence except to live, then he can fulfil that purpose by just living. Sisyphus has thus a very limited conception of the meaning of life (ironically through the denial of such meaning), but by embracing it he becomes content, the ‘master of his days’ (Camus 2005: p. 119) – a master and not a slave, redeemed and not condemned. By being content with his fate he becomes satisfied with what he has and he does not long for any other reason for existence, such as God, and he lives within his limits. Camus (2005: p. 119) can thus conclude that ‘all is well […] this universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile’. Sartre agrees with Camus when he writes that the absurd does not dictate suicide:

> The absurd man will not commit suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusions […] and without resignation either. He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him. He experiences the ‘divine irresponsibility’ of the condemned man (Sartre 1955: p. 27).

In other words, even with the denial of any final meaning of life, or rather with the embracing of the absurd, Sisyphus becomes content with life, and with contentment comes a ‘limited’ or ‘weak’

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\(^{11}\) Absurd ‘man’ is Camus’s terminology and is used here not to be sexist but as reference to any person who realises the absurd. It is also used interchangeably as a reference to Sisyphus in this article.

\(^{12}\) The world as a ‘limited whole’ is a concept Camus uses to emphasise the lack of transcendence and the unreasonable nature of the world.

\(^{13}\) This is also recognised in positive psychology. Martin Seligman (2002: p. ix), for example, remarks: ‘people want more […] they want lives imbued with meaning, and not just to fidget until they die’ See also footnote 9.

\(^{14}\) This demolishes the ‘terror of the absolutes’ and creates an ethics of the present – a justice sought not in future order but in the here and now (Meiring 2013: p. 5). This also opens up the ethical problem foreseen by Nietzsche, that if our tests are taken before ourselves and before no other judge, we cannot be sure that we will not let ourselves cheat (Angier 2006: p. 22).
meaning of life and the possibility to be happy. Camus therefore imagines Sisyphus to be happy despite the gods’ punishment. It is a happiness that is found within this absurd world. However, the question that arises here is whether this is ‘true’ happiness. Do we not need a more robust conception of a meaningful existence in order to be happy in any authentic sense?

Is Sisyphus ‘truly’ happy?

Although Camus imagines Sisyphus to be happy, one might argue that some important elements of happiness are lacking here. Camus’s definition of happiness is based on an acceptance of life’s absurdity, on a ‘weak’ meaning of life. Hence, the question remains whether a ‘stronger’ understanding of the meaning of life would not lead to a more encompassing or fulfilling happiness. This question indicates that the concept happiness has not only qualitative differences, but that it relates to different aspects of being human. In this regard, Daniel Haybron (2000: pp. 210–211) makes a distinction between happiness as a purely psychological matter and happiness as something that concerns the whole character of a person’s life. Haybron further distinguishes the second type into three concepts of happiness that denote three different things: (1) psychological happiness, denoting a state of mind; (2) prudential happiness, denoting a kind of well-being, a successful life, and to flourish; and (3) perfectionist happiness, denoting a life that is good in all respects, including the morally good. With regard to Sisyphus, it can then be asked whether he can be imagined to be happy according to these three types of happiness.

To determine Sisyphus’s psychological happiness is, of course, only a hypothetical exercise. Yet, psychologists may argue that his state of mind is probably positive while he is pushing the rock up the hill. This is the stage where there is probably no reflection and where he may experience ‘flow’ – the experience of being absorbed in what you are doing to the extent that you lose yourself. Flow may be defined as a ‘deeply satisfying state of mind achieved by intense and prolonged concentration on difficult activities requiring a high level of skill. The experience is similar for [...] competitive sport, mountain-climbing, professional work, playing an instrument [...] and sex’ (Foley 2010: p. 151).

With reference to flow, Richard Layard (2005: p. 74) observes that ‘the greatest happiness comes from absorbing yourself in some goal outside yourself [...] [to lose yourself]’. Because flow often occurs ‘during physical movement’ (Haidt 2006: p. 95), the act of pushing a rock up a hill can constitute such a flow activity, as it is an intense physical activity that might demand a lot of skill and concentration. Thus, if Sisyphus can be imagined as experiencing flow, we can imagine that he may be happy in the psychological sense – he may have a ‘happy brain’ and a positive state of mind. In

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15 Happiness depends here on his attitude, his reason and courage. Oktar argues that the same can be true for our lives: ‘What makes us strive to live despite our circumstances and privations and “be happy” rather than end our existence is the possibility that we can choose, if we realise that the world does not have any other meaning than we assign to it. This consciousness gives us the courage to live without appeal’ (Oktar 2013: p. 337).

16 Whether or not there is any transcendence here is an issue that will be investigated in the third part of the article. Wessel Stoker (1993: pp. 141–142) argues that to say that everything is absurd is to work with a metaphysical understanding of meaning. Camus still deals with the metaphysical understanding of meaning, but only in a negative way – there are no grounds for meaning: neither God nor the absolute.

17 Daniel Haybron’s research focuses on the relation between philosophical and psychological happiness. He has written on subjects such as ‘happiness and pleasure’, ‘happiness and the importance of life satisfaction’ and ‘a theory of happiness’. This article does not intend to analyse all of Haybron’s philosophical work on happiness, but uses only his specific definitions of happiness from his article ‘Two Philosophical Problems in the Study of Happiness’ (Haybron 2000).

18 Perfectionist happiness is the Aristotelian eudaimonia, which is about living in a manner that actively expresses excellence of character or virtue. While prudential happiness is focused on one’s own success and well-being, perfectionist happiness will often prove contrary to our selfish interest. The point is only that being virtuous, sometimes requires us to be selfless, which is in that sense something against our interest. Although psychological happiness is important for prudential happiness it is not exhausted by it, as hedonistic utilitarians may put it. Prudential happiness is more about ‘leading a happy life’ (a broad kind of well-being), while psychological happiness is about ‘a property of a person, a mental state’ (a more subjective but important part of well-being) (Haybron 2000: p. 211).

19 This concept of happiness (the phenomenon of flow or optimal experience) was developed by the Hungarian-born co-founder of positive psychology, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his book Flow: the Psychology of Happiness (Csikszentmihalyi 1992). Many researchers (especially in neuroscience and psychology) adopted this concept as a crucial psychological part of happiness. Jonathan Haidt, for example, describes flow in his Happiness Hypothesis as a ‘state of total immersion in a task that is challenging yet closely matched to one’s abilities […]’, and it creates a state of mind that ‘many people value even more than chocolate after sex’ (Haidt 2006: p. 95).

20 So if Sisyphus is not psychologically happy, he might get the advice to take certain steps (normally five to seven in most self-help books) and ‘exercise his human brain’ because ‘happiness is psychological and neurological growth’ (van der Spuy 2011: p. 28). The challenge is to
this context, Sisyphus might score high on a happiness index that measures brain states.\textsuperscript{21} However, there are difficulties with such a narrow conception of happiness as a moment of emotional euphoria, or of “losing oneself”. For Camus, being conscious of one’s situation is a necessary condition for being happy. This would involve precisely those moments where flow is lost, and where Sisyphus would be reflecting on his task and life. Hence, for Camus, the criteria for happiness apply to life as a whole, and not only to particular instants within it. The question, therefore, is whether we can imagine Sisyphus to be \textit{consciously happy} when he is reflecting on his life.

To answer this question, one can look at the five basic views of happiness that Haybron (2000: pp. 215–216) lists, which all acknowledge the reflective notion of happiness. The first is life satisfaction, which is about being satisfied with one’s life as a whole and not about feeling satisfied. It is here not only one’s mental state that is important for happiness, but also a more rational judgement of the happiness of one’s whole life. The concept of ‘whole life’ is, of course, philosophically problematic,\textsuperscript{22} but on a simplistic level one can ask whether one could be satisfied with one’s life as a whole if it only consisted of pushing a stone up a hill. Sisyphus recognises the absurdity of his fate. According to Camus, this initially causes him anguish, but to the extent that he comes to recognise that life itself is absurd, the question of being satisfied with one’s life as a whole also becomes absurd. So, ironically, when Sisyphus embraces his absurd fate, he can be content with his whole life. It is exactly the acceptance of this absurd fate that enables him to be satisfied with his life as a whole.

The second basic form of happiness, according to Haybron, is reflected in the hedonistic theories, which reduce happiness to the balance of pleasure over displeasure. Sisyphus’s punishment is not supposed to be pleasurable, but entirely unpleasurable. However, the positive psychology movement points out that one’s attitude to any task can make a world of difference.\textsuperscript{23} This means that with the right attitude, Sisyphus would be able to find more pleasure than displeasure in his daunting task – a scenario that is clearly envisaged by Foley (2010: pp. 225–227).

The third basic view of happiness, the affective state view, takes happiness to involve a subject’s emotional state (Haybron 2000: p. 215) – very much like psychological happiness. The hedonistic theories would normally count all pleasures, but in Sisyphus’s case the physical and intellectual pleasures are excluded. The question, then, is whether Sisyphus can be imagined to be happy in this sense. Does he \textit{feel} happy? As argued above, Sisyphus can experience flow while performing his task, but this is not conscious happiness. However, Camus (2005: p. 117) writes of Sisyphus that ‘the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart’. In other words, paradoxically, struggle and pain can also lead to a feeling of happiness. Thus, in terms of his conscious (struggle) and unconscious (flow) experiences, we can imagine Sisyphus having an affective state of happiness.

The fourth basic view of happiness that Haybron identifies is the perceived desire satisfaction account, which analyses happiness in terms of the perceived satisfaction of one’s desires. To be happy is ‘just to believe, for most of one’s desires, that they are being satisfied’ (Haybron 2000: p. 215). Can we imagine that Sisyphus believes that his desires are satisfied? Before Sisyphus was punished he ‘could not renounce the amenities of the world, because he wanted to experience the joys of life’ (Oktar 2013: p. 337). His desires were previously very extreme,\textsuperscript{24} but fate has forced him to renounce these amenities and to be conscious that there is no sense in having such desires any longer. We can imagine that if Sisyphus managed to embrace his fate with good grace, that his desires would change and that he would consequently have perceived satisfaction of his new limited desires.

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\textsuperscript{21} This kind of happiness is normally about people’s state of mind or emotion, and it is something that is measurable, empirical and scientifically researchable.

\textsuperscript{22} Feldman (2008: p. 219) explains this problem by saying that every precise ‘Whole Life Satisfaction’ concept of happiness ‘either requires actual satisfaction with life as a whole or requires hypothetical satisfaction with life as a whole’.

\textsuperscript{23} Seligman (2002: p. xi), for example, observes: ‘Authentic happiness comes from identifying and cultivating your most fundamental strengths and using them every day in work, love, play, and parenting’. Wittgenstein (2005: p. 86.43) also notes that ‘the world of a happy man is a different one from that of an unhappy man’.

\textsuperscript{24} Welten (2014: p. 17) points out that Sisyphus was famous for his cunning and avarice.
Lastly, Haybron mentions *hybrid* views of happiness, with ‘subjective well-being’ as the best-known example of such a view (Haybron 2000: p. 216). In this view, happiness consists in some combination of life satisfaction and an affective or hedonic state. Sisyphus’s happiness might include both these elements (as argued above) and therefore a combination is also possible. The basic five views of happiness that Haybron lists can thus in principle all be experienced by Sisyphus, but in spite of this the question remains whether Sisyphus is prudentially happy.

Haybron (2000: p. 211) describes prudential happiness as a kind of well-being or as success in life. Prudential happiness entails more than psychological happiness, because it requires ‘flourishing’ and ‘a high state of well-being’, but it may exclude the requirement that someone leads ‘a good life (good, that is, without qualification)’ (Haybron 2000: p. 212). Although psychological happiness is not the same as prudential happiness, Haybron (2000: p. 214) describes it as ‘the single most important aspect of well-being’. He further argues that ‘it is doubtful that many choices that lead to (psychological) happiness would fail to yield a broader kind of well-being as well. Secure happiness and the other prudential goods will likely follow’ (ibid.).

It has been argued above that one can imagine Sisyphus to be psychologically happy, and that Sisyphus can even be considered happy according to the five basic views of happiness that Haybron lists. While Haybron (2000: p. 214) agrees that well-being is a ‘comparatively abstract phenomenon’, Sisyphus’s happiness complies with the single most important aspect of well-being, namely the psychological. This kind of happiness is ‘secured’ for Sisyphus and ‘prudential goods will likely follow’, according to Haybron’s description above. One can therefore conclude that it is possible to imagine Sisyphus to be prudentially happy, or at least that his life does not preclude this type of happiness.

The third main concept of happiness for Haybron is *perfectionist* happiness. Here the question is whether we can imagine Sisyphus as being happy in the sense that he leads a life that is good in all respects, including the moral. Does he live in a manner that actively expresses excellence of character or virtue? This Aristotelian concept of happiness is difficult to identify with Sisyphus, because he interacts with no other humans, and nature is only part of the punishment and an obstacle. Neither is there any interaction with the gods. Sisyphus’s circumstances simply lack the possibility to act in accordance with an entire list of virtues such as friendship, generosity, moderation, wit and others. It is therefore difficult to imagine Sisyphus as being happy in the Aristotelian sense. One can say, however, that by doing his job and fulfilling his daily task, Sisyphus is obedient, he does nothing wrong, and in general leads a morally good life. Furthermore, in the light of the absurd, Sisyphus chooses life and embraces it with its fate, which is an indication of a good character by many standards. This still does not qualify Sisyphus as perfectionistically happy in the Aristotelian sense, but one can at least imagine Sisyphus living a good moral life.

So, does this mean that Sisyphus is ‘truly’ happy? Does it mean that Sisyphus (or the absurd man) can be happy despite his acceptance of the absurdness of life, despite his futile fate, despite his ‘weak’ meaning of life? From a religious perspective it is argued that God is necessary for happiness (see next section). Sisyphus’s predicament is caused by the gods: they condemn him to rolling this rock up a hill again and again. We can imagine therefore that he might understand his task as god-given and that this can give his life a higher purpose as well as a sense of meaning. It is on this point where modern Western people possibly differ the most from Sisyphus. In Camus’s discussion of Sisyphus, Sisyphus symbolises our absurd predicament, but with the important difference that, according to Camus, we do not have the gods to refer to anymore in our secularised society. We may ask, then, whether the gods (or at least a notion of transcendence) are indeed necessary for happiness.

**Happiness without transcendence?**

In religious terms, happiness is generally defined by referring to God. Aquinas, for example, identifies happiness with God as ‘at once real and ideal’ (Theron 1985: p. 363). This definition makes happiness without God impossible. However, what about atheists who seem to be happy?

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25 The absurd is understood as ‘the negative basis for the rejection of a religious view of the world’ (Nauman 1971: p. 2).
A move out of this dilemma is to speak of ‘maximal happiness’ as found with or within God alone. The ‘highest possible form’ of happiness is thus only available for a religious person, whereas someone who believes that life is deprived of any divine meaning (Sisyphus, for example) will only be able to experience happiness as something less. Ellen Charry (2004: p. 20) explains this as follows:

God is key to happiness in this life [...] we are shallow if we think of happiness as a state of mild emotional euphoria. A more substantial approach is to think of happiness as deep-seated satisfaction and enjoyment of life that is safe from its inevitable chances and changes: that is, it is far more rewarding to think of happiness in theological terms than in emotional ones.

Happiness without God, or within this life, is not ruled out by Charry, but God is the key to more rewarding and substantial happiness. Although some empirical evidence supports God as the ‘key’ to happiness, different types of transcendence (not only God) are sometimes linked to happiness. Transcendence in a psychological context, for instance, is often understood only on a basic level as referring to ‘something greater than ourselves, which we should respect and work for’ (Layard 2005: p. 91). This can include society, a system, an ideology, the common good, individualism, etc. In religious terms, transcendence refers to the supra-sensory, God, the divine, or the absolute of the ‘true world’. It is what lies beyond and stands over against the immanent. However, something immanent to our world – such as the belief structure of humanism, for example – can also become transcendent for us. In his typology of transcendence, Wessel Stoker (2012: pp. 5–26) calls this immanent transcendence. Radical transcendence, in contrast, is where the transcendent is the ‘wholly other’ and thus sharply distinguished from mundane reality. In this case, the transcendent (such as God) is beyond or above us and the world and therefore needs to break into our immanent world. This is the more metaphysical understanding of transcendence, which Camus rejects. The third type of transcendence described by Stoker is radical immanence, where the transcendent is no longer sought outside mundane reality. In other words, all we have is this world and there is nothing beyond it; the world is a limited whole (as perceived by Sisyphus). The last type of transcendence that Stoker identifies is transcendence as alterity, which rejects the opposition between transcendence and immanence, so that the wholly other can appear in every other. There are thus four different types of transcendence. All of them can relate to meaning of life and happiness, but the modern secular world seems to be much more geared towards immanent transcendence. Layard (2005: p. 194) remarks in this regard that ‘belief in God seems to be good for happiness. It certainly helps if you believe there is a purpose in the universe. But if you cannot believe that, you can still believe in purpose created by man’. A purpose in the universe, a meaningful life, personal goals and individual values are all contemporary forms of immanent transcendence – of the transcendent which is experienced in mundane reality. Is this the type of transcendence Sisyphus adheres to?

If Sisyphus embraces the absurd – which is part of mundane reality – and finds in it the meaning of his life (which is precisely that it has no meaning), and the absurd itself acquires

26 Maximal happiness is ‘incompatible with temporal existence’ and it ‘has to be “transcendent” ’ (Theron 1985: p. 363). The argument is that ‘in the literal sense there can be no happiness in the temporal order’ (Theron 1985: p. 366) and that happiness cannot be only a matter of full actualisation of the self. Happiness is only ‘perfect’ when ‘the world has come to an end, i.e. [when] all the misfortunes of others, and a general resurrection […] has taken place’ (Theron 1985: p. 367), to form a ‘perfect whole’. Only in the after-life one can experience complete happiness.

27 In this regard Layard (2005: p. 72) proposes that ‘one of the most robust findings of happiness research [is]: that people who believe in God are happier […] We can be sure that to some extent belief causes happiness’. Nevertheless, this evidence does not mean that no happiness is to be found without a god (or a different notion of transcendence). Stoker (1993: p. 108) therefore describes it as an embarrassment that religion sometimes claims to be the only source to provide meaning to life. He argues that religion does not have the sole mandate for happiness or meaning of life.

28 For psychology, the seven major factors that make the biggest difference to our adult happiness are (the first five in order of importance): (1) family relationships, (2) financial situation, (3) work, (4) community and friends, (5) health, (6) personal freedom and (7) personal values (Layard 2005: pp. 62–63). The importance of God (or transcendence) in one’s life is only mentioned under personal values (the last point).

29 Nietzsche and Deleuze fall in this category.
for him the status of an absolute, then one can say that Sisyphus recognises a form of immanent transcendence. If, on the other hand, he denies all absolutes, and hence any form of transcendence beyond mundane reality, as Camus argues, then one can say that he embraces transcendence as radical immanence. This means that there is nothing outside the world, nothing that can give us meaning, no absolutes; but in the end, this denial still leads to a purpose in life of merely living. Ironically, then, the complete immanent, mundane reality becomes the transcendent as a radical immanence. This type of immanent transcendence replaces the traditional radical transcendence (like God), both for Sisyphus and for members of modern secular society.  

Transcendence is, however, not annihilated in this quest for happiness. For example, self-transcendence (like flow) seems to be crucial for experiencing happiness in the psychological sense. Furthermore, the rejection of radical transcendence does not destroy Sisyphus’s possible happiness. Thus, although the type of transcendence has changed, transcendence remains important in relation to happiness.  

From a religious perspective it can still be asked if Sisyphus’s happiness is in any way comparable to the type of happiness one can experience when one has a notion of radical transcendence. In other words does belief in God, and the meaning such belief confers on human existence, necessarily lead to a more rewarding and substantial happiness than for those, like Sisyphus, who embrace radical immanence? Although Sisyphus rejects an absolute meaning of life (especially an externally received meaning linked to a radical transcendent), one can at least argue that he has an internal meaning of life. The paradox in Sisyphus’s case is that one can find meaning in life by denying that life has meaning. This is what Camus suggests happens when Sisyphus embraces his absurd fate:

> At such a point you no more ask whether it [your life] will be worthwhile, or whether anything of significance will come of it, than the worms and the birds. The point of living is simply to be living, in the manner that it is your nature to be living [...] The meaning of life is from within us, it is not bestowed from without, and it far exceeds in both its beauty and permanence any heaven of which men have ever dreamed or yearned for (Taylor 2000: pp. 333–334).

If such an internal meaning of Sisyphus’s life is comparable to the (external) meaning of life given by God, perhaps Sisyphus might know the same kind of happiness as experienced by those who believe that God gives their lives meaning. This comparison can be made (initially at least) by looking at four traditional arguments according to which one can only have a meaningful life with God (Wielenberg 2005: pp. 14–38). The first is the final outcome argument, which says that without God there is no immortality and consequently life has no ultimate significance. Against this, Sisyphus can claim that the point of living is not the final outcome, but simply to be living – ‘it was just the building, and not what was built, that gave [his] life meaning’ (Taylor 2000: p. 332). In answer to the pointless existence argument, or the idea that life has internal meaning only if it has a supernatural meaning, Sisyphus can say that he himself is qualified to assign a purpose to his life and he does not need a supernatural being to hand down a purpose. To the nobody of significance cares argument, which says life has internal meaning only if a suitable significant being (omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect) cares about that life, Sisyphus can again say that he is sufficiently significant to make his life meaningful – the importance is that he cares. To the fourth argument, that God is needed for a source of ethics, one can argue that Sisyphus makes a life-affirming choice by embracing his fate and that this can form the basis for an ethics of life, of justice in the here and now (Stoker 1993: p. 149). It thus seems that Sisyphus’s internal meaning of life (based on radical immanence as transcendence) is comparable with the

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30 There is ‘a flattening tendency in our contemporary culture’ (Foley 2010: p. 144) with its decline in religious belief (due to the progress of science) and a move away from radical transcendence to immanent transcendence and radical immanence. Van der Merwe (2012: p. 508) argues that ‘the general drift in postmodernity is towards the sublimation of transcendence within a conceptual framework and cultural condition of immanence’.

31 Happiness experienced through flow (as the optimal experience), meditation, ecstasy (standing outside yourself) and spirituality are all forms of self-transcendence. Self-transcendence is only a form of immanent transcendence in Stoker’s typology.

32 Camus (2005: p. 119) points out that while Sisyphus is ‘convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human [...] he is still on the go’.
external meaning of life one can find with God (as radical transcendence) and that he might thus be happy in the same rewarding and substantial manner as those who find happiness with God.

The above interpretation of Sisyphus’s life as being meaningful and eventually happy is not unproblematic. Erik Wielenberg (2005: p. 22), for example, is of the opinion that it is ‘going too far to say that whether a life has internal meaning is entirely a matter of the attitude of the person who lives the life’. This sentiment is echoed by Michael Martin (2002: pp. 205–206), who states that one ‘errs on the side of lenience’ because such an interpretation ‘allows practically any life […] to be meaningful’. Despite this critique, one has to admit that it is at least possible for Sisyphus to find life’s meaning in its very absurdity, and in the end also happiness. This is a happiness without an absolute meaning of life, without God, without radical transcendence. This happiness is dependent on a different type of transcendence, namely radical immanence. Even in this extreme case of Sisyphus, transcendence and happiness are thus inextricably linked. Michael Foley emphasises this point when he concludes that we need a type of transcendence to help us to be content, and to find happiness in this absurd world.\(^3\) Foley (2010: p. 219) also sees life as ‘essentially absurd’, without the possibility of a radical transcendence or a given meaning, and therefore, he argues, we need to settle for a ‘lower form of transcendence’. He adds that we need to ‘find again the classical courage and humility of Sisyphus who does not demand gratification but knows how to turn to advantage whatever the gods have decreed, and how to make every activity its own reward’ (Foley 2010: p. 225). Foley states more boldly than Camus that Sisyphus is happy with the absurdity of constantly pushing a rock up a hill. Foley imagines that even if the gods gave Sisyphus a new heavy rock, ‘[he] can defy. He can refuse. He can say no. Or rather in arrogance and humility, rebellion and acceptance, absurdity and happiness, with a loving slap, “This is my rock”’ (Foley 2010: p. 227).\(^4\)

Conclusion
To ask whether Sisyphus can be happy, as imagined by Camus, raises various questions regarding happiness. In this article I have argued, first, that different conceptions of happiness are reconcilable with the possible happiness of Sisyphus. Second, I investigated whether happiness (again with Sisyphus as an exemplar) can be disconnected from the twin notions of transcendence and a meaningful life. An analysis of Stoker’s typology of transcendence and Sisyphus’s possible happiness confirmed the interdependence of happiness and transcendence. Although there is in our secular culture a flattening tendency regarding transcendence, these considerations strongly suggest that a meaningful life, happiness and transcendence remain inextricably connected.

References

\(^3\) Previously, theistic religion was the main vehicle for experiencing transcendence (including self-transcendence, insofar as religion involved a spiritual desire ‘to lose oneself’ in God), but it has become increasingly difficult to believe in something beyond the world. An alternative in the modern world, according to Foley, is to locate the transcendent ideal in the world itself, thus in pantheism. This is echoed in Layard’s analysis of contemporary culture and is nothing other than transcendence as radical immanence.

\(^4\) Foley (2010: p. 227) argues that Sisyphus’s embracing of his fate, this content of Sisyphus, is not an illusion. Instead, it is a rebellion, an arrogance in which there is a consciousness of his absurd task, but also a consciousness of his self-worth, of his individuality, of his life – that is all that he has – and nothing can take that away. In this rebellion, Sisyphus can be imagined as happy.
Meiring, E. 2013. ‘Camus se opstand is nou nodig’, Rapport, 22 December, p. 5.

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