



Sisyphus and the Present: Time in Modern and Digital Legalities

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Accepted: 11 April 2022 / Published online: 29 June 2022
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Abstract

Albert Camus' reflection in *The Myth of Sisyphus* presents the absurd, the intrusion of the meaningless and irrational universe into the order and future focus of modern life. Central to Camus' reading of Sisyphus and his dammed eternal labour, was time. Camus clearly saw that modernity and modern life was predicated on tensions in time. Moderns perceived, and lived, in the timescale of past-present-future. A commitment to chronology that promised an allusion of meaning within a world of essential meaninglessness. Modern law, the law forged by the structural violence of positivism and sovereignty, shared this commitment to time. However, transitions to the digital are presenting different relationships of law and time. Emergent digital legality manifests a Sisyphean closed loop of repeat, return and enclosure, past and future become a blurred undistinguished present. The modern terror of mundane life that Camus tried to recast, seems intensified and totalised in the digital. However, rather than the possibility of the joy of the absurd, there is something else. Sisyphus, Camus imaged, had weathered to look like his rock, but he never merges with it. But in the unfolding of the digital and its legality, the secure subjectivity that Camus exalted is less then certain. This might not be bad.

This paper is an edited version of an invited conference talk presented the Cyberjustice Laboratory, University of Montreal 9 March 2022. I would especially like to thank Karim Benyekhlef and Cristiano Therrien for the invitation and opportunity to present. I also would particularly like to thank the comments and questions from the audience. All faults and omissions remain my responsibility.

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1 Introduction

In this paper I argue, through engaging with Albert Camus' reflection in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, an uneasy unfolding for digital humans and their laws. Camus' Sisyphus is celebrated as an 'absurd hero'¹ [7: 23]. He presents Sisyphus as a human that has, notwithstanding what looks like endless repetitious labour, let go of time and found joy in the present. Camus posits three key elements. First that the world is absurd; without meaning or reason. Two, that humans are prima facie compelled try to construct meaning and in doing so create and cling to time as chronology. Three, this structure ruptures. The absurdity of the world overwhelms. Camus claims that in response, there is a life-affirming need to dwell in the present without anxiety as to future.

Camus' text with its themes of repetition, time, life and death suggests the essential elements of legality. Furthermore, it particularly is provocative of the features of modern legality, of chronology, power over life, and the techniques of constructing legal machines from assemblages of humans, paper and writing. In this it also reveals the challenges of the emergent digital legality; of its speed and automation, its post-literacy focus on code and data and its rigidity to change. Together these combine to emphasis a deep presentism associated with digital legality. I conclude by examining Camus' Sisyphus in relation to the forms of life generated by digital legality. There is a suggestion of hopelessness, of the human lost in a digital of repetitious click-work; invoking the image of a forever present devoid of either external pleasure or even Sisyphus' alleged internal joy. However, there is another possibility. The digital is not absurd and the capacities for connection, of not being a monad in the digital are enhanced. In these there is the possibilities for hybridity and change that goes beyond the limits of human being-in-the-world emphasised by Camus.

2 Sisyphus and Camus

Sisyphus is a meme. In particular, the representations of his punishment in Hades of an eternity of pushing a boulder up an incline, until its weight became too great, and it rolls back down [22: 106–7]. This image of Sisyphus – of the fruitily of human doing – has circulated throughout history [30: 12]. A reminder of entropy, and the hubris of humanity daring to achieve lasting change in an inhuman universe.

The causes of Sisyphus's punishment is less clear [22: 105]. The myths mix and diverge. There seems agreement that he was the king of Corinth and was clever, manipulative and pragmatic. He has been accused of murdering travellers and profiting from their goods and seducing his niece as part of a complex plot to murder his brother. However, he seems to come into his myth-hood through tricking the gods and avoiding death. Sisyphus witnesses Zeus carrying off the river god Aso-

¹ A note on gender-neutral language and Camus' text. The universal human that Camus speaks about is male. Sisyphus, Camus' 'absurd hero' is an abuser of women. He is presented as a monad cut off from the world sentenced for his arrogance and manipulations to an eternity of fruitless labour. In Camus' conflating of humanity with masculine separation there is a pathway to critique, both of Camus' existentialism, but also the presentism encoded by the digital, that I explore towards the conclusion. For these reasons I have not changed Camus' text to gender-neutral language.

pus' daughter. He tells Asopus her location in return for a water spring in Corinth [22: 425]. Sent to Hades by Zeus, he escapes by tricking and binding Thanos thus preventing death on Earth [22: 553]. Caught again he manipulates his wife around his burial rites and then tricks Persephone and is sent back to Corinth where he thoroughly enjoys himself [19: 368] until finally detained by Hermes and locked into his everlasting punishment [22: 554].

Sisyphus and his punishment have circulated since classical times. He had a roll-on part in Ovid's version of Orpheus and Eurydice; pausing his eternal labours to listen to Orpheus' music. Political cartoonists and public pundits have represented agendas as Sisyphean tasks. There are debates about whether health care in a pandemic are 'Sisyphean' [15]. Similar poverty law practice has been described as Sisyphean [39: 493] and also the challenges facing minority law professors in North American law schools [20]. One of the more striking invocations of Sisyphus is Albert Camus' 'troubling' [40: 278] 1942 reflection on the absurd and suicide, that ends with Sisyphus and his rock as not a warning but an ideal. Indeed, contrary to the strain and pain that Titian captures in the famous 1548 painting of Sisyphus' bare back as his struggles with his stone, Camus concludes that: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" [7: 24].

The progression of ideas that leads Camus seemingly to this non sequitur is illuminating. Camus like Kafka is a serious interlocuter of the absurd. Located between reflection on the everyday of then modern mechanical living and the work of Kierkegaard, Jaspers and Heidegger, Camus postulates two essentials. The first is that the world is irrational – a chaos of forces, events and stimulations – that is beyond human reasoning and reckoning. A sovereign nature dark and unknowable: 'This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said' [7: 7]. The second is a human condition that is inherently orientated towards trying to make sense of this irrationality, a "wild longing for clarity" [7: 7]. Humans are condemned to be creatures of sense in a nonsensical universe [7: 18]. For Camus "the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" [7: 10]. It is absurd to be a being driven to making meaning and sense in a universe that is incapable of providing meaning and sense.

Camus notes that awareness, or a sense of the absurdity of existence comes in moments of doubt. He presents the repetitiousness of modern, more precisely mid-20th century, living:

Rising, street-car, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, street-car, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement [7: 5].

This amazement emerges when the "primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia" [7: 5]. Camus presents three responses to this why.

The first is the response of the modern to redouble efforts. The momentary why becomes sublimated into the time stream: "during every day of an unillustrious life, time carries us. But a moment always comes when we have to carry it. We live on

the future: ‘tomorrow,’ ‘later on,’ ‘when you have made your way,’ ‘you will understand when you are old enough’” [7: 5]. Activity and doing in the present is justified for a sense of a better future. This is the prudence of the moderns that Hobbes discussed, of a being composed of reason and time, who refuses to be subdued by the hostile, alien universe, and plans, accumulates and strives to set in place security, wealth, happiness *in the future* [26: 12–13]. The present is a nothing. The past is a resource for reflection on previous doing of, what worked, what didn’t, what regrets and what pleasures, should inform the future. The human, more precisely, the modern, in this vision, dwells in the future, located within the material actuality of the world, they cope by becoming a time-spectre, remembering, analysing the past and fixated, obsessing on the future. Pushing down the moments of why and amazement to return to “artifice” [7: 5] and purposeful doing. Camus, in broader community with Heidegger, sees this as masking and deferral. Ultimately, all the plans and dreams for the future are insubstantial: “Such irrelevancies are wonderful, for, after all, it’s a matter of dying” [7: 5]. Death is absurdity *para excellence*: “Death is there as the only reality” [7: 20]. It renders “plans that either come to naught or half a page of scribbled lines” [37] Death is the inescapable absurdity that annihilates the future, and with it, human reasoning and meaning making.

Camus’s second response, which he refutes, is suicide. Camus acknowledges that the sense of despair that can emerge in and through the absurd can invoke suicide as an ultimate attempt to control the chaos [7: 3–4, 9]. Through more contemporary discourses on mental health, these parts of Camus’ text are challenging. Early in the text he asks: “Does the Absurd dictate death?” [7: 3]. Camus follows up with a line of reason that pictures a modern facing the absurd and the certainty of death, and coming to the belief that “His future, his unique and dreadful future—he sees and rushes toward it. In its way, suicide settles the absurd.” [7: 19]. Camus, however, is trying to write against suicide, exposing the existentialist basis as a way of affirming living [38, 43: 187].

This affirmation as an alternative to suicide, forms Camus’ third response. For Camus the “revolt” of recognising absurdity should not lead to suicide [7: 18–19]. But rather “freedom”, a freedom from the maddening insecurity and anxiety of modern life but also a freedom from the totality of death [7: 20]. This freedom is the freedom of openness to the moment. A presentism; indifferent to the future: “The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man” [7: 22].

It is at this point, at the very end of Camus’ reflections that he turns to Sisyphus. In describing his crimes and imagining his labouring, Camus focuses on Sisyphus’ moment of return:

At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain...At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock [7: 22].

It is this moment of return, which from the perspective of the moderns and their pre-occupation with the future could only been seen as anticipation of toil and pain, is for Camus, the exemplar of absurdist presentism:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy [7: 24].

It is with this vision of Sisyphus at the base of his mountain, gripping his rock, surrounding by the dark nothingness of Hades that I want to begin to talk of law. It seems absurd to suggest that Camus' existentialist text has anything to do with law. Yet there is something essential to law that is revealed.

3 Legality

There are two immediate features to Camus' on Sisyphus that are striking to read in the immediate present. The first is as a text written at the zenith of world war – by an active member of the French underground [43: 184] – there is no mention of it. The social where it is presented is merely those *videttes* of mundane modern life, the focus is on the being thrown into the world with a compulsion to reckon with it. Death features as a finitude and an absolute, not something that is institutional and mechanical in the form of a power deployed in the present to secure some future. In Camus there is just the monad and irrational nature. Collectivity, connection and culture as living through and with the world is absent. In this war and law are banished to the absurd. Outside forces that a Sisyphian being with “inner freedom” [7: 20] would endure and cherish in the immediate. Just part of the rock that is being pushed up hill.

The second is the juxtaposition of two senses of time. The first is modern time. The awareness, and anxiety of the passage of time; of chronology, of a sense of past, present and future. The other is the presentism to accept the absurd. The moment in and of itself; where there is no sense of passage, no past and particularly no anticipation or anxiety for the future. In a sense, if time is only comprehensible to being as flow, it is a stasis of no-time. Commencing with the Hellenistic tradition, there has emerged a complex set of ruminations on the nature, essence and experience of time [5, 31]. These always circle around chronology and history; of time as a sequence, as an order through which matter moves and the presentism of a being conscious of this flow, of a future that is already a present and immediately a vanished past [57: 213].

It is the union of these two realisations that Camus' text can become a cypher on legality. There is the realisation of the absence of a meaningful social, and with that conflict, pain and death, beyond the immediate of the absurd man. This suggests Robert Cover's retort to modern jurisprudence for sanitising law and particularly judgement into an internal intellectual process of interpretive reckoning with textual

material. Cover points out that judicial interpretation takes place in the “field of pain and death” [12: 1601] and not just within the skull of a judge. The judge interconnects with a social-technical machine ultimately dedicated to the eradication of life. The reality of sovereign violence’s ultimate basis on the capacity to kill is always present in the judicial act. Camus considers the condemned man as freed from the tyranny of the future to live properly in the present [7: 9. 19]. If this is human, then Cover suggests that the creature that is generated through the hybrid of human and judicial office, is more monstrous. It is more monstrous because it constructs the world through wielding pain and death in the present so to make the future for others [49: 73–74]. In Camus’ schema this is inhuman work.

This realisation that law is not only a death machine but a time-death machine, something that is in time and makes time, suggests Cover’s other stellar contribution to legal theorising. In ‘Nomos and Narrative’ he opened the way for cultural legal studies through clearly presenting that legality fundamentally involves the imagining of normative universes. Law is ultimately storytelling that connects a present community to a past, and through which it not only imagines but strives towards a future [11]. First Nation communities know this well. They dream and sing a law that twines people, country and ancestors, to give life to a present, and to safeguard the future [4]. Law must, to be law, order time.

4 Modern Legality

To invoke Robert Cover is to immediately consider the structure of modern law. I have been using the term modern, knowingly, so far. By modern I am focusing on the human and the civilisation bequeathed by the Enlightenment. It was the moderns and their concerns for the future as deferring the absurd in the everyday life of industrial society, that Camus addressed.

There is clearly a modern sense of legality. A legality tied with rationality and sovereignty. A legality of posited orders [33] and as Cover reminded in the 1980s, predicated on sovereign violence. A predication that was not at all hidden by Austin or Hobbes. What also was not hidden by Austin or Hobbes, but becomes more obscured in the 20th century, was the intense commitment to time as chronology in modern legality. As the law and time literature has tried to retrieve, fundamental to positivism was past, present and future [10, 14, 34]. Most apparent being the sovereign lawmaking act. Rex on this date replaces a law with another. As John Finnis explains, with a nod to more mathematical notetaking, the lawmaking act by a valid lawmaking entity at T_1 changes the law. Prior to T_1 , at T_0 the law was different. At T_1 it changes, and then remains through $T_2, T_3 \dots T_x$ until a subsequent lawmaking act by a valid lawmaking entity changes it [17: 268]. Contracts also had the intense consideration of time as a sequence; of the past, negotiation, offers and counter offers, of present – the moment of contract formation – and of future, anticipations of performance or enforcement. Modern legality and its preference for time as sequence is pervasive. From the logics of court procedure to the tyranny of billable hours in legal practice, to the date in the police notepad, to the timestamps that organises the forms, files and the archives of paper that fuel modern law.

It is this last manifestation of time as chronology in modern law, the material practices of managing, organising and rendering coherent texts, that reveals a fundamental, and sometimes seen but not often reflected on essence to modern law. Modern legality is the law of writing. Its modern status confirmed by the rationalism of its textuality. Modern law does not depend on spectacle and speech, as did pre-modern legal orders. The common law, if its theorists and critics are to be believed, is defined as fundamentally unwritten and unwritable. Text of judgements are aids for memory, hints of how a time immemorial law should resolve a present dispute. Modern law is the law of writing, of signed contract and legislation. The law is in the books, capable of being read, understood and applied [55]. This is why modern jurisprudence forgot about pain and death, H. L. A. Hart could only refer to sovereign violence through agricultural allusions to sheep and abattoirs [23: 113]. Law was text and therefore the dilemma was how to ensure interpretive fidelity between the text of law and the actions of human decision makers. It was this safe retreat by modern legality to the technical concern with forming meaning from text that was the primary target for Cover. It ignored the inherent basis of law in exercising power over human lives, of manufacturing specific futures. A future with assets and wealth, a future without. A future with freedom and future of imprisonment. A future to be lived, a death sentence and a known date for termination. Paper, and people trained in the profession of law, formed a time-death machine that decided in the present the shape of the future [47: 29].

However, in the everyday of legal practice, indeed in the everyday of living, text and paper is in retreat. One does not read, one scrolls. One does not write, one types, or increasingly takes a photo or exclaims ‘hey Siri, take this note...’. If modern law was a time-death machine formed from the analogue cybernetic interactions between humans, paper, text and archives, that had known features, limits and alleged strengths, what changes when the material practices that bind this entity together transforms to the digital?

5 Digital Legality

Cornelia Vismann’s *Files* presents this fundamental challenge. Her fabulous work emphasises the material substrate that gives life to forms of law. She identifies in the Roman codex the physical technology that made it possible for the institute and in the late-19th century office technologies of files, safes and staples, the material forms for regulation and bureaucratic legality [52: 39–70, 123–160]. She also suggested that the digital, especially, as it grows into itself and dispenses with the legacies of earlier modes of information management, will nurture unique forms of legality [53].

The digital, and the digital and law has been present for at least 60 years. There is research from the late 1940s concerned with rendering legal decision making according to symbolic logic [1, 29] notes and commentaries from the 1960s discussing computers and legal practice [28, 45], and work beginning in the 1980s in what becomes known as the ‘rule/law as code’ [41]². However, it has only been more recently that

² On law/rules as code see generally [3, 58].

the impact of the digital on the basic essence of modern law has become a common focus, with concerns of disruption to legal practice [44] and also challenges to deeper legacies from modern law, such as due process and reasoned, transparent decision making [9]. There can be seen four emerging features of digital legality, particularly in contrast to the familiar features of chronology, text and human processing of modern legality [36].

First, digital legality seems instantaneous. There is a speed to the information flow and to decision making processes that eclipses modern legality. Modernity legality was slow, dependent on the cognitive processes of the human brain, the hand that writes and types, and the transportation technologies to move and organise paper. The digital, through automation can make decisions that manifest in the world with an inhuman speed. It has become a blasé truism of the digital that it is intensely global; a feature that is hardly mentioned in contemporary discourses. Notwithstanding, attempts at digital localisation and data regulation such as the EU's GDPR [2, 24] or China's recent cybersecurity laws [8], geography, and modern legality's jurisdictions are marginal in the digital [6: 25]. The digital exists outside of physical space and digital doing is frictionless. It seemingly takes no time. It also means there is a tremendous opportunity and capacity for connection and interactions in the digital. Space and time evaporate as barriers between human doing together in the digital. This has been heralded several times. In the initial celebration of social media as progressive globalisation [27], in the capacity for the digital to support remote working during the COVID pandemic [16] and in contemporary hype around meta(verse) style maturing of the digital [32].

The second is the primacy of code and data and not of writing and interpretation. These forms and practices, intensely intimate to modern legality are peripheral; merely one way that a user interface can be expressed. The digital is code and data; not text and writing. The digital has been described as post-literate [46]. Information can be communicated between digital systems and humans in ways that engage other senses and other forms of informatic training. The visual as still and moving images, sound, touch and direct neural interfacing can all interface between the digital's code and data and the human, to use a cyberpunk metaphor, 'meat' [54].

The third feature of digital legality is rigidity [54: 832–833]. There is with code and automation a lack of capacity to change. Law in modernity was plastic. Positive law *by definition* and in contrast to naturalist legal orders, was based on the possibility for change. To make new law. Modernity was revolutionary. Old laws, institutions, practices were replaced with new laws, agencies and interventions into human life. The technical discussions of law reform were made possible because of this capacity of modern legality to enact changes [18]. In the digital the master code endures. It is too essential to change. Instead of new, an additional line of code is layered over the top. For all the excessive consideration of the disruptive nature of the digital, once manifest code becomes architecture and then language. The digital involves an archaeology, a digging through the layers of code, of updates, patches and versions, to uncover the basic perimeters of the system.

These features all lead to the most singular and essential feature of digital legality, its presentism. There is an increasing sense that the chronology of modern legality is being dispensed with. The speed, automation and spacelessness create constant

instances [48: 528]. Machine learning systems examine data from the past to ensure homogeneity into the future [25]. The precariat rushes from one indistinguishable gig to the next. There is a buzz around blockchain because it supposedly provides an archive of the past that can be trusted in the future to not be an artifice of the present. All that is, was and will be. The moment that Camus suggests provides freedom from the terror of experiencing being in an unreasonable world, seems to be not the exception but the rule. Chronology is vanishing. The present becomes the alpha and omega.

The digital is emerging not as unknowable nature but a coded, known and curated universe. It is not absurd. As more of human life and doing migrates from the irrational world of the real and into the meta of bright colours and customizable avatars, the modern's sense of chronology dissipates. But this presentism remains restless. There is a Sisyphean sense to the doing in the digital. Menial, repetition, click-work, impulsive, unreflective; catch that Pokemón, generate data to feed the hungry AIs [42]. It is almost as if consciousness is also receding. A bot could do the same. The human in the loop can be excluded and efficiency could be even more maximised. The digital is presentism and menial repetition but there does not seem the capacity for self that Camus' Sisyphus retained. What it means to be human is in flux.³ This is not new. Fluxing on who or what deserves the title of human is perennial [13: 187]. The digital is disrupting, legal practice, legality and what it means to be human. The emergent being comprised of a hybrid of the real and digital that is meaninglessly clicking, swiping and shedding data [50] seems very close to Sisyphus. Except on Camus' account, I wonder if they are happy. Camus' Sisyphus, like the judge of modern jurisprudence, still had what was within his skull. To accept the absurd, allowed for a distancing between self and world so as to live in the moment without the modern's anxiety for the future. The being generated by the forms of digital legality does not seem to have this privacy. There is no privity of the self, and subjectivity is not given. If there is an immersion in a non-absurd world that is vouchsafed by code, there is no rupture with conflicting subjectivity. There is an echo chamber of being; that seemingly could amount to no being.

This might not be bad. Possibly this is the withering of what feminist called the separation thesis associated with masculinity [56]. That sense of self apart from the world, that is drawn to be in conflict with it and must master himself, so to let go and be happy in the moment, seems dated. Camus missed the social and in that, the role of connection. His inhuman nature could rather be considered the fluid connectedness that Donna Haraway has termed natureculture [21: 149]. The digital and its capacity for forming connections and relations could be understood to resonate with critical projects antithetical to the man in the world as projected by Camus [35].

Sisyphus cannot hope. To hope is to surrender to chronology and anticipation of the future. But I remain sufficiently, tragically modern to hope that emerging digital/real hybrids generated by digital legality, might do better and live richer, in the world of the real and of the meta, because of their capacity to connect. To be something else than a monad stuck in a cycle.

³ Umbrello and Lombard suggests that the secular freedom of Camus' Sisyphus presents as a model and myth for the future of transhumanism [51]. I am reluctant to reach this far, Camus' Sisyphus turns away from chronology. It is not a rejection of a specific future, but the closing off and rejecting of all futures.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

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