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The notion of “Sisyphus task” in medicine A reconstruction

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In medicine, along with the other domains of our life, the myth of Sisyphus is frequently evoked upon confronting a task conceived as laborious, endless and for some futile or even purposeless and meaningless. In this paper, we explore the origin of the myth of Sisyphus so that its connotations and symbolizations will hopefully emerge clearer. It is suggested that the natural background of the myth might be related to the seismologic history of Greece, and Corinth in particular, a city ruined and rebuilt several times. The natural component might symbolically echo in the personified myth of Sisyphus, Corinth's founder and might explain the peculiar labor he was condemned to execute eternally, as well as the meanings the myth carries. Like his own city, Sisyphus also suffered the same “ups and downs” of fate, either as a public figure –patron of several big achievements– or as a punished hero condemned to roll a stone in the underworld. His persistent efforts led to temporary successes, even though he could not find permanent solutions to the labors he undertook alive or dead. Thus, the myth of Sisyphus is related to human efforts and its limitations, the feasible and infeasible the two main poles between which the myth functions. Conceptualizing with Sisyphian terms their function, physicians can celebrate their transient victories, and by realizing their limitations, reconstruct their aspirations without decreasing their efforts.

Key words: Myth of Sisyphus, Sisyphian task, medicine.

Introduction

«Aye, and I saw Sisyphus in violent torment, seeking to raise a monstrous stone with both his hands. Verily he would brace himself with hands and feet, and thrust the stone towards the crest of a hill, but as often as he about to heave it over the top, the weight would turn it back, and then down again to the plain would come rolling the ruthless stone. But he would strain again and thrust it back, and the sweat flowed down from his limbs and dust rose up from his head»

HOMER, *Odyssey*¹

It has been suggested² that articles with "catchy" titles –that is titles "catching" the eye of the reader–work best in medicine, although they may occasionally introduce a systematic, so-called "catchy title bias".³ This may be the case with the word "Sisyphus" and its derivatives such as "Sisyphian task" or "Sisyphian labor". By using Pub Med and searching for published articles containing the words "Sisyphus" or "Sisyphian", we found 62 publications between 1965 and 2006, 53 of which used this catchy title. In scholar google, the response to "sisyphian" were 2270 citations in fields, including medicine, like education, philosophy, ecology, economy, computer sciences, or physics. The meaning, however, of a medical task called "Sisyphian" is far from clear: In the majority of cases it bears vaguely negative connotations, variously described as laborious, endless, frustrated or even futile, purposeless and meaningless. It is, therefore, interesting to trace its origins and the symbolic meanings that this unusual myth resonates, so that their semantics may be better elaborated. Our main emphasis is the working connotations of the myth, the constructions, physical and mental, since their building blocks, "the stones", stand prominently on the "Sisyphian" labor.

The myth

Sisyphus, a Greek mythical hero, was condemned to eternally roll a huge stone up the top of a hill. He never succeeded, because as soon as the "shameless"¹ stone almost reached the summit, it bounced to the very bottom. This myth, authored by Homer,¹

was broadly disseminated, particularly by the Nobel prize winner in literature, Albert Camus in a semi-essay titled "The myth of Sisyphus".⁴ The task Sisyphus was condemned to perform was laborious, as it required great physical effort, since the rock was huge and heavy. Furthermore, it was an endless task, as he had to repeat it eternally. Finally it was incomplete as the ultimate goal was to keep the rock permanently on the top of the hill. Due to its universality, and its relevance to everyday life, a task is oftentimes called «a labor of Sisyphus» or the efforts as «Sisyphian» if it possesses the above attributes.

Sisyphus was a creator: The founder and king of Ephyra (later Corinth), and of the biennial Isthmian Games; he was also credited as promoting Corinthian commerce and navigation,⁵ considered to be wise: Homer calls Sisyphus the "craftiest" («κέρδιστος») of men,⁶ Hesiod as "very clever" («αιολόμυτης»)⁷ and Pindar describes him "like a very god, was most wise in his counsels" («πυπνότατον παλάμαις ως θεόν»)⁸. His cleverness could only be compared to Ulysses' who was allegedly his son.⁵ Moreover, etymologically, although not all authors unanimously agree, the name Sisyphus means "wise man".⁵ But the strongest evidence of Sisyphus' ingenuity comes from his innumerable endeavors and tricks played on men and gods.⁵

Bringing to mind contemporary detective stories, Sisyphus trapped Autolycus, a thief of cattle (his name and his character borrowed by Shakespeare in his "Winter's Tale"), by engraving the inside of all his cattle's hooves with the monogram SS, or according to another version with the words "stolen by Autolycus". By this action, the stolen beasts could be later recognized in Autolycus' stable. In another story, however, reminiscent that of Autolycus, a woman, named Mistra, defeated Sisyphus. Sisyphus bought her from her father hoping to take advantage of her exceptional abilities and become wealthier, but she deceived him and returned to her father.

He attracted the wrath of the Gods, though, by revealing Zeus' whereabouts with Aegina, the daughter of the river-god Asopos, to her searching father. In exchange, Asopos undertook to supply the town of Corinth with a perennial fresh-water spring, Peirine, on the summit of Acrocorinthus, its

acropolis. Not forgiving Sisyphus, Zeus asked his brother Hades to fetch the informer down to the underworld. Sisyphus, however, chained Hades by persuading him to demonstrate the use of handcuffs and he quickly locked them. As long as Hades was kept prisoner in Sisyphus house "nobody could die, even men who had been beheaded or cut in pieces; until at last Ares, whose interests were threatened, came hurrying up, set him free, and delivered Sisyphus into his clutches".⁵

Anticipating his descent to Hades, Sisyphus plotted another ingenious escape: He instructed his wife Merope not to bury him. (She herself suffered Gods' resentment for marrying a mortal- and a criminal too! – and as a punishment she became the only pale star among her star-sisters, the Pleiades). On Hades, Sisyphus requested to return for a while to the upper world to arrange the neglected duty of his burial. The deceived Persephone granted the request, but he abandoned his promise to return to the underworld. It was left to Hermes to perform his duty, fetch him to Hades permanently and pay the labor ordered by the Gods.⁵

Thus, it seems that the Gods condemned him for trying to service his fellow citizens by giving them water, just as Prometheus was condemned for giving mortals fire. Sisyphus, however, never enjoyed the epic status and the happy end of Prometheus,⁹ apparently because some questioned the true reason for his punishment, as well as the morality of his character. According to Hyginus,¹⁰ the reason for his punishment was that Sisyphus seduced his brother's daughter, Tyro, to revenge his brother, as the two brothers hated each other. When Tyro learned that Sisyphus' motive was not love but hatred of her father, she killed the two sons she had borne to Sisyphus. Sisyphus has been also described as a villain or a street bandit, allegedly killed by Theseus (generally not mentioned among this hero's feats) who was credited as founder of the Isthmian games.⁵

At the end, no matter how creative or ingenious, Sisyphus was eventually defeated. This may imply that any constructions will be found some day inadequate and be reconstructed or replaced by new ones.

Tracing the origins: the ups and downs of Corinth

It is of interest to look upon some more or less salient physical features inherited to the myth, for most myths usually derive from popular efforts to explain natural phenomena.¹¹

By reflecting upon the marvelous Homeric description of Sisyphus pushing the rock (see above), we are impressed by the picture of Sisyphus himself: It is a human figure, perhaps that of a stone worker who tries hard, muscle-tensed, dusted and sweating. Camus himself makes the association: "The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks..."⁴

In contrast to other condemned heroes such as Ixion (crucified, in a rotating fire wheel), Tantalus (imprisoned, chained and unable to drink or eat) and Prometheus (chained to a cliff and having his liver eaten by a vulture) who were all restrained, almost incapable of doing anything, Sisyphus remained active and movable.

Moreover, knowing Sisyphus' origin, it is rather easy to associate the stone, the rock and the hill with Corinth's Acropolis, Acrocorinthos. Some vessel paintings show the top of the hill bearing resemblance to that of Acrocorinthos.¹² This huge, monolithic rock easily appeals to the stone and stone up-rolling hill task of Sisyphus. Acrocorinthos, indeed, symbolizes the triumph and the fall of Sisyphus.

Lastly, the city "Corinth" offers important clues. Corinth is Sisyphus's country and Poseidon, god of the sea and earthquakes, the chief god of the city. Often referred by the epithets Enosichthon, Seisichthon, and Ennosigaios -all meaning "earth-shaker", with "seismos" the Greek word for "earthquake"- Poseidon visits the area quite often. He is depicted as riding a chariot with horses, near the sea, possibly symbolizing the tsunamis after the earthquakes. Indeed, Corinth is one of the most seismically active areas in Greece, just as Greece is in Europe.¹³ There is evidence that the city of Corinth was destroyed around 2000 BC, but the reason for this event is not mentioned.¹⁴ Although it is not conclusive, some scientific data point towards an "earthquake storm" that may have occurred in the

Late Bronze Age Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean between 1225–1175 BC.¹⁵ The National Geophysical Data Center (NGDC)¹³ based on its own scientific criteria of significance, reports an earthquake in this area in 373 BC which has been described by several authors, such as the Greek writer Pausanias.¹⁶ In 1858, the old city was totally destroyed by an earthquake and the new city was founded 3 km NE, on the coast of the Gulf of Corinth. The most recent major earthquake (6,8 Richter) shocked and damaged the whole area, including Athens, in 1981. The connection between the water spring Peirine on the summit of Acrocorinthus and Poseidon's earthquake associations are evident. Poseidon, in his contest with Athena for the possession of Attica, thrust his trident into the Acropolis of Athens, and a seawater spring immediately gashed out.⁵

By combining these elements together, it can be suggested that the origin of the myth might be connected with the perpetual destruction and rebuilding of the city, due to the habitual in this region earthquakes. "The strong earthquakes (in Greece) have affected the history, tradition, religion, arts, building habits, political, social and economic status for a very long time".¹⁷ Such an explanation seems plausible and fits the peculiarity of this myth and the unique form of Sisyphus' punishment; otherwise a punishment compatible with other prominent attributes to his character would be more comprehensive. For example, since he was accused to be a street bandit, he might have been more "restricted" and assigned to a "Tantalian-like" punishment, such as desiring everything but achieving nothing. Instead, a task involving the burden of bearing a huge stone on his shoulder in an endless repetition and not accomplishing the ultimate goal fits rather better as a punishment, knowing the adventurous, crafty, creative, novelty seeking nature of Sisyphus.

Comments

Assuming that the main theme of the myth of Sisyphus is that of work and that our hypotheses regarding its physical origins has some merit, then the peculiar labor of Sisyphus seems more sensible. The real "ups and downs" phenomena of Corinth consist

of the physical framework, the "bones" for the myth, around which the fate of Sisyphus is folded and unfolded: An eternal physical and mental up and down, built and rebuilt, construct and reconstruct, stitched in an apparently monotonous rolling stone labor of Sisyphus or the rolling life labor of mortals.

At first glance and from an "external" point of view, any human physical and mental constructions seem to have the same rather pessimistic fate. No matter how marvelous they are, eventually, under the passing of time and/or the light of new knowledge, they yield to revision, reconstruction or replacement. A closer look, however, reveals that such an attitude does not necessarily need to be adopted. Although the task seems laborious and endless it need not be completely futile, unless the ultimate and unique goal is permanency, for the hero at least temporarily succeeds in bringing the rock to the peak, in spite its hugeness. Furthermore, even if we accept that the labor is actually futile, it need not be meaningless or purposeless, for the former is not synonymous or equal to the latter.^{18,19} For, according to Joske,¹⁹ besides futility (no achievement of the required end), to be meaningless an activity should be worthless (lacking intrinsic merit), pointless (not directed towards the fulfillment of an end) and trivial (lacking sufficient worth) as well. Thus, between fully meaningful (if it suffers from none of the four defects) and valueless (if it suffers from all of the four defects) an activity could be still valuable: that which is worth performing even though it falls short of the fully meaningful and suffers from at least one of the above mentioned defects.¹⁹

From an "inside" or empathic point of view, it is true that the myth and Homer in particular, says nothing about the psychological condition of Sisyphus and the way he looks upon the situation. Because if we adopt the dictum of Epictetus –as the cognitive approach in psychotherapy does– that "people are disturbed not by the things but by the way they view things", Sisyphus is not necessarily unhappy unless he mentally constructs his condition as such. Having portrayed Sisyphus as a person not easily bound from external restraints, it is rather impossible to envision him helpless and hopeless, in line with Camus' optimistic concluding remark "We must imagine that

Sisyphus is happy".⁴ Hope and faith are both beyond the realm of proven facts,²⁰ but Sisyphus shows no signs of demoralization. Indeed, if we believe Ovid's testimony, Sisyphus "climbed on his rock to listen" to the divine music played by Orpheus in Hades in his search for Eurydice.²¹

How does this myth apply to medicine? The fact that Sisyphus was able to defeat Death, albeit only for a short period of time and in an unconventional way, would be enough to put him into the Pantheon of medical heroes. Again, this glory was not for Sisyphus but saved for Asklepios, the medical hero who, by reviving a dead man, was blasted to Hades by Zeus' thunderbolt, perhaps as a warning to physicians' attempts to be god-like in overcoming death.²² Today, medicine is reminded of Sisyphus to express the vague notion of a medical task as "Sisyphian", denoting that medical efforts and new discoveries fall apart and disappear oftentimes without a trace. Furthermore, the myth of Sisyphus is becoming more relevant nowadays in medicine due to the current notion of "medical futility". A futile medical action is characterized as one that "cannot achieve the goals of the action, no matter how often repeated".²³ Hence, the danger of identifying

"Sisyphus" and "Sisyphian" with "medical futility" which is apparently inappropriate, as we argued earlier, is visible.¹⁸ Instead, the association of medical futility with the myth of the Danaids (they were condemned in Hades for murdering their cousins to having to carry water continuously in containers that had holes) seems better fit.^{23,24} On the other hand, the myth of Sisyphus seems to be more in concordance with the "Sisyphus syndrome":²⁵ Although medical expenditures increase with the increase in life expectancy, this seems a success for medicine rather than a desperate endeavor.²⁶

In conclusion, the Sisyphus labor reminds us of our capabilities as well as our limitations. If the ultimate goal of medicine is to negate death, a task that exceeds our capabilities it seems that all physicians are condemned to perform a futile task, such as the one illustrated by the myth of the Danaids. But if the physicians' task is "to cure sometimes, relieve often, comfort always",²⁷ physicians need not be frustrated. Instead, as Huntley²⁸ put it commenting on the myth of Sisyphus, no matter how small our medical victories are, we must always pursue and enjoy them and at the same time reconsider our goals without decreasing our efforts.

Η έννοια του «Σισύφειου έργου» στην ιατρική: Μια ανακατασκευή

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Στην ιατρική, όπως και σε άλλες επιστημονικές περιοχές, συχνά γίνεται επίκληση του μύθου του Σίσυφου όταν έρχεται κανείς αντιμέτωπος κάποιου έργου που θεωρείται κοπιώδες, ατελείωτο και για ορισμένους άγονο και ενδεχομένως χωρίς σκοπό ή νόημα. Στο άρθρο αυτό διερευνούμε τις πηγές του μύθου του Σίσυφου, ευελπιστώντας οι συνεκδοχές και οι συμβολισμοί του να γίνουν πιο

εξάκαθοι. Υποστηρίζεται ότι το φυσικό πλαίσιο του μύθου είναι δυνατόν να σχετίζεται με τη σεισμολογική ιστορία της Ελλάδος και της Κορίνθου ειδικότερα, μιας πόλης που καταστράφηκε και ξαναχτίστηκε πολλές φορές. Το φυσικό στοιχείο μπορεί συμβολικά να αντανακλάται στον προσωποποιημένο μύθο του ήρωα, ιδρυτή της Κορίνθου και ίσως να εξηγεί τον παράξενο έργο που καταδικάστηκε να επιτελεί αιώνια, καθώς και τα νοήματα που ο μύθος μεταφέρει. Ο Σίσυφος, παρόμοια όπως και η πόλη του, υπέφερε τα «πάνω» και «κάτω» της μοίρας, είτε ως ένα δημόσιο πρόσωπο και δημιουργός διάφορων μεγάλων επιτευγμάτων – είτε ως τιμωρημένος ήρωας καταδικασμένος, στον κάτω κόσμο να κουβαλάει την πέτρα. Οι επίμονες προσπάθειές του οδηγούσαν σε πρόσκαιρες επιτυχίες, αν και δεν μπορούσε να βρει οριστικές λύσεις στα έργα που αναλάμβανε, ζωντανός ή πεθαμένος. Κάτω από το πρίσμα αυτό ο μύθος του Σίσυφου έχει να κάνει με τις ανθρώπινες προσπάθειες, και τους περιορισμούς τους, το κατορθωτό και το ακατόρθωτο, τους δύο κύριους πόλους μεταξύ των οποίων λειτουργεί ο μύθος. Κατανοώντας με Σισύφειους όρους την λειτουργία τους, οι ιατροί μπορούν να επιχαιρόνται για τις εφήμερες επιτυχίες τους και με το να αναγνωρίζουν τους περιορισμούς τους να επαναπροσδιορίσουν τις φιλοδοξίες τους χωρίς να χαλαρώνουν τις προσπάθειές τους.

Λέξεις ευρετηρίου: Μύθος του Σίσυφου, Σισύφειο έργο, ιατρική.

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