

# ***Groundhog Day*: Finding an Invincible Summer in the Deepest Punxsutawney Winter**

By Paul Fields

The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man.<sup>1</sup>

Well, what if there is no tomorrow? There wasn't one today.<sup>2</sup>

*Groundhog Day* appears on its surface to be somewhat of a typical example of a 1990s romantic comedy: the lead male and the lead female “clash humorously before the collapse of the conflict so that the movie fulfils the ‘guy gets girl’ convention.”<sup>3</sup> As a consequence of closer and closer readings, however, thoughts have evolved to the point where it is now considered to be at least far more of a cerebral film than it was on its release, and at most as an allegory for many of the teachings in religion and philosophy. The film tells the story of Phil Connors, a misanthropic weather reporter who becomes stuck in a time loop during a visit to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to report on the groundhog festival. Having covered the 2 February event, which takes place at ‘Gobbler’s Knob’ in the centre of Punxsutawney, and the main feature of which involves a groundhog predicting whether or not there will be an early spring, he wakes up at 6am the following morning to discover it is still 2 February. 2 February appears again the following morning, the morning after that, and so on and so forth. Only Phil is aware this is happening, however; each repetition of 2 February is still the ‘first’ instance of that day for everyone else. Having been through enough successive 2 Februarys to conclude he is not dreaming or imagining it all, Phil accepts his fate. The degree to which he accepts it varies, however, and this can be seen through what are primarily three distinct stages:

First, he [...] begins to abuse the time loop: he steals money, seduces women, and delivers increasingly obnoxious reports, all in the knowledge that there will be no consequences to his hedonism. After an indeterminate number of days, Phil’s behaviour becomes more erratic and unstable. Second, having accidentally killed himself and still woken up, as before, on 2 February, Phil commits suicide in a bid to break the vicious cycle. Third, upon realising the futility even of death, Phil finally begins to use his time to do good: he learns and perfects a series of skills, including several foreign languages, he gets to know the townspeople and delivers increasingly eloquent reports, and he manages to persuade his producer, Rita, with whom he has fallen in love, of his new found sincerity.<sup>4</sup>

Although the time loop eventually ends—following a day on which Phil performs an assortment of good deeds in and around the town, concluding with Rita returning with him to his hotel—it is not revealed in the film what, if anything in particular, corrects the time loop. It has been speculated by some that it is because Phil has undergone a radical transformation into a likeable, charitable and, ultimately, happy man—or, perhaps more precisely, that he has convinced Rita of this fact<sup>5</sup>—or that “it is love which liberates him.”<sup>6</sup> Others note that, by the time of the last repetition, Phil has become

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<sup>1</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Trans. Justin O’Brien. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955, 63-64

<sup>2</sup> *Groundhog Day*. Directed by Harold Ramis. Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Fowkes, Katherine. *The Fantasy Film*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2010, 97

<sup>4</sup> Vardell, Daniel. *Hollywood Remakes, Deleuze and the Grandfather Paradox*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 62

<sup>5</sup> Murray, Carl. ‘Superman Meets the Last Man.’ *Philosophy Now*, no. 93, 2012, pp. 52-54, 54

<sup>6</sup> Faust, Michael. ‘Groundhog Day.’ *Philosophy Now*, no. 93, 2012, pp. 45-47, 47

“resigned to his fate and driven to go beyond duty.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the secret to Phil’s broken spell ultimately “lies within him.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the film’s reluctance to answer this question may be part of the reason why so many have been compelled to ask questions about it. One should of course acknowledge that films such as *Groundhog Day* exist “primarily to entertain”<sup>9</sup>—to sell “a lot of popcorn”<sup>10</sup>—but this does not necessarily detract from their intellectual potential; indeed, some consider *Groundhog Day* to be one of the great philosophical films:

Viewed on the most trivial level it’s just another Hollywood rom-com, but on closer inspection it furnishes a dazzling treatment of Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence, even illuminating Deleuze and Irigaray’s conflicting interpretations of this key Nietzschean idea. It also throws light on postmodern thinking regarding simulacra—representations without originals.<sup>11</sup>

The connection of interest here, however, is to the philosophical concept of the absurd. More precisely, of interest in particular is the absurd as conceived by Albert Camus, and Camus’s use of the Greek king Sisyphus to explicate the concept. As punishment for his many crimes, Sisyphus was “condemned [...] to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight.”<sup>12</sup> For Camus,<sup>13</sup> Sisyphus’s fate was a metaphor for the human condition, owing to his “whole being [being] exerted toward accomplishing nothing.” One reason this is of interest is that a similarity between *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Groundhog Day* has been acknowledged by some writers, however this is invariably fleeting.<sup>14</sup> There may indeed be more connecting the two than simply a similarity between their overarching themes of routine, repetition, and purposelessness. Additionally, as well as underlining or emphasising existing elements of the absurd, it may be that *Groundhog Day* introduces something new to the discussion. If one considers that Camus often used his fictional writings—such as *The Stranger* and *The Plague*—to illuminate his philosophical writing, the task of comparing one of his philosophical texts with a piece of comparatively modern fiction seems like a reasonable one.

This paper will focus on *Groundhog Day* in relation first to two of what I will term the ‘catalysts’ of the sensation of the absurd, and second to the ideas of both philosophical and physical suicide as a response to the absurd. Connections will be made to *The Myth of Sisyphus* for the ‘notion’ of the absurd, and, where necessary, to *The Stranger* for the ‘feeling’ of the absurd,<sup>15</sup> and it is assumed that readers are already familiar with these two texts. For clarity, and economy of words, the repetition of 2 Februarys will be referred to as ‘Phil’s predicament.’

Approximately halfway through the film, after some indeterminate number of days, Phil asks Rita, “If you only had one day to live, what would you do with it?”<sup>16</sup> Rita does not answer the question. While it is unclear precisely why Phil asks her this—it may be that this is all part of his attempt to seduce her—it appears to relate to a number of themes in both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*. On its surface it shares some similarity with Meursault’s choice to live a life of the present: in some ways, a life spent considering only the present moment, with no thought for tomorrow, is to act as if one has only one day left to live. This in turn relates to the idea of the rejection of philosophical suicide—to live without any deferral to some hoped or imagined future—from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (reflections on

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<sup>7</sup> Solman, Gregory. ‘The Passion of Bill Murray.’ *Film Comment*, vol. 29, no. 6, 1993, pp. 5-8, 7

<sup>8</sup> Gilbey, Ryan. ‘Groundhog Day: The Perfect Comedy, For Ever.’ *The Guardian*. 7 February, 2013.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/feb/07/groundhog-day-perfect-comedy-for-ever>

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Faust, 45

<sup>12</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 119

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 120

<sup>14</sup> Arian, Ali. ‘Imagining Sisyphus Happy: A Groundhog Day Retrospective.’ *Slant*. 2 February, 2009.

<http://www.slantmagazine.com/house/article/imagining-sisyphus-happy-a-groundhog-day-retrospective>; Faust, 46

<sup>15</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. ‘An Explication of The Stranger.’ *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Germaine Brée, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1962, pp. 108-121, 114

<sup>16</sup> *Groundhog Day*

which will be returned to later). However it appears also to connect to the ideas regarding suicide at the very beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.<sup>17</sup>

Is Phil's question fundamental, in the same way as is Camus's? In what real way is treating a given day as if it was one's only day different from treating one's life as if it was one's only life? Could it indeed be an extension of Camus's question? If one could not conceive worthwhile things to do if presented with only one day to live, then might the same be true of a life of 70 or 80 years? One could surmise that a life that is not worth living for one day might also not be worth living for multiple days. Additionally, there may be actions one might take, or projects on which one might embark, on one's only day to live that feasibly could become irritating or tedious were they to be repeated over and over again for many subsequent days. In having at the same time both only one day to live *and* a potentially infinite number of days to live, Phil is able somehow to address many of these possibilities. As well as sharing a similarity with Camus's question, Phil's question to Rita relates to a number of themes within *Groundhog Day* that will be reflected upon in this paper. It is on the point of life's tediousness that the first of Camus's 'catalysts' will be addressed.

### **Life's Mechanical Nature and Deadening Routine**

The first 'catalyst' of the absurd is the "mechanical nature [and] deadening routine"<sup>18</sup> of many people's lives. One might consider this as a modern-day version of the Sisyphus myth, in which one "question[s] the value and purpose of [one's] existence"<sup>19</sup>:

Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, 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.<sup>20</sup>

Similar to Sisyphus, a modern 'workman' may work every day at the same job at the same location, performing the same tasks, and with the same people. Camus<sup>21</sup> feels this fate is "no less absurd" than the fate of Sisyphus. And though Camus "regards monotony as the greatest single cause of unhappiness among men,"<sup>22</sup> the break from monotony—"the rare moments when [the absurd] becomes conscious,"<sup>23</sup> this first sign of absurdity"<sup>24</sup>—can turn this unhappiness to tragedy.

On its surface, *Groundhog Day*, and in particular the parts of the film sharply focused on the curse which forces Phil to repeat 2 February, appears perfectly to elucidate the mechanical nature and deadening routine that characterises the first 'catalyst' of Camus's absurd. Indeed, the film's title has become "shorthand for any period of intolerable monotony comparable to the one experienced by Phil Connors."<sup>25</sup> Beyond the film's title, one might say that Phil's predicament, stuck in a seemingly endless number of Groundhog Days, is comparable to these 'deadening mechanics' of the human condition. There are several moments where one can observe this: Phil meets the same man outside his hotel room

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<sup>17</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 3

<sup>18</sup> Cruickshank, John. *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, 54

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 12-13

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 121

<sup>22</sup> Masters, Brian. *Camus: A Study*. London: Heinemann, 1974, 22

<sup>23</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 121

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Gilbey, 'Groundhog Day: The Perfect Comedy, For Ever'

each morning; he tries to avoid his “obnoxious [...] revolting [and] parasit[ic] [yet] endearing”<sup>26</sup> old school friend Ned Ryerson at the same point every day; he overhears the waiter in the diner dropping a tray of dishes at the same time every day, and so on. These events repeat themselves daily, and become so predictable that it appears Phil begins not to notice them. On closer inspection, however, while Phil’s life becomes ‘mechanical’ to the extreme once he gets ‘stuck,’ his life was arguably on a path of rhythmized repetition and mundanity already.

The formulaic nature of his job and his trip to Punxsutawney is highlighted at the outset of the film. The first scene depicts Phil delivering a weather report, in what one might describe as a sarcastic tone, and involves him punctuating the factual weather report with other irrelevant and farcical information: in addition to warm weather, he reports that California is predicted to have “gang wars, and some very overpriced real estate,”<sup>27</sup> while the Pacific Northwest is forecast some “very, very tall trees.”<sup>28</sup> When a colleague suggests he must enjoy the groundhog festival, in virtue of it being the third consecutive time he has covered the annual event, Phil replies, again sarcastically, that it will be, in fact, his fourth time. Furthermore, each year’s report appears to be remarkably similar to the previous:

And it’s the same old schtick every year. The guy comes out with a big stick and raps on the door. They pull the little rat out. They talk to him. The rat talks back. And then they tell us what’s going to happen.<sup>29</sup>

As will be examined later on when looking at ‘philosophical suicide,’ prior to traveling to Punxsutawney, Phil seems to desire a life other than his own, and wishes for a future which is, in parts at least, imagined. In several ways, although it appears he is blind to this, Phil’s life prior to Punxsutawney was no less cyclic than his life stuck on 2 February. But it is by getting stuck in Punxsutawney that this first catalyst presents itself to Phil. Camus<sup>30</sup> likens the awareness of this catalyst to “that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent, [...] the chain of daily gestures is broken [and] the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again.” While it may be intuitive to consider the constant sequence of Groundhog Days to be a ‘daily chain of gestures,’ it is proposed here that the monotony of Phil’s predicament does not constitute a chain: it is the break in the chain. Phil’s life was already a repetitive routine, but to recognise and respond to this he appears to require the caricature of routine presented to him in his predicament. Camus regards monotony as “the greatest single cause of unhappiness among men”<sup>31</sup>; that Phil frequently appears to be just as unhappy while stuck in Punxsutawney as he did prior appears to support the idea that his life is just as monotonous in Punxsutawney as it was prior. It is only when he realises the positives of his predicament that he begins the journey to ‘happiness.’ One could argue, here, that in *Groundhog Day* one can see an underlining of this catalyst of the absurd in order to highlight its absurdity.

## **A Realisation of the Inevitable and Ineluctable Character of Death**

We don’t have for ever—isn’t that one of the lessons of Groundhog Day?<sup>32</sup>

As time passes, one becomes aware of its effects, and more specifically of its effects on all aspects of one’s person. Camus<sup>33</sup> refers to this as the “cruel mathematics that command [the human] condition.” Time is something to which one necessarily ‘belongs.’ It is both one’s master and one’s worst enemy. It is one’s master because it is unavoidable and is always in some way in control, in so far that one can

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<sup>26</sup> Teays, Wanda. *Seeing the Light: Exploring Ethics Through Movies*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 26

<sup>27</sup> *Groundhog Day*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 12

<sup>31</sup> *Masters*, 22

<sup>32</sup> Gilbey, ‘Groundhog Day: The Perfect Comedy, For Ever’

<sup>33</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 16

always situation oneself in relation to time. It is one's worst enemy because its unrelenting passing, and one's awareness of its unrelenting passing, becomes—indeed, it must become—“the destructive element”<sup>34</sup>:

We live on the future: ‘tomorrow,’ ‘later on,’ ‘when you have made your way,’ ‘you will understand when you are old enough.’ Such irrelevancies are wonderful, for, after all, it’s a matter of dying. Yet a time comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty. Thus he asserts his youth. But simultaneously he situates himself in relation to time. He takes his place in it. He admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end. He belongs to time and, by the horror that seizes him, he recognises his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it. The revolt of the flesh is the absurd.<sup>35</sup>

One must accept that the supernatural element to *Groundhog Day* could bring into question its suitability to be considered in relation to some of the terminology within *The Myth of Sisyphus*. For example, in what physical way does Phil become aware of the effects of passing time? Clearly passing time has no material effect on his body. Every day he wakes up exactly as he did before. He does not get old; he cannot gain weight; he cannot grow a beard. He has no way of recording the passing of days, as a prisoner might do by carving numbers into a cell wall. Fundamentally, he cannot kill himself—a point which will be returned to later. Does this all mean that he is in some way immune to Camus’s “cruel mathematics”?<sup>36</sup> It is proposed here that Phil does ‘belong’ to time, but he belongs to it uniquely. He cannot situate himself or take place in time,<sup>37</sup> or, from this, become aware of “the inevitable and ineluctable character of death”<sup>38</sup> in quite the same way as anyone who is not in his predicament. Yet he appears to become profoundly aware of this catalyst of the absurd having finally engaged with the elderly homeless man, whom he passes every morning on his walk to Gobbler’s Knob. On every previous occasion he had ensured to avoid speaking with—seemingly to avoid giving money to—the old man as he begged for change on a street corner. In choosing previously to “reach [...] into his pockets as if checking for loose change [as he] walk[ed] swiftly past, offering only a meanspirited glimmer of hope,”<sup>39</sup> Phil conducts himself in a way that is “worse than ignoring him.”<sup>40</sup> On this particular morning, however, Phil appears to be in a good mood having spent an enjoyable day with Rita, and elects to donate to the old man all the money in his pockets. Later, he encounters the old man again on a side street, who at this point appears tired, cold, and unwell. Phil takes him to a hospital where, despite the doctors’ best efforts, the old man dies:

**Nurse:** Sir, are you the one who brought the old man in?  
**Phil Connors:** Yes, how is he?  
**Nurse:** Well he just passed away.  
**Phil Connors:** What did he die of?  
**Nurse:** He was just old. It was just his time.  
**Phil Connors:** I want to see his chart. [...]  
**Nurse:** Sometimes people just die.  
**Phil Connors:** Not today.<sup>41</sup>

Equipped with the old man’s medical records, Phil becomes convinced he can somehow save his life the following day. But despite feeding him, keeping him warm, keeping him company, and so on, over a number of days, he soon realises he can do nothing to stop the old man from dying. Phil has the freedom and ability to do what he wants with each repeated 2 February, but cannot keep the old man

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<sup>34</sup> Cruickshank, 54

<sup>35</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13-14

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 16

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Cruickshank, 54

<sup>39</sup> Solman, 7

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Groundhog Day*

alive. Initially he struggles to rationalise this, but eventually acknowledges the reality that the old man always dies on 2 February, and he always will, with or without the input of others. Despite Phil's unique situation, there are some things he cannot change, and this appears to have a profound effect on him. It is proposed here that part of Phil's radical transformation is sparked by this "feeling of absurdity."<sup>42</sup> To the old man's death, the universe is entirely indifferent. With this information Phil appears able to move on. This is hinted at in Phil's final attempt to keep the old man alive. Having tried to resuscitate him in an alleyway—unsuccessfully, of course—Phil looks up towards the night sky. He says nothing. One could suggest, here, that Phil is greeted by a similar "benign indifference"<sup>43</sup> to that which greets Meursault at the conclusion of *The Stranger*. Like Meursault, could Phil feel "ready to start life all over again,"<sup>44</sup> or at least ready, or willing, in a way not seen before in the film, to start the day over again? His state of mind the following morning, which the narrative suggests is his final repetition of 2 February, appears to suggest this is the case. Addressing the news camera, flanked by the gathered crowds at Gobbler's Knob, Phil states:

When Chekhov saw the long winter, he saw a winter bleak and dark and bereft of hope. Yet we know that winter is just another step in the cycle of life. But standing here among the people of Punxsutawney and basking in the warmth of their hearths and hearts, I couldn't imagine a better fate than a long and lustrous winter.<sup>45</sup>

There could be significance within this passage that is useful for the task here. Like Chekhov, Phil too is faced with a long winter. For Phil, this is *the longest winter*.<sup>46</sup> He has descended into depression and apparent lunacy, he has committed suicide countless times, and finds himself, arguably, 'bereft of hope.'<sup>47</sup> Meursault becomes awakened to the absurd, and draws a sense of freedom from it, when he is confronted with the reality of his own death. Phil cannot face the reality of his own death, despite his best attempts. However, he cannot avoid the reality of the old man's death. Is it this confrontation with death, and—more precisely—this repeated, unacknowledged, and unavoidable confrontation with death, that forces Phil to awaken in a similar way? It is proposed here that, again, it is possible to see an emphasis on this catalyst of the absurd in *Groundhog Day*.

## Suicides

Necessary to instances of absurdity are two 'terms of comparison.' And from this comparison the absurd emerges to make up the 'three characters in the drama,' which Camus<sup>48</sup> terms the "odd trinity": "the irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter."<sup>49</sup> It exists only when its constituent parts meet in confrontation. Straight away one might note that in destroying the trinity one destroys the oddness. That is, by removing one of its elements—and it is agreed that one does nothing by removing the absurd in and of itself, if only for the fact that doing so is not possible—one might solve the dilemma. Camus,<sup>50</sup> indeed, asserts that "to destroy one of its terms is to destroy the whole." Thus, one could remove one's form from the equation, via the act of self-annihilation, which Camus terms 'physical suicide,' or one could derive some transcendent meaning from life's absurdity, a kind

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<sup>42</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 12

<sup>43</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1946, 154

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Groundhog Day*

<sup>46</sup> It is not specified in the film how long Phil is stuck, but some of those involved in creating the film have estimated it is between 10 and 40 years. – Fischer, Russ. 'Groundhog Day: Just How Long Was Phil Connors Stuck in a Time Loop?' *Slash Film*. 2011. <http://www.slashfilm.com/groundhog-day-long-phil-connors-stuck-time-loop/>

<sup>47</sup> It is not intended for this use of 'hope' to refer to the act of philosophical suicide, outlined by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

<sup>48</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 30

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 28

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 30

of annihilation of the intellect, which Camus terms ‘philosophical suicide.’ Neither response is satisfactory, though, and neither, it could be argued, is even a solution:

The only coherent position is to preserve the paradox, to live the tensions and conflicts which it involves and to refuse alleged solutions that turn out to be nothing more than evasions. We must learn not to make unrealistic demands of life, but to accept it as our minds experience it. The lucid contemplation of the absurd may even prove, in itself, a partial release. It will at any rate require a certain kind of lucidity and imply a certain kind of innocence that may make life more liveable without necessarily making it more rational.<sup>51</sup>

## Physical Suicide

Camus<sup>52</sup> argues that physical suicide merely confirms, rather than destroys the absurd. The absurd surfaces as a result of “an awareness of the confrontation between man’s aspirations and the impossibility that they will be fulfilled, [so, therefore] one cannot eliminate one of the elements of that confrontation by annihilation of the awareness.”<sup>53</sup> The elimination of that awareness does not solve nor does it eliminate the problem of the absurd. At best it could be said to avoid it. Much further, it more closely resembles a “private answer devoid of general validity.”<sup>54</sup> The individual, who is clearly an essential element in the trinity, is destroyed, yet it is only in that individual that the vision of the absurd is also destroyed. Destruction of the awareness of a thing does not destruct the thing itself. Far from repudiating the absurd, suicide complies with it: “suicide [...] is acceptance [of the absurd] in its extreme,”<sup>55</sup> and at best it is a misunderstanding:

People who kill themselves are confusing two separate issues. They assume that it is a logical step from the realisation that existence is irrational to the determination to put an end to it. But this is spurious logic. One cannot deduce anything from the irrationality of the world except that it is irrational. To say that, therefore, life is not worth living is a *non-sequitur*. On the contrary, life is senseless, but *nevertheless* it is worth living.<sup>56</sup>

Camus’s<sup>57</sup> assertion that physical suicide confirms the absurd, rather than destroys it, is echoed quite profoundly in *Groundhog Day*. Phil’s countless attempts at physical suicide neither ‘avoid,’ nor are they a ‘private answer’ to, the absurd. They may, at times, perhaps, be private, but they do not appear to be an adequate answer. Phil’s suicides all fail, in as much as they put an end only to Phil’s day, rather than to his life. Moments after stepping in front of a car, or jumping off a roof, or driving off a cliff, or dropping a toaster into his bath, he wakes up, again, to his alarm clock at 6am on 2 February. This appears somehow to underline further Camus’s assertion that to commit physical suicide is to accept the absurd in the extreme. The harsh tones of Phil’s 6am confrontation with the absurd force him to accept the ineffectiveness of physical suicide. He seems to find the absurd is emphasised more with each ineffective suicide. The impossibility of suicide appears to render immortal at least one of the characters in Camus’s<sup>58</sup> “odd trinity.” As well as complying with the absurd, or reasserting the absurd, as suggested already to commit suicide in response to absurdity is also an act founded upon a misunderstanding of the problem: the human experience is worthwhile *and* it is absurd, rather than the human experience is not worthwhile *because* it is absurd.<sup>59</sup> Phil appears to accept this, however it is

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<sup>51</sup> Cruickshank, 44

<sup>52</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 27

<sup>53</sup> Masters, 43

<sup>54</sup> Cruickshank, 60

<sup>55</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 54

<sup>56</sup> Masters, 43

<sup>57</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 27

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, 30

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

only after having realised the futility of suicide, and the certainty of death in the old man, that he reaches that conclusion.

*Groundhog Day* emphasises both the inadequacy of suicide in response to the absurd, and the possibility of finding significance in an indifferent world. Both the problem and the solution are highlighted here to an extent that is perhaps difficult to conceptualise outside of the *Groundhog Day* narrative.

### Philosophical Suicide

Of course, man desires a tomorrow, a permanence, an eternity, but to expect that this desire will be fulfilled [...] is a cruel evasion of his present condition [...] What we have to deal with is how to live now. We have recognised that life has no sense or purpose, yet we have resolved to live it. We must now further recognise that we shall live without hope; our present state is our only state. There is no tomorrow.<sup>60</sup>

Whether one uses Camus's term 'philosophical suicide,' or the arguably less emotive 'living with hope,' the meaning of this response to the absurd is the same: "if the world seems at the moment to be cruel and inexplicable, let us trust that one day it will be benevolent, and susceptible to understanding. All will eventually be explained."<sup>61</sup> One puts one's trust in a future in which the meaning and significance of the world will be revealed; the human condition may be absurd now, but it will not always be so. This "odd reasoning,"<sup>62</sup> is used by those attempting to escape the absurd by "deify[ing] what crushes them and find[ing] reason to hope in what impoverishes them."<sup>63</sup> Optimism of this sort—arguably artificial—is, to varying degrees, religious, and is perhaps what Camus<sup>64</sup> refers to when he speaks of "the problem of God." On its surface it is perhaps a little unclear what the film has to say that one can consider in relation to philosophical suicide, or at least the connection is not as clear as it may be with physical suicide. How can one consider notions of hope deferred into the future, when the concept of the future is as problematic as it is in *Groundhog Day*? It will be submitted here, however, that despite the connections made by the religious between the film and their faiths,<sup>65</sup> *Groundhog Day* instead appears altogether to reject faith in an afterlife and, perhaps, in any kind of future whatsoever.

First it must be reasserted that the groundhog festival is not an event it seems Phil particularly wishes to attend. In part this is because this is the fourth time he has reported on it, a point he caustically makes to his colleagues. Perhaps more significant, though, is his dissatisfaction with his job. Prior to arriving in Punxsutawney, Phil makes multiple references to his desire to resign: in addition to wanting to quit in general, he is convinced there is a "major [television] network"<sup>66</sup> interested in employing him. As such, Phil plans for this to be his final trip to Punxsutawney, motivated because, he says, "Someday somebody is going to see me interviewing a groundhog and think I don't have a future."<sup>67</sup> At this early point in the film, Phil places a great deal of significance on the future. The future—real or imagined—forms a significant part of how he conceives himself, and seems also to play a role in how he feels others view him. This is contrasted with Meursault, who appears only to care about the present moment

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<sup>60</sup> Masters, 45

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 32

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 56

<sup>65</sup> "*Groundhog Day* illustrated the Buddhist notion of samsara, the continuing cycle of rebirth that individuals try to escape. In the older form of Buddhist belief [...] no one can escape to nirvana unless they work hard and lead a very good life. [For Jews] there [is] a resonance in [Phil] being rewarded by being returned to earth to perform more good deeds, or mitzvahs. This was in contrast to gaining a place in heaven (the Christian reward) or else achieving nirvana (the Buddhist reward). [...] The movie tells us, as Judaism does, that the work doesn't end until the world has been perfected." – Buncombe, Andrew. 'Is This the Greatest Story Ever Told? A 1993 Romantic Comedy Starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell Is Being Hailed by Religious Leaders as the Most Spiritual Film of All Time.' *The Independent*. 2 February, 2002.

<sup>66</sup> *Groundhog Day*

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*



and, more specifically, on the physical effects of the present moment, rather than what others think of him.<sup>68</sup> The willingness to accept as the truth only those things which bring pleasure or comfort, or are in some way desirable, is a fundamental element of Camus's concept of philosophical suicide. One could suppose that Phil's mention of a 'major network' interested in him, or the real willingness to leave his current network, could be examples of this.

Second, once Phil is in his predicament, it is made plainly clear to him the difference between what is true and what is desirable, most notably because what he appears to desire the most, in the earlier parts of the film, at least—to leave Punxsutawney and wake up on 3 February—is so plainly denied to him every morning. This frequent brutal reminder—which at times clearly arouses real despair in him—is what renders impossible the idea of fantasising this reality away. Thus, the idea of a world without a future, without a 'tomorrow,' could be considered as being expressed more explicitly in *Groundhog Day* than in *The Myth of Sisyphus* or even *The Stranger*. On its surface, Phil's world has literally no tomorrow. One might say it is a *too literal* account of Camus's idea of a life without hope, and for this reason could be of limited value here. But it appears, even in this literal version of a world with no tomorrow, the very lack of a real tomorrow moves Phil to reject hope and leaves him open to an 'awakening' similar to one who has realised the futility of philosophical suicide. In a world of seemingly perpetual Groundhog Days, devoid of any meaning lasting more than 24 hours, Phil succeeds in finding meaning.

It could be argued that it is only when Phil completely rejects any notion of hope for the future that he wakes up on 3 February. Consistent throughout the film is Phil's desire for his love of Rita to be requited, and his attempts to bring this about are made in what is potentially an almost endless number of ways. But on what transpires to be his final 2 February, he barely sees or appears even to think about Rita until late in the evening. Instead he commits to serving the community through a series of acts: he helps three elderly women whose car has a flat tyre; he saves the boy who falls from a tree; he saves Buster, the groundhog festival master of ceremonies, who is choking in a restaurant. Phil must be aware that these kind gestures have significance in the present only, and must be repeated when 2 February appears again the following day. Also it must be assumed that Phil is performing these acts completely selflessly in spite of their almost-pointlessness; indeed, one should allow for the possibility that he has performed these acts many times before. At this point for Phil there is no future. Nothing is deferred, his life is pointless and thankless, and yet it is upon discovery of this fact that he appears most content. Earlier in the film, having realised there are superficial benefits to his predicament—such as getting arrested for dangerous driving yet still waking up in own bed the following morning—Phil posits that "if there were no tomorrow [...] we could do whatever we want."<sup>69</sup> By this final repetition of 2 February, Phil doing whatever-he-wants takes a markedly different form. One could argue that Phil has "accepted his condition in the world and has resolved to live it as best he can."<sup>70</sup>

In *The Stranger*, Meursault chooses to live his life in the present, and upon realising the certainty and close proximity of his death is subject to an absurd awakening. Conversely, Phil Connors is forced to live in the present, and yet is similarly awakened after realising the seeming impossibility of his own death. For both, the awakening comes after the loss of a 'tomorrow': Meursault in confronting his own demise, and Phil Connors in confronting the pointlessness and thanklessness of his repetitive reality. Phil is reminded again and again of the futility of physical suicide, and in a manner not possible for those who do not get to survive suicide. This is the starting point to his happiness. What comes after is a realisation of the futility of philosophical suicide. Yet again it could be argued that in *Groundhog Day* one can see an emphasised replication of Camus's absurd.

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<sup>68</sup> Feuerlicht, Ignace. 'Camus's L'Etranger Reconsidered.' *PMLA*, vol. 78, no. 5, 1963, pp. 606-621, 609-610

<sup>69</sup> *Groundhog Day*

<sup>70</sup> Masters, 46

In conclusion, it may be that Phil's predicament in Punxsutawney does resemble that of Sisyphus and his rock, but where *Groundhog Day* goes further, perhaps, is by taking the idea to its ultimate end. If the Sisyphus myth is an allegory for modern man's bovine, meaningless existence, and it is only when one acknowledges and accepts this that one is able to find true meaning and significance in life, then it could be argued that *Groundhog Day* grinds this point down a little finer. Phil realises he cannot defer meaning forward to some real or imagined future, as such a thing does not exist in a world of perpetual 2 Februarys. At the same time, the past is arguably even less real, as nobody else in Phil's world is aware of his 'yesterday.' Everyone else's yesterday is one day—or, indeed, many days—further back into the past than his own. Camus<sup>71</sup> pondered what Sisyphus did or thought about on his descent. Phil Connors' predicament does not offer him the contemplative return bestowed upon Sisyphus. But, unlike Sisyphus, whose psychic fate remains a mystery—other than the assumption that he must be happy—Phil appears to find true meaning in meaningless monotony. It seems of little value to reflect on what causes Phil's curse to be lifted, or even the significance of the curse being lifted, but on his last repetition of 2 February—which, it must be reasserted, Phil does not know will be his last; one must presume he presumes he is stuck for ever—one can confidently say that Phil appears happy, *in spite of* the meaninglessness and disposability of all his actions. He is aware of the thanklessness and pointlessness of all his actions; his condition renders impossible the act of physical suicide, and he has learned not to place any faith in the efficacy of philosophical suicide. His condition is unquestionably 'supernatural': outside of the *Groundhog Day* world, one appears not to get the opportunity to reflect on whether or not physical suicide solves whatever problem it is purported to solve, and one arguably has not the time to evaluate the effectiveness of philosophical suicide right through to the end. Moreover, one is in a world that at times, one could argue, does its best to convince its inhabitants that committing philosophical suicide is the only way to know its significance. But it is proposed here that *Groundhog Day* takes Camus's pondering on what Sisyphus thinks on the way back down and turns this into a significant part of its narrative. Phil's days involve simultaneously pushing the boulder up the hill, watching it roll back down, contemplating his fate on the walk back down, and the gradual journey into accepting the fate that the predicament demands. It may be easy to think of *Groundhog Day* in terms of Phil's transformation from an unsavoury character into a savoury one,<sup>72</sup> but perhaps, in the context here at least, it may be better to consider it in terms of Phil's transformation from an unhappy man into a happy one. Arguably the film adds little to the fundamental concept of the absurd, but what it does do is make clearer the things that signify that the world is absurd, as well as emphasising the reasons for rejecting those things that tempt one to pretend it is not. Perhaps one could say that one should imagine Phil Connors happy.

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<sup>71</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 121

<sup>72</sup> Gilbey, Ryan. 'It's That Man Again... and Again.' *The Guardian*. 1 February, 2004.  
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