The Meaning Of the Story of Sisyphus

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We will also want to consider Jeffrey Fish's "Not All Politicians are Sisyphus," as well as the Boeri book "Theory and Practice in Epicurean Political Philosophy" released last year. From the Fish article, which suggests that we reconsider the standard interpretation of Lucretius' reference to Sisyphus:

or consul, one who cannot win election but continues to try, and nothing more. Certainly, this is the how the earliest surviving commentary on the passage, contained within remarks by Servius on *Aeneid* 6.596, interprets it. Servius' comment presents a fairly extended interpretation of the three allegories in Lucr. 3.978–1010. On Sisyphus he writes: *per eos autem qui 'saxum volvunt' ambitum vult et repulsam significari, quia semel repulsi petitores ambire non desinunt* ('By those however who "roll their stone" Lucretius will have it that political ambition and the "repulsa" [i.e. electoral loss], is signified, because once they become "repulsi" [i.e. electorally defeated] the candidates do not quit campaigning'). This comment almost certainly extends back to earlier interpretations, perhaps even to Probus, who published a critical edition of Lucretius. Beginning here and extending through to Lemaire in 1838, I have been unable to find any evidence that the Sisphyus passage was ever taken to refer to anything other than a perennial candidate.[26] Lemaire's own commentary on the passage functions as something of an interpretative bridge, in that he presents both the older view and (only tentatively) the newer one. Commenting on the word *inane* in 998 he writes: *an quia nunquam datur; vel potius per se vanum est, neque ad hominis veram felicitatem quidquam confert?* ('Perhaps because "it is never granted"; or rather because it is empty in itself and contributes nothing to the true happiness of a man?') Of course, the fact that the newer reading seems not to have held any currency in pre-modern interpretation of the poem does not mean that the current consensus is incorrect, but it does suggest that the old view, all but forgotten, is worth re-examining. To begin with the most obvious aspect of earlier interpretation, *nec datur umquam* does not mean that power is never in any context conferred, or that power is unreal,[27] but that it is never *in this particular case* conferred, because the politician never gets elected to an office with *imperium*.[28] The

I don't think we can unwind all this without getting back to exactly what it was that Sisyphus is alleged to have done to be set up for the punishment which now defines his whole life.