

Suicide

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“Not to be born prevails over all meaning uttered in words; by far the second best for life, once it has appeared, is to go as swiftly as possible whence it came.” — Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, quoted in Arendt, Hannah, *On Revolution*, Penguin Books, London, 1965, p. 281.

“If everything causes cancer and nothing is fireproof, why live?” — my son at age five.

“The thought of suicide is a strong consolation; one can get through many a bad night with it.”— Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, paragraph 157.

We often forget that one of the most famous pieces of poetry in the English language, namely, Hamlet’s soliloquy, is a meditation on suicide, and that it repeats one of the most cogent arguments against committing suicide. A prose version of part of the soliloquy (punctuation my own) may make Hamlet’s thinking clearer:

...To die: to sleep...no more...and by “a sleep” to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to — tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep... To sleep, perchance to dream — ay, there’s the rub: for in that sleep of death, what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil must give us pause. *There’s* the respect that makes calamity of so long life. For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely, the pangs of despised love, the law’s delay, the insolence of office and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes, when he himself might his quietus make with a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear, to grunt and sweat under a weary life, but that the dread of something after death — the undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveler returns — puzzles the will and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of? Thus conscience does make cowards of us all... — Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. I

There is no reason to believe that suicide will bring an end to our sufferings. This may be the afterlife of a just man who died believing he had nothing to fear.

On the other hand, for some of us, the main argument against suicide is that it can only be done once. (“He put the gun to his head and fired once, twice, three times.”)

“Glaub nicht, dass ich mich ershiesse,
Wie schlimm auch die Sachen stehn!
Das alles, meine Suesse,
Ist mir schon einmal geschehn.”

Don’t think I’m going to kill myself,
No matter how bad things get.
All this, my sweet,

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Has already happened to me before.

— Heine, Heinrich, “Die Heimkehr”, 55, (1823-24) (My translation)

Patient to his doctor: “I don’t run in order to live long, I run in order to die healthy.”

“Ever since my teenage years, the mere *fact* that it is possible to commit suicide has constituted, for me, the only reasonable hope for believing that the universe is not completely evil.” — S.f.

“Other deaths, too, are messy [i.e., other than firing a bullet into one’s brain] — deaths from accidents and from some of the worst diseases of our time; they too cause great suffering among one’s friends and loved ones. Why use these consequences as an argument against suicide, instead of doing what you should do, namely, use them as an argument against death in general, hence against human life?” — S.f.

We always assume that God, if he exists, will punish us for committing suicide. Why do we never assume he will punish us for having stayed alive too long?

“Many die too late and some die too early. Still the doctrine sounds strange: ‘Die at the right time.’

“Die at the right time: thus Zarathustra teaches.

“To be sure, he who never lived at the right time could hardly die at the right time! Better if he were never to be born! — Thus I advise the superfluous.

“But even the superfluous make a great thing of their dying; yes, even the hollowest nut wants to be cracked.” — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, “Of Voluntary Death”, Penguin Books, 1961, p. 97.

“*The old man and death.* One may well ask why, aside from the demands of religion, it is more praiseworthy for a man grown old, who feels his powers decrease, to await his slow exhaustion and disintegration, rather than to put a term to his life with complete consciousness? In this case, suicide is quite natural, obvious, and should by rights awaken respect for the triumph of reason. This it did in those times when the leading Greek philosophers and the doughtiest Roman patriots used to die by suicide. Conversely, the compulsion to prolong life from day to day, anxiously consulting doctors and accepting the most painful, humiliating conditions, without the strength to come nearer the actual goal of one’s life: that is far less worthy of respect. Religions provide abundant excuses to escape the need to kill oneself: this is how they insinuate themselves into those who are in love with life.” — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Human, All Too Human*, section 80, The University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1984, p. 60.

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People often remind a person who is on the verge of committing suicide of what it will do to his children. They never consider what it will do to his children if they should one day learn that they are the reason their parent decided to endure years of suffering.

How do the blind commit suicide? What is it like not to be able to buy a gun, or poison, or be sure about where you are so you can jump?

A group of prisoners, each in solitary confinement, pass notes of encouragement to each other because they are unable as yet to kill themselves. Then the idea begins to circulate, "Stay alive because there is no reason to! *Stay alive out of spite!*" Soon they become interested in seeing just how far they can go; purely because they are alive, they become curious as to how long beings like them can endure just their hopeless situation.

"Ich bin doch neugierig zu sehen, wie viel eigentlich ein Mensch auszuhalten vermag! Ist die Grenze des noch Erträglichen erreicht, dann brauche ich ja bloss die Tür zu öffnen and bin entronnen."

"But I'm curious to see just how much a man can endure! And if I reach the limit of the endurable, well, then I can just open the door and leave." — Harry Haller in Hesse, Hermann, *Der Steppenwolf*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1961, p. 11. (My translation)

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