

SUICIDE & THE SELF

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By

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I have increasingly harbored the suspicion that any work about suicide is not really about suicide but something else—whatever that “something else” is, in any given instance, seems to be tied in with our deepest concerns for human life and our understanding and improvement of it. Studying suicide is at times a form of staring, or at least attempting to stare, death in the face. It is a ‘fringe’ topic, and a relatively rare occurrence, but we study it because we feel that life at the fringe—when everything has almost broken down and is seething from the sometimes overwhelming tensions of life—is where revelations about the human condition often emerge for examination. In the extreme cases we often stumble upon important truths or considerations about the human condition of which we might have otherwise remained ignorant. My hope is that even if there is no “ultimate truth” in this thesis (which there surely is not), that it will at the very least provoke serious thought and dialectic about suicide.

I would like to thank my thesis advisor and committee—Ed Minar, Lynne Spellman, and Barry Ward—for reading this lengthy thesis, for asking me difficult questions at the defense, and for making suggestions that I will certainly take into consideration in any further work I do on this subject.

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Introduction: The ‘Problem’

What do we mean when we call suicide ‘a problem’? What kind of problem is it? For whom? From what perspective ought we to take it up as a problem?

Every discipline which aspires toward the well-being and betterment of humankind—whether spiritual or material, physical or mental—has said something or other about the problem of suicide. Sociologists have sought to explain suicide in terms of societal conditions external to the agent’s innermost designs, and psychologists have attributed it to mental illness. Psychotherapists have peered into the mind of the suicidal person, seeking clues in the dark regions of the psyche, and neuroscientists have cut open his brain, in search of the biological malfunction. Clergymen have condemned it as a sin against God, and lawmakers have forbidden it as a crime against the state. Philosophers have defended every conceivable position on the moral spectrum, and have stretched or tightened the taxonomic extension of the concept in so many ways that, after sorting through the conceptual literature, one is almost at a loss for what exactly ‘counts’ as a suicide, on any given definition. But we all know what suicide is. It would seem that we are able to apply the term with accuracy, based upon common sense, and can even employ it in metaphors. Whether explicit or embedded in our routines and traditions, we all have a ‘theory’ of suicide—informed by our cultural attitudes, our language usage, our own experiences and responses, and our gut reaction.

The ‘stance’ in this essay might best be characterized as no stance at all, but rather as an effort to lay out the necessary considerations for regarding suicide from a more dialectical (and less unreflective) perspective. The problems revolving around the subject

of suicide are as myriad as the disciplines and perspectives from which it is addressed, and as divergent as the reasons and circumstances which provoke suicide. Some of the problems inhere in the nature of suicide itself; others belong instead to the perspectives from which suicide is addressed. All of these ‘levels’ and considerations that arise when we examine the ‘problem’ of suicide conspire to make it a terribly convoluted, and thus unpopular—ultimately, fearful—topic. At bottom it can become the most penetrating and personal of problems, may take on the form of a dreadful question we must ask ourselves, because we know that suicide is for each of us a possibility of our existing as we do.

Thomas Merton wrote, “We fear the thought of suicide, and yet we need to think rationally about it, if we can, because one of the characteristics of our time is precisely that it is a suicidal age.”¹ Strictly speaking, this may be hyperbole, since suicides occur in all cultures and times (although not at any one constant rate). What Merton may be driving at is that, like the Victorians, whose sexless virtues provoked an almost obscene obsession with sexual matters, we, in our nervousness about death and end-of-life matters, in our very anxiety *about* our own anxiety and other ‘mental health issues,’ are ourselves obsessed with death, and with suicide (or its provoking factors) as the special case where life meets death in the form of a violent, deliberate collision. Constantly avoiding, turning away, and hiding one’s face (while peeking between our fingers) can be just as much a fetish as base perversion. Suicide may not be as taboo as it once was, but it still makes for a difficult conversation, evokes hushed tones and linguistic tip-toeing. This must stop. We need more than to simply ‘prevent’ suicide, moralize about the act in isolation of its genesis, explain it away (and the ‘victim’, too) with deterministic (causal) theories, or grieve without hope of understanding it. Least of all can we dismiss suicide

¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 203.

as ‘not our problem,’ for the world we live in is not composed of tiny human islands but of interpersonal relationships and projects. As Artaud suggested of Van Gogh’s suicide:

[O]ne does not commit suicide alone.

No one was ever born alone.

Nor has anyone died alone.

But, in the case of suicide, a whole army of evil beings is needed to force the body to perform the unnatural act of depriving itself of its own life.²

If we are appalled by Artaud’s indictment of us as ‘evil beings,’ it is, we insist, because the words are too strong. And yet, as any person dear to one who has committed suicide will admit, the terrible thought, the question that the deceased can never answer, does cross our minds and inspires nightmares: how much are we ourselves to blame for ‘not seeing’ until it was ‘too late’? Guilt seems built into the emotional element of the problem.

The task of this inquiry is to disentangle the problem of suicide, and failing that, at least to cast it in a new light—one that will encourage us to think about suicide with a more sensitive awareness of how our theoretical, moral, and social commitments, as well as our concern with our own lives, bear upon our understanding of it. The goal is to provide the groundwork for a system, or point of view, from which suicide is considered within the full context of human existence (rather than merely isolating the patient and offering an ‘objective’ diagnosis). We must look, not at the cultural, ethical, or spiritual questions—not at first—but rather, at the ‘fundamental structure’ of suicide, that is, the relation between the possibility of suicide and the beings for whom it is a possibility—namely, us.

² Antonin Artaud, “Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society,” trans. Mary Beach and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *Artaud Anthology*, Ed. Jack Hirschman, 2nd Edition (San Francisco: City Lights, 1965) 161-162.

The first two chapters take up a ground-clearing task: Chapter One looks at some of the contemporary psychological positions on suicide, examines the history of the term, and seeks to show that the current understandings of suicide lack general application to all cases—that there is some confusion in our ways of speaking about suicide. Chapter Two considers the role of philosophy within human life, and how a philosophical approach to the problem of suicide might clarify some of the confusions; the chapter then looks at the case of Socrates and takes up the question as to whether he committed suicide. The answer, if there is one, requires a reexamination of Socrates' life and his philosophical commitments.

The remainder of the inquiry, Chapters Three through Six, attempt to compile a set of considerations leading up to the evaluation of the moral status of suicide. The process begins as a descriptive inquiry into existential features of the self which make suicide a possibility (freedom and responsibility, in Chapter Three), the motivations for considering suicide as a possibility (anxiety and despair, in Chapter Four), the 'logic' of arguing toward suicide, and the rationality, if any, of the choice to commit suicide (Chapter Five), and finally concludes with an attempt to construct a moral landscape, in terms of individual and societal moral demands (Chapter Six).

Before undertaking this main task, and as a preparation for it, we should consider whether suicide, examined as it will be from a philosophical perspective, is a philosophical problem at all. There are many who will readily assert that it is not.

Chapter 1: “I don’t know my way about.”

In order to proceed, two questions must be asked: (1) Why is suicide a philosophical problem, or how can it be treated as such? (2) What *is* a philosophical problem? To answer the second question by recommending that it is a question of knowledge is too broad, since this is the aim of any discipline which takes the form of experiment or inquiry. Giving a richer answer to this question will allow us to see just what about suicide or the problem it presents is philosophical.

Wittgenstein mused, “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about.’”³ It is fitting to turn here to Wittgenstein, who in his later writings became critical of the traditional ‘requirement’ for ‘the crystalline purity of logic’ when examining the underpinnings of language.⁴ There is much talk of a ‘logic’ to suicide, or more often, a lack or breakdown of logic in the person who goes through with suicide. Often, this characterization is intended to suggest that an understanding of suicide turns on whether the investigator can ‘crack the code’ of the suicidal person, to find the logical flaw in his or her reasoning process. So, the investigator searches for ‘clues to suicide,’ as if it were an unsolved mystery and, piecing these clues together, deduces what Leslie Farber refers to as the ‘staircase model’ of suicide. The methodological reasons to adopt such a model are obvious; it provides the investigator with a pre-fabricated construct by which to narrate the story of suicide. But for that very reason, we must ask whether such a ‘staircase’ does in fact explain suicide or if it merely invents a fictional account, creates

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, (London: Blackwell, 1953, 2001) §123.

⁴ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §107.

logic where there is none. Farber, for one, is unconvinced by the staircase. He writes, “I would suggest that this staircase, though a far more reassuring and manageable structure..exists principally in the analyst’s head, not in the real world...[I]t is my suspicion that the staircase leads us not to greater understanding but merely away from the issue.”⁵

What is more, the vocabulary of the detective novel is itself misleading. Rather than a “whodunit,” the problem a suicide leaves behind is a ‘*whydunit*.’ On one level of interpretation, an answer to the *why* in question is glaringly obvious—because, for one reason or another, this person chose to die. As David Bakan suggests of suicide, “*res ipsa loquitur*—the thing speaks for itself.”⁶ We have suggested that suicide is a problem; this is not to call it a mystery, as if what we are seeking were some hidden truth. Again, Wittgenstein explicitly rejects the idea that the philosophy of language requires such sleuthing, and asserts that such an approach is misguided: “[T]he essence of our investigation [is] that we do not seek to learn anything *new* by it. We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand.”⁷ What we seem not to understand in the case of suicide —what we are collectively confused and inconsistent about in our arguments and language—is not as simple as why people commit it, but includes also why our society’s preventative strategies sometimes fail, why our political and religious institutions have (and still do) condemn it, and why yet others, striking a Stoic pose, advocate and uphold suicide (physician-assisted and otherwise) as something belonging to our human rights of life,

⁵ Leslie Farber, “Despair and the Life of Suicide,” *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, 2.2 (May 1962): 125.

⁶ David Bakan, “Suicide and Immortality,” *On the Nature of Suicide*, ed. Edwin S. Shneidman (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1969) 124.

⁷ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §89.

liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Under the shadow of all these complicated why's, it seems that one might easily lose his way toward understanding. Admitting that one is at a loss for where to begin amidst these questions—confessing, ‘I don't know my way about’—only then does one begin at the beginning of the problem, instead of charging ahead without first coming to terms with the uncertainties at the foundation, based upon one's own ignorance or confusion. Socrates serves as the prime example in realizing that his only wisdom was that he himself was not wise. The psychologist, on the other hand, begins with a different presupposition, and goes forward on the unquestioning acceptance that his foundation is sound. In understanding how suicide comes to be a philosophical problem, we must turn briefly to the psychologist and ask whether what he accepts on face value can support his reasoning.

The Intervening Psychologist and a Defiant Psychiatrist

Edwin S. Shneidman, the psychologist who put suicidology on the map, has developed and maintained a “definite point of view” on suicide which we shall take as representative of the mainstream psychological view of ‘the suicidal mind.’ In the opening pages of *The Suicidal Mind*, he writes,

Stripped down to its bones, my argument goes like this: In almost every case, suicide is caused by pain, a certain kind of pain, which I call *psychache*..Furthermore, this psychache stems from thwarted or distorted psychological *needs*. In other words, suicide is chiefly a drama in the mind.⁸

⁸ Edwin Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 4. It should be noted that although we will treat Shneidman's view as paradigmatic of the interventionist, there is at least one count on which Shneidman may be at odds with the current neurobiological view of the suicidal mind. Many psychiatrists accept the link drawn between depression and the potential for suicide, and accepting this link, have tended increasingly to favor drug treatments (in conjunction with psychiatric counseling). This treatment is based upon neurological studies which show depression to be related to deficiencies in serotonin levels in the brain—a problem that drugs such as Prozac are aimed at treating. Shneidman expresses some reservations regarding the ultimate success of a drug-based treatment of the suicidal person. He writes, “[T]here is no

This view of suicide characterizes it as an essentially psychological problem, and thus understanding why a person commits suicide is a fundamentally psychological endeavor. In unfolding this ‘drama of the mind,’ Shneidman informs us that ‘thoughts and feeling are not things. They are pure process.’⁹ His reasons for rejecting a purely neurological inquiry into the causes of suicide are based upon the premise that certain functions of persons, such as thought process, cannot be discovered except by an examination of the living patient, of the psychological mind in its functioning environment (i.e. the person). ‘[S]licing Jeffrey Dahmer’s brain will no more explain the mysteries of his gross psychological pathology than slicing Einstein’s brain will yield $E = mc^2$.’¹⁰ Of course, some neuroscientists might not be ready to concede this point, since much headway has been made in neurology by comparing and contrasting the makeups of experimental brains (testing, say, for abnormalities associated with depression) with control brains (those of non-depressed persons).¹¹ But Shneidman contends that, as an essentially psychological problem, understanding suicide itself—the thought process underlying it—necessarily requires research of persons, not brains. As for suicide, he asserts, ‘suicide is an essentially mental process in the mind.’¹²

Here we come upon something of a confusion: *suicide as a process*. Certainly, one might characterize the person who contemplates suicide (for whatever reasons), decides in favor of it, walks to a bridge, stares down into the water, then jumps, as having undertaken a process. But does this whole series of mental and physical actions fall under

handy morphine drip for psychological pain that, to be effective, does not, at the same time, alter who we are” (161 -162). As will become clear, Shneidman’s concern for the self, or the human being as a *whole* person, will reflect some of our own concerns in this work.

⁹ Shneidman 18.

¹⁰ Shneidman 18.

¹¹ For an overview of such research methods, see for example, Carol Ezzell, “Why? The Neuroscience of Suicide,” *Scientific American*, (January 13, 2003).

¹² Shneidman 18.

the concept of, and constitute, suicide itself? Insofar as nearly every person has at one time or another, whether for a moment or longer, entertained, pondered, or otherwise ‘thought hard’ about suicide, are we to say that everyone thus engages in the process of suicide?

Shneidman’s conception of suicide-as-process reflects the very position that Thomas Szasz, a vocal critic of the standard practices and premises of his own psychiatric profession, opposes. Presenting the standard view, as characterized in a professional editorial, that ‘the contemporary physician sees suicide as a manifestation of emotional illness,’ Szasz infers the implicit suggestion that this view is ‘scientifically accurate and morally uplifting.’¹³ The view is morally uplifting first for the very reason that it is taken to be scientifically accurate, and that this accuracy will furthermore aid professionals in their quest to ‘solve the problem’ of suicide, once and for all. Szasz’s response, although heated, raises important questions about views such as Shneidman’s. Szasz writes, ‘I submit that it is neither; that, instead, this perspective on suicide is both erroneous and evil: erroneous because it treats an act as if it were a happening; and evil, because it serves to legitimize psychiatric force and fraud by justifying it as medical care and treatment.’¹⁴ What Szasz refers to as ‘a happening’ is precisely the ‘mental process’ by which Shneidman characterizes suicide. In criticizing this position, Szasz already makes evident his view of suicide—that it is an *act*, and not a series of actions collected under a single term. The error identified by Szasz is the seemingly universal acceptance in his profession is that suicide is always the result of a mental illness, that it is the final

¹³ Thomas S. Szasz, ‘The Ethics of Suicide,’ *Suicide: Right or Wrong?*, ed. John Donnelly (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1990) 165.

¹⁴ Szasz 165. We will not examine whether Szasz is correct about the evilness of this view, though, if he is correct that the view is erroneous, and that this error plays a part in justifying coercive treatment practices, something, to put it lightly, ought to be done about that.

terrifying thrust of a degenerative disease. Taken as such, the death that results from suicide is treated analogously to the death that results from a purely physical disease. From there, the analogy plays itself out in the form of suicide prevention, intervention, and treatment.¹⁵

This error, Szasz contends, rests on a further mistake committed by psychologists, namely, the conflation of two groups of persons, successful and unsuccessful suicides, into a single group. He writes,

I believe that, generally speaking, the person who commits suicide intends to die; whereas the one who threatens suicide or makes an unsuccessful attempt at it intends to improve his life, not to terminate it...Put differently, successful suicide is generally an expression of an individual's desire for greater autonomy—in particular, for self-control over his own death; whereas unsuccessful suicide is generally an expression of an individual's desire for more control over others...In short, I believe that successful and unsuccessful suicide constitute radically different acts or categories, and hence cannot be discussed together.¹⁶

Although the distinction in some cases might be unclear—since some people who merely intend to make a ‘cry for help’ inadvertently succeed in killing themselves and some people who genuinely intend to die might fail to do so, being caught in the act—there is more reason to accept Szasz's dichotomy of successful and unsuccessful suicides than there is to lump both into a single group. This is true for the simple reason that it's quite impossible to make any inquiries to those who have succeeded in committing suicide. Shneidman offers as a justification of his preventative project the observation, ‘I have never known anyone who was 100 percent for wanting to commit suicide without any

¹⁵ Szasz further rails against the manners in which these practices are carried out, criticizing them as coercive affronts on the rights of individuals, and argues that the patient-therapist relationship deprives the ‘patient’ of any freedom over his own situation. Szasz takes up these issues at length in his book *Fatal Freedom: The Ethics and Politics of Suicide* (Westport: Praeger, 1999).

¹⁶ Szasz 166.

fantasies of possible rescue.”¹⁷ Such an observation serves as a motivation for intervention in all cases of suicide. But this appeal to ignorance—that since Shneidman has never met a person in full favor of terminating his or her life, such a person must not exist—is fallacious. Wouldn’t it be the case that, firstly, the hypothetical 100 percent-er would likely not seek out Shneidman’s ear, and secondly, that such a person, having successfully committed suicide, would be completely unavailable to Shneidman’s observation? To put it bluntly, of course Shneidman has never known anyone of this sort, because those people are either dead, or avoiding people like him.

Our reason for examining the prevailing psychological position on suicide, and for raising doubts, is to expose that it does not offer a *fundamental* understanding of suicide—that is, it lacks a fully universalizable foundation, preferring the presupposition that all suicide results from mental illness, which can be reasonably doubted.¹⁸ But there is something deeper to the psychological presupposition, and it is a moral judgment: that suicide is *ipso facto* wrong. The suicidologist’s foundation is *moral*, and not scientific. One might object that it is necessary to begin with *some* assumptions, a principle of sufficient reason that allows the investigator to bootstrap her way toward understanding, but for our purposes here, we are compelled for the time being to suspend moral judgments about suicide. We must do so because no moral argument has been offered against suicide that does not either resort to dogmatism or suffer from ‘moral loopholes,’

¹⁷ Shneidman 133.

¹⁸ Even if despair is a component of suicide, it would be a mistake to equate despair itself with mental illness. As we shall see in Chapter Four, it is conceivable that despair results not from an illness but rather from an apprehension of one’s own existential situation. This apprehension may itself be confused or misconstrued, but this does not in itself constitute a mental illness in the purely psychological sense of the term.

condemning most suicides and yet providing criteria for exceptions to the rule which are exceedingly vague.¹⁹

We must herein put aside the psychological perspective. Although the therapist may do many people much good, we cannot accept the fundamental presuppositions. Beyond the failure of the psychological premises to achieve a level of universal applicability to all cases of suicide, there is a further worry, best expressed by Szasz, that members of the medical and mental health professions *must* accept these presuppositions about suicide as an essential part of their value system, part of their commitment to saving lives:

It is natural for people to dislike, indeed to hate, those who challenge their basic values...Feeling assaulted in the very center of their spiritual identity, some take flight, while others fight back...[T]hose who stand and fight back..seem to perceive suicide as a threat, not just to the suicidal person's physical survival but to their own value system...Suicide is medical heresy.²⁰

The 'life and death struggle' provoked by suicide is not peculiar to only certain persons, only the suicidal. Those who approach suicide are pulled into its tension, and although fighting back, acting on gut reactions, is part of our means for survival, it is a mistake to codify one's own experience as the general rule, or to construct an explanatory model and then insist that all the relevant cases must conform to its structure. Failure of the explanation is always a possibility. Suicide itself, we often feel, is an exception to some rule or other, points toward the failure of some principle or system of logic. The hold it gets on us, when its proximity is close, *is exceptional*, and it seems this way because it suggests the possibility of an exception to every rule, prods us to question moral,

¹⁹ For an overview of arguments against suicide, see for example the first two chapters of Victor Cosculluela's *The Ethics of Suicide*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).

²⁰ Szasz 169-170.

political, cultural, and biological presuppositions. The tendency of the living is to reaffirm the life-affirming, and to stand opposed to suicide. One might wonder whether this reaffirms the beliefs of some suicidal persons, too, who sense that their anxiety, anguish, or alienation is not a mere delusion but results from a clear perception that the (living) world is, in a sense, against them—for a condemnation of suicide may not be sufficient to show the despairing person why that about which he is in despair, his life, is in fact worth living. Thus, the moral condemnation of suicide may serve to constrict the suicidal person that much more, in a world in which he is already cramped to the point of despair.

One point worth noting about Shneidman's view is that although it seems odd to view suicide itself as a process, it is not unreasonable to suspect that some kind of process occurs which in some cases ends in suicide. Rather, as will emerge, it might be more accurate to characterize this process as the working-out (or the not-working-out) of despair. Furthermore, we might add a word of caution regarding Szasz's view; mainly, that Szasz's primary concern is *political*. The notion of freedom discussed in works such as *Fatal Freedom* is a legal conception, and in arguing against the traditional medical view of suicide, Szasz is setting the stage for an argument about political rights. We will not take up this concern in our own inquiry. Our own concern with the issue of freedom (discussed in Chapter Three) will look instead at the metaphysical, or existential, issues about agency and the possibility of choosing. It is this more basic sense of freedom which the medical view seems to bring into doubt, by treating the individual as a product of brute causal forces; if this picture is pushed too far, the result begins to resemble determinism. But as we will see, if determinism is true, then it becomes difficult to know what to say, morally, about suicide, or how and why it is wrong.

Personal or Public?—The Tension of the Problem

“We have taken up a question that, in the sense of modern logic, is an over-and-done-with ‘sham question.’ This we have done in order to demonstrate that it is not such a sham, rather that it plagues what are perhaps the deepest levels of our existence, by which fact alone a treatise on the question is justified.” —Jean Améry²¹

Taken as a philosophical problem, if one will allow it, suicide seems inextricably tied up with the related question of “the meaning of life.” Camus certainly approached the problem this way, in “The Myth of Sisyphus,” albeit in an ultimately unsatisfying manner. For if suicide is related to the question of the meaning of life, it still remains unclear whether this is a general problem—concerning the meaning of life for all people everywhere—or if the problem applies only to those who have taken it upon themselves to make it a problem. Camus himself admits in the prefatory note to his essay, “There will be found here merely the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady.”²² Whether an ‘intellectual malady’ has the stuff to ‘plague’ ‘the deepest levels of our existence’ remains to be seen. Some would accuse us of rationalizing about a non-rational issue.

In the oft-cited opening of his essay, Camus declares that the “one truly serious philosophical problem..is suicide.”²³ For Camus, the possibility of suicide, combined with the ‘absurd’ relationship in which the individual finds oneself with respect to the world, makes ‘judging whether life is or is not worth living..the fundamental question of philosophy.’ But what is Camus asking for here, a universal prescription or a personal remedy? The difficulty is that as we draw away from ourselves here, cast a scrutinizing

²¹ Jean Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, trans. John D. Barlow (Bloomington: Indiana UP 1999) 28.

²² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991) 2.

²³ Camus 3.

glare over our commitments, relationships, and roles—our very identity as citizens of the world—we tend to withdraw from the acts of engaging and involving ourselves, the modes of existence in which the meaning of our love, our goals, and our promises to ourselves and others is articulable. As we doubt the actual features of our lives, hold them at arm's length as Descartes did his wax, it is as if we were trying to retell ourselves a funny story in a context in which it can no longer make us laugh. "You had to be there, I guess," we tell ourselves, embarrassed and feeling none-too-foolish for still chuckling at what is no longer humorous. And all at once even the last self-comforting chuckle evaporates, for what has ceased to be funny—what appears to have lost its meaning as we take our bird's eye view of ourselves—is our own life. From here, far above ourselves, so to speak, we sense that all along the joke was on us, and there is nothing funny about it. Why go to work each day? Why read the newspaper (it's always the same news, we say)? Why shave, when a day will undo what we have done? These questions keep coming. We can stare at a single sheet of paper, and think it the most stupid, unreasonable thing. Why the paper? Why write? What for? We can go into nature, and find that it is ridiculous and weird.

Is this the absurdity of which Camus has warned us? He tells us, "[A]bsurdity springs from a comparison...is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation."²⁴ To what are we comparing our razor, the sheet of paper, a tree in the forest? Absolutely nothing at all. We have resisted our ability to engage these things, and merely stare, contemplating them in themselves, and have found that in doing so they seem to have no meaning. A friend interrupts our meditation and replies, "Why, but a razor's for shaving, that's all." But we say we are looking for a

²⁴ Camus 30.

‘deeper’ meaning, a sense to shaving, an answer to the why of mass production and consumption of razors. Our sensible friend shakes her head and runs along. No matter, our investigation *sub specie aeterni* is important, is *philosophy*. All the better that our difficult questions have chased our friend away, so that we can return to the ‘real’ problem.

Despite the ironic hue with which we have painted this picture of the philosophical thinker caught in the throes of absurdity, there is something deeply captivating about the problem—the ease with which the questions can be asked and the difficulty in discovering the ‘deep’ answers are tied to a conviction that they exist to be found. The difficulty we anticipate here, in alluding to the ‘absurdities’ one may encounter in inquiring about the meaning of life, and the ‘philosophical’ manner in which we pull away from ourselves—as if trying to transcend our own skin in order to attain the appropriate view on things—in order to ‘solve’ this problem, exposes what Améry called the ‘sham’ of our investigation of suicide. We are caught within a tangle of perspectives—not those of the varying disciplines offering their particular findings and views on suicide—but rather a tangle woven by our own perspective-shifting. Just as the absurd philosopher withdraws from life-activity in order to question it, we are inclined to draw away from suicide in order to gain an impersonal, third-person view of its nature. As we back-peddle toward our privileged viewpoint we move further away from the subject of our inquiry. We seek answers that lie beyond unfeeling logic, answers that only the suicided person can provide. But this is nonsense. The suicided person can tell us nothing. The suicided person is *not*. It is a trick we play on ourselves, to speak as if death were but a door that is very hard to open, and if only we can figure out how to pry it, we

will know what we've been seeking. To say, "X is dead," is to utter a metaphor. A person can no more 'be' dead than a something can simultaneously be a nothing.

Confronted with death in general, and suicide in particular, we are faced with the hard fact that in our manner of reasoning, "the logic of what *is*," "all logical conclusions that we draw in statements about life are constantly bound to the fact of this life..[and] must exclude death."²⁵ Death, the consequent of suicide, is the negation of our conceptual powers—this is part of the tension. Even calling death 'the consequent of suicide' illustrates the point: "If one commits suicide, then one dies." How else are we to put it, and yet we have said nothing about death, know no better anything about it, for it always is out in front of us, yet to occur. On the other hand, if we witness the dying moment of another we realize that, fundamentally, we are missing out on what we really want to know.

The tension here resides between these detached, groping, third-person considerations of death and the fact that each of us must die. Each of us can only die our own death, and despite its own incomprehensibility, it strikes us as the most 'private,' most 'subjective,' fact of life, even though we know—at least, suspect—that it is no event, no change, no finish line. The deaths of others may provoke us to recollect this 'private' certainty, but the suicide goes further than that, and reminds us that death need not be met with passivity or patience, but can be brought about by blows, can be self-inflicted, and, if language does not too much deceive us, can be willed, right up to the point at which logic disappears and talk of willing becomes gibberish—at the moment of our death. The person who commits suicide reminds us that suicide is a personal problem. The spectator view, the social attitudes, all that is public and outside the suicide, which

²⁵ Améry 19 (emphasis added).

treat suicide as a problem abstracted away from any given instance of it, which try to treat the problem objectively, are nonetheless parasitic upon the problem of suicide as experienced personally, just as the fantasy of viewing ourselves and the world *sub specie aeterni* only arises from an awareness of the self's limited perspective in the world, and the subsequent desire to get beyond that limitation. The tension is that, in order to understand suicide, it seems as if we have to get as close to death as possible (for subjective understanding), and paradoxically, as far away as we can (in order to attain an objective view of things).

Now it might be objected here that if, as we have just suggested, our third-person, 'objective understanding' of suicide is parasitic on, or—to use a less bloodthirsty word—dependent upon our personal responses or understanding of suicide, then our social, political, and moral attitudes toward suicide necessarily presuppose that we have a grasp on the personal, subjective underpinnings of suicide.²⁶ But this is to presuppose the very point which we wish to call into question. If our 'objective' attitudes toward suicide are an extrapolation and an interpretation of our personal response to the suicide of another, or to the possibility that we ourselves can commit suicide, then what we must ask is whether we have interpreted these subjective responses and exported them into the public sphere in an appropriate manner.

But what is to count as 'appropriate' here? To what depth must we penetrate suicide in order to be justified in calling our inquiry of it 'fundamental'? Any answer we attempt to supply here will seem arbitrary, but facing this difficulty itself may prove to be a beginning. We have already called our 'stance' 'no stance at all,' and so while on the

²⁶ Aleks Zarnitsyn pointed out this interpretation of the last sentence in the previous paragraph in conversation.

one hand we will contend that the psychologists and the moralists have not displayed a fundamental understanding of suicide, we must not ourselves either announce beforehand or merely assume that we have ‘found the answer.’ For when we look at the individual cases in which a suicide has occurred, consider the fragments of information we have about life histories and motives, circumstances and methods, it is not at all clear that the resulting overall picture of suicide is a unifying one. A businessman shoots himself because of sudden financial crisis. A woman dying of bone cancer knowingly ingests a lethal dose of painkillers. A somber youth leaps from a bridge. A daughter who had watched her senile father gradually lose his mind takes the sleeping pills she has saved for this moment at which she herself has first begun to forget. Ask of these suicides, as Wittgenstein did of “games,” “whether there is anything common to all.”²⁷ There is a person, a life, an act, a death. So far so good. But what of the other concepts and ideas that enter our talk when we consider suicide?—anxiety, intention, the wish to die, the desire for freedom, or peace? Talk of madness and of murder? Any theory of suicide encounters a complex class of cases, each with differing details, each person with a varying character, which must be accounted for. If, as Shneidman suggests, each case of suicide manifests “psycheache,” in which life is experienced as somehow cramped or constricted, we must come to see how such a term means more than, “the suicidal person is in a great amount of distress.” What this inquiry seeks is a way to fill out the picture of distress. This we will do by exploring the existential constitution of the human being, as a free agent acting and choosing within a world of possibilities. The goal is to construe the problem of suicide as it pertains to human beings as agents (rather than as brains, a mass of psychological fodder, or as social products), and if the project is successful, it will

²⁷ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §66.

provide us with a new way of analyzing suicide and of taking up the task of moral critique. The following section briefly explores suicide as a term within our language, examines its history, and attempts to recast “suicide” as a morally neutral term, or at least to show that the term itself does not contain any moral judgment.

Suicide & Language

From our experiences we ‘paint a picture’ of the world, but this process is not undertaken in a vacuum. Rather, as persons born into a society, a community, the conceptual equipment we use in interpreting the world is not of our own invention, but is something we are ‘given’ from the public world—given in the form of language, traditions, history, which include distortions, contractions, prejudices, ideals, ambiguities, and so on. Although the subjective experience, the experience of oneself in a world, always comes first, the language we use to report this experience is never ‘our own,’ is never a private language. Expressing experience through language is to engage in an interpretation. Thus, we say a table is a raised flat surface on which we can put other things, and seeing a cherry dining table, we point, say, “table.” But in interpreting this thing as a table we are leaving out details, such as its color or that it is composed of wood, as inessential to its being a table. What we have learned in taking up a language as a useful mode of expressing our experiences are ways of dividing through the world, of distinguishing the relevant details from the irrelevant (when applying a term such as table), in order to make sense of experience and to share the sense we have made of it with others. We appropriate not only words, but as Wittgenstein has suggested, a ‘form of life.’²⁸ Each of us does not interpret the world anew as we go through life, but accepts

²⁸ Discussed in *Philosophical Investigations*. See, for example, §19.

many of the judgments and distinctions that have already been made and incorporated into the language, and do so as a necessary prerequisite of participating and speaking meaningfully—in a way that is understandable—with other members of society.

But doesn't this characterization of language acquisition simply reinforce the objection that it is the subjective viewpoint which *needs* the public toolkit in order to make sense of its own experiences? If this question means, 'Do we only know how to 'go on' with language insofar as we understand and employ language according to certain community standards?', then we can answer affirmatively. But if on the other hand it means something more—'Is the speaker's use of language limited to the common public understanding and usage of the language?'—then we are inclined to say, 'No, the speaker often uses language in accordance with public norms, but he can also 'go beyond' the ordinary usage, can stipulate new definitions, can redefine, can employ metaphors, can use the language in *creative* ways.' The purpose of creativity in language is to *better express* what one means (unless one is merely trying to be clever). The creative or novel use of language, the reshaping of it, the invention of new words, implies a dissatisfaction with the preexisting lexicon, and a desire, perhaps a need, to improve the expressive capacity of language. (Of course, some changes in language might also be attributed to laziness or provincial idiosyncrasies, but even here, language-shifts are indicative of subjective modifications which make speaking easier, more concise, convenient, etc.) That there is a need or desire to get beyond the strictly common uses of language indicates that there is something the person 'wants to say, if only she knew how to say it.' We often use this expression, and it might just be a way of disguising the fact that we don't know what we want to say. But there is plenty of reason to suspect otherwise. The experimental poet, for example, wants to express something to the reader,

and employs novel constructions and phrasings. There is always a risk of obscurity, of not being understood, and so the poet must take care never to break completely from common usage and interpretation, must offer here and there a clear verse, a familiar image, and rely upon the reader's wit to take him past the usual subject-verb-direct object-indirect object formulations. The subjective experience does not simply succumb to the public language, but resists it, fights it, is not always satisfied with the usual ways in which to express certain things. The public language, the typical way in which words mean and are understood, is essentially 'leveled' or 'average'²⁹; just because the meanings of words, on the whole, represent agreements about interpretation amongst a community of speakers does not always mean that those agreements are well-founded.

In the case of suicide, there is reason to suspect that much of the public interpretation inherited with this word is ill-founded. On a strictly etymological level, the word 'suicide,' contrary to its Latinate appearance, arose out of word-play, and its history is as ridiculous as it is instructive. In "The Linguistics of Suicide" David Daube writes, "Suicide" gave —still gives—the impression of coming directly from Latin; but there was no Latin *suicidum*, and indeed the formation is contrary to Latin grammar..if understood in accordance with the rules of Latin word-building, "suicide" would suggest "the killing of a pig"."³⁰ Daube attributes coinage to Walter Charleton, "a physician of wide culture who wrote all sorts of clever pieces," in the mid-seventeenth century.³¹ The story in which the word first occurs, taken from Petronius, is absurd enough to warrant a brief summary: A woman mourning the death of her husband, stays with his body in the

²⁹ These terms, in the way they are intended here, are borrowed from Kierkegaard (in *The Present Age*) and Heidegger (in *Being and Time*), respectively.

³⁰ David Daube, "The Linguistics of Suicide," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1.4 (Summer 1972) 422.

³¹ Daube 421-424.

mausoleum without food or drink, “determined to follow him.” Nearby, a soldier stands guard over the hanged body of a criminal in order to prevent the body’s removal by friends or relatives. Because it is cold outside, the guard wanders into the mausoleum to warm up, and finds the “beautiful” young woman. “Let me say that they came to an understanding,” Daube reports modestly. After this happenstance tryst, the guard returns to his post to find that the hanged body has been taken, and resolves to kill himself rather than facing whatever his punishment might be. His reasoning: “To vindicate oneself from extreme and otherwise inevitable calamity by *sui-cide* is not (certainly) a crime.” The young widow insists that they might put her dead husband’s body up in its place, they do so, “nobody did notice” the difference, “and all ended well.”

Daube draws the link between this hyphenated construction and the term coined by John Donne in *Biathanatos* (published posthumously in the 1640s), “self-homicide.” The conjecture appears to be that Charleton’s word is intended as a clever abbreviation of Donne’s term. As Donne’s work was a ‘defense’ of suicide—an argument that it is not always a sin against God—he needed a neutral term. “Self-murder” begged the very question into which his arguments inquired, and so he hit upon “self-homicide,” since “there is criminal homicide but also justifiable homicide, as in self-defense, or even commendable homicide, as in a just war.”³² The words of Charleton’s soldier lean heavily on the notions and phrasings (that “*sui-cide* is not (certainly) a crime”) in Donne’s work. Charleton’s work was later discovered by Pierre François Guyot Desfontaines, a French Jesuit Abbé and literary buff who was connected with Voltaire. “It was Voltaire’s wholehearted acceptance [of the word “suicide”] that procured it tenure...It is safe to assert that Desfontaines imported *suicide* and Voltaire marketed

³² Daube 420.

it.”³³ *Suicide* is then reappropriated by English writers. The invention of the Latin word *suicidum* comes later.³⁴

The purpose of this brief historical excursus on the ‘invention’ of *suicide* is to diffuse the word of some of its ‘moral force.’ There is no deep history to the word; it was, in effect, originally a joke word. If Daube’s detective-work is sound, we may further infer that it served as a clever derivative of Donne’s morally neutral term *self-homicide*. Of course, this is not to say that the word hasn’t taken on plenty of meaning since its literary beginnings, and many of the recent philosophical debates focus on precisising the extension of *suicide*, and answering the question, “When do we call it suicide?” In this inquiry, we have resisted trying out a definition of *suicide*, and have thus relied heavily on the speaker to understand for him or herself what we mean by this word. This we feel justified in doing, because no matter what ambiguities may arise on the fringe of the concept—cases of self-starvation, acts of protest, single-car fatal traffic accidents, and so on—we trust that the reader has a working grasp of the concept, and can apply it in the most evident cases. Any moral feelings or emotional responses which accompany the concept should, we feel, be jettisoned, for *suicide*, at bottom, picks out an act alone, a case of self-killing in which the act is intended by the agent. There are too many questions yet to be fully explored to decide whether this act is necessarily always wrong (or cowardly, detestable, and so on). This is why beginning from a moral assumption about the wrongness of suicide seems to be misguided; rather, we regard it as a *problem*, which does not necessarily mean that the act itself *is* wrong, but that we sense that *something* has *gone wrong*.

³³ Daube 426, 427.

³⁴ Daube 428: “[S]uicidum appears in learned dissertations from the last quarter of the eighteenth century.”

Resisting Objectification

Unimpressed by Camus' claim that suicide is the "one truly serious philosophical problem," Joyce Carol Oates remarks, "Camus exaggerates, certainly, and it is doubtful whether, strictly speaking, suicide is a 'philosophical' problem at all. It may be social, moral, even economic, even political—especially political; but is it 'philosophical'?"³⁵ Oates considers other slogans offered up by philosophers: Marcus Aurelius told us, "In all you do or say or think, recollect that at any time the power of withdrawal from life is in your hands,"³⁶ and Nietzsche observed, "The thought of suicide is a strong consolation; one can get through many a bad night with it."³⁷ Her complaint seems to be that these thinkers are not, could not be, honestly engaging the problematic nature of suicide. She writes, "But these are *problems*, these are *thoughts*; that they are so clearly conceptualized suggests their detachment from the kind of anguish, raw and undifferentiated, that drove Sylvia Plath to her premature death." The presumption here is that clear thinking through about the problem of suicide is incompatible with suicide itself. The act of suicide, as Oates characterizes it, results from 'raw and undifferentiated anguish,' and so the applicability of thought is out. But this presumption no more undermines the *slogans* above (and must we take them as more than that, when considered out of context?) than it undermines her own writing on suicide. If suicide is impenetrable, unapproachable, by thought, then our ambition here is foolish.

This raises another concern that we will flag for now before proceeding further. If one peruses the literature on suicides—persons who have attempted or completed

³⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, "The Art of Suicide," *Suicide: Right or Wrong?*, ed. John Donnelly (New York: Prometheus 1990) 210.

³⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth, (London: Penguin, 1964), Book II, §11.

³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989) §157.

suicide—there is a tendency to objectify the person. To some extent, of course, this is unavoidable when writing about persons. But the talk of persons, subjects, often slides into a mere analysis of persons-as-objects. Casting suicide as a cognitively impenetrable act, as Oates does, excommunicates the suicide from the linguistic community, from our “form of life.” Perhaps the result is moot in the case of completed suicides, but at least in the case of those who attempt it, and survive, this judgment that the person or her condition is beyond us and past our understanding may only make worse the situation of the person whom the interventionists want badly to ‘save.’ Although these generalizations may be offensive to some, we feel that the objectifying tendency of those who cast the suicide outside the ‘realm of thinking’ make a much more contentious, and a self-defeating, generalization—that the suicide is necessarily ‘out of his mind.’ Essentially, what this tends to do is revoke the suicide’s humanity. In the eyes of many, the suicide, attempted or completed, has ceased to possess personhood, and perhaps never had it.

In contrast to this, Améry’s experience upon being revived from his first suicide attempt (written prior to his second, successful one), warrants consideration. The objectification experienced by him, or even that he perceives it in this way, seems especially revolting if one considers that he had previously endured confinement in a Nazi concentration camp from 1943-1945:

I still know very well how it was when I awoke after what was later reported to me as a thirty-hour coma. Fettered, drilled through with tubes, fitted on both wrists with painful devices for my artificial nourishment. Delivered and surrendered to a couple of nurses who came and went, washed me, cleaned my bed, put thermometers in my mouth, and did everything quite matter-of factly, as if I were already a thing, *une chose*. The earth did not have me yet: the world had me again and I had a world in which I was to project myself in order that I would once again be all

world myself. I was full of a deep bitterness against those who meant well who had done this disgrace to me. I became aggressive. I hated. And knew, I who had previously been intimately acquainted with death and its special form of voluntary death, I knew better than ever before that I was inclined to die and that the rescue, about which the physician boasted, belonged to the worst that had ever been done to me—and that was not a little.³⁸

The words of a man out of his mind? It is impossible to say. But that he writes lucidly, that he attempts to penetrate the act which he soon returned to, aware of his ‘inclination’ toward it, suggests that suicide will bear out some thinking through. What is unclear is why those, like Oates, presume that when anxiety, anguish, or any other emotion enters, thought exits completely. Granted, there are surely many who, consumed by ‘the emotion of the moment’ and unattentive to reason, kill themselves. But there are also, it seems, many who bear out their lives in this same unreflective way. It is easy enough to condemn the dead; they can’t fight back. It is harder to look at what has happened, and to ask what it means, and to resist the simplest, handiest answer, allowing us to sweep death back beneath the rug where we won’t have to look at it. To return to Wittgenstein’s suggestion that “a philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about,’” we can assert that the problem of suicide demands philosophical scrutiny because our ways of regarding and reacting to the problem are riddled at times with confusion and a sense of being lost, of not knowing what to say about what has happened, and there are cases where it seems correct to remain dissatisfied with the explanations offered by the preexisting pictures of suicide.

³⁸ Améry 78-79.

Chapter 2: The Issue—Not Truth, But Something Else

‘I am still waiting for a philosophical *physician* in the exceptional sense of that word—one who has to pursue the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity—to muster the courage to push my suspicion to its limits and to risk the proposition: *what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all “truth” but something else—let us say, health, future, growth, power, life.*’ —Friedrich Nietzsche³⁹

One feature of human brought out by the suicidal event is our deep concern about our own lives, and human life in general. This chapter examines the place of philosophy within that concern, and proposes that philosophy may not (perhaps need not) give us the “truth” about suicide, but rather can serve as a perspective from which to lay out the considerations we must confront in order to work more fully through the problem. The chapter ends with an examination of the case of Socrates, and entertains the question as to whether he committed suicide in drinking the cup of hemlock at his execution. Peering into the broader context of Socrates’ death, it seems that that there is something odd about regarding his death as a suicide, and that his life as a philosopher, his conception of philosophy, and his attitude toward death, all suggest that philosophy itself, far from being merely about ‘the truth’ may also consist in a therapeutic endeavor.

Our Concern With Life

Human life is not fundamentally rational. We are not the *res cogitans* of Descartes’ *Meditations*. The ability to think, to step outside our everyday perspective and into someone else’s shoes or to withdraw from our own primary experiences in order to

³⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1974) Preface for the Second Edition §2, 35 (emphasis on last statement added).

reflect upon them, or even to simply ‘stop, and take it all in’—these are *achievements*. The child looks, listens, tastes, cries, not for any intellectual reasons, nor because mere perceiving (the activity intended by Descartes when he understands himself as a thinking thing) is the child’s fundamental activity, but rather because these capacities help the child to get along, to cope, with the world.

When it comes to intellectual and reflective matters, thinking quite obviously has the upper hand. Our emotions cannot ‘emote’ themselves into intellectual priority—we regard emotions, impulses, instincts, as *intrusive* to our ‘pure’ intellectual activities, as if thought were somehow soiled and ruined by the non-rational makeup of our selves. These ‘animal’ faculties in us do not belong to ‘rationality-proper,’ and Western tradition, both academic and religious, has tended to divide the human being along these lines, to split the person into halves, praising and nurturing the mind’s (or soul’s) activity, while at the same time either making modest provisions for the care of the bodily and material needs (insofar as a healthy body aids in the crafting of a healthy soul), or advocating asceticism of varying severity. Aristotle, setting forth a guidebook of practical virtues in his *Nicomachean Ethics*—the ancient Greek self-help success manual for leading the happy life—tells us in the final pages that it is not at all the practical life which is happiest, but rather the contemplative life. The virtues propounded in the *Ethics* simply offer the best ways to free up time from the bustle of day-to-day life in order to turn attention inward. While sheer practical comfort and success may provide much happiness, it is not the highest of which humans are capable. Aristotle argues,

But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it

in power and worth surpass everything..[T]he life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else *is* man.⁴⁰

Although the immortality of the intellect or soul is now a non-issue (or an absurdity) for many thinkers and systems, there is still an unshakable conviction that human consciousness and cognizing, and the goods we can enjoy because of these human features, are somehow quite special, valuable. Even the forward-thinking Epicurean and the fully realized utilitarian will concede that the ‘pleasures of the mind’ are finer in quality and quantitatively weightier than the pleasures of the body.

There is a tension here between over-intellectualizing and over-romanticizing the picture. A great many people will suspect a tinge of sophistry and idleness in all of this, when it is hard enough to ‘get by’ from day to day, year to year. To that end, the great metaphysicians and the great poets may be equally guilty of erecting fantasies far removed from the needs and concerns of *actual* human existence. Both the epic myth and the metaphysical system entertain a scale of grandiosity and perfection to which no merely human life can fully attain, or fully know. But as the handiwork of human thoughts and minds, these grand notions can inspire. We identify with, or admire, the hero. We find hope in the ideals of justice and freedom, or in the hypothesis that we are a part of something ‘bigger’ (whether social, cosmic, or divine).

But the negative point, from which we have momentarily digressed in order to allude to the appeal of the ‘rational animal’ and ‘thinking thing’ pictures of the human being, is that philosophy itself can become ensnared in this tension between the intellectual and the romantic—namely, through too much romanticizing of the intellect, to the point that it is split off from the rest of the person. Nietzsche characterizes the

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross (and J.O. Urmson), *A New Aristotle Reader*, ed. J.L. Ackrill, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), Bk. X, Ch. 7, 1178^a.

situation as a power-struggle of the intellect, which, assured of its own primacy, sets Truth as its lone and ultimate goal. The “will to truth” seeks answers, a solid metaphysical, scientific, or moral foundation. Nietzsche worries that this ‘will’ bases its activity on a false presupposition—namely, that the Truth will turn out to be a tight, coherent, and *singular* system: that ultimately (or ideally), there will be no gray areas. Instead, Nietzsche wants us to see that the world is *potentially* open to “infinite interpretations.”⁴¹

This is not to suggest, as some have insisted, that Nietzsche is inviting us to accept a wild relativism which, because of its conception of multifarious “truths,” amounts to nihilism. Rather, Nietzsche is prescribing a degree of pragmatism and open-mindedness—to allow, for example, that the truth of quantum mechanics and particle physics will radically differ from the truths found in economics, psychology, or aesthetics. Far be it from Nietzsche to allow such truths as that God lives in my belly-button or that the moon is made of cheese, or even the increasingly popular and vacuous slogan, “it’s all relative.” It is not so much the possibility of finding meaning or truth in the world which Nietzsche wishes to bring into question, but the reasons *why* we seek meaning and truth so vehemently, with the determined conviction that there *must* be an answer. When, Nietzsche would ask, did *truth* (of all things!) become so important?

The response Nietzsche slips to us in his preface to *The Gay Science* stands at the beginning of this chapter: “what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all ‘truth’ but something else—let us say, health, future, growth, power, life.” These ‘something else’s’ possess a particularly human character, and if Nietzsche’s suggestion is at all correct, then we must conclude that our interest in ‘truth’—through

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §374.

philosophizing, science, and all other truth-seeking disciplines—is not merely a pursuit ‘for the sake of truth,’ but is at bottom a pursuit of understanding for the sake of ourselves: How to improve health of body and mind. How to plan for the future, to make educated guesses despite the uncertainty of induction. How to increase, deepen, or strengthen our self-understanding and to apply this understanding to our lives, institutions, and culture. Ultimately, *how to live*.

Here we have hit upon something fundamental. We are *concerned* about our lives, our existence. Everything we do expresses this concern—that we aim to do certain things, live a certain way, to follow the rules or rebel, to raise a family or enter a monastery. This is not a specifically *moral* concern with how to live—our concern with our lives is not limited to a ‘how should I..’ line of questioning, but includes even the questioning of possibilities—‘how *could* I..(get the girl?) (find a good job?) (put on my pants a different way in the morning?)’ We don’t merely go about performing all our routines and duties; we *think* about them. We plan, worry, anticipate, mull over, take charge of, and disregard the possibilities of our lives. We make our lives, and consequently the world in which we live, an *issue* for ourselves.⁴²

One might object that there is nothing terribly original or insightful in this finding, but our primary concern is not originality, but to get clear on what is at stake, what matters, in human existence—why, on the one hand, our making life an issue seems to place a premium on thought, and why, on the other hand, a certain possibility arises for humans that appears to be wholly absent for all other forms of life, the possibility of suicide.

⁴² Martin Heidegger writes, “Dasein [i.e. the human being] is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it.” *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 32/H.12.

Since suicide is inextricably connected to death, it is impossible to explore suicide without also examining our relation to death. But at the same time, suicide, as a uniquely human phenomenon, is quite obviously an enterprise that only the living human being can undertake. The usual line of questioning is *post hoc*; we ask ‘why’ a suicide has occurred, and pursue a causal explanation for an event that has taken place. Our focus sharpens on the individual (or the victim, the patient, or criminal), and the explanations that emerge have a definite cognitive flavor—and more recently a neurological underpinning which purports to add strength to the cognitive, psychological explanations. The suspicion is that an error has occurred somewhere in the mind; suicide is error. In addition to understanding why, there is the desire to ‘fix’ the error. Again, this picture of psychological detective work isolates the individual from the context of his or her life—treats the person as primarily a mind, a thinking thing (and a broken one, at that). At the other end of the spectrum, one may follow Durkheim’s sociological approach, and examine suicide as a purely cultural phenomenon, as a function of the conditions of a society, a problem to be ‘fixed’ at the societal level. But as a full-blown description, this, too, falls short, for the individual is transformed into a function of society—a specific manifestation of preexisting conditions. Rather than searching for the personal or subjective reasons for suicide, sociology (at least on the classic Durkheimian model) takes an entirely external approach. The result smacks of a kind of social determinism that fails to illuminate much more than the vital statistics that have been gathered.⁴³ On both these manners of interpretation, there have surely been informative insights

⁴³ Durkheim writes, ‘Shall suicide be considered to exist only if the act resulting in death was performed by the victim to achieve this result?...In the first place, this would define suicide by a characteristic which, whatever its interest and significance, would at least suffer from not being easily recognizable, since it is not easily observed...Intent is too intimate a thing to be more than approximately interpreted by another,’ in *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. Spaulding and Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951) 43.

regarding the factors contributing to suicide, but we must not believe that either approach—internal or external to the suicide—can have the final word. It is reasonable to assume that suicide is just as much a subjective matter as it is a social one, neither a ‘problem’ only of the mind nor only of society as a whole. The academic difficulty this presents is clear: a multitude of variables and factors. Working backwards—trying to solve the ‘case’ of suicide—presents one with too many pathways to follow them all at once, and yet it seems that both the personal and the social factors are essential to our understanding.

Instead of starting up the staircase model of suicide, which we may have reason to doubt, we will abandon causal explanations, and contrary to the tendency to work backward from an occurrence of suicide toward retrospective understanding, we will *approach* suicide—that is, the *possibility* of suicide—from where we stand as living human beings, and not so much as members of an academic or moral special interest group. But even with the care we have taken to clear the way in front of us—to cast some doubts on the preexisting conceptions of suicide—this project will still invite the suspicions of those, like Oates, who contend that a deliberate, philosophic inquiry into suicide must necessarily miss its mark, dealing merely with thoughts rather than the richer scenario surrounding the moments preceding and ending in suicide. The project itself must from this point on prove those suspicions mistaken. We can allow that thought itself is not the most fundamental feature of humans, and that rational thought may be the furthest thing from the mind of many suicides, while still proceeding on the hypothesis that thought may prove helpful in how we make life an issue for ourselves, as we strive to cope with our situation, whatever it may be. Philosophy itself, in practice, can be no more (or less!) than an ordering of articulable thoughts—the conceptual representations of the

ways in which we experience the world and ourselves within it, and the inferences we draw from those experiences.

Applying this method of approach toward suicide amounts to assuming a personal viewpoint on these matters. Because suicide, considered as an act (rather than as “a happening”), stands in a middle relation between life and death, because this act, if possible that it is *chosen*, gives rise to epistemological and moral puzzles, and because it is a possibility that adheres to every human being, exploring the problem of suicide demands an exploration of ourselves, our constitution as beings, the limits or limitations of our knowledge, and the ways in which we value and evaluate our existence. There are many questions we can ask in order to break open this problem: What does it ‘take’ for suicide to be a possibility? What ‘condition’ prompts our awareness of it? What stands in our way, or drives us toward it? And what do we ‘say’ about it—that is, how does suicide fit into our evaluations of our own life and life in general; how does it square with what we want to ‘get’ out of life? (This last question is not only a question of values, but also a question of meaning.) The remainder of this inquiry will attempt to address these questions each in turn.

*A Note on Socrates and the Trouble He Has Caused*⁴⁴

“I am afraid that other people do not realize that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.” —Socrates, in the *Phaedo*⁴⁵

⁴⁴ In what follows, the character of Socrates is treated singularly, rather than distinguishing (as some Ancient Greek scholars do) between the ‘historical Socrates’ and the ‘Socrates of Plato.’ The prior (actual Socrates) is taken to be the protagonist of the *Apology*, the latter (Socrates as the mouthpiece of Plato) as that of *Phaedo*. This distinction is not acknowledged here primarily to secure one continuous narrative about the last days of Socrates’ life. Although *Apology* and *Phaedo* may have been composed at different points in Plato’s career and although their historicity is uncertain, it remains true that they provide (along with *Crito*) the only surviving account of the last days of Socrates.

Two thousand years after Socrates delivered this edict to his pupils and friends, it is easy to lose track of the original meaning of these famous words. For the philosopher, there is some glory in the thought that his profession is the best for preparation for death, since there is heroism in conquering universal fears of humankind. But why philosophy, and not, say, fishing, or Zen meditation? Jacques Choron succinctly locates the sense of Socrates' words within the context of the metaphysical views discussed in *Phaedo*:

What is meant by rehearsal of dying, however, can be properly understood only in the light of Plato's concept of death as the liberation of the immortal soul from the body and his view of the body as an obstacle to the attainment of true knowledge. Only when the soul is no longer hampered by the body can it arrive at true knowledge. Therefore the real philosopher in his search for truth longs for the liberation of his soul and rehearses dying by constantly trying to approach the ideal state when his body is already out of the way and his soul is free. Since he thus becomes familiar with death, he is not afraid of dying.⁴⁶

For those philosophers who no longer subscribe to the notion of detachable souls and minds (or conversely, detachable bodies), Choron's exposition on Socrates' meaning might deflate the above quote of its glory as a contemporary 'philosophical slogan.' Furthermore, if the 'will to truth' is an illusion that philosophy suffers, as Nietzsche contended, while failing to see or admit that its true aim lies instead in improving our situation in life (whether this has anything to do in the strict sense with 'truth' or not), then it might be thought that Socrates epitomizes this mistake.

But it seems odd to attribute the 'will to truth' to Socrates since, of all philosophers, he claimed to know little or none of it. His belief in the existence of truth (whatever it might be), as well as his metaphysical views on the soul, were matters of

⁴⁵ Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997) 64a.

⁴⁶ Jacques Choron, 'Death as a Motive of Philosophic Thought,' *Essays in Self-Destruction*, ed. Edwin Shneidman (New York: Science House, 1967) 61.

perpetual speculation for him—and some might further suggest, matters of faith. His predilection to question and probe all matters of seeming importance characterizes Socrates more so than any preoccupation with truth—which might be no more than the focal point which allows for his ‘will to question.’ In the *Apology*, he is not yet committed to a position on death and the hereafter, but argues that death is a blessing either way: if death is the end of all cognizance, then its blessing lies in the release from the rigors and stresses of life; if there is something after death, then Socrates finds reason to believe it will be good, since he has led what he considers to be an upright life, one worthy of reward in the afterlife if there is such a thing. Since death will amount to one of these ‘states’ or the other, either way, death is a blessing for the person who has led a decent life: an eternal rest or a continued existence elsewhere.⁴⁷

Socrates maintains this dialectical stance up to the hour of his death. Although the narrative suggests strongly that he would prefer to believe in the immortality of the soul, he admits the possibility of being mistaken, never claims certainty on these matters. He says, ‘I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—that this, or something like this, is true about our souls.’⁴⁸ This sounds more akin to Pascal or Kierkegaard than our persistently questioning philosopher. One might conclude that Socrates simply understood that his ‘leap of faith’—if that’s what it was—could not be rationally justified, but that by expressing his beliefs as a constructive dilemma, he could remain within reason by publicly ascribing to no more than the disjunct—either death is annihilation, or life continues in another form, that is, either it is or it isn’t (the end).

⁴⁷ Some may have reservations with the metaphorical description of annihilation as ‘rest,’ but Socrates’ point seems to be that, at any rate, if a person no longer exists to be harmed, then harm cannot accrue to that person (whether anyone else claims that harm has occurred or not)—from an obliterated first-person perspective, talk of harm is out, no longer relevant to the person who can no longer experience it.

⁴⁸ Plato, *Phaedo* 114d.

All of this is more or less speculation, and we have turned our attention to Socrates for a moment in order to raise the issue of just how much trouble he has caused. The trouble which presently concerns us is the question, and the title of R.G. Frey's provocative essay, 'Did Socrates Commit Suicide?' Socrates' views on death and the metaphysical makeup of humans, as well as his attitude toward his own life at the time of his trial and subsequent condemnation, conspire to make this a tricky question. That Frey defended the answer, "Yes, he did," in the space of a mere three pages has caused ample scrutiny and dissent, and has produced a tidy collection of conceptual analyses of suicide. Socrates, though, tends to fall to the wayside in these considerations. As it turns out—or what might have been clear before Frey stirred the pot—is that there couldn't be a murkier case than that of Socrates, and yet, 'he drank the hemlock knowingly, not unknowingly or in ignorance of what it was or what its effect on him would be, and intentionally, not accidentally or mistakenly; and he died as a result of his act of drinking the hemlock.'⁴⁹ These conditions, for Frey, imply that Socrates committed suicide.

Undoubtedly, Frey's classification of Socrates as a suicide has not sat well with others. There are essentially two different kinds of objections— (1) Frey's definition of suicide is mistaken because it admits cases which we do not regard as suicide, or (2) Frey has misinterpreted the facts of Socrates' case, or failed to consider details relevant to the total situation surrounding Socrates' death, which undermine the notion that he committed suicide. The first objection can be considered in terms of 'wanting to die' as a necessary condition for attributing suicide to a self-killing. The second objection will be examined by referring to the narrative—looking at the context of Socrates' death—and

⁴⁹ R.G. Frey, 'Did Socrates Commit Suicide?' *Suicide: Right or Wrong?*, ed. John Donnelly (Buffalo: Prometheus 1990) 57.

by asking what the relation is between our application of the term *suicide* and the ascription of responsibility for action.

Several of the objections to Frey's argument fall under the first class. The responses that make reference to the social circumstances surrounding Socrates' death—that the occasion of his death is essentially an execution and therefore not a suicide—want to insist that there must be something more than Socrates' compliance in drinking the hemlock in order for his act to be regarded as suicide. It is not that his acts fail to display intention, but that they display the *wrong kinds of intentions*. (That the conditions surrounding his death are not fully in Socrates' control will be examined under the second kind of objection.) The central claim is that *Socrates did not want to die*, and that wanting to die is a necessary condition for committing suicide.

Consider a soldier who leaps on a grenade in order to save his comrades, or a parent who rushes into a burning building to save her children. (Assume in the second case that there is good reason for the mother to suspect that she will not survive the fire.) In neither of these cases is the desire to die a factor, even though, presumably, both agents understand that death is the likely result of their respective actions. Rather, each wants to save others from harm or death. To say that the soldier or the mother *wants* to die would be to misconstrue the case. We might argue that the desire to die is a logical extension of the desire to save the others, but this seems to overdetermine the factors prompting the agents to action (not exactly a *causal* overdetermination, but an *over-interpretation* on the part of the observer—putting desires into the head of the agent that needn't be there in order for the action to be performed, in this case, a desire for one's own death that is completely irrelevant to the explanation of the agent's life-saving action). Though each agent acts in a manner resulting in death, and acts intentionally,

there is no reason to attribute a ‘death wish’ to either the soldier or the mother (not without further contingent details being added to specific cases), and thus no reason to call either one a suicide.⁵⁰

Can we say that Socrates did not want to die, and that because of this, his death cannot be considered a suicide? Frey thinks not. Unlike the soldier or the mother, the action in question is his drinking of the hemlock. Frey argues,

[A]n agent intends to act only if he knows that he is doing it and wants to do it either as an end in itself or as a means to some further end. So unless one is prepared to say that Socrates did not intend to drink the hemlock, we can infer from the fact that he intended to drink it, together with what his knowledge of what its effect on him would be, that he wanted to die.⁵¹

We can assume that Socrates did intend to drink the hemlock, or more generally, to appear at his execution, based on his unwillingness to escape prison (discussed in *Crito*). Furthermore, he was not physically coerced or force-fed; he drank the hemlock himself. But does any of this entail that Socrates wanted *to die*? Maybe he wanted to be a good sport about the execution, or to do his Athenian duty (discussed in detail below), but does it have to be true that in order to be a good sport or fulfill his duty that he want to die? Take for example a person who has promised to help a friend move. On the day of the move, something else comes up, but having made the promise, the person chooses to keep it, to help the friend move, even though he needn't want to do it.

⁵⁰ This is to disregard the tag ‘altruistic suicide.’ We will not entertain this term, since on our emerging account, it would merely represent an adjectival way of describing two different intentions that coincide: the intention to perform an altruistic act, and the intention to commit suicide. (Someone who commits suicide, and disguises it if needed, so that his family can reap the insurance benefits of his death might fit this description.) The term is a leftover from Durkheim’s account, meant to distinguish the cases discussed in this paragraph from other kinds of suicide. In Durkheim’s system, since intention is left out, there is no way to exclude these cases from falling under the general concept (as he defined it) of suicide. For Durkheim, the soldier and the mother count as suicides.

⁵¹ Frey 58.

It might be suggested that *qua* maintaining his Athenian duty, Socrates wanted to die, because that's what maintaining his duty called for in this specific instance; this would satisfy the necessary conditions for intending an act as Frey defines it. His wanting to die is implicit in his wanting to uphold his duty to the city. In order for his commitment to the city to be upheld, that is, in order to succeed in his commitment, he must want that the actions and duties called for by that commitment are successfully completed (or else he fails to keep the promise he has made to himself and the city in committing himself to the project of Athenian citizenship). To that end, in drinking the hemlock, just as in refusing to escape from prison, it is implied that Socrates wants to die, for it is in keeping with the commitment he has undertaken.

If this extrapolation of Frey's assessment of the situation is true, then we must include the soldier and the mother in the class of suicides, too. Does the fact that Socrates raised the cup to his lips with his own hand make his case different from the soldier's leaping on a grenade or the mother's rushing into the inferno? Is the difference that Socrates acted in a positive manner (making his act a suicide), while the other two acted negatively in neglecting to protect their own lives while performing some other act? But Socrates' death, too, could be characterized this way by making reference to his commitment to the city and his rejection of the opportunity to escape. So, if Socrates committed suicide, then so did the soldier and the mother.

The reason Frey's intentional analysis has this result, which may seem strange, is that "want" appears to be pulling a double-duty. It only looks as if Socrates is 'more of a suicide' than the soldier or the mother because Socrates has ample time to ruminate over his death sentence while, presumably, the other two do not. Socrates has time to make all the appropriate inferences which we have just made which imply that he wants to die. (If

he has time to talk about good citizenship and the immortality of the soul, then surely he must have considered something like Frey's argument, too, and so it is impossible that he could have acted as he did and not have wanted to die!) Through a dialectical argument, a custodian might be made to realize that, in keeping with his job description and duties, he actually does want (desire) to clean up urine in a public restroom, although he seemed certain upon engagement in the conversation that he had no such desire, even though he had to do it. "Oh, I guess I really did want that."—so goes the puzzled response. At best, if it turns out correct to say in terms of the intentional analysis that Socrates wanted to die, it still seems that this "want" is merely implicit—better, *covered up*—by other wants and desires that have a higher degree of relevance to his immediate case.⁵²

A good deal of the argument here has consisted in gestures and hand-waving, and perhaps all we can or need say is that the function of desire on Frey's analysis seems dubious, and maybe psychologically impossible for the agent. If he is using "want" as a technical term, then we are no longer clear on why it matters that, in the technical sense, Socrates necessarily must have "wanted" to die, acting as he did. So, we might concede that Socrates committed "technical suicide." But we should turn to the second line of objections before deciding how seriously we ought to take this technicality.

Suzanne Stern-Gillet contends that Frey's definition of suicide "which allows for Socrates' inclusion in this class is incomplete insofar as it blurs the distinctions between what are, in fact, different *manners of viewing* a person's death."⁵³ What makes Frey's definition incomplete, she argues, is that it omits "the practical function..the rhetorical

⁵² Should we say it was an "unconscious desire"? Relegating Socrates' wanting to die to the unconscious might have some force if we were psychoanalyzing him, but as part of how Frey wants to describe Socrates' action, this would only muddy the waters even more.

⁵³ Suzanne Stern-Gillet, "The Rhetoric of Suicide," *Suicide: Right or Wrong?*, ed. John Donnelly (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1990) 93.

connotation(s) of the concept of “suicide.” This practical function is the ascription of moral responsibility. Stern-Gillet proposes to bring out this function of suicide by contrasting it with martyrdom (which is where she intends to locate Socrates):

To call X a suicide amounts, amongst other things, to ascribing to X the moral responsibility (and sometimes, but not always, the blame) for X’s death. To call X a martyr amounts, amongst other things, to ascribing the moral responsibility (and, usually, the blame) for X’s death to someone else (usually a government, an institution, or an organization).⁵⁴

Ignoring the problems we have highlighted in Frey’s argument, it seems consistent with Stern-Gillet’s position that she could agree that, by technical definition, Socrates committed suicide, but when the total situation surrounding his death is taken into consideration, the further details of the case undermine Frey’s claim. We might say, ‘Frey uses the word *suicide* in a special way in reference to Socrates, and it’s unclear why.’ In response to a similar worry—that ‘Socrates died a noble and dignified death and suicide is ignoble and undignified’—Frey closes his case by remarking, ‘On the contrary; the fact that Socrates died a noble and dignified death does not show that he did not commit suicide, but rather that suicide need not be ignoble and undignified.’⁵⁵

Stern-Gillet worries that this special application shifts the moral responsibility off the shoulders of the Athenian jury and onto Socrates, and that this shift might, in effect, serve to excuse the Athenians for condemning Socrates to death. ‘Polemically,’ she contends, ‘[Frey] is on the side of the Athenians since he is, more or less, telling them: ‘Don’t be shamed into believing that you have killed Socrates; in fact, he committed suicide.’’⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Stern-Gillet 99-100.

⁵⁵ Frey 59.

⁵⁶ Stern-Gillet 99.

The only way we could plausibly expect to solve the case is to look at the narrative itself. Two difficulties present themselves: first, the portrayal of Socrates shows him as a person who is remarkably prepared, maybe even optimistic, about his death, and second, his commitment to the practice of philosophy and to his dialectical method puts him in an antithetical position toward his judges. We know Socrates was familiar with his own reputation (portrayed even as buffoon in Aristophanes' *The Clouds*); the trial itself implies that he had enemies, and so we can assume that Socrates knew he was treading on thin ice in living and acting the way he did. He rejects every possible alternative to a severe sentence, provokes the jury by proposing that he ought to be given "free meals in the Prytaneum" because he teaches them how to be happy, shuns exile because he loves his city of Athens, suggesting that if Athens will not have him, then neither would any other city, so long as he continues to philosophize as he does. He understands that many detest his ways, which he characterizes as "doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as the best possible state of your soul," and believing that his intentions are virtuous, refuses to relent.⁵⁷ It is safe to say that, regardless of who was right or who was wrong, Socrates met Athens halfway upon arriving at his trial and continuing to behave as always. The *Apology* reads more like a self-delivered eulogy than a practical legal defense, and Socrates' age, combined with the knowledge that his city no longer wanted him in the only capacity in which he knew how or cared to live—as a philosopher, a seeker of ever-elusive wisdom—must certainly have weighed heavily in his considerations as to how he should meet with his own end. In a word, Socrates can hardly be said to have resisted death.

⁵⁷ Plato, *Apology* 30b.

In fact, if we return our attention to the opening points in this section, we might be inclined to suspect that Socrates looked forward to his death. His metaphysical ideas lead him to yet another dilemma: “either we can never attain knowledge or we can do so after death.”⁵⁸ His condemnation and pending execution thus serve as the stage upon which the dilemma might finally be solved. But anticipating death, even calling it a blessing, still seems a far cry from the “wanting to die” as it is employed in Frey’s analysis of Socrates’ fatal act.

Stern-Gillet points out that Socrates does not fail to implicate his judges in his death. Socrates claims,

It is for the sake of a short time, men of Athens, that you will acquire the reputation and the guilt, in the eyes of those who want to denigrate the city, of having killed Socrates, a wise man, for they who want to revile you will say that I am wise even if I am not. If you had waited a little while, this [my death] would have happened of its own accord.⁵⁹

That we are currently discussing Socrates even now bears out the truth of his first statement. But more interesting is the manner in which Socrates frames the indictment of his judges; it is not *all* who will pronounce that Athens put Socrates to death, but rather critics of the city. He is warning the city against their own ‘anti-intellectual’ tendencies; he is discussing politics. His own specific death is mentioned almost in passing, only as representative of the many more like him with whom Athens will be faced. In part, this is because, as he notes, at his age the nearness of death is inescapable, but also because Socrates thinks his own death is of little consequence or harm to himself, in comparison to his accusers who “are condemned by truth to wickedness and injustice.”⁶⁰ For Socrates, living a life poor in virtue is far more deplorable than being put to death, and in

⁵⁸ Plato, *Phaedo* 66e.

⁵⁹ Plato, *Apology* 38c.

⁶⁰ Plato, *Apology* 39b.

his circumstances, even though his accusers and judges are to blame for their part in the ordeal, Socrates seems to realize that once the impasse he and his fellow citizens had arrived at with each other had been reached, that there would be no other solution unless someone took a new position.

Setting aside Socrates' refusal to stop philosophizing or to otherwise strike a deal that would preserve his life, there is a certain amount of ambiguity in Socrates' final reflections on the act he himself undertakes in drinking the hemlock. The argument Socrates considers against suicide is offered in short order, and accepted with none of the usual Socratic questioning, based upon "the explanation...that we men are in a kind of prison, and that one must not free oneself or run away." The argument states: humans are the possessions of the gods. To kill oneself is to destroy a possession of the gods, which is likely to provoke the gods' anger, and possibly, punishment. Since no one wants either to anger the gods or to bring harm upon oneself, one ought not kill oneself, "before a god has indicated some necessity to do so, like the necessity now put upon us."⁶¹ This final caveat again seems to shift the moral responsibility (or at least, moral blame) off Socrates' shoulders, but interestingly, it is no longer the Athenians who are responsible for Socrates' death, but rather the gods themselves. Perhaps Socrates sees his execution as "the appointed time" for his death. This wouldn't seem so paradoxical if he had cancer or some other malignant disease, but the fact that he takes the hemlock into his own hand, again, complicates matters. Although there is something of a 'fateful' element to Socrates' view of his situation, his own willing—his acceptance and participation in his own death—is evident to the bitter end. He goes so far as to ask for the poison even while

⁶¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 62b-d. It is worth noting that the Catholic argument against suicide, first formulated by Augustine, is essentially a copy of the argument in *Phaedo*.

“there is still some time” for him to live, replying to Crito’s entreaty, “I do not expect any benefit from drinking the poison a little later, except to become ridiculous in my own eyes for clinging to life, and be sparing of it when there is none left. So do as I ask and do not refuse me.”⁶² If this indicates that Socrates wanted to die, it only does so in a rather weak sense, since he is only embracing the act at this particular moment rather than at some other. That he would drink the hemlock is never in question.

Finally, there are Socrates’ last words, spoken to Crito: “we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget.”⁶³ John Cooper notes, “Socrates apparently means that death is a cure for the ills of life.”⁶⁴ On this interpretation, a more poetic sense of closure couldn’t be desired, but leave it to Nietzsche to detect pessimism in Socrates’ words. He claims, “This ridiculous and terrible ‘last word’ means to those who have ears: ‘O Crito, *life is a disease*.’..Socrates, Socrates *suffered life!*”⁶⁵ But with Socrates’ metaphysics and the ascetic outlook it leads him to take, one might wonder whether life could be anything but suffering for him. Does this amount to pessimism? Nietzsche leaves the question open, for it is not Socrates with which he is primarily concerned, but rather with the notions of sickness and health, and the role philosophy plays in the tension between these two poles of human existence—not of securing truth, but of leading a ‘healthy’ life. To restate what should be obvious, Socrates’ entire practice was in the service of this end, even to the point of instruction on how to die well, in what might otherwise have been the most degrading of circumstances—for truth and

⁶² Plato, *Phaedo* 126e-127a.

⁶³ Plato, *Phaedo* 118a.

⁶⁴ Footnote to this passage in *Plato: Complete Works*, 100

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Gay Science* §340.

knowledge, if such things existed at all, lay elsewhere than in this life. Socrates had already seen that philosophy is not about truth, but something else.

Does any of this suggest that Socrates committed suicide? We might ask whether, at this point, the question has any appeal left in it. Whether Socrates wanted to die, whether he was martyred by the Athenians, whether his final words imply pessimism—these questions are merely ways of expressing an amazement, or a befuddlement, at the one detail of Socrates' death that doesn't depend upon heavy speculation: namely, that Socrates was terribly unafraid of death, even as he died. He did not run from it, and died in utter calmness. *That* is what is unnerving about Socrates. That is what has caused so much trouble. What we gain from Socrates is not that suicide can be noble and dignified—his case is far too vague to be classed as such; his case tells us *nothing*, really, about suicide. His death itself, however we choose to call it, seems noble and dignified enough, offers an idealized portrayal of the individual facing up to the inevitable.

But for all these ambiguities and unanswered, unanswerable questions raised by Socrates' death, his case raises in a non-trivial, existentially urgent manner, the questions we can now begin working on—the questions concerning freedom or free will, anxiety towards death, and the qualitative, evaluative aspects of human existence. Because our metaphysics and worldview differ greatly from that of Socrates, our answers will necessarily develop in a different manner, but the underlying problems remain the same. Life, it seems, is the problem. Perhaps that is the point to Socrates' 'final word': death invariably offers a solution. And yet, while living, this remains unsatisfying. How ridiculous it would seem to believe that the only answer we could get is the only one we can't have!

Chapter 3: The Backdrop for a Possibility—What It ‘Takes’ to Commit Suicide

‘[M]an is greatly flattered by the idea that he is free to remove himself from this world, if he so wishes. He may not make use of this freedom, but the thought of possessing it pleases him.’ –Immanuel Kant⁶⁶

The resistance we have given to the temptation to try a definition of *suicide* rests upon our faith in the reader to understand this word for him or herself. This faith is not based upon the belief that we could all gather round an evening fire, discuss Socrates or any other hard to define case, and reach a happy agreement. Instead, we proceed on the presupposition that each human individual has a grasp (to some degree) of what it would be for him or herself to commit suicide. The person who replies, ‘I could never imagine killing myself,’ misses the point, for the statement betrays an understanding of what it would be to do so. This response may furthermore indicate a moral position, a personal commitment to lead life in such a way that suicide never need be personally considered, an outright refusal to imagine, or simply a preference to not contemplate such morbid notions. But underlying whatever character traits motivate the response is an understanding of what it would be to do it, a grasp of what it ‘takes’ to commit suicide.

This may seem like both an obvious and a silly point to make, but this is precisely where the confusion begins. The temptation to “go external” at this point, or to “get objective,” immediately grabs us, presumably because the question of suicide most often gets raised after a suicide has occurred. From the “outside” of a suicide, the range of facts available to the observers left behind is always limited. Try as we might, our efforts to

⁶⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, ‘Suici de,’ trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 153.

explain why a given suicide has occurred run up against a point at which they cease to be pure fact but contain an element of speculation. The reconstruction of a suicide is an historical project; each competing theoretical approach aspires to tell the best story about what happened. It might seem that each succeeds or fails insofar as the audience is satisfied or fairly convinced by the story offered. For example, the two waiters in Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" discuss the recent suicide attempt of their old, deaf patron, who stays and drinks brandy at the café late into the night:

'Last week he tried to commit suicide,'" one waiter said.
'Why?'
'He was in despair.'
'What about?'
'Nothing.'
'How do you know it was nothing?'
'He has plenty of money.'⁶⁷

The explanation here is overly simplistic, but it may serve to warn against taking the path of least resistance in a more critical examination of suicide, and accepting the findings as fully general. Our reconstructions of past cases are necessarily inductive. However accurate a given explanation may seem to be for a specific case, on the level of generality, both definitions and explanations of suicide appear incomplete, or fail to illuminate the fundamental nature of suicide.

This is not to say that the existing theories and methods are useless. In his discussion of "games," Wittgenstein notes the seeming impossibility of giving a definition that satisfactorily captures all the activities we call games. He says, "We do not know the boundaries [of the concept] because none have been drawn...we can draw a boundary—for a special purpose. Does that make the concept more usable? Not at all!

⁶⁷ Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938) 379.

(Except for that special purpose.)”⁶⁸ The suicidologist and the sociologist draw boundaries around the concept of suicide which enable them to proceed with the projects of preventing suicide or understanding suicide as a social phenomenon. As much as we are able, we want instead to leave the boundaries open, and attempt a speculation that begins with each of us, introspectively and individually, while avoiding a slide toward Cartesian self-sealing (from the world) or a solipsism that reduces anything we say aloud to logical nonsense (since solipsism would presuppose that our personal speculations are condemned to be inarticulate).

The Self in the World

Améry agrees that, “Not everything suggested to us in psychological theories can be false. But they always *miss the mark* of the fundamental fact that *each human being essentially belongs to himself or herself*.”⁶⁹ Self-consciousness presupposes the ability to self-identify, to recognize that each of us has a special relationship to ourselves; Heidegger calls this relationship “mineness.” He claims of *Dasein*—that is, the human being—“The Being of any such entity is *in each case mine*.”⁷⁰ Anywhere we look and identify a person, we have identified a case of mineness; we implicitly recognize that the person at hand bears this relationship to himself—his life is his, my life is mine, and your life is yours. The ‘mineness’ one person has is essentially the same as all others; that is, mineness, as signifying the individual’s self-identification, is not *special* for any specific person. Each of us bears this subjective relation to ourselves in precisely the same way—

⁶⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §69.

⁶⁹ Améry 99.

⁷⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time* 67/H.41. *Dasein* indicates, roughly, human beings, i.e. the kind of beings that we ourselves are. Heidegger introduces this special terminology in order to disabuse the reader of any preconceptions of what exactly that ‘kind of being’ is. (In other words, he wants to avoid both Cartesian and materialist accounts of selves or persons.)

we identify our own consciousness as *our own*. Someone may say, ‘But my life is different; it’s *mine*.’ And this is exactly the point, because any other person could say exactly the same words, and be just as correct, but to the speaker, this declaration *does* seem important, unique. Relative to our own person, we insist that, subjectively, there is a difference, but when we try to say what the difference is, all we can do is to repeat our original claim (unless we’re solipsists and would prefer to deny the existence of other minds). It is recognizing one’s own mineness that seems to jumpstart what we have already called our concern with our own life, our making it an issue for ourselves.⁷¹ Mineness, then, points to the idea that each of us experiences our individual lives as uniquely our own; we each, as Améry expresses it, belong to ourselves.

Belonging to ourselves, and conscious of the self-relation as that of mineness, we thus find ourselves endowed with a perspective, or a point-of-view, by which we orient ourselves in the world. The world is *made available* to us by way of our perspective upon it. In a sense, it is natural to say here that “*the world begins with me*.” We can imagine awaking from a dreamless sleep, rubbing our eyes, and gradually discovering the world spread out before us. But conversely, we must also say that, “*I begin with the world*.” Waking up, or more fundamentally, *being born*, presupposes a world to wake up or be born into. Contrary to conceiving the relationship between the self and the world as one of mere perceiving (which would lead us into a Cartesian, inner/outer picture of our relation to the world), we characterize the relationship between self and world as that of *engagement*. From one’s own point of view, without oneself there would be no world. There would be nothing that could be conscious of the world. On the other hand, without

⁷¹ This is not intended to suggest a brand of psychological egoism, but only to bring out that there seems to be a difference in the way we make our own lives an issue, contrasted, for example, with making someone else’s life an issue for ourselves.

a world there could be nothing for the person to be conscious of. World, in this sense, need not signify any specific collection of objects or things; rather it should not be understood this way at all, but rather as the *backdrop*, or *context* in which consciousness of anything (including oneself) can take place.⁷² Consciousness is a continuous engaging with a context—the two cannot quite be pulled apart without distortion. It is this connection between consciousness and world—what Heidegger calls Being-in-the-world (*in-der-welt-Sein*), which is a fundamental structure of human beings—which makes it possible for us to engage more specifically with the things and others in the world. Waking up in the morning, we discover that everything is as we left it the night before, and orient ourselves by making reference to this immediate environment in which we find ourselves. Or we find that something has changed—someone has been moving things about while we slept. We might simply take note and reorient ourselves to the changes, or, if for example a significant piece of furniture is missing or has arrived, we might find ourselves disoriented and experiencing that awful feeling of *not knowing where we are*. Discovering ourselves (in our example, waking up) amounts to discovering a world; discovering a world amounts to discovering ourselves (in it).

We have called this reciprocal relation between self and world *engagement*. This notion is not meant to be a substitute for the notion of *perceiving*, but as something more basic. For while perceiving is certainly a way in which we engage the world, it is not the only way. For at any given time, while perceiving, we may also be willing, intending, acting, and so on. Furthermore, the world, as the context of our perceiving or doing anything, is never itself perceived; it is implicit in our existing as we do. This also implies

⁷² Heidegger draws this distinction in *Being and Time*, between ‘world’ (signified by single-quotation marks) as a smattering of entities in the world, and world (no scare-quotes) as the backdrop, or *environment* in which Dasein finds itself. (See 91/H.63-95/H.66)

that we do not *infer* a world as a result of being conscious, just as we do not infer our own existence (contrary to the claim of Descartes' *cogito*, which is not an inference so much as a repetition). The world as context and self as conscious mineness are *preconditions* of the activities of inferring, thinking, speaking, acting, knowing, and the host of other things that we as *agents* do. Thus, even the Cartesian who retires to his armchair and withdraws from the 'world' (disabuses himself of his ordinary beliefs) is still engaging the world, albeit in a particular (some will say, *passive*) way, for a particular (some will say, *obscure*) purpose.

But the Cartesian conception of the self as a thinking thing, we have noted, is not fundamental, for it has to presuppose a world to be doubted. Heidegger points out that Cartesian doubt begins as a skepticism of objects which transforms into a skepticism about the world as a whole.⁷³ Distinguishing between world as context and the 'world' as a collection of objects we confront, it seems dubious that, even if one can generate an epistemological skepticism about the latter, this skepticism does not equate to skepticism about the world. On our present formulation of self and world, it should be unclear *how* one could even begin to have skeptical doubts about the existence of the world (as context), for the activity of doubting is likewise an activity of engagement (or disengagement), bringing with it a world-context in which such doubting is possible at all.

The character of our engagement, then, is not properly said to be an engagement *with* the world-context, but rather an engagement *within* the context of the world.⁷⁴ The world opens up the possibility of *being engaged*. Another way we can express this is to

⁷³ Heidegger, *Being and Time* §43.

⁷⁴ Heidegger calls this the 'wherein' of the world, in which we encounter other entities.

say that we are *involved* within the world. With what are we engaged or involved?—with the ‘stuff’ of the world, artifacts, others, and ourselves. The various involvements we engage in are the possibilities that have been made available to us through our existing within a world. Furthermore, that some possibilities are taken up by us, while others are rejected, put aside, or never made explicit as possibilities—since what is available as a possible involvement for one person is not always a possibility for another—suggests that it is through the particular involvements taken up by a particular person that her individual character is constituted.

At this point, we should ask whether we have got it backwards, and whether it is instead the person’s character which determines the involvements she engages in. After all, we are each born at a specific time and place, of specific parents, each are biologically composed of a genetic code that prefigures certain features, dispositions, and abilities in us, are raised up on a certain language and worldview, subsist at a certain economic level, and so on. All these contingent facts load into our character and shape it up so that we take on the appearance of at least predictable, if not determined, creatures. There is no swift rebuttal to this objection, and on the face of it, this brief story of our coming into the world captures the tension between the two poles of self-conception. On the one extreme is the notion of the self as a fully autonomous self-determining being, and on the other is the contention that the self is a fully (biologically, socially, historically) predetermined being. We tend to live our lives under the (often undeclared, unreflective) assumption of the prior picture, and yet can’t help but be drawn (in our reflective thinking about our situation) to the latter picture. To put it another way, we aspire as if we were free, and despair as if we were not.

Ownership and Freedom

Mine-ness, or belonging to oneself, and the self-consciousness by which we grasp this relation we have to ourselves, also indicates the kind of relation we have to our actions, both mental and non-mental—namely, that we *own* our actions; they belong to us as much as our very selves, are an extension of us, and reflect our ability as agents to work on both the world and ourselves. If a town's city hall employees go to work one morning and find that their building has been vandalized, there is no doubt that *someone* is responsible. The building did not get all out of order on its own, but someone *did* this to the place. The papers scattered across the floor are the result of actions that someone performed, and we treat the situation as if this guilty party *owns* those actions. Furthermore, even if the culprit is apprehended and is, say, schizophrenic, we will still say that this person is at least causally responsible for what happened (though we might not hold this person *morally* responsible). Some will be inclined to take a further step back in the causal chain and claim that the *disease* is responsible for the mess, but this is either to conflate two levels of description, that of agency and of morality, or to presume that the schizophrenic vandal *lacks agency*. In order to take this latter tack, we must anthropomorphize the disease and claim that diseases can perform what were heretofore thought to be human actions. But no one can doubt that this is a bit of metaphor. A disease or other (abnormal) condition has never written a poem, although it makes fine sense to admit that Coleridge harbored some hefty delusions as he set to writing "Kubla Kahn." We still say that he wrote the poem, that it's *his*.

The situation is similar with respect to our mental lives. From our first-person perspective we know the difference between 'my' thoughts and 'yours'—that 'mine' are the ones 'I' 'have' and that 'yours' are the ones 'you' 'have.' To each other we can

report, keep quiet, or experience difficulty making our thoughts clear.⁷⁵ Our mental lives are as much a part of the reality of the world as physical objects are, since our conscious activity helps us to find our way through the world, to orient ourselves (even if, say, our orientation takes on the form of daydreaming or a temporary withdrawal from our immediate surroundings in preference for the diversion of our own thoughts).

These various involvements we are engaged in, and that we own these involvements (that they adhere to us in a manner which leads us to say that they are ours), identifies us as agents in the world. We each take up some possibilities and refuse others. In order to perform these actions of accepting and rejecting, speaking and keeping silent, doing and withholding, we must appropriate for ourselves a sense of freedom—not merely as an element of the inquiry, but as a presupposition of what it is to be a person living in the world. So far, this freedom has only been characterized negatively, as the ownership of actions. Because we experience ourselves as the possessors of our actions and thoughts, we operate on a presumption of autonomy, act with the sense that we are in control of our actions. Whatever may be the philosophical case for determinism, we certainly don't take up the issue of our own lives under the assumption that we aren't willfully acting and responding to the situations that confront us and that we create for

⁷⁵ There is nothing to be said here about 'mystical' experiences, or divine dictation. If there were such a state of affairs, it would be analogous to the situation of Wittgenstein's 'diarist' who wants to record a sensation S each time it occurs, but holds that the sensation is wholly private, cannot be publicly defined. Because the diarist lacks any criteria for recognizing the sensation each time it occurs (since otherwise it could be defined), it is altogether unclear how the diarist is to proceed; either he is deceiving himself about the nature of this sensation (i.e. that it is private), is imagining things, or is confused.

Of the phenomenon, 'thinking just the same thing as you': We need not worry about such cases, to try to figure out who 'owns' this thought (whether one or the other of us, or both). It is enough to say that our thoughts shared the same content, and that we had the same thought because we've become good predictors of what one another will say in a given situation. (We aren't, as it were, *in* each other's head in any literal sense!)

Similarly, of the adage, 'No one thinks anything that hasn't already been thought': The sense of ownership currently under consideration has nothing to do with intellectual property. All we want to establish is that each person takes her mental life to be her own.

ourselves. Unlike Descartes at the height of his skeptical doubts, we do not engage the world while supposing that we're driven along by mysterious forces, passively taking in the scenery around us. Our language seems to prohibit the entertainment of such deterministic notions for longer than the moment we attend to them, for if we examine our manner of responsibility-ascription, our descriptions of human actions, it becomes clear that there is always a presumption of freedom, which may, contingently, be weakened by making reference to the facts of specific cases. For example, if we say, "John walked into the room," there is a *prima facie* assumption that John owns this action, and is thus acting freely. But if it turns out that he was sleepwalking, the ascription of freedom is weakened, if not completely undermined. Anything else said about John's 'action' must follow distinctions similar to those employed with the schizophrenic vandal above.

Simply owning an action (in the causal sense) isn't itself enough to posit the freedom of human beings. Consciousness of oneself as an agent, as the actor performing one action among many available options, is also necessary. Imagine we are sitting in a pub, enjoying a few too many rounds, when a companion, drunk, stands up on his chair and proceeds in making a terrible spectacle of himself. We hurriedly put money on the bar, struggle to get our friend down from his pulpit. As we tell the bartender to keep the change, we might add apologetically, "He doesn't know what he's doing," with all due respect to our drunken friend, before dragging him home. In saying this about our friend, we are negating the freedom enjoyed by him, citing drunkenness as a reason to think him less than free as he puts on a show for the bar. He owns the actions of shouting and waving his arms around, but in his intoxicated state, we say he isn't quite acting freely,

but that the alcohol has taken hold of him. So, we do our best to take care of him while he's in no state in which to be responsible for himself.

Of course, the next morning, over black coffee, our friend may be in for a reprimand for drinking so much. We make our friend to realize that the scene he made resulted from the effects of his drinking more than his fair share, a choice which he admits was his own, or at least, began as such.

Whether our friend had acted on the assumption of freely choosing to drink or not, it is not clear that his responsibility for the chain of events would have occurred to him in the absence the role we ourselves played in the evening. It is not enough for him to see that he *could* have done otherwise, since, for lack of a reason to do otherwise, it's not obvious that other options would ever have occurred to him. Rather, our contention that he *should* have done otherwise—that he shouldn't have drank so much—coupled with an acknowledgement that he very well could have done otherwise, serve to make our friend aware that not only is he the owner of his actions, but also that he is subject to criticism for his actions. Such criticism identifies him as the responsible party, where his actions are involved. His having acted freely is an implicit assumption of any criticism—that is, any normative claims made—of his drunkenness.

This example does not 'prove' the existence of the freedom of the will. It merely illustrates that the individual is made aware of his freedom (by being made aware of his responsibility for his actions, and the possibility of having done otherwise) within a *normative context*. One could object, "But normativity isn't required for the existence of freedom, of choosing to turn right or left at the stop light." This might be true, but in absence of a normative context, the purpose, or efficacy, of positing freedom remains unclear. Without locating our existence within a community, with its traditions, language,

laws, and the norms that go along with these features of a community (whether it be composed only of one's family or of an empire), we can't make any sense of the notions of freedom or responsibility, or of how they matter for us.

The upshot is that we aren't merely agents in the world, but are *moral agents*. We are subject to praise and criticism for what we do, and these normative claims make it clear that we will be treated as not only the causal owners, but also, in many cases, the *moral* owners of our actions. A few possibilities could be the case at this point:

First, it might be that we're all under an illusion—call it the spell of freedom. Although our actions occur within a community operating on certain norms and are treated as free actions, this is merely a figure of speaking. In fact, all our actions are quite prefigured by all the usual causal suspects, but the community, in order to justify its system of praise and blame (reward and punishment), has to have a story to tell about why it's okay to applaud some people and okay to imprison others. Freedom is essentially a piece of political rhetoric.

Second, freedom may be little more than a psychological consolation, a bit of self-guided therapy with a Stoic "it's -all-in-your-head" flavor. As conscious, perceptive beings, we recognize ourselves as agents, as doing things in the world, although we ourselves aren't really controlling what we do. The positing of freedom is a mental backflip performed in order to rationalize the absurdity of being aware, but not in control—of riding shotgun, as it were, while the world sits at the steering wheel of our lives. Freedom is a coping mechanism.

Third, the notion of freedom might simply be inextricable from our ways of talking about ourselves and our actions. Our desires, intentions, goals, and aspirations turn out to be rather empty without the presupposition that we are in some way free to

pursue these goods. Here we must insist that, whether ‘proven’ or not, we are at the very least ‘condemned’ to speak, act, and think as if we were free. Despite the seeming reasonableness of the deterministic arguments, our self-regarding and other-regarding behaviors appear to be an embodied *reductio ad absurdum* against determinism. The irony of this is nothing new: ‘Suppose for a moment that we weren’t free.’ The imperative itself either contains the contradiction or simply begs the question. But how else are we to express the issue? ‘Suppose for a moment that we *were* free.’ If hard determinism were true, this sentence would be logically impossible, or incomprehensible.

The problem with these speculations about freedom is that they suppose that we can ever fully transcend the essentially human character of our situation. Here we don’t mean that humans are ‘rational animals’ or ‘thinking things,’ but simply that, as humans, we can’t *stop* being humans in order to take up the question of freedom from some other point of view. We can no more assume a God’s-eye view than we can a bird’s-eye view, since, in perceiving a world, we are always interpreting, processing, and relating the world to ourselves. An objective human viewpoint can’t extricate the ‘human’ element from itself; ‘objective truths’ are but norms or beliefs that each member of the community is responsible for accepting (or else running the risk of blame, penalty, etc.). Thus, when we speak of an objective viewpoint, we should understand this in terms of its *public* character—that a truth derived objectively is intended to be available for public use, that anyone should be able to pick it up and accept it, or to assume the particular viewpoint which makes that truth available—and not as a ‘view from nowhere’ (as Thomas Nagel’s well-known phrase puts it).

To put it rather bluntly, we simply cannot get rid of ourselves. Freedom is part and parcel of this not being able to get rid of ourselves; it goes with the territory. The real

issue, or the one which needs more attention, is to decide which actions, behaviors, activities, etc., we are inclined to *describe* and *evaluate* in terms of the freedom of the agent who undertakes various projects. We may say that our drunken friend didn't know what he was doing, wasn't free, as he made a scene in the pub; intoxicated, he wasn't in a state of consciousness to knowingly undertake this project of making a fool of himself. But on the larger picture, he was free, insofar as he made a project of drinking with us, engaged in the activity which, ironically, ended up temporarily reducing or impairing his ability to act freely. We might say that he undermined his own agency.

But how can an analysis of freedom be correct when it leads us to say that an agent can undermine his own agency? That is, isn't there something self-defeating happening here? No, not exactly. The self-defeating element of this situation isn't the analysis, but that our friend has engaged in a project which makes the expression of his freedom (while he is intoxicated) impossible—he has drunk himself into situation in which he is unable to morally own his actions, and has, we take it, willingly engaged in the activity which has put him in this situation. So, we wait for him sober up, then say, 'Look, when you drink that much, *you lose all sense of yourself*. You've got to stop doing that. You should have seen yourself: it was hard to even call that person last night *you*.' This suggests that, from our public perspective, it is possible for a person to act in a manner such that his identity is *lost*. When this happens, we don't really know what else can be said, except that, we believe, one shouldn't engage in such projects because it confuses us—the "de-selfing" action, project, or choice spoils the normative consistency we enjoy as members of a community, a consistency that helps us find our way through the world (sometimes guiding, other times commanding us). When the rules of the game are broken, the game comes to a halt.

The Possibility of Suicide

How, then, is the preceding analysis to assist us toward an understanding of suicide? The groundwork set forth here now allows us to see the connection between freedom and suicide which tends to get obscured in our present, quick-fix, ‘everyone’s-a-victim-of-something’ age of therapy.

Simply put, for suicide to be a possibility (and for it to be a *problem* with more than external, social ramifications), humans must be free to choose it. Our manner of applying the term *suicide* makes it clear that suicide is not a merely biological possibility, such as going bald or dying of a heart attack, or even the causal possibility of bringing about one’s own death, since this can happen inadvertently or for other reasons (perhaps as in Socrates’ case). Our use of the word *suicide* is inextricably tied up with the notion of intention. The phrase ‘to commit suicide’ is pregnant with a charge of intention; the verb ‘to commit’ suggests free agency.⁷⁶

The sense of speaking of suicide as a possibility becomes most clear if we take it up from our personal view on ourselves. Recognizing that it is possible for each of us to commit suicide (so long as we admit that we can to a degree ‘imagine’ such a scenario), we ascribe to ourselves the freedom to do it; if we were to commit suicide it would be *our* action, in the strong sense, and not merely as a causal claim. Granted, our motives for doing so may be of various kinds, but whether the full responsibility for the act falls on our own shoulders or some of the responsibility is put upon other people or mitigating

⁷⁶ Some writers have worried over the morally blameful connotations of the phrase ‘to commit suicide,’ find it morally question-begging in the same way as defining suicide as ‘self-murder’ would be. Fairbairn opts for the use of *suicide* itself as a verb. (So, “Alan committed suicide,” becomes, “Alan suicided.”) See Gavin J. Fairbairn, *Contemplating Suicide: The Language and Ethics of Self Harm* (London: Routledge, 1995). While there is nothing objectionable in Fairbairn’s proposal, it is simple enough to accept some of the words and phrases the language already offers us. ‘To commit suicide’ will thus be employed, with the caveat that we are not therefore committing ourselves to any *prima facie* moral judgment.

circumstances, it remains true that in committing suicide, we are engaging in an act which is open to criticism (where criticism need not be construed as necessarily negative). The point is that in personal considerations about the possibility of suicide, the act is not regarded as some brute state of affairs that may or may not obtain for us, but rather as an activity we can engage in or reject.

An interesting result of this analysis is that when suicide is regarded as the result of a mental illness, if the mental illness is doing all the explanatory work of telling why a suicide occurs, then we cannot call this person's act a suicide, in the strong sense of the term. We may say that it is an unfortunate death, but if a mental illness is so severe that it essentially destroys the individual's ability to operate as a moral agent, to own his actions in the normative sense, then we are no longer dealing with a free act, but with a disease that has a fatal ending. But we have already discussed the stretch involved in characterizing suicide itself as a disease, and have suggested that there is no reason to assume that the mental illness explanation can account for all cases of suicide. Some might find this characterization of suicide to be a piece of theoretical silliness due to its exclusion of the cases of 'suicide' explained purely in terms of mental illness, but insofar as we are inquiring into the nature of what we take to be a *philosophical* problem, it is necessary to exclude (or to disregard) these cases, for the simple reason that there is nothing 'philosophical' about them. What science and psychology can account for, they can have. Our exclusion at this point turns on nothing astounding, or even anything contentious for that matter, except for want of clarity as to which cases of suicide, whether theoretical or actual, our inquiry refers to. It is quite enough to say that the mentally ill person 'kills himself,' while pointing out that, if clarity in that specific case is

needed, we can add that killing oneself does not always entail having committed suicide. The latter is a sub-class of the prior.

Suicide, as we envisage the correct application of the term—where ‘correct’ means non-metaphorical, non-merely-convenient, non-slangily—describes what happens when a human being who possesses the ability to act freely, make choices, and become involved in projects, willingly terminates his or her own life by engaging in an act, or in a refusal to act, which results in his or her own death, where the choice to bring about death is primarily that of the agent. That the choice belongs to the agent implies that he or she is responsible for the act, and so the act is thus open to moral scrutiny and criticism. This conception of suicide says nothing of reasons, of which there may be multifarious kinds, ranging from mental despair to irremediable physical pain, or of methods, which may be as swift and aggressive as a gunshot to the head, as drawn out and (to some extent) passive such as self-starvation, as incidental as allowing oneself to be hit by an oncoming car (when a step to the curb would have avoided it), or as ambiguous as the act of a soldier who runs headlong into an onslaught of enemy fire (who knows that he is charging to his death). Finally, this conception says nothing of the agent’s ‘wanting to die’ and whether this is a necessary component or not. Death and choosing are examined in their relation to suicide in Chapter Five.

The Thought of Suicide

It is unclear whether the suicide interventionist *qua* his profession can be committed to an unequivocal understanding of suicide, given the standard diagnostic methods and tactics in this field of study and ‘therapy.’ On the one hand, the suicidal individual is treated as an agent, is interviewed, asked questions about her life and why it

is that she wants to commit suicide—is treated, that is, as if she were free. The possibility of suicide, so far, is regarded as a free action (albeit, one of which the interventionist disapproves). But the combination of a moral conviction and a scientific explanation tend to obscure this assumption of freedom. The therapist/doctor-patient relationship is hierarchical, often manifested as either authoritarian or paternalistic (or both). Equipped with a neurological or psychological program, the professional is poised to negate whatever freedom the patient might possess, and to assume that suicide—the possibility of which was posed as a question to the patient—is to be treated as a curable disease.⁷⁷ The paradoxical line the clinician must employ: “I acknowledge you as a free human being (or pretend to for the sake of therapy), and thus admit that you are free to commit suicide, but as I am unwilling to allow that to happen, you cannot commit suicide, and thus are not free to do so. Furthermore, your current urge to kill yourself is but the result of a psychological disorder or a chemical imbalance in your brain, which has undermined your ability to think freely. So, in fact, because of your disease, you are not a free human being.” This conclusion is lived out in the recent history of suicide prevention. George Howe Colt summarizes the dramatic lengths to which Shneidman and company, as the pioneers of suicide prevention (in Shneidman’s words), “became directive, assertive, straightforward, even authoritarian—anything that it takes to keep a person from becoming a case in the coroner’s office”:

One day a client ran out of the offices onto the roof with several LASPC [Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center] staff members in hot pursuit; they managed to grab her and wrestle her back inside before she could

⁷⁷ None of this is to say that the ‘patient’ in many cases is not equally responsible for accepting and assuming this picture of suicide. The popularity of psychiatric drugs, cosmetic surgery, apple martinis, and designer bluejeans suggest that the patient (consumer) is willing to indulge in the pictures of human life and happiness which demand such treatments and goods, and to accept professional and advertised opinions as the truth on these matters.

jump. Another time a suicidal young woman was brought in by her family; halfway through the consultation she ran out of the building. An LASPC staffer tackled her, put her in the car, and told her brother to sit on her while he drove her to the hospital.⁷⁸

It is a strange state of affairs when an enterprise based upon the care and well-being of the human being resorts to wrestling and tackling. Granted, the rashness of the persons involved may have warranted such a response, but this might have been just as true even if they were running off to wreak some other kind of havoc than killing themselves. The claim, “They didn’t know what they were doing,” may be appropriate here. From this perspective, if conditions can be specified in which the agent has ‘lost control’ of himself, it may be possible to argue for the use of force in some cases. Such cases as the ones mentioned above involve more than the suicidal motive of the individual, but also a seem to involve public disturbance and the threat of harm to others. Thus, because the acts of the agents involved raise other moral concerns (besides the possibility of their committing suicide), it would be misguided to suppose that such treatment—which we usually reserve for criminals and psychotics—ought to be the norm. That said, there is nothing particularly heroic about what Shneidman’s workers were doing; rather, these are unsettling cases, and remind us that no matter what kind of theory emerges herein, human life and society do not always operate as smoothly.

But we ourselves are a long ways away from not knowing what we are doing as we take up the possibility of suicide here. From our individual perspectives, as we contemplate the matter, suicide reveals itself to be a free enterprise, a possibility of our choosing. If suicide is something that just happens, the upshot of a freedom-negating disease, then all bets are off as to what truth, rationality, or applicability our thoughts possess, both now and at the ledge.

⁷⁸ George Howe Colt, *The Enigma of Suicide* (New York: Touchstone, 1991) 295.

This concern is precisely what critics (of the ‘philosophical’ approach to suicide) like Oates have in mind when they raise doubts about posing suicide as a philosophical problem—as an issue which we can (or at least try to) think through and evaluate, in a manner broadly construed as rational. To repeat Oates’ complaint: when philosophers remind us that the possibility of suicide always lay within our grasp, suicide itself seems to become less the object of existential concern and more a rhetorical device, presumably employed to shake us into the belief or recognition that we are in control of our lives (and that our ability to take ourselves out of this world, if nothing else, demonstrates this fact). But to remind people that they are free is not to address the issues that we most readily associate with suicide: pain and distress, whether emotional or physical, and the despair of never being able, in life, to get out from underneath the weight of a greatly compromised or miserable existence.

The development of the notions of ownership, responsibility, and freedom is not intended to offer anything ‘new.’ The purpose of the inquiry is not the positing of novel features, heretofore unidentified in the human being or its relation to others and the world, but only to set the complicated stage upon which our talk of ourselves, our freedom and its limitations, and moral responsibility emerge. To downplay the force of the quips and reminders furnished by thinkers like Aurelius, Nietzsche, and Kant (cited as the epigram of this chapter) is perhaps to misinterpret the intention behind these phrases: if there is a therapeutic message to be found in them, it exists precisely in their rhetorical force—if you’re unhappy with your life, you can always kill yourself, since the necessary means are always within your reach. For many this is nasty advice; it seems cruel and pessimistic. But there is nothing in the phrases themselves that *recommends* suicide. (Kant, at least, was quite firm in his moral opposition to the act). These thinkers are

instead focusing on one of the many things that suicide itself may express: the freedom of the human being to exert a measure of control over his life. But as the act itself destroys any opportunity for a further expression of freedom or improvement, these ‘words of advice’ are necessarily couched in terms of *thought*. From our individual viewpoint, the thought of suicide may tell us something, may serve as a forceful reminder of our own agency in the world and the degree of responsibility we both assume and are expected to have for ourselves. From that same viewpoint (our own), the act itself tells us nothing, because we are no longer there to hear.

But mere thoughts are not enough to solve the problem of suicide. Asserting our freedom to commit or withhold from committing the act does not resolve the issue. A common criticism of the Stoic philosophy, of which Marcus Aurelius was a representative, is that the Stoics remained too much ‘in their heads,’ that their ‘freedom’ was an empty freedom which could only be appreciated from a meditative, withdrawn perspective. But human life is not typically one of disengagement and reflection (except perhaps for philosophers and monks!); in general, we are engaged in an active world. Coming to realize suicide as a possibility is not the result of casually reflecting over the powers of our will. It is not something we might stumble upon at any given time. Suicide presents itself as a reaction to life, in certain extreme situations. Most everyone has had the thought, has whispered to oneself on occasion, ‘After all, I could always kill myself.’ And for most of us, it is a fleeting thought, an overreaction in a moment of distress, and not a ‘warning sign.’ (Our dismissing it quickly and keeping it to ourselves until we have forgotten it absolves us from regarding ourselves as ill.) We even treat suicide with a joking tone, parting ways with a friend who’s had an unsettling day (albeit, nothing so serious as to provoke a deeper concern), saying, ‘Well, don’t go home and kill yourself.’

We'll fix this problem tomorrow." Our friend rolls her eyes and replies, "Oh, come on.

It's not *that* bad."

Of course, for some, there is something that *is*, or seems to be, that bad. The following chapter seeks to expose the underpinnings of how suicide reveals itself as a possibility, and to outline the condition and the function of both anxiety and despair.

Chapter 4: Anxiety & Unavoidability

There is an undeniable connection between suicide, anxiety, and despair. This chapter seeks to uncover the connection between anxiety and despair from within an existential framework, treating anxiety as a basic constituent of human beings (rather than as a psychological phenomenon). As a means of exposing the issues, we will look first at three literary cases which each raise the question of suicide on different grounds, but which each manifest a deep anxiety about the nature of the self, freedom, and the meaning or worth of life.

The Faces of Suicide and Despair: Artaud, Hamlet, & Kirilov

The Theater of Cruelty playwright Antonin Artaud betrayed a deep concern with the possibility of suicide in his fragmented writings. Artaud's life seems to have been one of no small amount of depression, mania, and despair; he spent nearly a decade going in and out of mental institutions (from 1937-1946). What flowed from his pen reflects the personality of a man who was his own double-edged sword. He identified himself as a mentally ill person, and yet many of his brief essays and letters show a desire to penetrate his own madness (if that's what it was), and to understand its nature. It seems as if he was more interested in pushing his condition to its limits, rather than recovering from it, and perhaps he was only putting us on. He held a deterministic view of life, and so he might have contended that he was simply trying to make do with what he had, torment notwithstanding. The puzzling aspect of his treatment of suicide lay in his thorough commitment to a fatalistic account of human existence:

Certainly, it is abject to be created and to live and feel yourself in the darkest corners of your mind, down to the most *unthought* ramifications of your irreducibly predetermined being. After all, we are only trees and it is probably written in some crook or other of my family tree that I shall kill myself on a given day.

The very idea of the freedom of suicide falls down like a lopped tree. I create neither the time nor the place nor the circumstances of my suicide. I do not even invent the thought of it; will I at least feel it when it uproots me?

...I can neither live nor die, nor am I capable of not wishing to die or live. And all mankind resembles me.⁷⁹

Organically no different than the tree with which he compares his life, Artaud embraces the view of oneself as a passenger, wired-in to the body so that the life he leads *feels* as if it were his, and causally, is his, but about which he can exert no voluntary influence. The upshot of this view, as has already been suggested, is that the *threat* posed by suicide falls away with everything else—the moral terror, the normative concerns, all dissolve into mere illusion. Suicide is not a choice, but only an unfortunate result of one's lot being cast in such-and-such a way.

Contrast Artaud's meditations on suicide and the absurdity of conscious access into the machinery of a determined life and world with what is certainly the most well-known meditation on suicide in Western literature, Hamlet's soliloquy in Act III, Scene One.⁸⁰ For Hamlet, the possibility of suicide is not a point of mere deterministic

⁷⁹ Antonin Artaud, "On Suicide," trans. David Rattray, *Artaud Anthology*, ed. Jack Hirshman, 2nd Edition (San Francisco: City Lights, 1965) 57-58.

⁸⁰ Although it may be unnecessary to quote at length such a oft-cited passage, it is worth reminding ourselves of Hamlet's words, with the topic of the present inquiry in mind:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing, end them. 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 wish'd. To die, to sleep—
 To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub,
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,

circumstance, but is regarded as a potential alternative to suffering “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” Why suffer the pains of aging, the insults and injuries dealt by enemies, unrequited love, the lack of justice in the world and the consequent seeming pointlessness of waiting patiently for things to improve—why suffer all this when the possibility of suicide promises an end to this worldly suffering?

The answer, of course, is *fear*. Hamlet recalls that we do not know what, if anything, to expect beyond the bounds of this life, and it is the fear of remaining conscious, of still dreaming, of killing ourselves yet to find that we have still not managed to get rid of ourselves, that “makes us rather bears those ills we have, [t]han fly to others that we know not of.” Because suicide, as a means of bringing about death, leaves us ignorant of the ultimate result of our action, it is the fear of taking what appears to be an unjustifiable leap into the dark which prevents us from committing suicide. Reflecting on the result of suicide tells us nothing—introspectively, we take it that there

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,
 Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
 The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay,
 The insolence of office, and the spurns
 That patient merit of th' 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 traveller returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bears those ills we have,
 Than fly to others that we know not of?
 Thus conscience does make cowards [of us all],
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment
 With this regard their currents turn awry,
 And lose the name of action.

William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Second Edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), Act III, Scene 1, 55-87.

is nothing left, and we can only then view ourselves from the perspective of others, of those who will cart us to the grave. We only see that we can no longer see through our own eyes, and although we say this, although the words roll from our tongue as if we truly understood them, we have no idea what it would be like not to be ourselves, not to see, touch, taste, hear, and smell the world from our distinct perspective. Contemplating suicide forces us at the end to give up our own perspective, or else to stare dumbly at the dead end of ourselves, and the impossibility of speculating with any inductive strength past the point at which the hammer makes contact with the firing pin. We can no longer speak of right or wrong belief, for there is nothing to confirm any of the possibilities. This uncertainty, Hamlet contends, stops us: “Thus conscience does make cowards [of us all], / And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought, / And enterprises of great pitch and moment / With this regard their currents turn awry, / And lose the name of action.”

Hamlet never explicitly decides upon the morality of suicide; his meandering speech slides from the moral question into an epistemological conundrum. Literally, he says, thinking makes us cowards. Thinking disrupts the will to act. The ambiguity of his ‘conclusion’ is that Hamlet may at this point be speaking more generally of the moral dilemma facing him: to avenge his father’s murder, or to let what he knows drive him crazy—to kill Claudius or to kill himself. There is no third option for Hamlet, and so his inaction is not merely his resistance to committing suicide, but is more generally, a self-criticism of his inability to *choose at all*, but instead assuming a reflective, theoretical stance on his situation. His propensity for fretting runs deep, and yet all his worrying adds nothing new to his situation—his insights are ineffective, and instead of aiding him

in choosing, he sees that his reflections are nothing more than a forestalling of that which cannot be thought through, but must be chosen and acted upon.

Hamlet's dilemma suggests that the problem of suicide cannot be explicated in terms of desire-satisfaction. The decision, if cast in either/or terms, does not amount to a choice between something very good (desirable) and something else very bad (undesirable). It is instead a question of whether to endure what is already experienced as terrible or to throw oneself into the ultimate, impenetrable uncertainty of death, as regarded by the living.

As a final turn in this brief literary survey, Dostoevsky's Kirilov (in *The Possessed*, or *The Devils*) cannot be denied his say on the subject. He sums up his argument to Peter Verkhovensky, a scheming fool who aims to use Kirilov's suicide as part of a conspiratorial ploy. For Kirilov, Verkhovensky's plots are of little concern, since he has bigger fish to fry in committing suicide:

So at last you understand...that the only salvation for all is to prove this idea to everyone. Who will prove it? I! I cannot understand how an atheist could know that there is no god and not kill himself at once! To realize that there is no god and not to realize at the same instant that you have become god yourself—is an absurdity, for else you would certainly kill yourself. If you do realize it, you are a king and you will never kill yourself, but will live in the greatest glory. But he who is the first to realize it is bound to kill himself, for otherwise who will begin and prove it? It is I who will most certainly kill myself to begin with and prove it. I am still only a god against my own will, and I am unhappy because I am *bound* to express my self-will. All are unhappy, because all are afraid to express their self-will. The reason why man has hitherto been so unhappy and poor is because he was afraid to express the main point of his self-will, but has expressed it only in little things, like a schoolboy. I am terribly unhappy because I'm terribly afraid. Fear is the curse of mankind. But I shall proclaim my self-will. I am bound to believe that I do not believe. I shall begin and end, and open the door. And I shall save. Only this will save mankind and will transform it physically in the next generation. For in his present physical condition man cannot—as far as I can see—get along without his former God. For three years I've been

searching for the attribute of my divinity, and I've found it: the attribute of my divinity is—Self-Will! That's all I can do to prove in the main point my defiance and my new terrible freedom. For it is very terrible. I am killing myself to show my defiance and my new terrible freedom.⁸¹

Early in the novel, Kirilov explains to the narrator the results of his own investigations into why people shy away from suicide. The reasons are twofold, “One very little one, and the other a very big one.”⁸² The ‘little’ reason is fear of pain, specifically the *imagined* pain that would result from certain methods of taking one’s own life. Kirilov offers a thought experiment in which one is to imagine that a stone “as big as a very large house” is hovering above, and to ask oneself whether, if it fell, any pain would be experienced in being crushed by such an immense object. The narrator admits that he would be very frightened, and Kirilov asks him to attend to the question of whether there would be any pain or not, to which the narrator readily admits that there would not be any pain. Presumably, the process of being crushed would happen too quickly for pain to be experienced. But Kirilov agrees with the narrator’s expression of fear at the idea of the stone falling. The imagined pain causes the person standing beneath the stone to remove herself to safer ground.

The second, ‘very big’ reason is ‘the next world.’ The narrator inquires whether Kirilov means the possibility of being punished for committing suicide, but Kirilov dismisses this qualification as unimportant. Little further is said about this reason for avoiding suicide, but it, too, seems to be based upon fear—of whatever ‘the next world’ might be for the suicided person, or more simply, fear of death itself. The narrator suggests that people fear death because they love life, but Kirilov exclaims that such an idea is a deception, asserting that life is essentially pain and fear, with the promise of

⁸¹ Dostoevsky, *The Devils (The Possessed)*, trans. David Magarshack, (New York: Penguin Books, 1971) 614-615.

⁸² Dostoevsky, *The Possessed* 124.

happiness remaining elsewhere (perhaps in the next world). And so, we are deceived into accepting the pain and suffering in the world as a necessary preparation for death, as a component of human imperfection, fearing death lest it wrangle us from our life of virtuous suffering before we are prepared to exit this life. Consequently, we live our lives in a vicious circle of enslavement to the tortures of the world.

Kirilov's conception of life (as lived by the people of his time) is essentially the classic Christian view of existence—that human life is filled with imperfection (sin), and thus suffering, but that those who virtuously endure will be rewarded in the hereafter. Kirilov imagines that his suicide will open the eyes of humanity because, as he says, it will be the ultimate expression of his self-will. That is, Kirilov is proclaiming that his suicide is (or will be) *rational*. His self-willed death is supposed to demonstrate the freedom humans possess, and that this freedom is not limited to patiently enduring a life of earthbound slavery. He seems to assume that the Christian God has begun to drop out of the modern picture of life (with the rise of atheism among the intellectuals and radical youth as support for his assumption), but that those who no longer believe in a god still live their lives, qua suffering and fear, under a God-like paradigm.⁸³ Kirilov's defiance is directed toward the non-existent god; his 'new terrible freedom' is essentially the freedom to do whatever he desires to do—self-will has no *prima facie* limits.

The difficulty which Kirilov recognizes is that in killing himself, he will be unable to enjoy his own existence as a god. All he can do, as the first to have stumbled upon his terrible truth, is to relay the message by undertaking rational suicide, so that others will come to see that they, too, possess this freedom, and that they, too, are their

⁸³ There are parallels here between Kirilov's radical views and the madman's announcement of the death of God in Nietzsche's *Gay Science*. Nietzsche might suggest that in place of the singularity of a God, *truth* (where truth is understood in rigid, singular terms) has become the singularity upon which life is based.

own gods, the controllers of their own destinies. Kirilov's savior-complex is difficult to accept, for he keeps mostly to himself, allows Verkovensky to dictate what should be included in his suicide note for the purposes of the political plot. It often seems that his 'message' is not a gospel but is rather a means by which to convince himself to commit suicide, and that it is right to do so. The premise in his speech which betrays the fallacy in his reasoning is the claim, 'I am still only a god against my own will, and I am unhappy because I am *bound* to express my self-will.' Kirilov is confessing, in a confused manner, that he can't cope with his own freedom, his own godhood, and pointing out the limit to his freedom: that he did not choose his freedom—that he is not free to choose this. Suicide is intended to be an expression of self-will in the highest degree, but Kirilov is reasoning in an inescapable circle: since, presumably, the worst thing we could do to ourselves, as living beings, is to kill ourselves, and since death results in an end to all free human choosing, suicide appears to point toward the limit of freedom—death. But Kirilov thinks he can beat death by rationally choosing it, by committing suicide. So, he is free even to reject freedom by killing himself.

Kirilov has convinced himself that the 'mere belief' in his terrible freedom is not enough—he must 'prove' it by acting it out to its bitter completion. Of course, for Kirilov, this is self-defeating, and for everyone else, his argument is useless. For if Kirilov himself is not convinced of his terrible freedom unless he acts upon it by committing suicide, then why should anyone else be convinced unless we each kill ourselves in order to prove it to ourselves?

Just as Artaud totally abandons the possibility of human freedom, Kirilov essentially destroys it, his suicide canceling out the very thing he seeks to prove. Each in his own way is unconvinced that humans have any say in their own lives. On the other

hand, Hamlet realizes that thought alone can't help us decide all the dilemmas, and yet he persists in trying to reason his way to a decision which resists all attempts. In all three, thought has short-circuited, and the human being has gone into meltdown. Artaud's position forces him to disregard the consciously attuned and seemingly willed action of setting his skepticisms to paper, Hamlet's reason paralyzes, and Kirilov's rationality borders on madness.

All three of these three literary examples exhibit an element of despair, which is a particular attitude or stance we can take in responding to anxiety. In general, we evaluate despair as a negative response to anxiety, as a poor means of coping (or refusing to cope) with one's situation. This evaluation is made when the despair seems unfounded—based upon bad reasoning or false beliefs (resulting either from self-deception or faulty information). On the rare occasions when despair appears to be the only possible, or at least an *understandable*, response to a set of circumstances—some will say here that Hamlet's dilemma falls into this category—then we evaluate the situation as a *tragedy*. Intuitively, we all understand that there are limits to what in life is endurable, or to what we expect should be endured, though we may disagree on the actual boundaries. Some aspects of the debate on physician-assisted suicide hinge on clarifying these boundaries, or arguing that such limits, especially in terms of physical pain and suffering, do indeed exist, and that insisting on the sanctity of human life in the cases of terminally ill patients is either unduly idealistic or a form of sadism.

Suicide itself is commonly referred to as a tragedy. It is a tragic loss of human life. It is a tragedy for those whom the suicide has left behind, who must now come to terms with the impossible question, *why?* There is something tragic in considering the life of a person who perceived no open doors, no other way but out, whose perception of life,

we imagine, must have been almost unimaginable—cramped, closed, painful, impossible, over.

The danger in such ‘tragic descriptions’ is the tendency to misplace to locus of the tragedy. For it cannot be death itself which is tragic. There are those who will contend that all death is tragic, that dying itself is a tragedy. But such a view towards death will not do unless one accepts a thorough pessimism about human existence. Some deaths, certainly, are tragic—because the person died too young, or for no good reason, or because the situation surrounding the death was simply disastrous, beyond all possible control. But death itself cannot be any more tragic than the erosion of mountains, the ebb and flow of the tide, or of cell metabolism.

Everyone has to die, and no one wants to die. So the story goes. Thus, when someone goes against our expectations, our usual way of enduring, and commits suicide, we feel among other things insulted. Our own struggle to survive, to achieve, to find happiness, gets spun into disarray when we consider that someone else said of life, ‘No thanks, I’ve had enough.’ We feel that suicide poses a challenge and a threat to our own projects, because suicide seems to show us that it is possible that we’ll either lose faith in our projects (and in ourselves) or that the world may not always be so accommodating to our means of existence. These two threats are not mutually exclusive. We are inclined to distance ourselves from the suicide, needing to believe that our own lives are not so close to leading us, too, into that dreaded act, and yet we cannot get too far away, knowing that the suicide was not an alien, an outsider, or a self-contained entity unaffected by the conditions of the world and society we all share—no, the person who commits suicide *was one of us*. This person seems to invert our paradoxical attitude toward death—she did

not *have* to die (at that precise moment) but chose to (and so it might seem, wanted to die). How could this have come about?

The Sickness Unto Death

The existentialist philosophers and their precursors (especially Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) are typically typecast as a gloomy, brooding lot. At the heart of existentialist philosophy, humans are regarded as peculiar beings, generally existing in a state of alienation from themselves (in “inauthenticity” for Heidegger; in “bad faith” for Sartre). We are “thrown” into the world against our will, and experience ourselves temporally as “falling” through the world (Heidegger). We did not choose to be born, we cannot (ultimately) choose whether we die (which we will one way or another), and in between these two points, we “project” ourselves into the future, either by going along with the accepted norms of society, by being led by the faceless masses of the “they,” or by coming to terms with our own individuated consciousness and freedom, and making something of ourselves, appropriating our life as our own, and discovering authentic ways of coping with our situation and of becoming authentically ourselves.

For the secular existentialists (Heidegger and Sartre), this existence is fundamentally *groundless*. It is, as it were, arbitrary, but we hardly regard our own concerns as arbitrary—what we do, desire, and hope for *matters* to us. Yet when we step back from our own lives, when something goes wrong that compels us to examine our predicament, we look at ourselves and are flooded with a sense of the absurdity of our hopes and dreams. We are torn between the questions, “Why does any of *this* matter?” and, “How could I continue to exist, to tolerate *this*, if it *doesn't* matter?” (That is, it *feels*

as if it matters, and I don't have any idea how to live without also *believing* that my life matters.)

The condition in which we here find ourselves has been characterized as *angst* (Heidegger), or *la nausée* (Sartre)—we will follow Heidegger in using the term *anxiety*. The difficulty in employing this term today, thanks largely to the success its application found in the writings of Freud and Heidegger, is that anxiety is everywhere. It is used ambiguously to refer to a myriad of mood disorders and phobias, and possesses, at large, a vague character of negativity. Anxiety has been carved up, divided, organized, and transformed into a big business. Where the existential thinkers claim to have identified in anxiety a fundamental ontological structure of human beings, the psychological and social work communities have found treatable disorders. Marketing strategists have found in anxiety a precious human tendency, related to fretting, fear, and the need to identify with others—to belong—which can be played upon to sell product to the anxious consumer.

Améry writes that anxiety (*la nausée*) is “one of the basic constituents of a human being. It is no more possible to ignore it than eros, with the distinction that the latter is recognized by society because it is consistent with the logic of life, while the former, *la nausée*, is denied by civilization's howling rabble set on preserving the species.”⁸⁴ This is partially true. What gets denied is the fundamentality of anxiety. Certainly, anxiety is recognized (*ad nauseam*) by society, but in the quest to quell anxiety as soon as it rises up within us, what often goes unidentified is the function of anxiety in our lives. The tendency, as Heidegger was acutely aware, is to *flee* from anxiety, to find a means of

⁸⁴ Améry 47.

forgetting about it, and once we have regained our wits, to claim that ‘it was really nothing.’⁸⁵

Heidegger goes on to say that, from an everyday point of view, it does seem correct to say that anxiety really is nothing. Unlike *fear*, which focuses upon a definite object or circumstance (the student’s upcoming midterm, cramped spaces, or an approaching large carnivorous mammal), anxiety is not about any particular thing or possibility in the world. Although a certain particularity might provide an occasion for anxiety, Heidegger contends that in anxiety, that about which we are anxious is *ourselves*.⁸⁶ When anxiety strikes, our own lives become suspect. Our projects cease to make sense. The world strikes us as odd, and the things within the world appear senseless, useless, and strange. The world does not help us in resolving anxiety when it first arises, but instead exacerbates this feeling.

Imagine a mathematician who spends all her waking hours in her study, diligently working proofs, crunching numbers on her computer, always in pursuit of a major discovery. One evening as she sits at her desk working through a new idea, a line in the proof seems to evade her, and she stares blankly at her scribblings, clicking her fingers in annoyance against the desk. The insight fails to come, and her mind trails to other thoughts. She becomes angered at her momentary block, in contrast to the clarity with which the ideas had previously occurred to her. She wonders why she’s just sitting there, no longer doing anything productive, why she can’t find the link that her data, her years of work suggested only minutes ago. The dreadful answer that offers itself to her is that she can’t move forward because the proof isn’t there at all; the data is bunk, her work is a

⁸⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time* 231/H.187.

⁸⁶ For Heidegger’s discussion of anxiety, see *Being and Time* ¶40, 228-235 (H.184-H.191).

hoax. She suddenly thinks of mathematics as a waste of time and education, a neglecting of a life outside of numbers, of a non-theoretical happiness. Something has gone terribly wrong, she thinks, rising violently and pacing the room, knocking papers off her desk, glaring at the walls. In her current state, she forgets all about the task at hand, begins questioning every decision that has led up to this present frustration. Her life has come into question, and bitterly anxious, she worries that she does not have an answer, is no longer satisfied with the replies implicit in her previous choices and work.

This example might or might not be far-fetched. That the frustrated mathematician overreacted seems clear, or at least, that's what we'd say. But for the mathematician in this moment of anxiety, the grounding of her life in anything deeper has revealed itself to be less than stable. As she questions the reason for all her hard work, her life seems to hang by a thread. What was once pursued without questioning, now brought before her interrogating mind, has nothing to say for itself. She even realizes how trite it must seem to others that math of all things, a theory, ink on a page, could drive her into this state, and this merely perpetuates her anxiety further. Moving in thought further away from her mathematical commitments in an attempt to attain a neutral viewpoint on her current frustration, all she can see is that her project ultimately doesn't amount to much. Even if she finishes the proof, it will be only one of millions in the world. Even if she gets over her frustration, she could always die before her work is finished. She asks herself, "What could any of this ever amount to?" The answer arrives, is pushed away, but continues to echo in her brain: "Nothing."

The anxiety of the mathematician is anxiety about *her own life*, and not simply her current difficulty. Anxiety brings into question the meaning of her life. Heidegger points out that, for one who is anxious, "Anxiety thus takes away..the possibility of

understanding [oneself]..in terms of the ‘world’ and the way things have been publicly interpreted.”⁸⁷ The anxious mathematician can no longer refer to her work, or the prestige of her university appointment, or any other external interpretation of her life which purports to ‘preordain’ her life as a mathematician with a meaning or value. Anxiety makes these interpretations and valuations appear arbitrary and lacking in the kind of solid grounding which could reassure the mathematician that her life is not essentially a nothing. Those public interpretations of her life are not hers; they could just as well be applied to anyone else in her position. Thus, anxiety leads her to suspect that any meaning in her life, in her work, cannot be the mere result of the public preconceptions of what the ‘meaning and value of being a mathematician’ is. Accepting the public image of her work as defining who she is, and what her value as a person is, would be to essentially place the meaning of her life into the hands of others—to give herself up to the nameless, faceless mass of ‘humanity,’ or ‘society,’ which has already interpreted the world for her (and everyone else) and laid down a path of norms and meanings to which she can unreflectively conform without manifesting any amount of authenticity or individuality in her actions. To the extent that she has at times conformed and simply accepted the public interpretation of her role and identity—to the extent that she has allowed herself to be absorbed into the normal way of going about and evaluating her own life, anxiety shows her, precisely to the extent of her absorption, that her life is inauthentic.

Anxiety calls to the individual’s attention her very own individuality and the concern she has with herself (because her life is *hers*). Paradoxically, in the same turn, anxiety announces to the individual that she is not really herself, that she has allowed

⁸⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time* 232/H.187.

herself to drift along into this moment, and in this drifting has *lost* herself. Hume's observation on the slippery nature of the self becomes something more pressing than a simple philosophical puzzle: 'For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other..I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception.'⁸⁸ In the anxious moment, discovering one's inauthenticity, the perception of oneself is not simply revealed to be fleeting and ever-changing, but shows itself to be wholly alien to the person's usual, unreflective sense of herself; from this anxious point of view, one's self-image has shown itself to be disappointing and un-self-like. The person feels betrayed by the public world which has made it so easy for her identity to be consumed and co-opted by the usual way of going about her workday and betrayed by her own self for not being the person she thought herself to be. Self-identity has come under fire. Heidegger sums up anxiety's role, saying that, 'what it does is precisely to bring Dasein [the human being] face to face with its world as world, and thus bring it face to face with itself as Being-in-the-world.'⁸⁹ Anxiety brings us face to face with ourselves, with the world which engulfs us and opens up possibilities for our undertaking. Although dreadful, paralyzing, painful, anxiety exposes to us our nature as free beings, able to make choices and engage the world.

At this basic level of description, anxiety is seen to be a fundamental structure of what we as human being are—and not essentially as a disease or disorder. That anxiety causes us some disorder is true. But to suppose a human being completely lacking in anxiety would be to conceive of a being completely disconnected from itself, a being that is not human at all. This is not to say that humans are *always* anxious, or that anxiety

⁸⁸ David Hume, 'Of Personal Identity,' *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (La Salle: Open Court, 1946), Part IV, Section VI.

⁸⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time* 233/H.188.

itself cannot be dealt with in a coherent, authentic way. Rather, anxiety always remains a possibility, or perhaps a threat, of our existing as we do. Although the experience is generally viewed as a negative one, without anxiety, there would be nothing in us to direct attention toward ourselves and our own needs (when those needs are most pressing). Like other experiences which serve to draw our attention to the needs of the self, such as thirst and hunger, anxiety may be understood as an (often unpleasant) experience which calls on us to attend to something we lack—in this case not food or drink, but a better handle on our own lives and the situation in which we have discovered ourselves at this anxious moment.

So, what is the anxious person to do? In the face of anxiety, how are we to get ourselves back? How are we to ‘deal’ with our anxiety? There appear to be three most basic categories of coping (or of failing to cope) with anxiety: procrastination and diversion (or remaining inauthentic), despair (an inauthentic resignation to the ‘truth’ of anxiety), or an authentic facing-up to anxiety (and thus ourselves) by which we find a way out of alienation and win ourselves back. After a consideration of the first category, we will proceed to the category of despair, in which suicide manifests itself as a possible way of ‘getting rid’ of our anxiety—but at the cost of getting rid of ourselves. Reaching this point in our inquiry, it will be necessary to return again to the question of freedom and its limits, or of the proper conception of human freedom. The third category, the authentic facing-up to anxiety, and the moral question as to whether suicide itself might present itself as an authentic possibility can only be considered once the totality of the suicidal situation has been clearly laid before us.

a) Procrastination & Diversion

Often we simply ignore anxiety, or put it off, or take a deep breath, and carry on with things. We do this because we are convinced that the anxiety experienced arises from some minor provocation not warranting an existential crisis, because we don't know how to solve the problem and prefer not to dwell on it, or because we are diverted from our anxieties by some other concern or activity. The telephone rings. A friend invites us out, and we readily accept the invitation, knowing that we can thus remove ourselves from the anxious situation.

The first case, where anxiety seems the result of mere trifles, can be dismissed so long as we are not deceiving ourselves as to the actual depth of the anxiety. But when true anxiety is displaced by putting off the confrontation between ourselves and anxiety's concern, which is our own life, or by diverting ourselves with some other activity, the situation becomes peculiar: anxiety had brought us face to face with ourselves, and so refusing to face anxiety is equivalent to refusing to confront ourselves.

The pressure to pigeonhole anxiety as quickly as possible is experienced both as a result of one's own recoil from its threatening appearance and as a requirement of the public world—the anxious person is not an efficient, functioning member of society. The person is, as it were, broken, and the world in which one exists has already designed 'one hundred and one ways to quell anxiety.' But reaching for distraction or quick solution contradicts anxiety, for in falling back into the public, usual way of coping with anxiety, there is no guarantee against its reoccurrence. Furthermore, it signifies a failure to fully acknowledge what anxiety had already brought into doubt—for it was one's own falling too completely into the everyday rhythm and pre-interpreted way of existing which prompted anxiety to bring the person, by force, face to face with oneself. Anxiety asks for

something more than the public interpretation of oneself—which could just as well apply to any other person inserted into one's position (such as in the workplace, where it is often made clear that the worker is 'replaceable,' while being told at employee meetings that each *individual* in the company is *special*). It calls upon the person to see oneself as a forward-searching, projecting possibility—as a being which can individualize itself by appropriating (or embracing) a meaning for its life which goes beyond the formulaic self-identities offered by the public world as 'signs' of the person's individuality (a social security number, for example). Anxiety says, "Make your life your own." Procrastination and diversion reply, "Not right now. I'm busy."

(b) Despair

The manner of responding to anxiety, or more appropriately, refusing to respond, discussed in the previous section is common. Every person has dealt with anxiety in the previous way, because the anxiety seems trivial, or because 'there isn't enough time' to confront (or to get oneself into) an existential dilemma. A bartender sits over his dinner table before work and thinks over his days in school, of his degree, the trunk of notebooks in his closet, and tells himself that he ought to spend more time writing—that writing is what he *really* ought to be doing. He is relatively happy with his life. He is married, enjoys his quiet neighborhood, his town, that he is more financially comfortable than in his college days. But maybe they should have moved to Seattle after the wedding. Maybe he should spend more time reading, in order to find the inspiration that scenes in a bar no longer evoke in him. It all seems the same now. He hears a car pull into the drive outside, the door open and close, signaling that his wife's day has ended and that it is time for his to begin. He cleans up his dishes, rinses his mind of these solitary thoughts,

and waits for her to enter the room. Then off to work for another night. After all, that's just the way it is sometimes.

There is both a grain of truth and a hint of despair in this picture of resignation. No person is completely himself, without reference to the world, or the language or contingent possibilities that the world makes available to the person. No person becomes a fully formed self in a vacuum, or is, as is often said, an island to himself. There is something 'inauthentic' in all human beings. Here inauthentic needn't signify a (morally) negative evaluation, but rather points out the obvious truth that all humans use what has been given to them by the world in order to shape their lives. We take into ourselves a way of speaking, customs, and norms which don't belong to us as individuals alone, but are shared by the community at large. To call attention to the inauthenticity of our lives is simply to point to tools and rules and habits that we have picked up from society, and to note that simply becoming educated or assimilated in a certain manner does not make us individuals in any sharply defined, authentic sense of individuality. Tacitly accepting the norms and traditions of society, the possible jobs or social status that our birth and education seem to point toward, expresses superficially only an ability to conform. The onset of anxiety suggests that there is more to existence than simply 'taking what we get,' or 'rolling with the punches,' come what may. Anxiety calls for an active engagement with one's life and possibilities, and taking responsibility for one's life as uniquely one's own.

But what if all these demands of anxiety are impossible? What if there is no way to 'become oneself authentically,' to own one's being, or to discover a meaning in one's life that does not ultimately refer back to the contingent and arbitrary whims and ideals of society (and thus, smacks of inauthenticity again)?

Despair is a function of confronting one's anxiety—that is, taking anxiety's demands seriously—and of concluding that what anxiety asks is impossible. To confront anxiety, refusing to flee from it or to put it off for another day, is to risk despair. The risk arises from the fact that we are blazing forward into new territory, searching for a response to anxiety, a means of understanding ourselves and our possibilities, which goes beyond the average everyday social interpretations of our lives and roles in the world as we lead them in the public world. We are seeking a self-distinguishing answer to ourselves. The risk lies in searching for this self-understanding and possibly failing to find it.

Through anxiety, the despairing person is acutely aware of the inauthentic character of his existence—that on some level his life is nothing 'special,' that consciousness is not unique to him, that other people do the same work he does (with the same vigor or apathy), enjoy the same hobbies as he, and perhaps even that other people despair over life in just the same way that he does. Determined to get down to the heart of the matter, the despairing person begins to pare away all the facets of his life which fail to exhibit to him what he truly is. Think again of the bartender who, as much as he may claim to enjoy his life, begins to systematically discredit each dimension of his current self as inessential, and not *really* him: his job is a trifle, his home and possessions disposable, his education much like that of others who attended his school; he pauses as his thoughts turn to his wife and to love, but even that doubting pause speaks for itself. What would really be him, he believes, is something that he is not, in this case a writer. So why not do that instead? But he is already submerged in commitments which he cannot merely drop—retreating from the life he has already established for himself would

only complicate matters more, and he is not the kind of person to run out on responsibilities. After all, how would *that* aid in the forming of an authentic life?

Furthermore, even if one were to attempt to change or get out of some of the commitments made in life—to quit the repetitive job in favor of a more stimulating employment, to get out of a bad relationship, etc.—there still remains an entirely more basic level of our constitution which we are unable to simply foist off our shoulders: namely, our history or past. We are each born into a historical moment, and from there on, our lives move temporally forward. There are no ‘do-overs’ or ‘take-backs’ in life. What’s done is done, has become past. Our actions and choices, the place of our birth and the rearing our parents provided—such events and past happenings belong to us in a manner such that it is impossible to disown them. Although we might renounce our past, or apologize for it, or wish that certain things had worked out differently, we can never fully divest ourselves of where we have been and what we have done.

Certainly then, the worry raised by despair seems legitimate. Our identity has been shaped largely by the world and the circumstances into which we are thrown. If anxiety says that we must go beyond this externally shaped identity in order to find our authentic selves, then the situation seems bleak. Our past, the history that has led us to this point, is part of us—it is who we are. The despairing person is stuck inside of the existential contradiction of seeing herself (the inauthentic, publicly-determined self) and yet insisting that this is not truly *her*. There is a split between the actual and the envisioned (ideal) self. Preferring the non-actualized ideal self as the representative self-image, the self that one ought to be, the despairer insists, “I am not really me.”

Kierkegaard characterizes despair as “the sickness unto death.” The despairing person despairs at not having himself, not being the person he envisions himself to be.

Despair is the sickness unto death because what the despairing person wants is to get rid of himself, to die to himself, so that he can become the other envisioned self. Kierkegaard writes,

A despairing man wants despairingly to be himself. But if he despairingly wants to be himself, he will not want to get rid of himself. Yes, so it seems; but if one inspects more closely, one perceives that after all the contradiction is the same. That self which he despairingly wills to be is a self which he is not (for the will to be that self which one truly is, is indeed the opposite of despair).⁹⁰

It is not physical death that is desired, but a death of the self—an existential death which would free the individual to become something completely different from who he currently is.

So to be sick unto death is, not to be able to die—yet not as though there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness in this case is that even the last hope, death, is not available...The despairing man cannot die...[D]espair is precisely *self*-consuming, but it is an impotent self-consumption which is not able to do what it wills; and this impotence is a new form of self-consumption, in which again, however, the despairer is not able to do what he wills, namely, to consume himself...[H]e despairs..because he cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot become nothing.⁹¹

The contradictory stance one takes toward oneself in despairing runs quite deep. Suicide seems here to become a possible option—not a *solution* to the problem presented by anxiety and dwelled upon in despair, but rather as a *reaction* to the irresolvable dichotomy between one's self-conception (as inauthentic) and the need for an authentic identity and existence.

⁹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953) 153.

⁹¹ Kierkegaard 151. Kierkegaard's argument rests upon a conception of the self as eternal, as constituted by an eternal Power. It is not necessary take up the theological dimension of Kierkegaard's argument in order to characterize despair, for the inability of the individual to consume himself need not rest upon the immortality of the self or soul. Rather, this can be interpreted as a brute logical fact about our consciousness of ourselves: we cannot 'unperceive' ourselves—we cannot, from the first person perspective, both die and experience this event. For at the moment the self has died, it no longer exists to have itself or to become some other self. The upward limit of the self, from the viewpoint of first-person experience, is its own self-consciousness.

Suicide thus serves as a way to get oneself out of the contradiction by brute force. The *mineness* of our selfhood (the self-identity relation we have to ourselves) points to the truism that, as Kierkegaard notes, we cannot get rid of ourselves in the strong sense of becoming wholly other than what we are. Although the contingent character of a person may change over time, this change is gradual, and occurs as a process of modification and not as an overall *replacement* of the self as a whole. It may be supposed that the despairing person is convinced that the contingent modification of the current self will not produce the results which anxiety seems to demand. That is, the possibilities of one's life, the choices available, do not seem to allow for the development of an authentic self. The despairer, having acknowledged the legitimacy of anxiety can no longer put off responding to anxiety's call, can no longer find a diversion from this anxious feeling; anxiety will not desist. Despair then becomes the condition of seeing one's life as impossible; there is no change which can undo what anxiety has brought to one's attention—that one's life is intolerable. It is intolerable precisely because the despairer sees that there are no authentic possibilities available, and that despite the lack of possibility, the individual is stuck with himself.

The despairing person, indignant toward this predicament, may see suicide as the only way to secure some shred of dignity for his life. In committing suicide, this person at the very least goes to his death with the knowledge that he opted out of an impossible situation, rather than being dragged along by the forces of nature and society. In thought, this person resembles Kirilov, who had convinced himself that the only way to fully embrace his freedom in the world was to turn that freedom against himself in suicide. Thrust into a world which has already been laid out in front of him and interpreted by the public-at-large, Kirilov experiences himself as a free agent in the world. And yet, because

he did not choose to become this free-acting self, did not choose this world, he is not free. That is, he is not free to choose his own freedom.⁹² Furthermore, any choice made throws one back into a relation with the public world, and thus with inauthenticity. Even rejecting or rebelling against the traditional norms still makes reference to those very norms, and after all, if one chooses to rebel, he will not be the first to do so. Even this action does not point toward the individual character of the self or the possibility of an authentic existence. The act of suicide seeks to short-circuit the paradox of existence; it removes the self entirely from the public world, makes it impossible for the person to continue making inauthentic choices or living in accordance with public norms which seem to disallow any kind of individuality. From this perspective, suicide becomes an act of *freeing* oneself from the constraints of the world, from anxiety, and from the impossibility of discovering an authentic way of being.

But as our literary examples have suggested, there is more than this one manner of viewing suicide from the despairing point of view. Artaud, certainly, would have considered suicide as freeing only insofar as it puts an end to the torture of consciousness in a deterministic world. And this freeing does not truly matter, because it is neither brought about by the free action of the human nor experienced by the human (since one is only 'freed' once one is dead and unable to enjoy such liberation). From the Artaudian perspective, one despairs not over oneself, per se, but rather over the situation which one has been thrown into, despairs over the impossibility of changing the trajectory of one's life through the world, despairs even at suicide, as the last horrible act in a life not of

⁹² Sartre writes, "[M]an is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." "The Humanism of Existentialism," *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, ed. Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995) 274.

one's own choosing, subject to the forces of nature and the fates. This individual sees suicide as a mere result—or as Szasz expresses it, a “happening”—and not as a choice. This person's stance toward life is essentially passive; life itself is a mere happening. It is interesting to note that this form of despair, and its understanding of suicide, fits well with the deterministic view of suicide prevalent in the psychological picture of the suicidal person. But as we have noted, the failing of this view is that it does not acknowledge the agency of the individual. For even to despair is to assume a stance toward one's life; it is to act in a mental sense, to choose to regard one's life on those despairing terms.

Thus, this second variety of despair and its relation to suicide can be seen as either a failure to acknowledge the efficacy of the individual as an agent or an outright denial of human freedom. The two kinds of despair represented by Kirilov and Artaud, then, are despair at being a limited and inauthentic being (Kirilov), and despair at not being free or in control of one's life (Artaud). But as should be clear, the distinction between these forms of despair is not essentially the difference between the two despairers views of freedom (or lack thereof), for even Kirilov's motivation toward suicide shows that he is not quite convinced of his own freedom. Through suicide, he aims to prove its existence. The difference lies instead in their contrary views of themselves as human beings—Kirilov sees himself as an active agent, Artaud as passive. It is probably important to note here that Artaud did not commit suicide. Although he was obsessed with his own sickness and dabbled in self-destructive habits (opium addiction, suicidal threats), his deterministic view may have actually ‘prevented’ the possibility of his committing suicide, for suicide requires that the agent do something to himself (to take something, fire something, to put oneself into a fatal situation). In this sense, suicide is not at all

possible within Artaud's worldview. His causal universe does not include suicide because suicide is a possible action of free beings, of which his world contains none. Had he committed suicide, it would have been more appropriate, *qua* his worldview, to say that the 'biological organism self-destructed.' Suicide, as we understand it, would be to attribute too much to the mere event, for events (happenings) do not act freely. They do not 'act' at all.

Intellectual Suicide?

The danger of any philosophical inquiry is the chance of its losing touch with the reality it seeks to get hold of. Critiques of philosophy, both from outside the discipline and at the fringe (in the writings of Richard Rorty, for example), often take this line against the philosophical tradition. The conditions which have been described are intended to portray a generalized account of the human experiences of anxiety and despair, and not merely the woes of impotent bourgeois academics. Obviously, one need not be at least an amateur philosopher in order to consider or to commit suicide.⁹³ Although there may be contingent variance in anxiety and despair as experienced from one person to the next, the conditions themselves each capture a fundamental phenomenon. The conceptual equipment with which one can *articulate* anxiety and despair certainly differs among humans, just as much as any other experience might be expressed in varying ways, depending upon one's vocabulary and the emotional responses associated with one's descriptive terms. Nothing has been said specifically

⁹³ In the field of epistemology, a theory of knowledge is usually considered deficient if one need be an "amateur epistemologist" in order to possess the adequate conceptual equipment to have any knowledge, since the majority of humankind would thus be excluded. A similar requirement holds for this inquiry into the nature of suicide.

about emotions herein, but it seems that anxiety is primarily a ‘fearful’ state of mind in which the object of fear—oneself—has not quite come into focus; the ‘blurriness’ of the self is due to its inauthenticity. Despair, on the other hand, allows for a range of emotional responses—such as sadness, anger, ambivalence, and so on—which may be based upon one’s interpretation of despair.

The suicidal motivation arises out of the perception of oneself as being *stuck*. It is this ‘stuckness,’ accompanied with the conviction that one has fully grasped and described one’s situation, which fosters despair. The possibilities of life have run out. Sidney Jourard suggests that if *human living* consists in the *meaningful experience* of life, then despair occurs at the point at which meaning runs out:

A person lives as long as he experiences his life as having meaning and value, and as long as he has something to live *for*—meaningful projects that will animate him and invite him into the future or entice him to pull himself into the future. He will continue to live as long as he has hope of fulfilling meanings and values. As soon as meaning, value, and hope vanish from a person’s experience, he begins to stop living; that is, he begins to die.⁹⁴

The opposite experience, of one’s life as meaning *less*, does not turn on a logical conception of meaning, but rather upon an evaluative conception. The experience is of a *lack of worth*, and not, for example, the experience of believing that the correspondence theory of truth is false. The statement, ‘Life is meaningless,’ is never a logical statement. If the statement ‘Life is meaningless’ is equivalent to the statement ‘All life is meaningless,’ then that statement itself is nonsense, because it undercuts the very property—that *something* possesses meaning—which would allow for it to have any meaning. To speak of something’s being meaningless, to even have a concept of

⁹⁴ Sidney M. Jourard, ‘The Invitation to Die,’ *On the Nature of Suicide*, ed. Edwin Shneidman (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1969) 132.

‘meaninglessness,’ there must be something that is, once was, or is seen to be potentially meaningful. But if all life really is meaningless, and if this has always been (and will be) true, then it is puzzling how one could ever learn to make such a statement.

The only sensible solution is to assume that the statement “Life is meaningless” is equivalent to “*Some* life (or other) is meaningless (in comparison to some other life or other).” To interpret the statement this way allows for the existence of a comparison-base (i.e. some life that *is*, or would be, meaningful), and it should be noted that this base has nothing to do with meaning as a logical relation or property but is constituted instead by a value scheme. “Life is meaningless” cannot state anything logically meaningful, but what it can and does state is that some life or other is not *worth* living. Even if one were to entertain the statement, “No life is worth living,” this statement only gets its sense from there being either at least one life that once was or is potentially worth living.

But how does the condition of being stuck equate to meaninglessness (i.e. ‘not-worth-living-ness’)? Jourard and others have pointed toward the role of *projects* in the experience of one’s life as meaningful.⁹⁵ For the person in despair, there seems to be some fact or perceived truth which undercuts the possibility of meaningful undertakings. A radical change in one’s life (the death of a loved one, loss of a job, a natural disaster) may induce such a great amount of distress that one despairs over ever squaring one’s long-held self-conception with drastic changes in the world: “I don’t know how I can live without her.” “I cannot be anything other than a businessman, and now that I’m bankrupt, my life is meaningless. There’s nothing else I can do.” “This fire has destroyed

⁹⁵ See also Arndt Seifert, “A Theory of Projects: Its Application to Death and Suicide,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 39.2 (Dec. 1978) 208-218. Seifert proposes a list of conditions which must be met in order for an undertaking to be regarded as a meaningful project.

everything. It's not possible to start over. The meaning of my life, everything I've worked toward and had to show for my work, has been annihilated."

On the other hand, despair might build over time, as a result of discontent which has never been properly addressed. Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* discovers that her domestic life has been ultimately unfulfilling and that she has been selling herself short all these years. Although she tries to rebel—engages her artistic aspirations, moves out of her husband's house, even leaving her children there—she discovers that she has too long been committed to her role as wife and mother to adjust to this change, and that furthermore, the community in which she lives is either unable or unwilling to accommodate her 'awakened' self. Thus, she realizes that she is stuck, has been stuck for a long time. She can no longer go back to her old life, and her rebellion has led her to a dead end. What she cannot escape is her own life as a mother, and yet, having identified this role as inauthentic—as an enslaving role—she has committed herself to the imperative that "she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice *herself* for her children."⁹⁶ Seeing her ideal self as wholly other than the mother-role her life seems to demand of her, she is unable to resolve herself with the world; because the possibilities available to her have been deemed inauthentic by her, the narrator observes, "There was no one thing in the world that she desired." The world had nothing worthwhile to offer her. But so long as she continues to live, the world itself—her children—would make demands of her, demands which she cannot authentically accept. Realizing that her situation is impossible—that no possibility of her life can be meaningfully engaged in—she swims out into the ocean with no intention of returning to shore. In Edna's case, the drastic change, enacted by she herself, seems in retrospect to

⁹⁶ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993) 136 (emphasis added).

have been a desperate attempt to tear herself from herself and yet remain in life—an attempt to escape herself without resorting to suicide. When rebellion fails, she becomes like Artaud's vision of suicide—by swimming into the ocean, there exists an ultimate ambiguity in her death, for she swims until the shore of survival is too far away, until the forces of nature take her life. Chopin's description is not of an approaching death, but of the onset of ultimate fatigue, exhaustion setting in as she swims further and further into the ocean, her arms and legs growing weak. The exposition seems to suggest that it was not Edna who killed herself, but rather society which drove her to it, and nature which did the work—Edna is made passive, a victim. She has been drowned metaphorically by the world just as much as she has allowed herself, literally, to drown.

Edna's death brings out the tension between the self and the world, and that suicide may result from either a (falsely) perceived or an actual experience of this tension at fever pitch. That is, Edna experienced her (ideal) self as irresolvable with her world. As each event after her awakening confirms the unbridgeable distance between her ideal self and the self the world demands that she be, the tension of her continued existence increases as it becomes more and more difficult (or futile) to get hold of herself while the demands of her world and pre-established role as mother continually deny her this grasp of herself. Her world—her husband, her children, the traditions of New Orleans in the late 19th century—thus becomes a participant in the downward spiral that ends in Edna's death. Here Artaud's accusation returns to haunt us, that, "one does not commit suicide alone...a whole army of evil beings is needed to force the body to perform the unnatural act of depriving itself of its own life." This finger-pointing hints again at the complex ethical structure of the suicidal act—what does it *say* about the world and others? We must note that while the inquiry into the existential structure of the individual has shed

some light on the nature of suicide as a chosen undertaking in response to a form of despair, the inquiry would remain incomplete if we did not also take note of this suicidal process as taking place *within a world*. Suicide, verily, is a response to the world, to the conditions within it, the possibilities (or lack of possibility) available to the individual, and not simply the existential struggle of the self within a vacuous bubble.

Because the treatment of suicidal persons necessarily focuses on the individual, in isolating one's problems (psychological or physiological) and then assisting the individual in developing coping methods (psychotherapeutic or pharmaceutical) for dealing with one's life, it is easy to put aside considerations that a person's life-situation may be truly awful. The world, as we are aware, is not always a pleasant, decent place, and people who find themselves in despair over themselves are not always suffering from psychological delusion. To the extent that one's world plays a role in facilitating the decision to commit suicide, the 'prevention' of suicide would be to save the person *from the world* just as much as from himself. And insofar as the breakdown of the despairing individual can be seen to stem from *both* the forces of our public world and in some coping deficiency in the individual, this suggests that *changing the suicidal individual* will never be quite enough to solve the problem. The world, the societal possibilities, the attitudes of others, must be changed, too. To put the burden of recovery on the suicidal person would be to assume that the society is itself in perfect order.

Chapter 5: The Logic of Life and Death

On the subject of death, its meaning-negating character, and the futility of resorting to suicide as an attempt to circumvent this meaning-negating termination, Sartre writes:

[D]eath is never that which gives life its meanings; it is, on the contrary, that which on principle removes all meaning from life...It would be in vain for us to resort to suicide in order to escape this necessity. Suicide can not be considered as an end of life for which I should be the unique foundation. Since it is an act of my life, indeed, it itself requires a meaning which only the future can give to it; but as it is the *last* act of my life, it is denied this future. Thus it remains totally undetermined...Suicide is an absurdity which causes my life to be submerged in the absurd.⁹⁷

If Sartre is correct about death as the end of life's meaning, then his critique of suicide as an absurdity possesses only rhetorical force. For if absurdity is the condition of believing that one's actions are meaningful while actually existing within a meaningless space, and if any action within a life ultimately loses its meaning upon the death of the individual (and is thus made absurd), then suicide is not a *sui generis* cause of this 'submersion in the absurd.' Any everyday action would serve up absurdity just as well, since the meaning of that action will ultimately be revoked by death. The difference between suicide and any other action is that suicide brings into deadly focus the *groundlessness* of meaning. In suicide, the bootstrapping process in which actions take on meaning as we project ourselves and our intentions into the future—where one action makes available other tentatively meaningful possibilities—fails to get off the ground. On Sartre's account, this loss of meaning would have happened at the moment of death anyway; his

⁹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992) 690-691.

point must be that one cannot 'beat the odds' by committing suicide. Suicide cannot confer meaning on a person's life, from within the point of view of the person who commits it.

For Sartre, the above comments are intended to shed light on his argument that "death can not be my peculiar possibility; it can not even be one of *my* possibilities."⁹⁸ Since death is beyond the experience of the individual, it cannot be grasped as a possibility of free action—death cannot be engaged from within life. As for meaning, Sartre notes that once a person is dead, changes and modifications can no longer be made *inwardly* (from inside that person's life), but this does not entail that the meaning of the deceased person's life is fixed. Rather, 'its meaning does not cease to be modified from the outside.' In death, we are vulnerable to whatever interpretations other people decide to throw over our completed lives: "To be dead is to be a prey for the living."⁹⁹ We are vulnerable even to being forgotten.

There is something odd about this so-called vulnerability, for it, too, is something that we can only experience from within our lives. It seems as if Sartre is tempted to say that we are responsible not only for our lives, but also for how we will be remembered even after life has ended. But he realizes that such insistence still runs up against death and the interpretations of the surviving others, and that questions about the meaning of history which arise at this point are irresolvable ("since all answers which can be made..are themselves historical"¹⁰⁰).

In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus seemed to worry over whether suicide provided the only genuine retort to a life understood as an absurdity. Sartre does well to

⁹⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 691.

⁹⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 695.

¹⁰⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 697.

illustrate that for the absurd life, suicide, too, will be absurd. But no more or less can be gained from considerations of absurdity, since once absurdity is established as the status quo, the force of crying out, “All life is absurd!” becomes itself, absurd. As living human beings, we operate within a space of reasons and meanings. Absurdity promises that as soon as we step back from this logical space, we simply lose our footing.

In a sense, the despairing person has already fallen outside this logical space, or is standing at its edge, since where life is not worth living, the reasons for living, obviously, have run out. The “logic of life,” as Améry notices, loses its grip on suicide, because, “all logical conclusions that we draw in statements about life are constantly bound to the fact of this life. One can’t say that in order to live well it is best not to live.”¹⁰¹ Améry contends that a logical analysis of suicide, especially as a therapeutic endeavor, is impotent, because the person on the edge of suicide has already rejected the validity of any argument that would lead away from self-destruction and back into the flush of life. There is a suspicion that suicide is necessarily irrational because it contains a contradiction in its self-defeating logic, or because death—as an unknown—can never be rationally chosen. Such counterarguments to suicide deserve scrutiny, because in the long history of logic, suicide has not always raised the red flag of contradiction. The purpose of this investigation is not simply to demonstrate the failure of these logical arguments against suicide, but rather to question whether they are applicable to suicide at the level of generality, or only to particular cases or classes of cases, which must be specified by referring to the contingent details of those cases. Although from an optimistic perspective, we might desire that there be no suicide in the world, a desire alone is a far cry from requiring us to categorize all suicides as senseless, irrational, or condemnable.

¹⁰¹ Améry 19.

To do so is to forget that the individual is responding to a world, and that the world itself often appears as senseless, irrational, and condemnable.

Death by Modus Tollens—Suicide as a Corollary

A simplistic logical model of suicide would characterize suicide as a *modus tollens* argument, with suicide as the upshot of the successful argument:

If my life is worth living, then X (where X is a statement describing a condition or possibility that would make life worth living).

But X is not the case (i.e. X is false).

Therefore, my life is not worth living.

Therefore, I ought to commit suicide.

The normative leap from the first conclusion to the second, while perhaps bothersome, is unassailable from our contemporary moral point of view for the simple reason that no moral person advocates, or approves of, torture. If we remain within the confines of this narrow argument, it should become clear that the only other option besides suicide would be to endure a worthless life.

The base argument is unquestionably valid, and so any failing in it will be that it is unsound. But since X is a variable statement, we cannot make this judgment until a verifiable statement takes the place of X. This suggests that, whereas to claim that all suicides commit the act because life is not worth living seems tautologous (i.e. uninformative), the force of the suicide's reasoning rests entirely upon statement X, and furthermore that X may vary from one suicide to another.

Leslie Farber attempts to construct the above line of reasoning in such a way that it captures all cases of suicidal despair without invoking the variable statement. On Farber's account, the despairer reasons with counterfactuals of the form, 'If life weren't

unbearable, then I wouldn't be contemplating suicide." A modified version of the above argument replaces X with the claim "my life would not be unbearable," so that the conditional reads, "If my life is worth living, then my life would not be unbearable." The question then is whether the consequent can be proven false. But the previous conditional seems to do the job just fine for the despairer, suggests Farber, because this person is already contemplating suicide. So, the negative conclusion follows, "my life is not worth living." The logic here is unrelenting. Farber observes,

In fact, it may happen that the act of suicide seems to have become necessary to demonstrate how unendurable his pain is, in which case he commits suicide in order to prove it unendurable. Here the despairer takes his own life to prove that he is not responsible for taking his own life. By definition what is unendurable cannot be endured; therefore his suicide is not a matter of choice but an externally determined response to a situation which has deprived him of choice. The flaw in this logical construct, of course is that his definition of his condition as unendurable is very much a matter of choice, and thus, obviously, so is his suicide.¹⁰²

Farber's comments surely conjure up the image of a person trying to talk himself into something, into the necessity of suicide. We could easily insert the clichéd image of a person sitting on the ledge of a high-rise apartment building, talking her way through this line of reasoning one more time before shoving off. But why rehearse the simple argument yet again? It has given all the conclusion it can give; the 'rational' thing to do would be to act on it, to jump. So, why not?

The obvious answer is that *things change*. Sometimes. That is, *sometimes* things change. Underlying the so-called logic of suicide, which is itself not so very complicated, the despairer is often faced with the fleeting contingency of statement X (the unbearable-condition), is paralyzed by Prufrock's observation that, "In a minute there

¹⁰² Farber 137.

is time for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.”¹⁰³ Farber’s unbearability-condition seems to capture all the cases, but it does so in an empty way. What has yet to be made clear is what unbearability consists in.

The Unbearability-Hypothesis

Unbearability must here be understood in the strongest possible sense—that is, in its actual sense. We often label certain experiences as unbearable, but they only remain so while they are occurring. And as it turns out, we bore out the experience without floundering or dying, and so, in fact, we fudge a bit in calling the experience unbearable. What we seem to mean is that *if the experience had continued indefinitely*, it would have become unbearable. In a sense, while we remain living, unbearability is only a hypothesis. We simply don’t know what is unbearable. We can guess and make predictions. We can say, ‘Being tortured in a dark cellar for fifteen years would be unbearable,’ and based upon our past experiences with pain and suffering, we believe that our underlying reasoning is sufficiently strong to make this statement true.

There appear to be two components of unbearability: the condition of being stuck (and being conscious of this stuckness) and the belief that the condition of our life, as stuck, is beyond repair. The first component we have already discussed in its relation to despair. The second component is essentially built into despair as we have characterized it; it is the inference by induction that things *won’t* change, life won’t improve. Furthermore, we have noted that from the point of view of existential ontology that the despairer (a) is anxious about the inauthenticity of his self (i.e. his lack of a true,

¹⁰³ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’ *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2 Fifth Edition (New York: Norton, 1998) 1371.

individuated self, and the fact that his life is in many ways just like any other life) and (b) is in despair over the impossibility of fully ridding himself of this inauthentic nature in order to become an authentic self. But the despairer sees that inauthenticity is not something that can simply be gotten rid of by a simple change, *because part of what constitutes the human being is inauthenticity.*

This is not to say that all human beings are ‘bad’ people. Rather, that inauthenticity is part of the human being’s existential structure is a necessary upshot of our being social beings, beings who are just like others of our kind (speaking the same language, following the same rules of the road). Inauthenticity is the condition of being indistinguishable from any other human being in certain ways, especially in our capacity as rule-followers within a community and in our own mineness-relation to ourselves (self-identity). In order for the despairer to throw the negative interpretation over inauthenticity, she concludes that her entire being is determined from the outside, by social and natural forces, and that she herself is defenseless against these forces so that her entire being is determined by factors other than herself. What is unbearable is the impossibility of ever breaking away from these determining forces, the impossibility of tearing oneself away from the world. The despairer may arrive at this point from any number of situations—physical illness, sudden tragedy, breakup, or prolonged discontent. The condition is unbearable because the pain is immense, and doesn’t appear to be going away. Thus, the despairer is not actually in despair over inauthenticity, but is instead in despair over the *limited*, or closed-off, nature of her possibilities. Inauthenticity, as a structure ‘inherited’ from the public world, gestures toward this limit in an abstract way, but the despairing person goes much further than this in interpreting her situation. Inauthenticity is to be distinguished from the perceived or actual limitation experienced

by the despairer in that inauthenticity is an existential structure which denotes the public character of the self, whereas the latter consists in a contingent and specific perception of one's own possibilities or lack of possibilities. This distinction is related to a point made in Chapter Four regarding the statement, 'Life is meaningless': in this case what the person is in despair over is not the abstracted character of inauthenticity, but of a specific circumstance in one's life which bars engaging in authentic possibilities (thus tipping the balance of one's self toward an unacceptable form of inauthenticity). The person despairs over having cancer, or being left by his wife, or of being captured by the enemy. It is some such actual event which leads the despairer to believe that all future possibilities are inauthentic—that his life from this point forward will no longer be *his*, because his situation has limited him in such a way that it is impossible for him to authentically embrace some possibility of his own choosing. His world has been narrowed such that, from his point of view, it is hardly a world at all, but something more akin to a prison cell. And his own self, as he sees it, has been dehumanized, taken away, and made null.

We are approaching a point at which, in despair at the lack of possibilities in a constricted world, suicide begins to have an appearance of necessity. The nature of stuckness is that it is painful. Although this pain may manifest itself in physiological ways (or stem from it), it seems that the pain of being stuck is primarily psychological, since if brute physical pain is too great, it will override the agent's ability to think clearly (or at all). But as we have noted, what makes this stuck condition unbearable is not only the experience itself—since, considering that most everyone has found themselves existentially stuck at times, this condition by itself would imply that everyone has been on the brink of suicide—but also that the individual believes that there can be no relief from this stuckness in the future. If the despairer believed that he could somehow get out

of this stuck situation, that the sensation would pass, or that there is some other way to alleviate his despair and anxiety, then he would not readily take suicide to be the appropriate response to his difficulties. In one of his many arguments that humans are essentially free to choose and create themselves—that being human *is* the condition of being free—and that this freedom includes implicitly responsibility, Sartre argues from the example of a soldier sent to war:

If I am mobilized in a war, this war is *my* war; it is in my image and I deserve it. I deserve it first because I could always get out of it by suicide or by desertion; these ultimate possibles are those which must always be present for us when there is a question of envisaging a situation. For lack of getting out of it, I have *chosen* it.¹⁰⁴

It is odd that Sartre would posit desertion and suicide as ‘ultimate possibles,’ since the two ‘choices’ offered are quite different in nature. Desertion, on the one hand, allows for the continuance of life; suicide does not. But it may be that in the example, desertion serves as a ‘metaphorical suicide,’ in the sense that desertion would radically alter the individual’s world. He would become a fugitive, would be stuck with the stigma of being a draft-dodger, and so on. It may be that Sartre employs the possibility of desertion because in our time, desertion is classed as a bad thing to do—something that most people can’t imagine themselves doing, running out, running away. What happens in the pairing of desertion and suicide is that Sartre establishes a link or similarity between the two possibilities—what makes them ‘ultimate’ is their *rejecting*. It might be that Sartre wants to suggest that all actions and choices possess the very same irreversibility as suicide, the difference being that in any other action or choice besides suicide, the person remains in the world and must face up to the outcome of what he has done (or refused to do). Each choice is, in a sense, a life-or-death decision, and each action kills off other

¹⁰⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 708.

possibilities we could have undertaken. In choosing, we limit ourselves. Thus, it may be that the despairer, as Farber suggests, is at least in part responsible for his stuckness in casting his situation in terms that open up to the possibility of despair, or which make it easier to give in to despair.

The difference between suicide and any other act is *not* that it is only in committing suicide that there are no do-overs. Each action, enacted in a temporal existence, possesses this quality. The difference is that suicide is *the* end—it is not a limiting action like others because what it does is to destroy the being which can experience itself as limited. Thus, it is a falsehood to envision that suicide is freeing in any other than a fantastic sense, since suicide results in something that cannot be free (or anything else). In performing any other action, the agent can always make later adjustments—if the decision turned out to be a poor one, the person can contend with this. But in committing suicide, no adjustment can be made. The despairer would not take up suicide if adjustment seemed possible.

But justifying this inductive belief—arriving at the conclusion that no adjustment is possible, that stuckness cannot become unstuck—this is precisely the difficulty for the despairer contemplating suicide. The despairer cannot reason through to the act of suicide deductively, for at the heart of the matter is a premise about one's own future. Since the second component of the unbearable-condition refers to a future state (or series of future states) in which the despairer's life continues to be unbearable, any claims made about the unbearable of one's life remain always open to question and revision. When a person claims, "*Here and now*, at this moment, my life is unbearable," what she means is, "I am suffering greatly, such that if this suffering continues, *I won't be able to handle it.*" Relief might come in the very next moment, over the course of time, or not at all.

The simple fact that people commit suicide indicates that there is a threshold—a point at which suffering is great enough such that it generates the belief that one’s life is unbearable. What happens after the despairer accepts this belief remains indeterminate. Suicide itself is not a deliberative act, but follows after all deliberations are finished, having either led directly to the decision to commit suicide, or arriving at suicide because deliberation has failed to suggest any other alternative. But here we must draw a distinction between the individual’s *beliefs* about her life’s unbearability and the actual state of unbearability. As we have already noted, it is unlikely that any living human being has actually experienced an unbearable existence, since such a life by definition would end in self-destruction.¹⁰⁵ We can look at the lives of other people and claim that if we ourselves were living such a life, we would find it unbearable, but such statements are either hypothetical or metaphorical.

Thus, what is truly intolerable about the despairing person’s life is not that it is *in fact* unbearable, but that the despairer accepts as true that his life *will become* unbearable if he continues to live. Classifying one’s life as unbearable is an anticipatory description, a prediction. The despairer believes that it is highly unlikely that things will change, that the sort of possibilities that would make life in the future bearable will not avail themselves. The possibility of committing suicide presents itself as a way for the despairer to make a preemptive strike—to act first, and to thus secure a measure of control over one’s own undoing. The terminally ill patient realizes that if she continues to live, her disease will gradually spread through her entire body. Great physical pain will

¹⁰⁵ We say ‘self-destruction’ here rather than suicide, since it seems that a true state of unbearability would tend to undermine self-conscious, reflective activity. A truly unbearable life would be one in which it is impossible for the human being to *function* as a human being (projecting oneself into the future, and making choices or acting based upon these projections of oneself into the future).

consume her, and very soon, she will die. The prisoner of war anticipates that his captors will continue to torture him until he gives up certain military secrets which would result in the slaughter of his countrymen. If he doesn't share these secrets, they will eventually tire of torture, and shoot him, just as they have several others in this same prison. The mourning widow cannot make sense of his life without his spouse. A year has passed, and still, he awakes expecting to see her. Each day results in the same disappointment of her absence. None of his attempts to socialize with others have bridged the gap that her death has left in his heart. His life seems futile without her, and all he seems able to anticipate is the death which will rid him of this perpetual feeling of absence. For each of these persons, suicide presents a way to bypass a pointless duration of life. Once the belief is accepted that one's life will become ultimately unbearable, that no future possibility will alter this condition, then the only thing left for the despairer to anticipate is the only thing left which will radically alter his or her life—and that is death. The terminally ill person can wait for the disease to run its course. The prisoner of war can wait for the firing squad. The widow can wait for his grief to consume him. There is no lesson to be learned from the suffering; no virtue is being tested or strengthened. There is no longer any benefit to be had in continued existence. Life itself has become a moot point.

The (Dead) End of Logic

For all that has been said, none of this exposition entails suicide as a *necessary* act. Farber suggests that the despairing person who commits suicide must convince himself of the necessity of his act, because if suicide is not necessary, then this seems to mean that there *are* other possibilities open to the individual. But since the belief that

one's life is unbearable is a hypothetical belief—because actual unbearability exists as a property of an as yet unexperienced state—there appears to be no way for the despairer to reason his way to the conclusion of suicide. The act of suicide represents an unjustifiable *leap* in one's reasoning. It is a decision against waiting to see what else will happen. The motions of suicide are like those of the critic who walks out of the movie theater after the first fifteen minutes, so disgusted by the opening scenes of the film that it was simply not worth enduring the remainder—no good could come of staying. Of course, since the critic refuses to endure the film, he is not in any position to say anything more than that he walked out. No matter how likely his conclusion that the entire film was terrible, his action puts him into a position such that he can never know for certain whether his conclusion is right. Similarly, with suicide, the successful suicide is never in a position to know of his own success. All he could have said in his final moment was that *at that moment*, the potential benefit of a continued existence was outweighed and overshadowed by the belief that a continued existence would result in no such benefit.

That suicide represents a final leap in one's reasoning, that it is a canceling out of any potential openness in the future, is sufficient reason for many to charge that suicide cannot be a rational undertaking. For one thing, the previous descriptions of despair certainly leave room for error on the part of the despairer—it may be that he is not accurately assessing his own situation. Farber's central point is that the despairing individual often plays a reflectively active role in construing his own possibilities as limited in a way that allows him to justify his despair. Anxiety reveals one's inauthentic condition and opens up the possibility of despairing over oneself, and despair makes it difficult for the individual to see past this current dire situation. In such a case, the despairer bars himself from being able to apprehend the possibilities that lay beyond his

despair, and thus fails to accurately appraise his total situation. But even assuming that there are cases where the despairing person is not leaving out anything in his self-appraisal, the rationality of suicide has been brought into doubt on the grounds that it can never be rational to choose death. Philip E. Devine argues that the contemplation of suicide is not simply a deliberation over future possibilities or “world-courses” one’s life may take, but instead, “What I am contemplating is much more intimate than a world-course. It is my own (self-chosen) death, and such a choice presents itself inevitably as a leap in the dark.”¹⁰⁶ He contends that it is impossible to choose death rationally because death is “logically opaque.” In order to make his case, Devine distinguishes between two conceptions of rationality:

I do not want to deny that a suicide can be calmly and deliberately, and in that sense rationally, carried out. But then someone might do something blatantly foolish or even pointless, and it is sometimes rational to act quickly and with passionate fervor. But if, as seems plausible, a precondition of rational choice is that one know *what* one is choosing, either by experience or by the testimony of others who have experienced it or something like it, then it is not possible to choose death rationally. Nor is any degree of knowledge of what one desires to escape by death helpful, since rational choice between two alternatives requires knowledge of both.¹⁰⁷

Roughly, the distinction is between an intellectual disposition and the logic involved in choice theory. To be a rational deliberator is one thing; to make the rational choice is a separate matter. Devine further notes that “the opacity of death is logical rather than epistemological.”¹⁰⁸ This seems to make a point that Améry, too, observed: that the ‘logic of life’ excludes talk about death. The realm of death is isolated from the space of reasons

¹⁰⁶ Philip E. Devine, “On Choosing Death,” *Suicide: Right or Wrong?*, ed. John Donnelly (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1990) 204. Devine takes the phrase “world-course” from Brandt’s essay, “The Morality and Rationality of Suicide” (also printed in *Suicide: Right or Wrong?*).

¹⁰⁷ Devine 201-202.

¹⁰⁸ Devine 205.

in which comparisons are made, data collected from testimony, and truth-values tested. The opaqueness of death is not epistemological for the reason that, logically, epistemology can never get its foot in death's door. The statement, "I know what death is like," cannot be true (for humans) because of the very nature of death—namely, that there cannot be dead knowers. For Devine, this logical opaqueness implies that death cannot be made an object of rational comparison with any other possibility, not even if death is assumed to be total annihilation, since annihilation, too, is something beyond the logical capacity of thought and reasoning.

At the end of the day, many of the observations in Devine's short paper are very good. His claims about the logical opacity of death are well-aligned with Sartre's claims about death's meaning-negating character and Améry's statements about the logic of life (and its exclusion of death). Death cannot be regarded by the agent as an object of choice. From within the individual point of view, it cannot even be treated as an event in one's own life, but only as the end of all events, the limit. For Devine, these observations about death are intended to support his claim that death cannot be rationally chosen (in the narrower sense of *rational*). But if Devine's characterization of death, as lying outside the realm of logical statements and options is correct, then his argument either begs the question—by characterizing death in such a way that it cannot exist along a world-course of logical choice and thus presupposing what he seeks to prove—or is only trivially true, in that the logical nature of death is such that it can never be 'chosen' at all. In fact, Devine's argument is both, because his argument proves nothing more than what the logical nature of death itself already establishes. But we must clarify the theoretical stance from which these criticisms of Devine's position are correct.

Simply put, the question Devine proposes to answer is whether death can be rationally chosen. His answer is, “No.” Why? “Because death is such that it cannot be rationally chosen.” On the grounds of the rational choice theorist who entertains death as a potentially rational choice (in the form of suicide or other act of self-killing), Devine’s very characterization of death presupposes his answer. Thus, it would be mistaken to see Devine as taking *head-on* the claim that death can be treated as an object of choice. Rather, Devine succeeds in making a grammatical point about both death and choosing which brings into question the very applicability of rational choice theory to this particular situation. Devine, too, seems to miss the grammatical criticism his paper contains, in continuing to speak (hypothetically?) of death as a “self-chosen” “leap in the dark.” On Devine’s grounds, it is not simply that it is never *rational* to choose death, but that the very notion of ‘choosing death’ is logically *meaningless*.

The mistake here is the result of deliberative shorthand. For the person contemplating suicide, the supposed choice is either between committing suicide or continuing to live—in short, between life and death. Thus life gets marked as A, death as B, and the decision now presents itself as a choice between two options, A or B. But the tendency to dichotomize has led to a fundamental deception. The “choice” is not between two distinct alternatives, but is instead between one single “option” and that selfsame “option’s” negation —A or not-A. Or to put it in another more familiar way: “to be, or not to be”—that has been the question all along. One might try to get out of this utterly useless statement by specifying a particular case: suppose that, on the one hand, an individual could choose to pursue some goal that might get him out of despair, or on the other hand, he could put a bullet in his head. But this quickly reduces to the question, “to shoot, or not to shoot.” One could go further, to propose a *specific* choice which would

not result in death, say, taking the dog for a walk, and pit that against the choice to pull the trigger. The question now becomes, “to walk the dog, or to pull the trigger.” But this ridiculous dilemma no longer accurately portrays the existential depth of the question as to whether one should commit suicide or not. The question is not of whether to go right or to go left, but whether to go *at all*.

Of course, Devine can say that it is never rational to choose death, but it doesn't appear that this claim is doing any work. The person contemplating suicide is considering a “choice” that is fundamentally unlike other choices, and the difference is such that the possibility of rationally choosing (in the narrower sense) is simply not a characteristic of the decision to commit suicide. But if this is true, then it remains open to question whether a person in the throes of despair, who is suffering greatly, can be said to be any more rational in his “choice” *not* to go through with suicide. On Devine's own grounds—that is, on the grounds which treat death as a potential object of a two-sided choice—it is never rational to choose life either.

This seemingly absurd result simply reflects Améry's contention that logic (of life) presupposes life. From within that logical framework, death presents itself as an absurdity, as does suicide as an action that ends in death. To “choose” life is to operate within the logic of life. To “choose” death is to reject the entire framework, that is, to die. Devine may be right that to commit suicide is to take a “leap in the dark”; what this establishes is the plain truth that in committing suicide, an individual gives up *everything*, even rationality. Conversely, the fundamental drive which compels most people to live is *prior* to rationality, since rational choosing only gets its footing within the logic of life, within the presupposition that life is worth living. And finally, most importantly, it is not logic which decides the fundamental issue of whether to live or die. Reasoning to either

conclusion only gets us so far, and it is quite another thing to actually act in accordance with what our reason tells us. Perhaps it is more often the case that we reason because we act so peculiarly, and seemingly without reason.

The Ethical Tension of Life

Suicide just *is* a fundamental break from reason. Hence, the confusion it inspires among the living. The act itself is resistant to criticism. The suicided person can no longer hear. The web of reasons and rationalizations that guide us through the world, that put a sense to our experiences and a meaning to our moods and whims—in all truth, *life itself*—is a fragile structure. When our entire life is brought into question, the logic of life runs out. In an attempt to get an objective view of the choosing involved in committing suicide, we have peered over the precipice of reason and have discovered not a contradiction but instead have run up against the tireless and unceasing void which encloses and impinges upon reason itself. Karsten Harries noted, “when I question the worth of my life, no wider context offers itself which allows me to place and thus to get a handle on what is at issue.”¹⁰⁹ Stepping too far back from ourselves, we risk losing our own footing on our most fundamental presupposition that life, at least most of the time, is worth living.

The manner in which suicide raises the question of the worth of life is shattering. Anxiety reveals a dilemma that penetrates the very core of our being—the tension between our human need for self-expression, a unique identity, as well as authentic meaning in our lives, and the world which runs counter to our desires, a society which

¹⁰⁹ Karsten Harries, “Questioning the Question of the Worth of Life,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 88.11 (Nov. 1991) 688.

demands normative obedience, and a death which strips all of it away. To survive within such tension demands an incredible effort from the conscious individual—at the very least, an incredible amount of repression. To remain in life is to embrace this tension. It is to commit oneself to the effort of carving out a space of meaning against all the odds. To exit from life is to dissolve it—not to beat the odds, but to fold. Free from all burdens, it would be absurd to think that anyone would commit suicide. And so again, we return to the belief that suicide is undertaken with reasons. But what kinds of reasons? In what circumstances? What we have tried to expose is an underlying existential backdrop which sets the stage for the peculiarly human concerns we harbor and demands we put upon our own existence which, if not met, if unreachable, may lead us to reject the entire foundation—our lives and our world—and to send ourselves out through suicide in a manner which expresses our deepest desires for meaning, identity, and possibility, our greatest anxieties and fears, and either the failure or the impossibility of striking a livable balance.

As suicide seems to raise, almost by necessity, an ethical concern, we must now devote attention to the ethical picture surrounding suicide. The advantage of our inquiry is that we are now equipped with a conceptual framework from which an informed and multi-dimensional moral landscape emerges naturally. Rather than attempting to apply a single ethical principle, we will pursue the moral issues of suicide from within the existential ontology already explored. It is a messy approach, resting more upon open-ended questioning and dialogical criticism than on the standard talk of right and wrong, praise and blame. But our intuition all along has been that a difficult problem does not beget a neatly packaged solution. What we need is not a moral *answer* to the problem of suicide, but instead a set of *moral considerations* that add depth to the ways in which we

think about suicide, in regard to our own lives and the lives of others. Returning again to Harries' insights, we find that

All philosophy is radical interpretation. The question shadowing all genuine philosophizing is: Where should I (we) be going? At the center of philosophy lies an ethical concern, born of the demand that human beings assume responsibility for their actions and the consequent refusal to rest content with maps and authorities that have come to be established, accepted, and taken for granted.¹¹⁰

Rather than implicitly assuming that the suicidal person is *a priori* mistaken in his consideration of suicide, we must take his despair and his intentions quite seriously. Just because we ourselves "could never imagine doing *that*" does not imply that the despairing person does not have every reason, and every imaginative capability that we in our own circumstances lack, to regard the ending of his life as the most obvious, perhaps the only, thing left to do.

¹¹⁰ Harries 690.

Chapter 6: The Threshold of Morality

“The temptation to despair is something we can hardly avoid, but there is a fruitfulness and a possibility of new life in the very threat of despair...Thus it happens that the man on the edge of suicide may in fact also be on the edge of a miracle of hope that saves him in spite of himself, pulls him out of the cramp. If he can understand what has happened, he may completely revise his idea of what constitutes “defeat” and what bestows freedom and fulfillment.” —Thomas Merton¹¹¹

Painting a Moral Picture of the World

Moral considerations serve two intertwined functions. First, they assist in guiding our interpretations and calculating our responses to the events we witness in the world. Second, they assist in guiding our interpretations and calculations of ourselves, from within our first person perspective. Our moral statements express how the world ought to be (based upon our reasoned considerations), and how we ought to be or act within it, what we ought to do in order to change the world (which includes ourselves) into what we believe it should be. Moral beliefs reflect what we think the ideal state of affairs would be—the happiest, the most productive, the world with the least suffering—and of course there are various ways in which this ideal state has been described and worked toward. The jury has been and probably always will be hung on the question of what way is best, whether it is a single moral principle or a potpourri of virtues which leads to the best life and world. As regards suicide, our moral discussion will consider suicide from within the tension between the individual’s moral demands on himself and the society’s moral demands on him—demands of individuality and integration.

¹¹¹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* 205.

From the societal perspective, the integrated citizen is invaluable. This person follows the rules set forth, and thus works for the good of the society. She is at once both a “team player” and “self-sufficient”—putting in as much as, if not more than, she takes away from the society. The integrated person moves with ease through society to the extent that she follows along with the rules and ideals in place. If she stands out, she does so in a way that is approved of socially, and will be rewarded for this success. Clearly then, it is not only the society which stands to benefit from this person, but the person herself stands to benefit from the society—to receive an education, protection, support in time of need, and so on. The demands of integration are such that if one refuses to play the games of society, then society reserves the right to castigate her, or even exclude her from the benefits it can provide.

On the other hand, from the individual perspective, there is a need to take care of our own person—we are invaluable to ourselves. From early on, the human being recognizes that his own needs are, from his viewpoint, very important to him—not necessarily more important than the needs of others, but important to him in a different way than others’ needs. In a basic sense, the demand of individuality is the necessity of distinguishing ourselves from the world, or in recognizing that distinction, so that we can set about satisfying whatever hunger or lack we perceive in ourselves. In order to go about satisfying these needs, in order to take care of ourselves, we need a certain amount of freedom to move through the world, and we need to be able to see ourselves as efficacious agents in the world. (Were we to sit about and wait for fate to provide, we would starve.) The need for freedom is a need for self-expression. We look about ourselves and see a world of possibilities; to pursue them is to express something about ourselves—what we value, what we take to be worthwhile, what we find *meaningful*.

The ideal state of affairs, then, would be the one in which the individual is able to pursue meaningful routes of self-expression (in satisfying his needs) while remaining sufficiently integrated in his society or world. At the two deviant extremes are the self-serving tyrant and the self-willed slave. The tyrant is willing to sacrifice the world for her own sake (not seeing that this would leave her with no kingdom), and the slave to society has willed himself into a condition of mindlessness, allowing the world around him to make all his decisions for him and passively accepting the possibilities handed over to him (not seeing that he himself has assumed this position in relation to his own life). To put it another way, on the one hand there is the desire to be god, and on the other a desire to be dirt. In each of us, we find, there is a little bit of both—we experience ourselves as both free to choose among a world of possibilities and as limited by our own circumstances to a contingent range of realizable options. What we want to find is that the viable options include something that we can take up as our own meaningful, self-expressive project.

Identifying our own meaningful possibilities involves both a clear understanding of where we want to be in the future as well as where we have *already* been. We inherit not only genetic traits but also value-traits: in the beginning we are taught what is valuable, what is needed, and even what can be done without. In learning these things we inherit a way of viewing the world through an evaluative lens—once perception begins interpreting, it becomes an evaluation of the world. To look at a stump and to say, “Well, that’s just a stump,” already contains a judgment: that it’s *just* a stump means that it doesn’t have any great significance, doesn’t mean anything important, gives no reason to stop and wonder over the stumpness of the stump. An environmentalist might look at the same stump and see it as a reminder of the deforestation of the jungles, the destruction of

nature, and of humanity's persistent urge to command the very force from which it springs. Mere perceiving is not enough to get us through the world; we must know what to do with what we perceive. The ways in which we learn to attach significance to this or that piece of the world dictates how we initially respond to it. One person looks upon belts as odd pieces of equipment, having been raised wearing suspenders instead. Another person looks at a belt and sees a potential weapon.

Clearly, there are various ways to see the world. Conceptual variance among cultures tells us this time and again. And in many cases there is no obviously right or value-neutral way of seeing. Wittgenstein's "duck -rabbit" makes this point quite clear.¹¹² The duck-rabbit is a simple sketch which, for the person who knows what both ducks and rabbits are, can be viewed in such a way that it resembles, at one moment, a duck, and at the next, a rabbit. Which one is it *really*? An objective answer eludes us, and it is doubtful that there is one. But if a person has no knowledge of ducks, then it would be surprising for him to look at the duck-rabbit and see the duck in it. (It would be surprising even for him to say, "A -ha, the old duck-rabbit trick.") If we taught him about ducks, took him to the park to feed them, then the alternate ways of seeing the duck-rabbit would become possible for the heretofore duck-ignorant person.

So, while our ability to interpret the world is ultimately limited by our conceptual capacities and our human ways of perceiving, there is a range of flexibility within the conceptual system and the possibility of novel and creative interpretations of the world. We are able to imagine fantastic possibilities, to put Mr. Potato Head's eyes where his mouth should be and to give him noses for ears. Have we done Mr. Potato Head any injustice? Did we do something *wrong*? All creative projects are informed by the

¹¹² Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* Part II, xi.

concepts and capacities we have, but then add a twist, a distortion, a modification which is intended to more accurately approximate a point, an idea, or an emotion—to hit more closely at some ‘truth.’ We scratch our chins and say, “Well, I never thought about it that way before,” or we shudder at the uncanniness of the depiction, realizing that it rings true with some experience we’ve had but had never expressed or thought expressible. Nietzsche seems to have had in mind creativity and its way of expanding our conceptual limits when he suggested that the world “may include infinite interpretations.”¹¹³ We do not create the world, but we do create our interpretation of it, and would like to do so in a way such that the two are indistinguishable. We want our interpretation to match the world as it really is, because being wrong would mean that we are deluded. Nietzsche, for one, worried that a lack of creativity, an inability to see the world from more than a single conceptual or moral viewpoint, could be dangerous. At its strongest, a single truth houses us within its fortress, protects us, but should that truth come into question—should our interpretation be revealed as false—then we are suddenly exposed to an alien and incomprehensible world. Unable to pare the ‘real’ world away from our interpretation—unable to stop seeing things the way we always have but at the same time no longer able to trust this interpretation, we find ourselves unsure what is fact and what is fiction. On the evaluative level, this difficulty results in our not knowing what matters, what doesn’t, and why. Finding that prior to this foundation-shattering event, we were beholden to a single (mistaken) picture of ourselves and our world, we are now beholden to the picture of our own beholdenness as wrong. We can become trapped by our own alienation.

But at the same time, it seems that we can become trapped by the world, too. Humans get sick, get into accidents, get in over their heads and out of their depth—we

¹¹³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §374.

cause and invite trouble for ourselves; we put ourselves at risk in order to move forward in our lives. We all gamble a bit (or a lot) in pursuing our own possibilities. The question of whether to commit suicide—or of what to say, morally, about someone who has—rests completely upon how we characterize and evaluate the entire situation surrounding the decision. The demands of both integration and individuality come into play here, as well as the fact (discussed in Chapter Three) that we recognize others and ourselves as moral agents in the world—as beings which, because we are free, are thus responsible for our actions. In Chapter One, the question was raised as to whether ascribing suicide to mental illness gives us a complete picture of suicide and the concerns it raises. The suspicion is that this ascription has served to excommunicate suicide from the philosophical/moral realm, to insist that any *normal* person would never do such a thing, and that if we take the suicidal person's motives or reasons seriously, it is only for the covert operation of preventing that person's suicide. Such a position is thus dogmatic and morally evasive; it resists raising the fundamental question, "Is life worth living," or else supposes that there is only one possible answer, no matter what the circumstances may be. A comment made by Laura Foster regarding her father's (Vincent W. Foster, Jr.) suicide in 1995 straightforwardly admits the moral evasiveness the mental illness explanation allows: "It's a whole lot easier seeing him as sick [depressed] and having a chemical imbalance than to feel 'Oh, my God, he did this and he knew what he was doing.' It's easier to say it wasn't his fault."¹¹⁴ It is unfortunate how much relief can be found in lying to ourselves, and unfortunate that so many people seem prepared to accept the quick fix at any cost. One might wonder whether the 'cure' (mental illness) in such cases is worse than the 'disease' (being a responsible agent). The mental illness explanation may indeed give an

¹¹⁴ P.J. Boyer, "Life after Vince," *The New Yorker* 71.27 (11 September 1995) 66-67.

answer to the problem, but at the cost of revoking human agency. It covers up the problem in a manner that suppresses a deeper concern about our control over our own lives and our ability to effect change in ourselves and the world. And, as we have said many times, it seems probable that positing a mental illness does not present a clear or complete picture of the circumstances that motivate suicide.

Despair—Fact or Fiction?

In the foregoing discussion of despair, a key tension arises out of the despairer's recognition of his own inauthenticity and his need for an authentic identity, a real sense of self. Kierkegaard suggested that the despairer is in despair precisely over his inability to get rid of himself, to become a wholly different person. Thus, seeing himself unable to attain the ideal, and unable to tolerate the present character of his existence, suicide seems to be the only way to resolve the tension if his condition becomes sufficiently unbearable. Suicide does not solve the existential problem, as Sartre reminds us, but is a means of dissolving both the stage and the actor through which the tension occurs. From a moral standpoint, we should ask (1) whether the existential picture is itself correct, and (2) if so, whether the despairer has correctly interpreted or grasped his situation—that is, whether suicide is motivated by truly unbearable suffering (or the imminent threat of such suffering), or rather by the despairer's inability to see any other state of affairs besides unbearable suffering as a possibility. because the very despair into which he has plummeted has constricted his capacity to imagine other possibilities for his life.

The first question is a meta-ethical question: Does the existential picture characterize our lives (or at least, our despair) in such a way that the project of living is doomed to failure? If humans are fundamentally inauthentic, and if anxiety calls us to

make our lives authentic, then doesn't the problem reduce to an ontological paradox that humans are such that they want what they *just can't have*? To suggest that human existence is groundless seems to preclude the possibility of discovering a firm truth, a guiding light to which we might cling in order to get ourselves out of despair. There has been no shortage of critics who believe that existential phenomenology is doomed because it's always kicking away the ladder of meaning, always bordering on a moral nihilism in which any moral assertion turns out to be optional, empty, or not grounded in anything deeper than impulse. Since human existence is in some sense *without direction* (in a teleological sense), such a picture of human beings seems to admit a permissive moral view of suicide—not because suicide is ever the right thing to do, but rather because there is nothing the existential phenomenologist can say as to why suicide is wrong, or misguided. We are thrown into the world, we inherit a set of concepts for interpreting the world, and so if x seems true, then so be it. If life seems unbearable, then end it. Who are we to begrudge the person who moves to take a final stand of control over his own misery?

This is a hopelessly oversimple picture for a number of reasons. First, it is mistaken to conclude that if human existence is groundless and if meaning is always fundamentally unstable, that moral nihilism (or *laissez-faire* moral permissiveness) necessarily follows. Rather than directly defending this claim, we shall try to show in the remainder of this inquiry that the ontological picture offered through an existentialist phenomenology *can* develop a system of moral critique. Second, this oversimple picture overlooks the fundamental concern of existentialist thought: namely, that we are trying to *understand* human existence. The goal is not to undermine human activity or to throw out meaningfulness altogether. Furthermore, the existentialist picture is not “suicide-friendly”

for the reason that the existential concern with understanding life presupposes a rather strong commitment to living (in order to figure itself out). The fair-weather optimists of the world have systematically failed to see that beneath the painful brooding of a Kierkegaard or a Nietzsche there is an optimism driving their philosophies, a belief that something *better* can be said about human existence rather than resorting to a kind of dogmatism that takes refuge in defunct eternal truths. They are essentially making the same case as Wittgenstein does when he criticizes the tendency to become subsumed by or over-committed to a certain theoretical picture: “A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”¹¹⁵ The warning contained is straightforward: take caution before you allow yourself to be seduced into a particular way of looking at the world, since there might well be other ways of proceeding.

To address the apparent inauthentic/authentic paradox, we can expand on what we have already noted about inauthenticity—namely, that on an ontological level, inauthenticity is *not evaluative*, but is constitutive of what it is to be a human being, born into a world (of things) and a society (of concepts and institutions) not of one’s own making. The seeming paradox arises out of a misconstruing of inauthenticity which states that in order to become authentic, one must *break completely* from the inauthentic structure. But plainly, this is not possible, or at least, it’s difficult to imagine how one would even begin doing this—invent a new (private) language, establish one’s own (private) normative code, and so on and so forth into a realm of pure solipsism? Authenticity thus construed is a process of excluding oneself from the given world, a process of boxing oneself into a world of pure conceptual privacy. But to carry out this

¹¹⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §115.

project is just another way of succumbing to the despair outlined by Kierkegaard—it is to attempt to become something other than oneself; it is striving to become *inhuman* (not super-human).

Instead of this solipsistic picture, which seems wrong-headed, authenticity might be understood as *taking a certain stance towards one's own life*, to face up to the 'terrible truths' anxiety throws in our face. For Heidegger, the key appears to be facing up to the fact of one's own finitude and death rather than to repress these constituent elements of our being, to deny or ignore death because it makes us anxious, or to deny our thrown nature (into the world) because this betrays a limitedness to our freedom. An authentic appropriation of one's own self, then, would be to allow these truths about our being *inform* and *shape* the ways that we act and live, rather than fleeing from these truths by constructing (or complacently accepting) a fantastic interpretation of reality which allows us to repress the truth about our lives. Thus, facing up to that by which anxiety terrorizes us is, for Heidegger, supposed to help *free* us from the grip of anxiety. Accepting the fact of our own death is supposed to allow us to live, in a sense, *toward* that death—to be somehow *at ease* with death—rather than framing our lives and our worldviews in *opposition* to death, which would be to live in denial, since opposing our own death is bound to fail.

This brief apologia for the existentialist picture of the human being contains the beginnings of an answer to the second moral question: Has the despairer correctly interpreted or grasped his situation? It is not enough to simply say that somewhere within the despairing person is a deep desire to live..if only something were different. Szasz observes that, "We could, if we wanted to, attribute a nonsuicidal motive to every case of

suicide, such as wanting to avoid physical pain or a painful life situation.”¹¹⁶ Szasz is probably being more generous than he needs to be, for it’s not that we *could* attribute a nonsuicidal motive, but that, if we want to understand the motivation for suicide, that we *should* both attribute and seek to *make clear* what exactly that motive is, and what the reasons are behind it—whether conscious or unconscious.

Despair itself is very real—of that there is no doubt. But equally certain is that despair, and the anxiety upon which it is founded, can be covered up and ignored. One of the ways to cope with anxiety is to put it off. This refusal to face up to anxiety can itself lead to a catastrophe, a buildup of pressure which, when it can no longer be contained or repressed, sends the individual into a spiral. Similarly, our commitments and projects in the world—the things we choose to engage in and the meanings we hold as important—can lead us into a conceptual rigidity such that when our projects break down, our life, too, appears to have broken down and lost all of its meaning.

To commit suicide is to insist that there is no other *meaningful* way of existing—that a continued existence would lack all possibility of worthwhile meaning is what is (potentially) unbearable. Thus, the terminally ill man who decides to take his own life insists that to remain living while the cancer wreaks havoc on his body, causing so much pain that every breath is difficult, would be too much to endure because he would not be able, in a sense, to *live* his life anymore. He would only be merely existing, and the space of his life would be a meaningless void in which his consciousness could engage in nothing but pure terror and agony. The heartbroken lover, in committing suicide, insists that to live on in the absence of (the lost) love would be horrible, because love remains to be, even though she now lacks a reciprocal relationship in which to express it, a central

¹¹⁶ Szasz, *Fatal Freedom* 6.

part of her existence. To live without that relationship into which she had poured so much of herself would be to exist in meaninglessness. And how many heartbroken lovers have dried their tears just long enough to drive themselves to a bar instead, in order to pursue the artificial warmth and non-functioning brain that a few rounds of drinks will secure?— anything to silence the dreadful anxiety of being alone, of facing oneself laid bare, stripped down to a core that doesn't (and never did) include the person who found it "better" to break things off. Catastrophe and loss remind us that, at bottom, we are alone in the world—that no matter what we share with others, the "connections" we feel, the public lives we lead, we remain, from our own self-conscious perspective, alone with our thoughts, stuck inside the same conscious flow from beginning to end. Our aloneness is constituted by the very nature of consciousness, and when the reminder comes in these disruptive ways, it is ugly. We are brought, or more appropriately, dragged and thrown, back to that basic truth that each of our lives is our own, that we own our actions, and that we are consequently responsible for our engagements and projects.

But when the heartbroken lover despairs of finding any other fruitful way of expressing herself and of making her life meaningful now that her relationship has ended, we might ask: what is being left out of this self-assessment? What other projects are being ignored in order for her to feel the sorrow that seems appropriate at this moment? And to what degree has the lover herself convinced herself that this now-defunct relationship is the only way in which her life could be "authentic," meaningful? Compared to the circumstances of the terminally ill man, at least this much seems clear about the heartbroken lover—life itself will go on, and with it, new possibilities may reveal themselves. Of course, the lover will have to *recognize* them as possibilities, will have to see that, although the meaning of her life may have suffered a severe blow in the

break-up, even though the relationship, in a sense, *died*, this does not necessitate her own “existential death.” Farber suggests that despair seems to compel the individual into an interpretation of her situation which sets her up for impending failure:

In some sense the despairer moves hazardously, despite distractions and entrenchment, toward a tragic, often excessively tragic, position in regard to the inauthentic in his life and in his relations with others. In other words, through his objectifications he may arrive at an extreme and radical concern over the very center of his being, creating in this way an abyss too wide and too deep for easy bridging.¹¹⁷

It is not so much an abyss between the authentic and the inauthentic self—at least, this is only the terminology we have employed to carve out a distinction between the publicly handed-over constitution of the self (through language, norms, and traditions) and the possibility of staking out a personal claim on our own life, of developing an informed, or in some way transparent relationship with the commitments which make our lives meaningful. Rather, the abyss spans between the despairer’s broken-up, disrupted world of meaning, and the possibilities still available in the world which she has yet to consider. The heartbroken lover refuses to look at another man and to consider him as a potential partner; she might even feel guilty if she does, believing that she is not being true to herself, and true to a love which no longer exists except in her own mind, in her past. The tighter she clings to this relationship which can no longer confer a present meaning on her life—not because it is past, but because she experiences the memory as a *lack* of present meaning—the deeper her clinging will throw her into despair.

The upshot of these considerations is that suicide, at least in the capacity that we are considering it, is motivated by a rigidity in the despairer’s ability to take his own possibilities into account, or, in what is probably the rarer case, by a realization that one’s

¹¹⁷ Farber 138.

meaningful possibilities really have been cut off—by illness, by being taken captive by the enemy, or perhaps even by one’s own engagement in a project in which the society prohibits resignation or escape. Without some reason, some difficult situation provoking the thought of suicide, it seems that no one would simply opt to end her own life. As Camus observed, “In a man’s attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world..We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking.”¹¹⁸ But in getting into the ‘habit of living,’ we may acquire ways of thinking about ourselves and what is possible in our lives which serves to box us in, to limit us in both our living and our thinking. When our intricately carved, safe corner of the world is ruined or brought into question, despair may be the end result if we are unable to see past the limiting nature of our own commitments. The meanings we weave are a delicate thread, and since we put so much of ourselves into the commitments through which we derive meaning, this thread makes human life fragile, insofar as the psychological underpinnings of our lives are what make them peculiarly, painfully *human*.

Of course, rigidity in thought is not unique to the despairer. What distinguishes the despairing person is that rigidity—unbending commitment to a single picture of oneself, life, and possibility—has just about reached its breaking point (from inside the individual perspective—from the outside, we often make the casual assessment that ‘it’s not so bad’). Though the experience itself is excruciating, at least Thomas Merton was insightful enough to see the potential for a positive outgrowth from despair. Because suicide is marked by a sense that the act is existentially *necessary*, Merton suggests that if a person can see that the interpretation of his own life, which he himself has accepted as constituting his meaning, is not the ultimate or only possibility for human existence, then

¹¹⁸ Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” 8.

despair can be broken through by the understanding that it is in fact possible (although perhaps quite difficult) to find other ways to make life meaningful, and thus, that suicide is not so “he cessary” as it might seem from within despair. He writes:

The temptation to despair is something we can hardly avoid, but there is a fruitfulness and a possibility of new life in the very threat of despair. It forces us to choose. And we will *always* have the strength to choose life, unless we are so ill and so destroyed that we are no longer ourselves at all. The real pity and sin of suicide is the *needless* and arbitrary refusal of this last gift and possibility: the chance to prefer life even in defeat—a refusal of this *hope precisely because* the chance and the hope come to us *not from ourselves*. Thus it happens that the man on the edge of suicide may in fact also be on the edge of a miracle of hope that saves him in spite of himself, pulls him out of the cramp. If he can understand what has happened, he may completely revise his idea of what constitutes “defeat” and what bestows freedom and fulfillment. And he may begin to live as another person—as one who has the humility to accept gifts which come to him on conditions he cannot foresee or determine, which come to him from an unknown source, and which are in no way subject to his own imperious demand.

Yet this is no strange supernatural state: it is simply the ordinary way of human existence!¹¹⁹

Merton is in effect reminding us that we cannot get away from ourselves, and consequently, cannot get away from the world in which possibilities are made available to us. We can attempt to shield ourselves from the world, curse our society for being culturally degraded, curse our parents for not understanding us, curse our lovers for leaving us, and so on, and yet to despair on any of these bases is to despair precisely on the terms that we picked up from the world we curse—we are not suddenly on the “outside” and seeing our world in all its misery, and the misery it causes us, and then electing never to return to the world. The oddity of all societies is that they produce their own critics, but this is, perhaps, the one cultural safeguard against running utterly afoul. On Merton’s account, the breaking-out of despair is not the same as what Camus has

¹¹⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* 205-206.

characterized as the ‘revolt against the absurd’¹²⁰; rather, Merton’s ‘refusal’ is the refusal to play out one’s dichotomous thinking to its bitter conclusion, but instead to allow oneself to see other possibilities for living, other ways of making life meaningful, to look at other potential lovers without guilt, to look at a pink slip as an opportunity (albeit an inconvenient one) to pursue some other career or employer—essentially, to refuse to despair, since the outcome of remaining in despair is crippling, and ultimately, fatal.

Of course, this is easier said than done, especially when the society itself tends to foster a degree of rigidity in thought—by way of its own rules and traditions, and its praise of stability, in both one’s values and material existence. In our own culture, suicide is generally regarded as or associated with a failure—a failure to fulfill one’s duties, to function “normally,” or to “fit i n” and “be understood” by others —that is, a failure to assimilate. Thus, this association is part of the cultural picture that we all learn from the get-go. We learn that failures commit suicide. And so, when we ourselves reach a point of anxiety or despair over ourselves, if we experience this as a result of some perceived failure or setback in our lives, the association between our own situation and the applicability of suicide as a response to the problem has already been set in place. But this is not simply a question of socialization, but also one of adaptability. Anxiety calls upon the individual to perform a reevaluation of his own life, and to adjust himself accordingly. What must be discovered is some significant project which would instill meaning and worth in this person’s life. What we see in the despairing individual is an inability to perform this reevaluation due to an inflexibility in his thinking—the meanings through which he has experienced his life as worthwhile are the only ones he has ever known, and once the significance of his life has been thrown into jeopardy, it appears as

¹²⁰ In “The Myth of Sisyphus.” See, for example, 53 -55.

if his own anxiety is requiring that he recreate himself *ex nihilo*. What he has learned from society has failed to sustain him, and so now, he must, he believes, go it alone. This is a terrifying task, and not at all a conceivably possible one, since the framework rests upon a solipsistic interpretation of one's life. If a person manages to "go it alone" and to construct a world for himself, there is no guarantee that he isn't simply sketching a delusion for himself, a fictionalized world, accessible only to himself, in which, as Wittgenstein says, "[he has] no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to [him] is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'."¹²¹ It has often been observed that neuroses function as coping mechanisms—the neurotic is able to frame the world, and to explain it, in terms of an invented, mythical framework. But clearly, to develop a neurosis is not the answer we would like to give to our despair, since the neurotic move represents a fleeing from reality just as much as ignoring anxiety represents a refusal to face up to one's problematic situation.

That said, there is something right about the neurotic strategy—namely, the creative effort it requires.¹²² The key, then, is that the creative reinterpretation of oneself, possibilities, and world, must not be a merely "private" effort, but must be communicable to others. The defiant claim, "I don't have to justify myself to you!" is not only wrong-headed, but also dangerous, because it attempts to immunize oneself from criticism. What this means for the despairer is that breaking out of despair does not need to (and cannot) proceed *ex nihilo* but must rather take the form of a dialectical reexamination of meaning and possibility. The heartbroken lover must reevaluate her idea of love, perhaps draw a distinction between what is *ideal* and what is *humanly* possible, and to take into

¹²¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §258.

¹²² Jonathan Lear discusses coping as a product of neurosis in Chapter Three of his book *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000).

consideration that ideals are posited as way to order one's life, not to be reached; she might ask herself whether she has mistaken a goal for an ideal, and if she has, then she might see that even though the goal (say, of sustaining her broken-up relationship) has not been met, there may yet be other goals through which she can pursue the ideal love. Tolstoy, who was at one point convinced that the only thing keeping him from suicide was his own weakness, concluded that only religious faith could save him from despair. But even then, after some time, despair threatened to return. He found that "theology was itself destroying what it ought to produce," namely love, and that as he was "seeking a faith, the power of life," "they are seeking the best way to fulfill in the eyes of men certain human obligations. And fulfilling these human affairs they fulfill them in a human way." Even in that which he believed would save him from himself, alongside the truth he sensed in religion, "it is also certain that there is falsehood in it, and I must find what is true and what is false, and must disentangle the one from the other."¹²³ Ideals, it might seem, are a dime a dozen, and the paths through which they are pursued innumerable. Tolstoy saw that the dialectic, the questioning and interpretation (or disentangling) is an unceasing activity. The moment at which one grows complacent with regard to the meaning of his own life is the exact moment when it becomes most delicate. The way out of despair, if circumstances allow it at all, is to see not that one must change *completely*—we never let our entire self or world go, cannot do so—but that change, adjustment, reevaluation, and reinterpretation are *possible*. Life is never fixed: that is the significance of contingency, and is the one opportunity that a life—even a finite one—experienced as one's own, as free, affords us. Although this freedom to act and create is continually limited from within (by our choosing) and without (by the limits of society,

¹²³ Leo Tolstoy, *My Confession*, trans. Leo Wiener (New York: Willey Book Co., 1904) Chapters 15-16.

the world, and our place in it), a limit is not tantamount to defeat—it only marks off the space from within which the expression of freedom is possible. What Kirilov failed to see is that while suicide may be a terrifying expression of freedom, it is at the same time a resignation. Freedom cannot be secured by suicide, but only used up. This does not show any contradiction in suicide itself; it is just the fact of the matter.

The Ground Below

If there is any further lesson to be learned from Améry's notion of the "logic of life," it is that the moral judgments made about suicide are not for the dead but rather for the living. If we curse the dead, it is only to instill fear in the living, to warn those around us that if they act in the same manner, then they, too, will be cursed by us. But what would it be to curse, or condemn, the person who commits suicide? If we accept a purely neuro-biological explanation of suicide—conceive of it as a sickness—then the condemnation turns out to be empty; it is as if we were condemning a man for catching a cold. (Perhaps he should have worn a heavier jacket?) On the other hand, taking a purely sociological view of suicide—seeing it as a function of a person's demographic and cultural situation—again empties condemnation of its worth; what else could she do in that circumstance, for the statistics tell us that...? It is no lie that the statistics and the causal explanations capture most of the cases from their objective, outsider perspectives, but what do they tell us, except that most people with a given diagnosis tend with regularity to carry out and/or end their lives according to the standard cultural values and explanations? It is those very values and explanations which the person committing suicide can no longer accept—the message he leaves us with is that, in his situation, those values, ideals, and codes of ethics *no longer allow him to live*; he has failed to find a way

to apply our ‘rules’ of living to his own life, or has found that those rules entail that he must die. (Consider, for example, the high regard for *hara-kiri* in traditional Japanese culture.) Sidney Jourard remarked on the Western culture of forty years ago that,

[T]ypically, we train people to an impoverished imagination, to a banal image of their possibilities, and to conventional ways to attach meaning. We train people to repress their experience of freedom and to replace it with the conviction that in certain situations they ‘have no choice.’ Our way of socializing is effective at producing a social system that has an immense productive output and much material wealth, but at the cost of alienating most of us from the experience of our own possibilities—including the possibility of reinventing ourselves and reconstruing our situations of felt entrapment.¹²⁴

The suspicion that suicide somehow implicates us, too, or the society at large, arouses moral outrage and guilt, and these reactions are most easily channeled into a condemnation of the individual—after all, the corpse gives us something to focus on which won’t strike back as we say of it whatever is necessary in order to bolster our own will to live, in the face of a willed death. We locate a sickness in the individual, which means that it wasn’t *our* fault, and just in case he was still in control of his actions, we add that, anyway, what he did was wrong. On top of that, we say further that the external circumstances all conspired to constitute the necessary conditions, sociologically, for suicide to occur—but we as members of society are not specifically to blame, since society is larger than the sum of its parts; it is simply a horrible thing that happened, beyond anyone’s control. But again, just in case this person knew what he was up to (even though we just said he wasn’t in control, in more ways than one), it was wrong, atrocious, a sin against society (the very society we just said “caused” it to happen). If one were out contradiction-hunting, she would fare better by looking at the mess of our

¹²⁴ Jourard 136.

confused reaction to suicide, and the resultant claims that get mixed together, than to look at the suicide itself.

It *often seems as if* suicide is wrong because we ourselves still want to live—or that it is wrong in the abstract. But a culture with a divorce rate over fifty percent should understand what it is for an ideal or an abstract principle to fail. To put it another way: if suicide is “wrong,” this is only because “wrong” is our shorthand (or dogmatic, or mystical) way of saying that we don’t in general approve of it. Approval is the heart of morality. What this potentially misses, of course, is that the despairing person on the brink of suicide may no longer want approval, or at least, his willingness to end his own life suggests that it doesn’t ultimately matter to him anymore.¹²⁵ The difference between suicide and other forms of so-called “deviant behavior” is that the person who commits suicide undermines the framework—the form of life—in which moral criticism of his act has any weight. Contrasting this with say, the serial killer or the pedophile brings out the distinction. Although the killer and the pedophile are certainly ‘on the fringe’ of society, their deviant acts do not *remove* them completely from our form of life, our society. Remaining within the societal framework, they are subject to criticism (and moral and legal action).

¹²⁵ Conversely, if societal values have pressured the person into committing suicide, then this suggests that his own desire to live has been trumped by the demands heaped upon him (such as in the case of *hara-kiri*). These statements are not intended to imply that the *person* who is contemplating suicide is somehow ‘beyond the pale’ of our moral criticism; rather the point is that if someone claims that suicide is “wrong,” it seems that there need to be reasons, probably not universally applicable, which address the particular situation of a particular case, perhaps raising issues that the despairing person has failed to consider from her cramped perspective. Barry Stroud and Ed Minar worried that the claim here was too strong, that for some reason, the suicidal person is immune from standard moral criticism; this is not the intended point, only that, especially for the person who engages with the suicidal person, it is important to note that a universal moral argument against suicide, or inarticulate hand-waving, seem unlikely candidates for convincing the person to reevaluate his or her situation.

This brings us to a final moral consideration, for the despairing person who has not yet committed suicide is not in the same position as the deceased. That is, she is still ‘on the fringe’ of our form of life. And like these other forms of deviant behavior, it can be argued that suicide does not merely affect the life of the despairing individual, but extends also to the lives of others—family, friends, colleagues, and even entire cultures.¹²⁶ Even if the suicide is not violating a responsibility he has toward his own life, it may be argued that he is violating responsibilities he has in regard to the lives of others. It is one thing to commit suicide, and quite another to ruin everybody else’s life, too. Thus, our moral reaction to a person who takes her own life in a private, solitary setting may be quite different than in the case of the person who makes a public scene of himself—draws a crowd as he paces the ledge of a high-rise building before jumping—and different, too, from the case of a person who “goes postal” and murders others before taking his own life. What we disapprove of primarily in the last case is murder, in the middle case, the public disturbance. But in the first case? Well, what did this person have to live for? And what responsibilities have been neglected?

Let us return to Edna Pontellier to fill out the story. Edna had a good life, albeit one limited to traditional roles. She was a wife and a mother. The “awakening” she experiences is that her traditional role is preventing her from expressing certain needs of her own—her artistic aspirations, her freedom to break out of her role. She realizes that her life has been put on hold for her children—that *they are* her life, and this suggests that she has no life of her own, no separate identity from the roles specified by the tradition. Attempting to break from these roles through a series of rebellions (moving out of her

¹²⁶ The suggestion here is not that suicide *is* necessarily deviant, but that it is possible to view it in this way in certain cases.

husband's home, having an affair), her awakening, and the means through which she acts on it, set her up for despair. Her rebellious life is failing; her lover, she realizes, will one day refuse her, and she can find no societal approval for what she is doing. On the other hand, a return to her old life and roles, if permitted, would lead again to the same frustrations—she herself cannot authentically return to the tradition. We have already noted that she had claimed “that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children.” Edna is in effect denying any ultimate duty to her children; she is not willing to give up her own identity (an identity that is more than her mother-role) in order to take care of her children. But the pressure, it seems, is too much. The demand that she accept this role, and the demands she places on herself which directly counter this societal demand, create an irresolvable tension, and she drowns. Chopin clearly understood the force of the drowning metaphor, and that what drowns Edna is not the water itself, but the gulf between her own demands and those of her society.

If Edna did commit suicide, which we assume she did, was it wrong of her to do so? This is essentially a misdirected question, because it is clear that even if she did live—if she were coerced or institutionalized, she would still be failing to carry out the responsibilities of motherhood. She would be a mother in name and blood, but nothing more. Thus, what is “wrong” about Edna's actions is not the suicide itself, but her manner of coping with her despair *even before suicide presented itself as the last possibility of her life*—as the possibility of destroying the tension by destroying herself and the world of her perspective.

Edna's dilemma brings out something of great concern to those who seek to rehabilitate the despairer. It is not enough to coerce the individual back into life—if

'suicide prevention' were to stop there, it would be unclear what real purpose it served, for there is nothing to block the person from falling immediately back into despair (or, as soon as the drugs wear off). What Edna seemed to lack was the possibility for a radical reinterpretation of the possibilities of motherhood. She herself realizes that her refusal to accept her duty to her children is reprehensible, and this, combined with the inability to find it in herself to accept this role, leads her to see suicide as the only way out. To remain living, since she would not (could not?) accept the mother-role, would entail punishment or institutionalization (which are to some degree the same). But then her suicide, too, comes off as a form of punishment: the punishment of not being able to lead an authentic life.

The demands of integration do not have to amount to inauthentic roles which oppose the demands of the individual. Rather, what should be clear is that integration contains within it an authentic ideal, or the possibility for authentic self-expression: the roles in a society must *allow* for self-expression, interpretation, and redefinition. Self-expression *is* the process of interpretation and redefinition, and of owning the role rather than being owned *by* it. Jourard's point is that if every role is scripted in a way that prohibits *ad libbing* at times, if the roles only work out if they are unbending, then we set ourselves up as conscious beings to experience our lives in the manner of Artaud: we follow our part to its conclusion, and all we get in return is the ability to watch our lives pass before our eyes, to see how it all plays out. If we can't change anything, then a certain section of the society will indeed experience their lives as a 'theater of cruelty' (the sick, the poor, the schizophrenic). If we can't change anything, if we can't modify the role, or scream out "CUT!" at the top of our lungs, then self-consciousness is torture.

The rehabilitation of the despairer, then, unless it condescends to mere cultural brainwashing and existential lobotomy, must proceed as a lesson in rebellion. This does not mean that the despairer must set about breaking all the rules. That is not rebellion; what the rebel seeks is not anarchy, but *change*. This requires furthermore a cultivation of creativity, for the person who has only one way of interpreting his life and possibilities will have nothing else to look toward if anxiety calls into question the worth of his narrowly interpreted life. Creativity involves first, the ability to see a range of possibilities, and second, the ability to implement a path toward pursuing some of those possibilities. This is to make one's life a *project* rather than a mere expression of a predefined role. The function of the role, then, is to guide the individual; the role itself cannot solve all the problems or contingencies of actual life.

These considerations cannot amount to moral rule for judging suicide; the point is to resist swift judgment. For suicide, by calling into question the entire framework and form of life, demands much more than that. It expresses the flaws in a society or its values, the fragility of the individual in the face of despair, and the danger of univocal interpretations of existence and possibility. To judge a suicide is to judge the entire surrounding circumstances of a particular individual in a specific world. The guilt, outrage, and anxiety that suicide can spur in our reaction to it tells us that we are not considering a single event, isolated from its underpinnings, but are confronted with a question that raises doubts about *our* world and *our* form of life. It shows us that despair is a possibility which cannot be disposed of by avoidance or dogmatic condemnation. The nature of suicide suggests that life cannot be lived without great risk by seeking solace within rigid ways of regarding ourselves and our possibilities, and that life, if it is to see past the potential for despair, must invest in creative and novel routes for self-

interpretation and understanding. If there is any benefit in despair and the possibility of suicide it is this: that finding ourselves at the edge of reason and understanding, we come to a place where both terror and opportunity abound. The terror is our responsibility for our lives and the challenge to invest our lives with a significance and meaning, when at the same time we see that significance and meaning are not immune to doubt. The opportunity is that we might find significance and meaning that allow us to live in more fruitful, open-ended, and dialectical ways than the predefined roles and paths handed over to us—and at times, forced upon us—which can only make us “happy” so long as we don’t reflect on how much of ourselves we have sacrificed in order to repress the natural anxiety of human existence. The possibility of suicide is a product of the “terrible” freedom we possess, and that we exercise this freedom within the tension of a finite time and space, and are held accountable for what we do. The actuality of suicide is a dreadful silence. In this silence is a call, a demand, that the living reconsider the conditions that must be met in order for life to be worth living—and not just to think, but to *act*, to do what we can in making our imagined possibilities a livable, lived reality.

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