Suicide is NOT Painless

A personal perspective by Denis Joe March 2013

The man who kills a man, kills a man. The man who kills himself, kills all men. As far as he is concerned he wipes out the world.

G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest — whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards.

Albert Camus, *The Myth Of Sisyphus*

About 10 years ago, while I underwent a personal crisis, largely of my own making, my partner at the time alerted the police to her suspicion that I was suicidal. After wandering around town for some time, I was picked up under the Mental Health Act and taken to Clatterbridge hospital where I was kept in overnight until I could be seen by a mental health team. I was told by the psychiatrist that if I was intent on committing suicide then there was nothing they could do, and for some reason I was escorted off the hospital grounds by security.

I wandered around for most of the day and ending it all was the only thing I was concerned with. In my mid-forties I had spent too much of the previous decades drinking heavily, thinking nothing of knocking back one bottle of vodka (the cheapest and quickest way to get drunk) after another - itself a rather drawn-out suicide. My partner had had enough and ‘bin-bagged’ me, so I had nowhere to go.

Once evening came and it was getting dark, knowing that fewer people would be catching a train I took myself to the nearest station, walked to the end of the platform and further down the track, to wait for the next train to come along. Though I had money, I didn’t have anything to drink so I was clear-headed in my purpose. When the train did come along I stood in front of it. The only thing I can remember before the impact was seeing the driver and noting that he was wearing glasses.

This was not the first time I had attempted suicide. It had become almost a knee-jerk reaction to any personal crisis I could not (or would not) handle. I had taken overdoses, slashed my arms and one time I took the car to an isolated spot. I had bought a hose pipe and made sure the car had a full tank of petrol. I was aware that I would find it difficult to asphyxiate myself so I also had four cans of Special Brew to hand to send me off to sleep. As it happened, the spot I had chosen was not as isolated as I had hoped and I was ‘rescued’ by police and taken to hospital. The funny thing was that what I thought would aid my departure was the very reason why I did not succeed. A nurse told me that I was "very lucky" that the alcohol slowed down my breathing and may well have ensured that I didn’t breathe in enough carbon monoxide.

When I awoke in hospital after my last attempt, I was wracked with disappointment at, once again, not succeeding. My partner was at my bedside and I also realised that the lower part of my leg was missing. But neither this, nor the fact that my partner was there, dislodged my sense of frustration at failing to kill myself. In fact it took a year or so for me to recover my wits and look back on that act (and previous attempts) to see them for what they really were: actions of a profoundly arrogant and selfish nature. I had felt no remorse about the suffering I had put my family and friends through. I never thought about the inconvenience I had caused to the train passengers nor the anguish I may put the train driver through. I cared little about the time and energy that the emergency services had put in to rescuing me, nor the amount of resources taken up across the National Health Service in order to get me back on my feet, well, foot. I even found it strange when, months after my release from hospital, representatives from British Rail visited to assure me that I would not be prosecuted for trespass. “Why should they prosecute poor old me?” was my only thought on the matter.

What really began to annoy me was other people’s reactions to what I had done. I was seen as being brave for standing in front of an oncoming train. There was actually nothing brave about it. Yes, it spoke of a determination and a commitment to carrying out the deed, but it also suggested a lack of commitment to my family and friends. It was a lazy way of finding a solution to deal with the problems I was facing. It was also cowardly, because I was aware that others would be ‘held responsible’ for my action. And it was this, more than anything else, that led me to question myself in particular and to form, within myself, a strong commitment to life in general.

In the same way that devout Catholics believe in the sanctity of life, my political views should have suggested a commitment to living. After all, the philosophies that that shape ideology arise from ideas about how best to take mankind forward, regardless of whether those views can be seen as wrong-headed. That I was a Marxist, and recognised that Marxism evolved out of the greatest period of human understanding, the Enlightenment, did not impinge on my personal thinking about the value of my own life. Of course, suicides have their own rationale and people have killed themselves for reasons as bizarre as being bored. I vaguely recall reading that suicide, amongst rank and file Bolsheviks rose after the Soviets seized power in 1917, suggesting that some members saw their role as fighters for the Russian Revolution as fulfilled, that they had served their purpose.

There are those who end their life in order for others to live. These acts of self-sacrifice are referred to as ***altruistic suicide***. A recent story in **The Times** of the death of a British soldier in Afghanistan, who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for sacrificing himself in order to help his comrades, drew a response that this wasn't worth committing suicide for. But I find it hard to see this, or any self-sacrifice as suicide. In the same way that we have a legal category of 'justifiable homicide', that reflects the occasional necessity to kill someone, we do not see such actions as 'murder'. Likewise, those who deliberately sacrifice their lives for others or for a cause, cannot really be seen a suicide.

Parasuicides are generally seen as issuing a cry for help (attention-seeking) and there is also the more understandable reason for ending one's life - that of physical suffering (which I will return to later). There are many 'reasons' why a person might want to end their life, and difficult as it may be to accept, that decision is a choice.

But I don't think that trying to understand individual motivations would get us any further. It might help friends and family in coming to terms with a loss, but making it a unique study, as **E mile Durkheim**
and later
Edwin Shneidman
's
Suicidology
have tried to do, tend to fail because such disciplines, as
A. Alvaraz
pointed out in his study of suicide,
The Savage God
, are intent on seeing suicide as a social problem, when in reality it is the opposite. The sociological approach absolves the suicide of any responsibility. By reducing suicide rationale to a number of empirical indicators and treating it with therapy, medication or even laws, we ignore the complexity of human experience.

Camus' essay, ***The Myth Of Sisyphus,*** does see the thoughts and action of suicide as resulting from an existential crisis within the individual. The absurdness of suicide as a meaningless gesture is countered by the suicidal view of the absurdity of life:

If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd. But it is so solely by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction I notice between his true strength and the aim he has in view.

Cutting through the cynical narrative, I think that **Camus** also pointed to the absurdity of trying to find a justification in the hope that future lives may be saved. It begs the question should society dictate to the individual what they should do with their life?

The 16th/17th century poet and clergyman, **John Donne**, was plagued by thoughts of 'self-homicide' and there seemed to be a constant battle between his private and public personas. This can be seen in some of his poetry, particularly the Holy Sonnet
Death Be Not Proud
.
The opening lines "
Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so
" demonstrate the battles between his two worlds. And that this conflict rages within the very being of one man, one mind (or 'soul'), should be seen as the height of absurdity. Yet there were many periods of my life when I saw nothing absurd or contradictory in holding Humanist political beliefs with my private thoughts of not wanting to carry on living. And now I have reached middle age I do not wish to try to fathom my suicidal reasoning. It would do me no good and I doubt very much that it would contribute to a better understanding of such a wretched existence.

That I have reached such a point in my life that seems to coincide with greater propagation of misanthropic views seems to me a greater absurdity. When, in June of last year, BBC presenter and ‘liberator of Kabul’, **John Simpson** announced his plans to commit suicide rather than allow his young son to see him as a "gibbering wreck", I was truly shocked. My view of suicide as the ultimate act of selfishness was sickeningly reinforced by Simpson’s reasoning. It was difficult to escape the feeling that he was refusing to take responsibility for his own ***potential*** actions and was placing that responsibility on the shoulders of his son and his wife by suggesting that looking after him as a 'gibbering wreck’ would be too great a burden. To me his presumptuousness called into question not only the love his wife and child have for him, and that they would be prepared to endure him come what may, but also his arrogant vanity of wishing to be forever virile. And yet in some quarters, particularly in the media, this admission of a lack of faith in his ‘loved ones’ as well as a super-charged vanity, was treated as a virtue.

In the last few years death had become something of a ***cause célèbre*** amongst the chattering classes. The novelist, **Martin Amis**, has compared Britain's fast-growing population of elderly people to "an invasion of terrible immigrants" and suggested that

euthanasia booths on street corners
would be a practical way of dealing with the ‘silver tsunami’. His reasoning that “[t]he choice to die is a noble privilege we should all have" reminded me of the ancient Japanese custom of taking the elderly of the village to a remote mountain place to die (as recounted in the novel
The Ballad of Narayama
by
Shichirô Fukazawa
). Film maker
Peter Greenaway
has already announced his plans to take his own life before reaching the age of 80.

But the issue that really captured the zeitgeist revolved around the idea of the ***right to die*** (a ridiculous oxymoron, as ‘rights’ are concerned with improving life, not ending it) and assisted suicide. The latter has a great deal of public support and it is understandable that people who are suffering physical pain, with no foreseeable end to it, may no point in carrying on. The problem, however, is that pro euthanasia groups have taken this very personal sentiment as a vehicle to demand that the state introduce safeguards in order to protect medical professionals and family members from prosecution.

Many who are opposed to the idea of assisted suicide being decriminalised or made legal are concerned that it would be open to abuse or a cheap option to palliative care. But I believe that the argument against assisted suicide should not rely on this ‘thin end of the wedge’ scaremongering. It seems reasonable to me that society should accept that there are those who wish to end their lives for whatever reason, and will act upon it. But that does not mean that society should condone actions resulting from that view, and introducing legislation to safeguard assisters from criminal charges would be an admission that society places little value on human life.

Historically there is evidence of far greater suffering in which life is still held precious. In his book ***Suicide and the Holocaust***, **David Lester** tells us that suicide amongst Jewish internees of Nazi concentration camps was surprisingly low. In some instances there was a high level of intolerance to suicide among internees, as the need to cling to life under such barbaric conditions was felt to be the greater act. As **Etty Helesum** wrote in her diary "*Of course, it is our complete destruction they [the Nazis] want! But let us bear it with grace*".

An article in the Guardian newspaper in January of this year, headlined **Alarm at rise in UK suicide rate**, pointed to a rise in suicide amongst males between 2002 and 2011, and an increase in the suicide rate among 45-59 year-old men as the highest since 1986. The article suggested that the cause could well be the economic downturn, with one Professor of Health Policy Research at Edinburgh University suggesting that "*...disadvantaged men in midlife today are facing a perfect storm of challenges: unemployment, deprivation, social isolation, changing definitions of what it is to be a man, alcohol misuse, labour market and demographic changes that have had a dramatic effect on their work, relationships and very identity.*" And whilst some of the reasons given by the Professor might pose a possible explanation, the fact that the statistics that he based his opinion on, surveyed the suicide rate over a 30-year period, between 1981 and 2011 and show very little change in the overall suicide rate, especially among 45-59 year-old men, rather undermines the common belief that the economic climate is to blame.

There certainly would have been some tenuous justifications for blaming suicide rates on the economic recession of the early 1980s; the monetarist policies of the Thatcher government hit many of society's worse off. Yet the overall suicide rate averaged only 0.009%. The 2011 figure shows an average of 0.011% hardly an epidemic. This small increase occurs in times of relative security and seems to point to the cultural changes that have taken place as a more realistic explanation for a rise in suicide rates. Back in the 1980s if you complained about how hard life was you would generally be told to 'buck up your ideas'. Friends, relatives and work mates had little time to listen to complaints; they had their own problems and were dealing with them as

best they could.

Today, however, we are living through a period that can only be described as a culture of victimhood. It seems that we are less likely to make an impact on the world through our personal strengths: intellect; resolve; determination and even courage seem to count for very little. To have suffered and to have evidence of that suffering (real or imagined - very few will question the word of the victim) becomes the key to the kingdom. We can see this in the role played by ***Hacked Off!***, which uses the stories of the victim as a substitute for reasoned debate. We can also see this in the outcry that has accompanied the police enquiries into Operation Yewtree - the investigation into alleged sexual abuse by Jimmy Savile - and, more recently, the investigation into alleged sex abuses by members of two prestigious schools of music in Manchester, that today's climate is more deferential to victims than ever before (to the detriment of the accused).

Where there is a victim, there must also be an instigator. When the news of **Jacintha Saldanha**'s suicide became known, voices amongst the media and political classes were raised, calling for the heads of the two Australian DJs who had made a prank call to the hospital where she worked, asking after the health of the
Duchess of Cambridge
during her hospital treatment for severe morning sickness.

Then last month the suicide of violinist **Frances Andrade** was blamed on her cross-examination in the rape trial of **Michael** and **Hilary Kay Brewer**. It led to immediate calls for a review of the questioning of ‘vulnerable’ witnesses in court. The police were also held responsible for advising Andrade not to have counselling - even though the police, very reasonably, pointed out that it would amount to coaching the witness. Everywhere the ‘rights’ of the victim to be heard and their testimony to be more uncritically

accepted is being promoted over the very real rights of people to a presumption of innocence or the rights of freedom of speech.

“What drove you to it?” is a question I have been asked and could never respond to. Like the questioner I simply did not know. I have come to understand the query to be a rhetorical one – borne out of frustration and the need to understand an action so inherently irrational. Common sense prevailed over the suicide of **Jacintha Saldanha**, but not before the CPS considered prosecuting the two DJs. We have yet to know the outcome of the fall-out from the suicide of **Frances Andrade**
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One thing that should trouble us is that we really do not know why some people take their own life, yet the environment that we live in today, where we are exhorted to address our weaknesses, and the only honour appears to be that of the victim, is one that cannot possibly inspire anyone considering suicide to see the value of life. In a society that can seriously contemplate euthanasia as ***a right***, it looks like Camus’s point, that suicide is being ***the one truly serious philosophical problem***
, is one that we will have to revisit, perhaps with a little help from the likes of
Aristotle
,
Thomas Aquinas
and
Pico della Mirandola
, from so many centuries ago.

Editor's Note: The issue of Assisted Dying will be looked at in a Manchester Salon public

discussion on Monday 20 May - see Assisted dying: does it benefit society?