
NOËSIS XIX

THE POSSIBILITY OF AUTHENTIC SUICIDE:
MEURSAULT AS A MODEL

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In this paper, I contend that the question of suicide is one worth attending to because only by considering its possibility can we give value to life. To this end I read Camus' *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a pair in considering the question: Can we commit suicide? Our answer to this question is concerned both with its possibility as a genuine choice, and our ability to justify suicide as a course of action. Making a genuine choice requires options, although the nature of suicide is inherently self-limiting. To this end literature presents itself as an alternative means of encountering suicide, through its ability to overcome absence and its intrinsically reflective nature. Furthermore, although suicide seems irrational to beings that have chosen life, literature presents a way of convincing that succeeds not through rational argument, but rather by demonstration. Literature thus presents us both with the possibility of suicide, and a means of justifying it, although it will be up to us to engage with them. All of this is not to say that literature is the only means of encountering suicide, but simply a particularly fruitful one. Having once encountered it, the possibility of suicide constitutes a background condition to our lives, one that is omnipresent if only we attend to it. The possibility that we may value life is, *ipso facto*, the possibility that we may value death, and so suicide must in principle be a legitimate choice, even if it is one that we do not make.

Key Words: Camus, suicide, literature, choice, possibility, meaning

1 CAN THE CHOICE OF SUICIDE BE LEGITIMATE?

In this paper I will explore the legitimacy of suicide, and the possibility of using literature both to encounter and to justify it. Much of the current debate concerning suicide is ethical, and it is often framed as a mental health crisis

and thus a problem for psychology or medicine. It seems *prima facie* accepted that we should not commit suicide, with our mental health services and suicide hotlines in place to prevent it. However, this ethical response presupposes a philosophical answer to the question of suicide's legitimacy, one that I believe bears re-evaluation. It is to this decidedly modern shift in the discourse around suicide that this paper is addressed. As such, it is concerned neither with honor societies in which acts of ritual suicide might be considered honorable, nor with the Judeo-Christian tradition of suicide as a sin against God (Cholbi, 2017). The goal is simply a discussion of suicide's moral permissibility in a value-neutral way. The following discussion is also independent of Hume's utilitarian considerations (Cholbi, 2017), although it does presuppose some notion of fundamental freedoms insofar as they make choice possible. The suggestion here is simply that we evaluate, seriously and without bias, the possibility of suicide and the reasons we may have for it, whatever they may turn out to be. Our reasons should shape our answers and not vice versa. If our predetermined answers shaped our supposed reasons, then they become only excuses.

To this end I will be reading Camus' *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a pair. Camus' answer to the "one truly serious philosophical problem" (Camus, 1955, p.3) of suicide is given in the preface to *The Myth of Sisyphus*: that suicide is not legitimate because "even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism" (Camus, 1955). This is to say that the absurdity of man's place in the world, and our recognition of such absurdity, does not logically necessitate suicide. The absurdity stems, as Julian Young discusses in his book, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, from our desire for grand-narrative meaning in life, and the "evident failure of reality to provide such meaning" (Young, 2014, p.162). The rest of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is dedicated to showing that the absurdity of life does not entail its worthlessness, and therefore suicide on our part. However, to say that it is possible for us to proceed beyond nihilism is not to say that it is necessary that we do so. Camus' proclamation that "suicide is not legitimate" (Camus, 1955) therefore seems premature, for he already appears to presuppose that we should want to live, if only we could find a way to do so in spite of life's absurdity. Yet all he has shown is that suicide is not necessitated by life's absurdity. Camus therefore answers the question, "Must we commit suicide?" but leaves open the answer to the more general question of, "Can we commit suicide?"

In posing the question above, I apply the use of what might be called a choice model to the question of suicide. I presuppose, in the existentialist tradition of radical free choice, that suicide can in fact be a choice. It is only on this basis that the subsequent question of legitimacy arises. I grant that the following will prove unpersuasive to those who disagree with this fundamental presupposition, perhaps because in certain cases, suicide might not seem like a choice at all. I believe such cases encounter the converse of the problem that is here addressed: the depressive suicide does not see life as a choice, just as the people addressed herein might not see suicide as a choice. Thus,

the prescription for the depressive suicide would not be to read Camus' *The Outsider*, whose perspective they already inhabit, but perhaps Coelho's *The Alchemist* instead. It is precisely this broadening of perspective that underpins the possibility of our making a choice. I do not thereby deny the legitimacy of circumstances in which suicide might not seem like a choice at all. But the fact that suicide is not always a choice does not mean that it never is. My target audience is only those who will grant that the choice is possible, but who deny its legitimacy. This, I hope, circumscribes my project appropriately. It makes a relatively modest claim that, in some cases, suicide is a choice, and as a subset of those cases, that choice can be legitimate. It denies the moral absolutism that often characterizes the debate and claims only that the legitimacy of suicide must remain at least possible.

With this background in mind, the question of legitimacy has two aspects. Firstly, is it possible for us to commit suicide? The sense of possibility under consideration is neither logical nor metaphysical, for it is readily apparent that, should we so choose, we may in fact end our own lives. Instead, I am speaking of the practical possibility under which suicide may become a genuine choice for us, which requires that we be presented with the option of suicide. Secondly, could we be justified in committing suicide? Certainly some people may, as Camus suggests, embrace the absurdity of life and live, but could others, faced with the same dilemma, confront life's absurdity and justifiably choose death? To this end we are trying to convince another that suicide could be the 'right' course of action. Under consideration here are not the justifications *per se*, but rather the possibility of giving any kind of justification for suicide. In this paper I will argue that literature can prove helpful in addressing both the problems of possibility and justifiability laid out above.

2 THE FORM AND CONTENT OF LITERATURE

Before delving into the two problems of possibility and justifiability, it is worth pausing to consider the ways in which the form and content of literature is particularly well suited to engage with the problem of suicide. Firstly, the novel persists in our world to tell the story of the suicide *post factum*. Secondly, because it is a narrative about someone else, it also gives us the distance necessary to objectively evaluate the choices being made. Lastly, the novel focuses our attention on one particular aspect of life that might otherwise pass without remark or consideration. Concerned as I am with Camus' novel in particular, in speaking of literature I will be speaking primarily of novels, and will often use the terms interchangeably. Nevertheless, I intend what is said here to apply more generally to other forms of literature, in either prose or verse.

As an artifact of our world, Camus' novel persists even through Meursault's suicide in the world of *The Outsider*. The novel ends, as it must, just before Meursault's execution (Camus, 1984, p.122-3). Told as it is from his point of view, with its subjective first-person narration, there is simply nothing more after his death. Although as far as Meursault is concerned, the world of

the novel has ended, the novel persists and so it can continue to tell its story. Ironically enough, Meursault ‘lives’, in spite of his suicide, and dies again, as *The Outsider* is read and re-read. Thus, we may encounter his suicide repeatedly, and by the same token, other people, at different times and in different places, may likewise encounter his suicide. Meursault’s choice of suicide in the novel is not, like the real-world suicide, a self-limiting option; because the novel persists, so too does the act of suicide within it. In this way, the existential novel is able to overcome the absence of the suicide after death, thereby granting us cognitive access to its possibility as a genuine choice.

Moreover, the novel, insofar as it is someone else’s story, also allows us to abstract away from our own lives to consider the actions therein without personal bias. As Martha Nussbaum suggests in *Love’s Knowledge*, “A novel, just because it is not our life... shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life” (Camus, 1984, p.162). In offering a perspective that is not our own, the novel allows us to assess the actions taken therein objectively, and perhaps even to consider them for ourselves. Insofar as Meursault makes a choice that we are all in principle capable of making, his choice represents a genuine possibility for us even beyond the world of the novel that he inhabits. As Nussbaum says in *Love’s Knowledge*, “there is no better way to show one’s commitment to the fine possibilities of the actual than to create, in imagination, their actualization” (Nussbaum, 2009, p.165). By actualizing suicide through Meursault, Camus likewise actualizes its possibility as a genuine choice for us. A similar point is made by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, wherein he says concerning poetry,

the distinction between the historian and the poet is not whether they give their accounts in verse or prose the [real] difference is this: that the one [i.e. the historian] tells what happened, and the other [i.e., the poet] [tells] the sort of things that can happen (Aristotle, 1997, p.81).

Camus is, in Aristotle’s sense, a poet. Meursault might best be understood as an example, one who shows us first-hand what it would be like to commit suicide, and in so doing expands our moral imagination to include its possibility. What has been said here about the nature of literature pertains primarily to its form, as opposed to its content. All literature partakes in this form, but not all literature draws our attention to suicide. Whether or not the story being told does so will depend, by and large, upon its content. This is what differentiates the existential novel from literature in general. As a crafted work, the form of all literature is intrinsically reflective; it focuses our attention upon particular interactions and experiences that the author has deliberately chosen. In her essay, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature”, Martha Nussbaum discusses the role of literature in focusing our ‘moral attention’ on matters of moral significance (Nussbaum, 2009, p.153-4). Immersed as we are in our own lives, many interactions pass without conscious notice. Even when we do take note of significant interactions, we

often forget them amidst the bustle of everyday life. What literature does is it forces us to pause upon particular experiences and helps us to overcome the limitations of our own attention. The content upon which the novel focuses our attention is up to the author, and in the case of *The Outsider*, it shines a spotlight upon the question of suicide. In reading it we encounter the question, just as Meursault does.

Before we proceed, one final clarificatory point is in order. The forgoing is not to suggest that literature is the only means by which we may encounter the question of suicide, or even that it is the most productive means. One may, for example, speak to a suicide before their death, or to one who has attempted suicide, both of which might leave a far deeper impression than a casual reading of *The Outsider* is capable. However, such encounters necessarily face their own constraints in light of suicide's self-limiting nature. Life afterwards moves on. We get caught up amidst the oncoming rush of living our everyday lives as we confront, every second of every day, the overwhelming abundance of life; not just our own particular lives, but also the infinite other lives lived by the other people whom we encounter. This constant affirmation of life, in all its myriad forms, crowds out the possibility of suicide. Thus, the suggestion here is only that the novel is a particularly fruitful way of encountering suicide, although it is by no means the only way.

3 THE PROBLEM OF POSSIBILITY

The first difficulty in questioning the legitimacy of suicide is how we may come to recognize it as an option that is in fact open to us. Genuine choice requires options, and so we must be presented with the possibility of suicide in order for it to be practically possible. Imagine your experience in a local Chinatown restaurant. The menu is sometimes literally, and quite unhelpfully, translated; you wonder what "Buddha Jumps Over the Wall" is supposed to be; and perhaps you resort, more often than not, to the pictures on the menu when deciding what to order.

Now, not only is the menu unhelpful, it is also incomplete. If you happen to speak Cantonese, or Mandarin as the case may be, a whole new world of options opens up to you. If you know what to ask for, you can get combinations and dishes that were never on the menu to begin with. The only problem is, how do you come to know about these options? They exist, and can be ordered, if only you had known about them.

Analogously, our ordinary, everyday experience, because it is experience of and with existent beings, seldom if ever presents us with the possibility of suicide. We simply have no way of encountering non-being, or those that have chosen suicide, which makes it an inherently self-limiting choice. Thus, there a positive survivorship bias in our experience of life. We see only the various lives that we could lead, because every model of authenticity that we have, in virtue of being a model that is present to us, is one that exists. The most fundamental choice of 'life or death' has already been made, and the answer

appears always in the affirmative. What is presented to us is only ‘life or life’, which is not a genuine choice, but rather a false dichotomy. We see only the infinite possibilities of life presented to us: the life of a lawyer, doctor, soldier, or sportsman, but always life of some sort; and in its infinitude life excludes the possibility of choosing death. Yet the set of possibilities that are open to us is in fact one option greater than the set of possibilities circumscribed by life, for it contains the option of suicide. And this option is always present, even if we are unaware of it, because it remains in principle logically and metaphysically possible. How then could we come to recognize suicide as a genuine choice?

In Camus’ *The Outsider*, I believe one solution is being presented. Through the use of literature, we may come to recognize other possibilities that could be open to us, including but not limited to suicide. In her book, *The Realistic Spirit*, Cora Diamond proposes the use of literature to enlarge the moral imagination that shows us, “with imaginative force” (Diamond, 1995, p.294), alternative perspectives from which we may view the world. She cites Dickens’ *David Copperfield* and Wordsworth’s “The Old Cumberland Beggar” as examples that give us cognitive access to hitherto unconsidered and therefore cognitively inaccessible perspectives. The enlargement of our moral imagination therefore increases the perspectives to which we have cognitive access, insofar as we may now imagine those perspectives, and so recognize them as being possibilities that are in principle open to us. We may disagree with his choice, but we are nevertheless forced to contemplate the possibility of suicide, and Meursault’s reasons for it. In this way, literature is able to overcome the self-limiting nature of suicide to present us with its possibility.

4 THE PROBLEM OF JUSTIFICATION

Even if we can gain cognitive access to the possibility of suicide, the question remains if we can justify it. And in asking if we can justify suicide, we are not asking about the justifications themselves that are being offered, but rather the possibility of giving any kind of justification for suicide. What are we doing when we try to justify suicide, or any other action? We are trying to *convince* someone else of our point of view, that we should have chosen that particular course of action. Most of the time, this convincing is done through rational argument. Thus, to say that we are justified in pursuing a course of action is just to say that we can argue for it in such a way that explains why we did what we did.

However, in the case of suicide, the societal valuation of life makes it appear irrational, and therefore unjustifiable, because everything that we encounter in everyday life is necessarily existent. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Existentialism is a Humanism*, he puts forth the notion that we instantiate the value of the things that we choose, in virtue of having chosen them (Sartre, 2007, p.32). If I were to ask someone to choose between five different cakes, the one that he considers to be the best will naturally be the one that he chooses; otherwise he would have chosen differently. It would be irrational for us to make

a sub-optimal choice, knowing that it was sub-optimal. By parity of reason, all beings that do not value life instantiate this value judgment by choosing suicide. Having thus become non-being, they are no longer present for us to encounter. We may therefore genuinely exhort life but not death, because only those who value life remain present to us to do so, and to these existent beings suicide necessarily appears irrational. To them, there is no justification possible for an act that ends all justification.

In this regard, justification for suicide appears circumscribed by rational argument, and this is often very persuasive. It is, after all, the bulk of what we do in philosophy. And the persuasive power of rational argument arises because to reject the conclusion of a sound argument, assuming that it is in fact sound, is in some sense to reject logic itself. Either that, or we admit to being incapable of following the argument's inferential structure. But rational argument need not be the only way to convince someone. In her book, *The Realistic Spirit*, Cora Diamond suggests that literature not only passively presents us with alternative points of view, but in fact works actively to convince us of them (Diamond, 1995, p.292-3). The narrative demonstration, although not an argument, is more than mere assertion. *The Outsider* does not just state that Meursault did commit suicide, but also that he *should* have done so; that given his circumstance suicide was the right thing to do. What persuades is more than the objective fact being presented, but also the style and form of the narrative. By allowing us to inhabit the subjective perspective of another, which would otherwise be inaccessible to us, the narrative is capable of eliciting emotion that enables empathy rather than sympathy. It is therefore not just an assertion about the perspective shown but also a means of convincing someone else. Despite the lack of appeal to rational argument, the act of suicide may nevertheless be justified by demonstration.

However, this is just to say that the act of suicide could be justified, but not that it need be. Unsurprisingly, not everyone who reads *The Outsider* will be convinced, nor would it be realistic to expect them to be. No novel, no matter how persuasive, will succeed in convincing everyone, just as no argument, no matter how sound, will convince everyone. However, to reject an argument and to reject a demonstration both entail a cost. In the former, we admit to an incapacity to follow the argument's valid inferential structure, whereas in the latter we admit to a limited moral imagination. Someone who rejects an argument could simply be obstinate enough to deny its conclusion, despite conceding both to its inferential structure and to the truth of its premises. Similarly, those possessed of an imagination incapable of sufficiently fine feeling may nevertheless read the novel and ignore, or prove incapable of grasping, its message. Unlike argument that appeals to reason, demonstration's appeal is to emotion. Moreover, just as one could reasonably reject an argument for having false premises or deny the inference from premise to conclusion, so too may one reject a demonstration for being insufficiently persuasive. However, even if the reader is not convinced, there is still a concession that some kind of justification is being given, and therefore that justification is in principle

possible.

Even the potential of giving such justification through demonstration requires an openness to its possibility that not everyone will concede. Those who believe that justification can only occur through rational argument will not be convinced by Diamond's suggestion, and it is admittedly only a suggestion. However, there is likewise no reason to suppose that rational argument is the only means of justification. We are rational creatures, but not wholly rational automata. If the purpose of justification is to convince, then an appeal to emotion can be just as persuasive as an appeal to reason, perhaps even more so. There is, and should be, something to be said for literature's, and art and music's, ability to move and thereby persuade us. Not all works are created equal, and not everyone who reads *The Outsider* will be convinced that suicide is a justifiable choice. Nevertheless, justification is being given, and in reading *The Outsider* we are forced to confront its possibility; whether or not we accept it is up to us.

5 WHY QUESTION THE LEGITIMACY OF SUICIDE?

Even if all of the foregoing is granted, one final question remains: Why should we question the legitimacy of suicide? Why not accept society's *prima facie* judgment that suicide is immoral, and simply live our lives? In fact, the recognition of suicide as a genuine option is often called "suicidal ideation", and it is seen as a condition to be treated, not something to be encouraged.

My suggestion here is that it ultimately boils down to choice. Without the option of suicide, we cannot truly give value to life because it is only by considering the possibility of suicide, and rejecting it, that we can value life by choosing it for its own sake. When we are faced with a choice between two lives, what we affirm with value in our choice is not life itself, which is common to both options, but the difference between them. This not only means that we are "condemned to be free," in Sartre's words (Sartre, 2007, p.29), but also that we are condemned to life. Without the possibility of suicide, we would live only by *fiat*; we would be alive not by choice, but from the sheer fact that we are alive. The relevant question then becomes, "Do I have a reason to die?" instead of, "Do I have a reason to live?" And this perhaps should not be good enough. We ought to have a positive reason to live, above and beyond the mere absence of any reason to die. And if we do choose to live, why we do so matters less than the choice that we make; regardless of whether we choose to live for the sake of family, friends or the beauty of a sunrise, we *chose* life, and that gives it value.

What then of those who confront the choice of suicide, but rather than affirm life, choose death? I am here compelled to concede that the choice of suicide, having been made freely, must be an acceptable one. If suicide is to be a genuine choice, then the one who chooses suicide must be able to affirm that his particular life, and not necessarily life in general, is not worth living. Recognizing, as Camus does, the absurdity of our lives, life is meaningless

but not necessarily valueless (Camus, 1955, p.55). Instead, the value of any particular life can be judged only by the one who lives it, and the possibility must be open that he decides it is not worth living. The choice of suicide is no less valid than its converse that affirms life, and the possibility that allows us to value life likewise requires that we cede to the possibility that someone may choose to value death. To light a candle is to cast a shadow, and in denying the value of suicide we necessarily also deny the value of life.

We should confront the possibility of suicide because it enables us to give value to life, not just for ourselves, but also for all people. Will there be those who would prefer to avoid such a confrontation? Naturally, but that does not change the fact that they should. This, then, constitutes a moral claim: All of us ought to confront the possibility of suicide, that we may either judge life not worth living and hence commit suicide, or judge it worthwhile and through our choice give it the only value possible.

6 SUICIDE AS A BACKGROUND CONDITION

What then does this conception of a valuable life demand of us, as agents in the world? Must we contemplate the possibility of suicide with every choice that we make? Given the fleeting nature of our attention, to keep constant hold of the possibility of suicide must be to the detriment of all other things. The exhortation to confront suicide as a genuine possibility is simply for us to encounter the notion, pause to consider it, and should we judge life worth living, to carry on with our lives. To this end an existential novel like *The Outsider* is useful, for it crystallizes the transient act of suicide and preserves it for posterity. Having once encountered it, the possibility of suicide becomes more accessible to us the second, third and thirtieth time. Although the possibility of suicide is omnipresent, as a background condition of our lives, we need not attend to it always and all the time. Instead, we may revisit the question as we see fit, having once chosen to live, to see if our reasons stand up to the test of time. At that time, our reasons might be the same, or we might have different reasons, or perhaps by then, no reason at all.

What has been suggested in this paper is simply that the question of suicide, in order to be treated ethically, must first be considered philosophically. I have offered reason to think that confronting the question of suicide is worthwhile, and that is a particularly fruitful method of inquiry, albeit not to the exclusion of other means. As Camus makes clear in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the question of suicide is worth asking because of its relation to meaning-giving in our lives (Camus, 1955, p.6). I have no doubt that some will find the amoral nature of the choice unpalatable, because it grants that suicide must be permissible, but that is a price I consider worth paying. Such a view requires much presumption on my part, both in the ability of choice to confer value and in the capacity of literature to justify through demonstration; to this end I have borrowed liberally from both Sartre and Diamond. Yet if these are granted, I believe that the conclusion follows as a natural consequence. All who have

paused to contemplate the question of suicide, and who nevertheless remain, may value life in and of itself, and their lives may prove all the richer for it.

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