



**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 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 **Emile 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 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> 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.



[Assisted dying: does it benefit society?](#)