

UNDERSTANDING SUICIDE THROUGH THE LENS OF LIBERTARIANISM

In what ways can suicide be interpreted as
proof for the existence of free will?

TRINITY COLLEGE PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT

Paz Daniela Ortiz Santa María '26

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INTRODUCTION

*Didn't you think I knew that you were born with the power of a locomotive,
able to leap tall buildings in a single bound?*

“For You” (1973), Bruce Springsteen.

French philosopher Albert Camus began his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” by stating that “*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*”.¹ When expanding upon the reasons behind his claim, Camus alludes to the real-life implications of deciding to take one’s own life, concluding that “*the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions*”.²

Indeed, the issue of suicide constitutes one of the most intricate discussions related to the topic of human behaviour. Consequently, it has been widely examined through the lens of various disciplines, ranging from psychology to biology, from anthropology to theology, and from ethics to philosophy. Although in most of these instances suicide has been approached as nothing more than a social phenomenon,³ thinkers often decide to explore the metaphysical implications of an act of this nature, and what it can reveal about identity and free will.

In metaphysics, libertarianism is the philosophical position that asserts that humans have free will. Free will can be described as “*the main cause of human choices and actions. Actions are unpredictable because people are choosing from a set of options, and that choice is free. Despite some external influences, free will has the final word and can override external*

¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1.

² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 2.

³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 2.

causes”.⁴ In support of this view, philosophers have appealed to diverse instances that allegedly stem from humans’ exercise of freedom; however, can it be argued that the voluntary termination of one’s life is one of them?

According to Cambridge Dictionary, the noun suicide stands for “*the act of killing yourself intentionally*”.⁵ The word used to refer to this act is clearly distinguishable from the term that describes an unexpected or unplanned passing—that distinction being the intentional and aware pursuit of one’s death. This differentiation is present across many languages, as noted by the Austrian essayist Jean Améry, who highlights the importance of denoting intent when talking about suicide. In Améry’s native German, the term “Freitod” can be translated to “voluntary death”,⁶ which he explains is appropriate to describe the fact that “*the act itself is sometimes—frequently—brought into being by a condition of urgent compulsion*”.⁷

Though initially, one might find it difficult to identify a clear connection between suicide and free will—let alone reach the conclusion that the latter’s existence is fundamentally proved by the former’s—, it takes but a close look at what killing oneself entails to realize the extent to which they are intertwined. Accepting the premise that suicide is feasible for any individual implies that human beings can be accurately described as self-aware creatures that can recognize their own mortality and voluntarily seek death. Amongst other things, it suggests that, unlike other animals, humans can challenge and ultimately overcome their biological drive to prioritize self-preservation. At the very least, the mere existence of people who have actively chosen to kill themselves defies our perception of ourselves as exclusively determined creatures.

⁴ Nezet, N. L., Williams, G., White, C., and Lee, D., *Philosophy: Being Human. Course Companion (IB Diploma Programme)*, 268.

⁵ *Meaning of suicide in English*, Cambridge Dictionary.

⁶ Barlow, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death (prologue)*, xviii.

⁷ Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, 1.

This essay is titled “*Understanding suicide through the lens of libertarianism*”, and aims to answer the question “*In what ways can suicide be interpreted as proof for the existence of free will?*” In this essay, a philosophical investigation of the metaphysical implications of suicide—voluntary death—will be conducted in order to evaluate how cogent it is to claim that, at its core, taking one’s own life is an exercise of free will.

To do so, the essay will be divided into three chapters, each of which will address a different perspective on the matter: **Chapter I: Through the lens of libertarianism** (where the nature of actions, agency, and ownership will be studied); **Chapter II: Fear of death** (where biological and social determinism will be the main focus), and **Chapter III: A life worth living** (where it will be considered if suicide can be the result of a logical thought process). The conclusion will present the results of this exploration.

METHODOLOGY.

The investigation carried out to answer the Research Question focused primarily on works by philosophers who have discussed suicide from a libertarian or absurdist standpoint, amongst which “The Myth of Sisyphus” by Albert Camus and “On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death” by Jean Améry have stood out as the most influential throughout the writing process. Likewise, Thomas Szasz’s essay “The Ethics of Suicide” both challenged and supported the ideas presented in this essay.

Similarly, extracts from three of the Romanian pessimistic philosopher Emil Cioran’s works—“Drawn and Quartered”; “On the Heights of Despair” and “The Trouble with Being Born”—were consulted to formulate the thesis that this essay is evaluating. Other primary sources that were utilized include various academic essays and journal articles related to free

will, suicide, or both. Secondary sources, used for definitions and expansion of ideas, include the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

CHAPTER I. *Through the lens of libertarianism*

This chapter will attempt to define if it can be accurately claimed that humans have both agency and ownership over their own lives. To do so, Section a) will explore the nature of actions, agree upon a set of categories that aids the development of this essay, and sort voluntary death into one of them. Furthermore, Section b) will discuss different perspectives of who or what truly owns one's life.

a) Agency in the midst of cause-effect correlation

According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, an agent is “*a being with the capacity to act*” and agency “*denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity*”.⁸ Elemental action theory sums up action by asserting that it is something an agent does that was “*intentional under some description*”.⁹ Within deterministic schools of thought, any human action that indicates intent is often argued to be the mere effect of a related cause, proportional in every way to it.

These definitions allow for a wider discussion to take place regarding the nature of actions and how they can be classified. Naturally, one can conclude that all causes have effects and that every cause is, in turn, the effect of another cause—and vice versa. Nonetheless, it is reductionist to the point of fallacy to assert that all effects react to the same type of cause, which can signify an important distinction when discussing free will. For the debate at hand, the

⁸ Schlosser, *Agency*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

⁹ Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, essay 3.

source of an event—where it originates—will be analysed as a point of reference to classify potential causes.

If one agrees with the premise that there is a cause-effect correlation between all actions, it is appropriate to conclude that the source of a cause has an impact on the nature of the effect. It logically follows to recognize that a given cause's source can either be external to one's space of consciousness, or internal. In order to assure clarity in terms of philosophical terminology, the term "space of consciousness" will be used to refer to the delimited extent within which a person can have first-hand experiences. Hence, a rainy day classifies as an external-sourced cause, and a person opening an umbrella is the effect. Accordingly, a desire would classify as an internal-sourced cause and fulfilling it, its effect.

When discussing external causes, effects can be referred to as "reactions" because they constitute a response to an external stimulus, and a strong case as to why those are inherently determined can be made with ease. However, when talking about causes that originate within one's space of consciousness, it becomes more difficult to measure how the effect could be directly proportional to said cause, simply by the nature of every person's inalienability from their first-hand experiences. In other words, accurately identifying cause-effect correlation becomes almost impossible when the cause is an internal phenomenon because they are often unexplainable to anyone but the person experiencing it. Thus, if the effect were to be voluntary death, and the cause could be argued to be internal, then one could not fully confirm the extent to which that was determined to happen.

Camus's observations on suicide are as follows: "*An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. [...] One evening he pulls the trigger or jumps*".¹⁰ This implies that he considers that the causes behind someone's suicide originate within their inner selves. He goes on to comment on the origin of suicide, saying that "*beginning to think*

¹⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 2.

is beginning to be undermined. Society has but little connection with such beginnings. The worm is in man's heart. That is where it must be sought".¹¹ His mention of the limited—almost non-existent—role of societal factors in the decision to take one's life speaks to a belief that suicide cannot be reduced to a mere response to external stimuli or social conditioning.

This section allows us to conclude that agency can be identified in an action like suicide bearing in mind the nature of its cause. What follows is to discuss the ownership of life, and whether it is an individual's to end.

b) The nature of the ownership of life

Having planted the seed of uncertainty in total determinism, this section asks: What can one claim to truly own? This question becomes relevant given that free will can be argued to exist only when exercised over things that one owns. Current societal structures are built upon the idea that objects—and even other people's lives—can be rightfully owned by individuals, and that any violation of that property is a serious transgression. Nevertheless, it is not inaccurate to point out that ownership is, at its core, a social construct. There is no tangible attachment to any physical body but the imaginary one we agree upon as a collective species to sustain our society. This is proven by the fact that things one owns remain unchanged when one dies (eg. a man's house will not face any physical transformation when the man dies, at least not one that arises from his death).

Continuing with this line of thought, one could argue that the only physical substance that irreparably changes after an individual's death is the same individual's body. Thus, one can claim that true ownership is only present when referring to a person and their physical bodies, as there is an indivisible inextricable link between a human's physical body and their

¹¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 2.

life as we understand it. Life cannot survive the death of the physical body, nor can the physical body survive the end of life, which establishes a strong bond between life and body to the point where they can be understood as the same thing.

The way each of their existences seems to depend on the continuation of the other shapes our understanding of them as somewhat inseparable. It is perhaps the only tangible ownership connection that can be discerned. It may be concluded that true ownership only materializes itself when it comes to a human's body and life.

CHAPTER II. *Fear of death*

This chapter will attempt to find an explanation as to why suicide cannot be logically attributed to biological or social determinism. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic at hand, it should be noted that the author does not intend to develop a psychological, sociological, or biological account of suicide, but to look at the core claims that place suicide as a consequence of biological and/or social determinism and untangle them to decipher if they are rightfully stated or not.

a) Suicide and biological determinism

Biological determinism holds that actions are determined by an individual's physiology.¹² Thus, biological determinists would be inclined to state that suicide is nothing but the aftermath of a chemical event. This is the case when one examines suicide as the result of a mental health condition, such as depression. Notwithstanding, it can be argued that the

¹² de Melo-Martin, *When is Biology Destiny? Biological Determinism and Social Responsibility*, PhilSci Archive.

condition only fuels self-destructive tendencies, but the presence of those tendencies can be overridden by the exercise of free will, and the decision to act upon them or not ultimately is an individual's to take.

Either side of the argument is difficult to disprove through the use of logical reasoning alone, although both appear to be equally feasible.

Withal, if one was to agree with the biological determinist stance, it would open a new debate about the primary drive of any living organism: the self-preservation instinct. If this tendency (often referred to as survival instinct) takes precedence over any other physiological event, then wouldn't it outweigh suicidal propensities? If anything, the decision to take one's life challenges and ultimately wins over a human's self-preservation instinct. Therefore, arguing that suicide can be explained by appealing to biological determinism becomes self-refuting in many ways. Though it does not fully disprove it, it poses a viable alternative to interpreting voluntary death.

b) Suicide and social determinism

Social determinism opens a discussion about social structures conditioning certain individuals to take their own lives. Although the way society works indisputably causes large amounts of suffering, one cannot deny how arbitrary and essentially unpredictable the circumstances that lead up to a person's suicide are. As noted by Améry, "*it is undeniable that there are acts of suicide that, at first glance, have hardly anything to do with each other as far as their casualty, their transsuicidal intentions, and even their ranking are concerned*".¹³ It seems as though individuals of all races, socioeconomic statuses, nationalities, backgrounds,

¹³ Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, 1.

and genders can engage in such an act, which suggests that it cannot be reduced to a set of emotions caused by social circumstances—which therapeutic views of suicide often propose.

As pointed out by the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, libertarian Thomas Szasz is “*strongly associated with the ‘anti-psychiatry’ movement of the last half century. According to that movement, attempts by the state or by the medical profession to interfere with suicidal behaviour are essentially coercive attempts to pathologize morally permissible exercises of individual freedom*”.¹⁴ Similarly, Jean Améry stated that “*the inclination to voluntary death is not a sickness of which one has to be cured as one is cured of measles*”.¹⁵ Szasz and Améry’s view on a medical explanation for suicidal behaviour is that it is reductionist and ultimately inaccurate, Szasz going as far as to call it a restraint on individual freedom.

According to Améry, people kill themselves because living in a wretched condition prevents the individual from having any dignity. Suicide then turns into the logical conclusion to an inner debate regarding whether life is worth living or not. Regarding social determinism as a probable cause for suicide, Améry writes: “*Is and always has been an extraordinary act that goes beyond the customary ordering of individual and social existence; this it has been even in circumstances where it has been socially accepted as a duty of honor (hari-kari) or as an obligation of taste (Petronius) or even as an order in the name of an unwritten officer’s quote (Lieutenant Gustl)*”.¹⁶

Thomas Szasz took a similar stand regarding this issue. He believed that the State took a hypocritical stand when it penalized suicide allegedly based on the premise that it could be prevented through psychological aid, considering that its regard for life appeared to be fluid to aid their stand at its convenience.¹⁷ It follows to recognize that, while social determinism may

¹⁴ Cholbi, *Suicide*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

¹⁵ Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, 30.

¹⁶ Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, .

¹⁷ Szasz, *The Ethics of Suicide*, 4.

aid in explaining suicide under certain circumstances, it is too broad of a claim to ascertain that it does so in every instance related to voluntary death. One might go on to state that it is ultimately a subjective question about whether life is worth living or not.

CHAPTER III. *A life worth living*

After demonstrating that an action like suicide cannot be fully explained by social or biological determinism, this chapter will set out to explore the thought process that leads an individual to take their own life in order to conclude if suicide can be the logical conclusion of a rational thought process and not an undefeatable compulsion. Section a) will focus on the arguments posed by Jean Améry in “On Suicide”, where he thoroughly discusses why the reasons that lead someone to choose voluntary death can be deemed logical even if they cannot be expressed. Section b) will examine suicide as a response to realizing what Camus referred to as the absurdity of life in “The Myth of Sisyphus”.

a) On choosing voluntary death.

Based on his personal experience, Améry indicates that the reasons behind suicide are valid irrespective of the individual’s ability to verbalize them. Barlow sums this up by declaring that “*for Améry, [...] the alienations and setbacks one experiences in one’s life could lead to legitimate reasons for choosing a voluntary death, regardless of whether those reasons can be communicated*”.¹⁸ He further elaborates on this idea: “*One is trying to understand reasons expressed in a language that is individually subjective and not persuasive in the language of*

¹⁸ Barlow, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death (prologue)*, xiv-xv.

everyday life”.¹⁹ Améry discusses the idea that suicide means to engage in contradiction and truly embrace the unknown (i.e. non-existence) and calls the individual that does it “a person of nonsense” which, to him, is inherently different from “deluded sense”.²⁰

Amplifying this syntactic distinction, Améry claims that “*anyone who wants to commit suicide is breaking out, out of the logic of life*”.²¹ He explains that desire to continue living often stems from habit and not from actively choosing to do so, asking the reader: “*Do you have to live? [...] In the moment before the leap, suicides tear to pieces a prescription of nature and throw it at the feet of the invisible prescriber*”.²² The rejection and eventual intentional termination of conscious experience through the exercise of that same consciousness presents a logical contradiction that, in its feasibility, denotes the presence of freedom.

The issue of coexistent logic and illogicality of voluntary death is quite revealing when determining the role that free will plays in choosing it. Améry writes: “*Actually, someone standing before the leap [...] has at the same time one foot still in the logic of life and the other in the anti-logical logic of death. Because we mean by the logic of life not only the immanent logic of behaviour that preserves the self and the species, to which we are tributary, but also the logic gained from this logic as an abstraction of higher order, one that weighs being against being, sets one against the other, [...] because there is no bridge from being to nonbeing, because of all this, we are helpless in thinking about death*”.²³ Human’s perception of death is intrinsically contradictory, as it involves the conceptualization of something which lies outside one’s empirical knowledge. In turn, this transforms the awareness of mortality into a tortuous exercise which came to be from having the cognitive capacity to be aware of death but lacking the means to know what comes after.

¹⁹ Barlow, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death (prologue)*, xiv-xv.

²⁰ Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, 29.

²¹ Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, 13.

²² Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, 13.

²³ Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, 19-20.

For Améry, humans can only reconcile these two opposing notions by choosing voluntary death. He claims that it is not even necessary to engage in the act itself, but simply by making the decision one truly embraces and rationalizes the “nonsense”. The active pursuit for what cannot be understood—death and the unknown—contradicts human nature and, as such, can only be attained through the unconstrained exercise of free will.

b) Linking suicide, freedom, and the absurd

The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy states that “*Camus sees this question of suicide as a natural response to an underlying premise, namely that life is absurd in a variety of ways*”.²⁴ Absurd, in this case, describes the realization that life has no meaning whatsoever, and suicide—Camus argues—seems to be an appropriate response to that realization, as seen in the following extract: “*In a sense, and as in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it*”.²⁵

He further develops the notion of the absurd by asserting that “*you continue making the gestures commanded by existence, for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering*”.²⁶ Here, he summarizes the idea that living is nothing but the natural state in which we find ourselves and that, the more one contemplates it, the more one is enlightened to the many things that make it unbearable.

Agreeing with Camus’s premise on the inescapable absurdity of life means agreeing that suicide can be the conclusion of a rational inner debate on whether life is worth living or

²⁴ Aronson, *Albert Camus*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

²⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 2.

²⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 2.

not. He wrote: “*At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. [...] This must be clung to because the whole consequence of a life can depend on it.*”²⁷ The lack of fulfilment that comes from being denied an answer to the question of the meaning of life can amount to the reasoning that suicide is the only path that remains.

It is worth noting that Camus ends his essay by claiming that life’s meaninglessness does not have to end in suicide. Referencing the character that inspires the title of his essay which he used as a microcosm for humanity, he states that “*one must imagine Sisyphus happy*”,²⁸ in spite of the absurdity that permeates his existence because as individuals, our lives have no meaning but the one that is consciously given to it through action and perception. Nonetheless, doing so requires a decision that one can just as easily decide not to carry out. Camus acknowledges that, ultimately, the continuation of life in spite of being aware of its nature depends solely on the individual that owns it and the way they choose to exercise their free will.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a thorough analysis of free will and suicide has been carried out to answer the question “In what ways can suicide be interpreted as proof for the existence of free will?”. All things considered, it cannot be stated that suicide is the proportional effect of any given cause, given its intrinsic nature and the fact that it originates from an effect sourced within a human’s space of consciousness. Likewise, appealing to biological and/or social determinism

²⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 10.

²⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 24.

only explains voluntary death to a certain extent, and ultimately does not address the issue in its entirety. Moreover, asking oneself whether life is worth living, concluding that it is not, and deciding to end one's life has been proven to be a logical response to a rational thought process, even though the debate is inherently illogical. Suicide as a potential and factual phenomenon can only be feasible if individuals have free will.

From these observations, one may conclude that voluntary death can and should be interpreted as proof for the existence of free will. This Extended Essay defied the foundations upon which many determinist theories have been built and conducted a thorough autopsy of the relationship between suicide and free will. When approached through the lens of libertarianism, it becomes clear that acknowledging and scrutinizing suicide takes the free will discussion to a whole new different level.

As was pointed out in the Introduction, the perpetual possibility of voluntary death defies our perception of humans are exclusively determined creatures. Jean Améry declares that *“as a way of death, however, voluntary death is still freely chosen even when one is trapped in a vise of compulsions; there is no carcinoma that devours me, no infarction that fells me, no uremic crisis that takes away my breath. I am that which lays hands upon me, who dies after taking barbiturates “from hand to mouth”.”*²⁹ It is fundamentally in the individual's power to forfeit the right to exist and exercise the right to terminate their life.

²⁹ Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, 1-2.

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