

PROLOGUE

"There is but one philosophical problem truly serious and that is suicide". (The Myth of Sisyphus, p.1) Albert Camus states that judging whether one's life is or is not worth living amounts to answering this single most important question of philosophy.

Three hundred and forty years separate Camus' statement and Shakespeare's soliloquy of Hamlet. Yet, Hamlet's soliloquy reverberates within the hearts of so many people today:

Why is the one philosophical problem truly serious, suicide?

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,
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,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bare,
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 bear 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 pith and moment,
With this regard, their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action... (*Hamlet, Act III, Scene I*)

A thread runs through this soliloquy and Camus' statement and the end of this thread is the meaning of the Greek word, *aletheia*. This Greek word is composed of the Greek alpha-privative, *a*, meaning not and the Greek verb, *lethein*, meaning four things in the following order: to forget, to hide, to bury and to cover up. English translates this Greek word as truth so the Greeks think of our positive word, truth in negative terms, that is, what is not forgotten, what is not hidden, what is not buried and what is not covered

up.

This distinction argues to a major difference between English and Greek culture, but return to the thread. The thread we grasp here is that the Greeks argue to being open whereas our word covers up this openness because our word provides a name! The name truth gives us the idea we know something, that it the truth whereas the Greek word manifests an attitude, that is, showing four things we can not do, if we seek truth. So, this thread shows us that both the "death" and "sleep" options Hamlet refer to are functions of forgetting, or hiding, of burying and of covering up. Both "dreaming" and conscience are activities which force us to remember, to face life, to live rather than to avoid life and living by dying or sleeping.

This "pale cast of thought" about suicide is especially relevant today, beginning the third millennium, given the recent statistics concerning suicide within the United States, some

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of which accompany these notes. The contemporary tendency is "to take the easy way out" relative to life, namely, death when, that is, the easiest way of living, namely, the comfortable way of pleasing others, whether parents, peers, "friends" fails! - whether that death be by abortion, euthanasia, murder or suicide. The fact is that nature teaches humans through the cyclic and annual seasons to serve life, prepare for it through the annual movement of winter to spring, summer and fall and nourish it through air, water and food so that living things might mature and reproduce and thereby continue this cycle of life. Although death is a means through which nature conserves living beings, nature achieves this death through a natural selection process during which these living beings struggle to conserve the life they possess. Every living being, whether plant or animal fights against death, indeed, produces seeds so it can survive death, except the human animal, supposedly the "highest" animal!

The human being alone, that celebrated rational animal seeks to control both life and death, whether because the boredom of loneliness or in order to avoid the emptiness of meaning signaled by pain or to prevent inconvenience occasioned by injustice or even pregnancy. Most contemporary humans measure the gift of life against the convenience of their living. Indeed, this same human being claims suicide to be a right, claiming that such a right to kill oneself and others is a reasonable right, particularly when looked at in relation to the "quality" of one's life. Yet, if each living being is unique and, therefore, irreplaceable, is not the basic quality of each human life the fact that it is a gift? But, if such a life is a gift, how can one claim it is reasonable to judge whether or not such a life is one of lesser or greater quality? Does not common sense preclude such a claim if and when any human being receives a gift from some other person? Whether or not that gift, a pen, for instance, costs \$50.00 or \$00.50 is irrelevant if such is a gift from another person - after all, if we take Hume's measure of life as useful, both pens do write!

To seek to be other than one is
is to be suicidal.

Yet, the suicide statistics are telling. The October, 1995 report by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development shows that the rate of suicide among young

adolescents increased 120% from 1980-1992; the firearm-homicide rate for 10-14

year olds increased by 110% between 1985 and 1992; the smoking rate among eighth-graders rose 30% from 1991-1994; two-thirds of eighth-graders report that they have tried alcohol and 28% say they have been drunk at least once; pregnancy rates for girls younger than 15 rose 4.1% between 1980 and 1988 - notwithstanding all the millions poured into "sex education" in public schools, the availability of condoms, various other birth control devices and birth control pills. The National Institute of Health statistics as of 1997 show that suicide is the eighth leading cause of death among all Americans and the third highest cause of death among fifteen to twenty-four year olds!

The National Center for Health Statistics also produced a report in October, 1995 which documented 23,730 homicides in 1994, of which 15-24 year-old males listed 6,790 slain for 1994, a rate of 37 per 100,000. Males showed 32,410 suicides in 1994, up 12.1% from 1993, an average of 12.4 per 100,000 people but males, ages 15-24 showed a suicide rate of 26 per 100,000 people, 110% and 300% the rate increase from 1950. The combined suicide and homicide rate for young males was 63 per 100,000 for 1994. Indeed, the New York Times of 13 October 1999 documents the statistics for the 1997 year in which guns were used nationally in 17,566 suicides compared with 13,522 homicides - the first year records show more suicides than homicides with guns!

 If to be human is to be
 animal and rational can
 life be worth living?
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Indeed, lack of appreciating the gift of life and lack of being recognized as a valuable gift of being alive have turned untimely death into a "natural" phenomena and a popular song. The "Notorious Big" has a "hit" song entitled "You're nobody 'till somebody kills you"! Contemporary America is a society of "throw always". Once a person is no longer "useful" - the practical definition Hume uses to determine whether or not someone should live or die - the person is "down-sized", shuttled into a rest home or made available for burial - shades of Hume's "Essay on Suicide"! As a matter of fact, the "useless" extends to anything or anyone who is found to be inconvenient or a cause of our "inconvenience" - including the human fetus within the womb. Thus, "Notorious Big" is correct. Only the County or City Department of Health requires a valid death certificate and a valid death certificate requires a name! Indeed, although everyone has a death certificate, not everyone has a birth certificate! So, in America death becomes personal recognition and it could be "big" news and make the evening or morning TV news channel! Just think, the evening news report or the obituary column is one's last claim to fame, except, of course, the aborted child and then only a conscience provides any memory of that child's brief gift of life!

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Camus focuses on the "pain of living" whereas Shakespeare emphasizes the possible pain of life after death. Both confront the thought of suicide from pain! One seeks the value of life compared to the pain of living; the other questions the desire to die

confronted with an unknown and possible eternal future. Suicide is born out of the desire to avoid the pain of living whether that pain results from the emptiness which we call the boredom of loneliness or the physical and psychological pain humans create or seek to avoid. Popular song groups, such as the Smashing Pumpkins, reflect this suicide wave. Their Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness tape release even includes a song entitled love is suicide in its set called Bodies.

Now, what is the relationship between Hamlet's speech and Camus' question? The answer is quite simple When we live other than we are, we are not ourselves. Such a way of living is painful because it is an unnatural way to live. Indeed, to live not as ourselves is to kill self, that is, to commit suicide.

But, what occasions the kind of pain which fathers this thought of suicide? That answer is also simple. The kind of pain which fathers thoughts of suicide is the pain of living other than we are. To live other than we are means to experience the pain of dying while we are still living, that is: we seek to avoid the reality of living with the pleasure of acceptance or, indeed, the pain of rejection. When we live other than we are, we are not ourselves so we seek to escape through suicide. As Camus observes in The Myth of Sisyphus, suicide is a thought before it is an act, however, we humans first experience the habit of living and only afterward develop the habit of thinking.

But, if nature and nurture
are who I am, how can I be me?
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Therefore, this thought to be other than we are is suicidal. First, when we think we can avoid the realities of life, such as "the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely", we are suicidal. To seek to avoid these "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" is to seek to avoid being human because to be human means to feel pain as well as pleasure - imagine nature's spring seeking to avoid winter's pain! Secondly, when we think we can be someone else, anyone more successful, more beautiful, richer than we are, we are suicidal. To seek to avoid acceptance of who we are, different, unique and irreplaceable, and thus to avoid being alive is suicidal because to be alive is to be human in a unique way. So, we commit suicide when we seek the "cover" of doing things as others do them or as being as others think we should be - e e cummings was as succinct as he was sublime in the sixth of i six nonlectures

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To be nobody-but-yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else-means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting.

To be oneself is not to seek "cover," not to forget, not to hide, not to bury, not to cover up. To be oneself is to be honest, and thus, truthful, a unique instance of humanity, an insight which Sartre dramatized within Huis Clos, No Exit, which Camus described within The Myth of Sisyphus, but which originally Plato described within the Apology. To be truthful is to be incarnate, that is, to be oneself, this mind in this body. The Greek word we translate as truth, alethein, literally, a, not and lethein, to forget, to hide, to bury, to cover up - perhaps the Greeks were not as pagan (that is, "out of it") as some Christians thought and still think! To be truthful is painful and pleasurable, but both are the price of the cost of being alive and living humanly.

If we look at "being oneself" within the Christian/Catholic creation/providence perspective means to accept the creative action and providential decision of God, namely, both to accept the gift of being alive and to be thankful to be alive as this unique person who is I. Indeed, within the first Chapter of Genesis, as Hebraic Yhwh breathed life into earth and calls the creation, Adam, literally, from the earth, the Old

Testament text calls this Adam, **zelem**, literally, image and likeness, so Orthodox Jews see each human by transposition to be the image and likeness of **Yhwh**, God, irreplaceable, inimitable, essentially a person being loved!

Indeed, **Genesis** describes Adam and Eve seeking to know both good and evil. **Yhwh** declared everything created as good. Whereas Adam and Eve sought to know both good and evil, thereby rejecting the created world as **Yhwh** saw it, namely, as good. Even the pagan, sixth century B.C. Heraclitus contrasted humans with God when he commented: "To God all things are good, whereas humans deem some things as good and others as bad". Indeed, another pagan, Socrates accepted himself as good even though he saw himself as knowing that he did not know. Such an acceptance was as humble as it was virtuous and this acceptance appreciated being human, in his case a questioning, Athenian Greek. Such an acceptance is human wisdom, the highest virtue to which the human can attain, a combination of love and knowledge, or, rather, love of knowledge as the human good, literally, the love of being human, as we shall see, the **jen** of Chu Hsi, Confucius and Mencius.

The accepted alternative to being oneself, or ethical is to identify with a group and, thus to be moral. Yet, is it not good to be moral? Friedrich Nietzsche makes an insightful comment that "Morality is the best of all devices for leading mankind by the nose".

Today, the American press is replete with articles announcing the decline of morals within human society. Parents question themselves about the lack of morals their children show. Citizens complain about the breakdown of morals in government. State and federal workers complain about the lack of accountability in the management of public monies. This is the 90's, however, a quotation of Charles Dickens is as relevant today as it was in David Copperfield's time about 1855: "This is the best of times; this is the worst of times". If we turn back to the time before Christ, specifically, the fifth century B.C., we find Socrates lamenting the lack of ethics vis á vis morals in Athens. A pagan distinguishes between public morals and private ethics! Perhaps we "Christians" can learn something which might nurture our meaning for life.

For I spend my whole life in going about and persuading you all to give your first and greatest care to the improvement of your souls, and not until you have done that to think of your bodies or your wealth. And I tell you that wealth does not bring excellence, but that wealth, and every other good thing which men have, whether in public or in private, comes from excellence.
(Apology 29b-30b)

The contemporary complaint, the statements of Socrates, the statement of Camus and the soliloquy of Hamlet converge. The message is the same: the goodness or badness of a human being is internal and results from each person's choices and actions. Humans can control nothing which comes from the outside of us; but humans can control only what comes out of us, our reactions to external people and actions. External achievements, whether reputation, honor or wealth have no effect, or only a temporal and, therefore, temporary effect upon the internal goodness or badness of any human being - unless, that is, that individual person, like Ivan Ilych decides that it can and does affect him or her!

This difference between external and internal influences creates the

basis for the distinction between morals and ethics. Whatever practical purpose is served by the claim that "the devil made me do it", or the lament "if I had a different mother or father", or excuses such as "if my peers had not done it," "if I had a better example", "if only I had known", "if I only had another chance", or "if I only had a better education" the fact stands: we individually made the decision to go along or not to go along with these external influences and excuses. We chose to agree or disagree, to act or not to act. We find that the New Testament provides us a unique example for the inability to exercise control over individual, human choices, even if we were to return from the dead to warn others, our most beloved of the results which individual decisions entail. So Abraham advises the rich man who begs Abraham to have Lazarus go back and warn his brothers of what happens if they also do not feed the hungry (Luke 16:19-31).

The Gospel, literally Greek for the Good News emphasizes individual responsibility, even the sacredness of choice within the parable of the "rich man and Lazarus". The temporal, rich man

 "If they will not listen either to
 Moses or to the prophets, they will
 not be convinced even if someone
 should rise from the dead".

had rejected the daily, perhaps to him painful presence of a beggar, one Lazarus, whose sores the rich man had seen dogs lick. Both died. The rich man found torment in Hades and saw Lazarus in the "bosom" of Abraham. The rich man asked that Abraham allow Lazarus to dip his hand in water and drip the water upon his tongue, however, Abraham rejected this request, commenting that "...between us and you a great gulf has been fixed..." The rich man then begged Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers "to give them warning so that they do not come to this place of torment too". Abraham observes: They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them. The rich man insists: "...if someone comes to them from the dead, they will repent". Abraham retorts: "If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead".

 "If to be human is to be mortal, am I
 not naturally suicidal?"

The "Good News" is that each of us decides but one thing. None of us decides whether we are to be born or when we are to die - the former might be the result either of an act of

passion, even a criminal act or a result of love, or a mixture. The latter is the decision of a combination of factors we call "nature" - of course, contemporaneously, given the cheapness in which people, particularly many contemporary Americans hold the uniqueness of life, whether those advocating abortion or euthanasia, humans more than "nature" is the cause! The one thing each of us can decide is how to live as we are, that is, whether to choose to live or die. As a matter of fact, the "Good News" quotes Jesus Christ as saying:

Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew, 10, 37-39; Mark 8, 34- 38; Luke, 9, 23-26; 14, 26-27)

If that does not suggest suicide, how else would the advertisement read? In addition, John's "Good News" quotes Christ as saying:

...and I lay down my life for my sheep...The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one

takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as it is in my own power to lay it down, so it is in my power to take it up again...(John 10, 15- 21)

Later on within John's "Good News", Jesus Christ states an apparent and ultimate New Testament vindication for suicide:

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[If to be Christ-like is to die, is not to  
be Christian suicidal?  
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This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you. A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. (John 15, 12-14 and I John 1:4, 3:16 and 13:34.)

The question is, therefore, not whether or not to commit suicide, but whether suicide is not the best choice a Christian/Catholic can make?

Human beings are strange. They want to be independent, yet they seek to be dependent. They want to control, yet, they submit to being controlled. They crave power, but they claim impotence. They pretend to be rational as they continue to rationalize. They want rights, but not responsibilities: they want the appearance of knowing and acting (call it "my rights"), yet they reject the reality of knowing and acting (call it "my responsibility"). Today, we hear countless arguments for "rights", seldom any for "responsibility". Perhaps we may view this human ambivalence in a traditional, philosophical way of the problem between the one and many. Heraclitus, for instance, stated:

...To be in agreement is to differ; the concordant is the discordant. From out of all the many particulars, comes oneness, and out of oneness come all the many particulars. (*Frag. 112*)

To be born is to be the same and different. Each is a child of two parents, the recipient of twenty-three chromosomes from each the father and the mother and so with similar DNA, characteristics and traditions, another human being not withstanding cloning and various other technological innovations! Yet, each child is unique, an inimitable forty-six chromosomes. Growth confronts the child with this same one and many. The desire to belong seduces the child to be one with family and peers, yet the urge to be many, oneself, confuses the child to be assertive, independent. If we apply the soliloquy of Hamlet to this conflict, we could describe our situation as a "to be or not to be", to be myself, independent, unique, or to be as others want me, dependent, a member of the family, one of the group. The question, of course, is the same, as Camus comments: whether the pain of living as myself-human-being is worth living? This is the question for suicide.

The urge to be independent, however, is itself seductive. We ask: "what do you want of me?" "What are you doing?" We seek to control people through these "what" questions, trying to force them to explain their requests and actions in our own terms, assuming that answers will provide the brakes upon the speed of individual human actions. We ask these questions as the "blindness" for our own vision. We ask these questions, but refuse to do any self-reflection. The issue of human action is not "what" but "how". "How" we act, not what we do is the key to understand "human" action. All animals, human as well, eat, walk, "talk", hear, feel and live. The difference between and among these animals is "how" each kind of animal eats and acts. When we speak of a human being we call this different "how" "rational", yet, even

though we are all so-called "rational animals", each of us is unique.

Again, the one and many, indeed, the same but different confront us humans. We, like Adam and Eve after they sought to know both good and evil by eating the fruit from the tree of both good and evil cover up differences in order to remain comfortable with being the same, not being different from the "crowd". Yet, humans are not simple beings, as it were, but we are complex; we are not like everybody else, each is different. We are neither animal, or rational; rather, we are both. But, when does it mean to be rational, to be human? Rational stands as an adjective, modifier of animal, the noun. However, we humans make more out of the rational adjective than we do the animal noun. We focus on being rational, yet, ignore being animal. Then, we equate this rational with being someone other than we are, hiding under the cloak of being moral and with having rights. Indeed, we even use our rational ability to reduce the unique particulars we perceive within and around us to a so-called universal - humans are no longer unique individuals but become rational animals, a group to which we all belong, a comfortable category! So, many contemporary American women scream for equality with males - given the biological diversity such a cry hardly can be a reasonable expectation! But, we continue this reduction in order to avoid facing the differences, the complexities of living - we reduce some of these rational animals into criminals, law breakers, others into law-abiding, into "welfare recipients" and "people who work for a living".

Does to live as I am make life worth living?

The following chapters investigate this human strangeness as it has been discussed or written about by various philosophers and authors. Each chapter discusses one of these works and authors and the exhibit contains the discussed work; this way the reader may read about the meaning of the work from a second perspective and read the work itself from his or her own perspective. This approach seeks to convey understanding of the work and the human problem; the purpose of this understanding is that the reader better will understand him or herself.

The questions are many, but the problem is the same. The problem is: am I really choosing to perform or not to perform a given act; am I being responsible or irresponsible? The questions are many: am I ethical or am I am moral? Can I be moral when I am ethical? If I am religious, am I moral? Or, if I am ethical can I be religious? What, if any, is the relationship between morals and ethics; between religion and morals; between religion and ethics, between living as I am and dying as someone else? The basis of the problem is how does the I-who-am relate to the we from whom I am born and with whom I live? Of course, the age old issue is the relationship between the human being as individual and as social.

The problem concerns how a human being rightfully continues to be him or herself, a unique individual while at the same time responsibly assumes other roles on the Shakespearean stage of life. We each, after all, have our part and our time in this play we call "life". Those other roles might be any one of the following, or others, not listed: self and child; self and parent; self and spouse; self, wife and mother; self, husband and father; self, wife, airline hostess, wife and mother; self, husband, store manager and father. The issue is the ability of the human person to be centered as a unity, yet, at the same time to be diverse and a multiplicity.

Originally, of course, we are centered as a unity, yet, at the same time we are diverse and a multiplicity. This is reality, a fact of nature and the result of biology. Although the *I* is one, yet, *I* is many. The *I* is body and soul; mind, will, feelings and emotions; body as head, upper body, hands, torso, feet; soul as knowing and loving; body as brain, heart, large and small intestine, and so forth. The pronominal and practical *I* is the pronominal and real "we." The interesting thing about this biological fact is that we accept this as reality, understand it when we say *I* and do not lose our center as a result of the awareness. Yet, when this *I* considers its relationship to parents, even siblings, but especially peers, this *I* reacts like a ship in a stormy sea. *I* feels that *I* is losing *I*'s balance and that *I*'s center disappears.

 [Does to be moral differ from to be ethical?]
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The physiological
 acceptance and confidence
 gives way to a

psychological confusion, even fear. Who am *I*? Will *I* lose "me"? My very life is at stake. Our thinking affects our living and our acting. Our thinking about who and how we are affects how we act. Indeed, our thinking about ourselves affects how we think about other people and how we act toward other people changes accordingly.

Of course, the dilemma each human being faces is whether or not to be as each is or as others, even loved ones, but especially peers want us to be. To be different always occasions discomfort whereas to conform induces comfort. But common sense faces a fact of nature and biology: being unique means to be different. So, the problem persists: even if *I* conform *I* can never be the same! Thus, each of us must face our image whenever we look into a mirror and ask the question: if *I* am who *I* am, then my actions are unique to me, so how can *I* ever be or act like other people want and act? Contemporary movies, entitled "Shirley Valentine" and "Word of Honor" dramatize this issue and present this problem. The following chapters seek to explore this issue and problem from the perspective of several philosophic and prose works, some oriental, others occidental.