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Suicide According to Socrates and Camus

Meghan Gavis, '22

The never-ending philosophical questioning of the “meaning of life” often yields doubts whether meaning can be distinguished, if it even exists. This uncertainty can incite contemplations of suicide to free oneself from an undefinable world. Socrates and Camus approach the urgency of suicide from different angles, but both condemn its practice. They do so in different ways; Socrates cites a necessary respect for the gods while Camus believes that meaning is intertwined with life. Socrates’ and Camus’ arguments against suicide reveal the dissenting ways that they perceive earthly life and its meaning.

Socrates triggers the question of suicide in his belief that the body hinders comprehension of meaning. In the final hours before his execution, Socrates preaches that philosophers should not fear death because philosophy is the “practice [of] dying” (Plato, *Phaedo*). Proper philosophers should renounce earthly distractions such as bodily pleasure, pain, and riches, to purely pursue reason. This rejection of earthly life stems from the notion that the body and senses are inherently inaccurate. The body distracts the soul from the pursuit of reason, as it innately must be nurtured before higher contemplation can be attempted. The senses are unable to

provide information about abstract concepts central to philosophical reasoning, like strength and justice. They can only perceive the physical world which, Socrates argues, contains no information of the “truth.” The body not only impedes the soul’s efforts to acquire knowledge, but it is inherently unable to reason and, therefore, cannot pursue a philosophical life. The body’s hindrance of the soul’s comprehension necessitates a separation of the two in order to perceive only with the soul. As Socrates defines death as “the separation of the soul from the body,” he asserts that death is the only process by which humans can understand abstract concepts (Plato, *Phaedo*). This prompts contemplation of suicide as it would seemingly allow philosophers to attain uninhibited comprehension more quickly.

Though Socrates claims that meaning can only be understood after death, he condemns suicide out of religious commitment. Socrates renounces the practice out of belief that humans are under the jurisdiction of the gods. By his reasoning, humans are possessions of the protective gods: “We humans are in a kind of prison and one must not release oneself or run away from it...It is the gods who have regard for us and... we humans are the gods possessions. and should not die before a god wills it” (Plato, *Phaedo*). Though they can free themselves from earthly life, to do so without permission would likely incite punishment from the gods. Socrates is

challenged by his companions as they believe one devoted to the gods would cherish protection from them: “[T]he wise would resent dying, whereas the foolish would rejoice at it” (Plato, *Phaedo*). This presents contradiction between Socrates’ welcoming of death and supposed reverence for the gods’ government. Nevertheless, he maintains that if one reveres the gods’ jurisdiction in his earthly life and waits until his necessitated death, a future of meaning and goodness awaits him: “I’d be wrong not to be disturbed at the idea of dying. But as it is, be fully aware that I expect to go to men who are in fact good... I expect to go to the gods who are very good masters” (Plato, *Phaedo*). Though Socrates desires the freedom brought on by death, a reverence for something greater restrains him.

Camus prompts the issue of suicide in his assertion that life is absurd. Camus defines life as “absurd” because of humans’ incessant attempts to assign order to a world which refuses to be organized. Our insistence on fixing meaning to earthly life stems from human self-awareness. Hyper self-awareness leads to a mundane familiarity with the world. Self-questioning humans vehemently try to distinguish meaning behind life but are met with inconclusion. It seems that the more aware we become, the more stubbornly meaning evades us: “[T]he mystery was increasing with our knowledge” (*Return to Tipasa*). To cope with this lack of meaning, humans

may assign characteristics of their own life, like tiredness or inadequacy, to their environment, leading to an overwhelming sense of homogeneity and stagnation. Underactive self-awareness, however, incites a crushing sense of foreignness of the world. If humans do not strive to find purpose in the universe, they lose connection with earthly life. Without a semblance of meaning, the world feels alien and hopeless. The constant warring of self-consciousness against an indefinable universe makes human life absurd, prompting the thought of taking one's life as an escape.

Camus argues against suicide because he believes that we can find balance and happiness in an absurd world. The philosopher asserts that "happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth" (The Myth of Sisyphus). They are intertwined and inseparable, meaning that happiness can and should be found in an absurd world. Camus strives to achieve this by restraining self-awareness to maintain a simultaneously familiar and foreign environment. By maintaining both positions, we can recognize the strangeness of life without feeling alienated or desensitized; we can uphold a "will to live without rejecting anything of life" (Return to Tipasa). In this way, we embrace our uniquely human self-consciousness for, even though it causes absurdity, it also affords us happiness. Humans will continually assign meaning to a meaningless world, but since

there is no distinguishable purpose to life, we can approach the universe with whatever perspective we choose, without fault. In a master-less universe, each person can become his own master of purpose — finding ultimate personal fate in whatever absurd life he experiences. It seems absurdity is wholly intertwined with the human condition, but so is the happiness we can experience from it. Camus believes that suicide is not only unnecessary but unjoyful compared to the contentment with which humans can experience life. Those searching for greater meaning in death will not find it; the highest meaning we can grasp is the joy of present human life.

Camus' and Socrates' different contentions with suicide reveal that the former reveres present life on earth, while the latter considers it an obstacle to overcome, rendering it insignificant. Socrates denies the distractions of earthly life in order to purely reason without hindrance. He believes that the body only inhibits the soul's understanding of abstract concepts. Though bodily desires can be ignored to some degree, the soul can only purely comprehend once it is separated from the body in death. In this way, Socrates portrays humanity as a barrier to meaning, affording our present life a certain insignificance. Camus, however, believes that meaning and beauty can only be found in present life. Our self-awareness creates the absurdity of life, but also affords us happiness and beauty, by what we perceive alone.

While Socrates condemns our body as a distractor, Camus asserts that we only perceive beauty through our senses.

Though Socrates seems to afford significance to human life in its devotion to the gods, he does so in preparation for an afterlife, maintaining humanity as an obstacle, opposite Camus. Socrates' devotion to the gods seems to emphasize present life. Humans use life to act in service of the gods and revere them; they refrain from committing suicide out of respect for religious commitment. Though this devotion to the gods seems to signify meaning, it is only a means to attain knowledge in the afterlife. Socrates urges against suicide to preserve the gods' favor and future comprehension of meaning in a "good" afterlife. Preserving human life and honoring the gods' does not signify meaning to life but a condition to acquire meaning. This belief opposes Camus,' as he claims that those who require gods to perceive beauty are "poor" (Nuptials at Tipasa). He believes that all humans need to understand the beauty of life is an unembellished perception of the surrounding world. While Socrates considers earthly life a step to comprehending meaning, Camus asserts the non-existence of the ultimate truth for which Socrates longs. Human self-awareness is the master of meaning; we create it and can only perceive it in present life. Though he defines life as "absurd," Camus

believes it contains the only meaning and happiness we will ever know.

While Socrates and Camus present opposing perspectives of earthly life, they agree on the significance of self-consciousness and human possibilities for higher perception. Socrates preaches that the unhindered soul can attain pure knowledge. Camus asserts that self-awareness allows us to paint life with meaning and find beauty in the world. Whether we comprehend ultimate meaning or create it ourselves, whether in life or death, Socrates and Camus agree that the human self-consciousness is capable of finding purpose and joy.