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The Benefits of Being a Suicidal Curmudgeon: Emil Cioran on Killing Yourself

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Abstract: Emil Cioran offers novel arguments against suicide. He assumes a meaningless world. But in such a world, he argues, suicide and death would be equally as meaningless as life or anything else. Suicide and death are as cumbersome and useless as meaning and life. Yet Cioran also argues that we should contemplate suicide to live better lives. By contemplating suicide, we confront the deep suffering inherent in existence. This humbles us enough to allow us to change even the deepest aspects of ourselves. Yet it also reminds us that our peculiar human ability—being able to contemplate suicide—sets us above anything else in nature or in the heavens. This paper assembles and defends a view of suicide written about in Cioran’s aphorisms and essays.

Keywords: Emil Cioran, suicide, ethics, good life, pessimism, French philosophy, existentialism

Why don't I commit suicide? Because I am as sick of death as I am of life. I should be cast into a flaming cauldron! Why am I on this earth? I feel the need to cry out, to utter a savage scream that will set the world atremble with dread. I am like a lightning bolt ready to set the world ablaze and swallow it all in the flames of my nothingness. I am the most monstrous being in history, the beast of the apocalypse full of fire and darkness, of aspirations and despair. I am the beast with a contorted grin, contracting down to illusion and dilating toward infinity, both growing and dying, delightfully suspended between hope for nothing and despair of everything, brought up among perfumes and poisons, consumed with love and hatred, killed by lights and shadows. My symbol is the death of light and the flame of death. Sparks die in me only to be reborn as thunder and lightning. Darkness itself glows in me.

—Emil Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*

Suicide is folded into French existentialism like butter into croissants. For Jean-Paul Sartre, humans are “condemned to be free,” beings who “are not free to cease being free.” (1984 [1944], p. 439). Why? Because no

matter the harshness of circumstances, we always have suicide as an out.¹ In choosing not to complete suicide, we affirm responsibility for every action because we could have chosen otherwise. Suicide's possibility upholds our agency and freedom. Albert Camus intensified this theme, writing: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (1983 [1955], p. 3).² After all, he explains, "... killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it" (1983 [1955], p. 5). For Camus, suicide is something we cannot ignore because it displays the absurdity of life and our reactions to it. Hope, scorn, defiance, whatever our alternative to suicide—meanings in life emerge after we contemplate suicide.³ Despite coming from the same philosophical tradition, Camus and Sartre do not agree about suicide. Camus recommends against suicide. Sartre keeps the option. Camus argues based on meaning in life. Sartre argues based on autonomy, freedom, and responsibility.

I argue that Emil Cioran, a contemporary of Sartre and Camus, resolves the conflict between the two thinkers. He disparages the *act* of suicide but promotes its *contemplation*. He thus agrees with Sartre that it affects our agency, responsibility, and ability to consider existential issues. Yet he agrees with Camus that we should not kill ourselves. Cioran did not change his mind about these ideas either. Throughout his career, Cioran stands firmly against suicide (e.g. 1992 [1934], p. 55).⁴ Yet also throughout his career, he champions the importance of the *idea* of suicide, as when writing: "I live only because it is in my power to die when I choose to: without the idea of suicide, I'd have killed myself right away" (2012 [1952]).⁵

How can Cioran advocate for thinking about suicide while criticizing going through with it? The key is how he characterizes human existence: meaningless and full of suffering. But rather than euphemize that, he lays it bare. Beginning his philosophical defense of life from bleakness, he offers a novel way of thinking about suicide: It is ultimately useless, but you become a better person by considering it. I want to make sense of these claims, especially since Cioran's aphorisms and essays fail to explicate these ideas clearly. So, this paper aims, first, to organize Cioran's thoughts about suicide and, second, to examine whether his claim is true that we should contemplate suicide to make our lives go better.

1. Life Is Meaningless But So Is Suicide

What puzzles me about Cioran is the bleakness of his worldview yet his insistence against suicide. He ends *A Short History of Decay* with, "Forever be accursed the star under which I was born, may no sky protect

it, let it crumble in space like a dust without honor! And let the traitorous moment that cast me among the creatures be forever erased from the lists of Time” (2012 [1949], p. 180)! He did not want to be born, and despite living eight decades, many with a life-long partner, he never changed his mind. Life is suffering, and nothing can justify its torments (1992 [1934], p. 54).⁶ In fact, at one point Cioran defines life as “*a state of non-suicide*” (2012 [1949], p. 19 [emphasis in original]). Yet here we are.⁷ And here, Cioran argues, we should not kill ourselves.

Cioran writes: “It is not worth the bother of killing yourself, since you always kill yourself *too late*” (2012 [1973], p. 32 [emphasis in original]). Also: “Why don’t I commit suicide? Because I am as sick of death as I am of life” (1992 [1934], p. 56). Cioran has moments as a poet waxing defiant. He has moments as an arbiter, litigating on behalf of freedom. But the central theme in his writings on suicide is this: everything is meaningless, and nothing you do can help, not even suicide. If that is truly the verdict, there is no basis for preferring death to life. He explains, “Only optimists commit suicide, the optimists who can no longer be ... [sic] optimists. The others, having no reason to live, why should they have any to die” (2012 [1952])? We muck about in a vacuum of meaninglessness, failed values sucking at our shoes like putrid mud. By the time we consider suicide, we have already suffered immensely. There is no way any action, even suicide, can justify this or make sense of life. Additionally, by the point of suicidal ideation, we have seen every value falter. As corollary, there is no value that can ground non-suffering as preferable to suffering.⁸ So, there is nothing to gain from suicide.

We usually associate meaninglessness and hopelessness with desperation, anxiety, and misery. Cioran would deny none of these associations. But he would also ask why these things should push us toward suicide. Putting aside the pretenses of meaning, aspiration, or positive values liberates us. After all, Cioran writes, “In order to triumph over [death’s] appetite, there is but one ‘method’: to live [life] to the end, to submit to all its pleasures, all its pangs, to do nothing to elude it” (2012 [1949], p. 12). Many human frustrations lie in trying to find something to cover the ugly truths that life has no obvious meaning and that we are all making things up. Instead, Cioran recommends that we should face this realization and keep moving forward.

Cioran advances novel arguments against suicide. He does not rely on the irrationality of using one’s capacity to will to never will again, nor does he rely on duties to one’s own or another’s dignity (cf. Kant, 1996, §6). Nor does he make religious appeals (cf. Augustine, 2003, I.20). Rather, he takes the prospect of meaninglessness seriously. He extrapolates that

under such conditions, suicide would be meaningless too, not to mention useless. Killing oneself can accomplish no goal of the would-be suicide.⁹

2. The Virtues of Contemplating Suicide

Yet Cioran says he admires the suicidal. Non-suicidal people have a self-assurance and contentment that prevent radical change. By contrast, the suicidal are acquainted with death and can kill every aspect of themselves, a prerequisite for metamorphosis. Something about their dispositions allows them to transform themselves in ways that others cannot (1992 [1934], p. 56). Thinking everything through, they live more mindfully. Embracing their finitude, they are more realistic.

Given Cioran's admiration of the suicidal, he laments that Christianity took away the serious everyday consideration of killing ourselves (2012 [1973], p. 157). The ancients, especially the Stoics, made an art of dying. They took control of death by contemplating it daily and setting forth plans to ensure a good one. They did not cling to life because they cowered before death. Nor did they avoid discussing the issue altogether, Stoics often laughing at the lash of a *faux pas*. They considered all alternatives to their actions and life goals, and they lived and died better for it. By contrast, when looking at people today, Cioran bemoans, "Habités of despair, complacent corpses, we all outlive ourselves and die only to fulfill a futile formality. It is as if our life were attached to itself only to postpone the moment when we could get rid of it" (2012 [1949], p. 39). By not empowering ourselves through considering suicide, we enfeeble every aspect of ourselves.

But contemplating suicide does not mean obsession with it. Contemplation is optimal; obsession is glutted. Cioran argues, "To be obsessed with suicide, there must be such inner agony that all self-imposed barriers break and nothing is left but catastrophic dizziness, a strange and powerful whirlwind" (1992 [1934], p. 55). Obsession occurs whenever we refuse to spend time considering the positives of anguish and death. Like trying not to pay attention to a chronic, worsening ache, a person ends up letting his illness deteriorate, and adjusts every other aspect of his body to compensate. In trying not to pay attention, he pays more than he would have. Cioran writes, "The man who has not given himself up to the pleasures of anguish, who has not savored in his mind the dangers of his own extinction nor relished such cruel and sweet annihilations, will never be cured of the obsession with death: he will be tormented by it for he will have resisted it" (2012 [1949], p. 12). In contrast, the person who understands death, especially at her own hands, can put the issue of death behind her and live resurrected. Rather than die a million deaths anxiously

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avoiding the topics of suicide and death, the wise person entertains the thought thoroughly enough to die once intellectually and to be reborn through further action.¹⁰ No one is freer than the dead, unencumbered by yesterday's pacts and tomorrow's obligations. Cioran might say: live as if you are already dead, not because you recoil at the thought, but because you left the corpse of your life and its values behind.¹¹

Perhaps most unique to Cioran, he offers hedonistic reasons for contemplating suicide. He admits, "The notion of destroying ourselves, the multiplicity of means for doing so, their ease and their proximity delight us and fill us with dread; for there is nothing simpler and more terrible than the action by which we decide irrevocably upon ourselves" (1992 [1934], p. 36). While we should never complete suicide, Cioran thinks that contemplating suicide is fair fun. I cannot help but wonder what he would think of the movie *Harold and Maude* (1971), in which Harold routinely fakes his own suicide in theatrical ways and relishes the memories in therapy. Or Andy Riley's *The Book of Bunny Suicides* (2003), which has dozens of comics of rabbits killing themselves. There is a perverse pleasure in experiencing these works, and if we could give up pretenses, maybe we could feel the same thinking of our own demise.

It is also worth stressing an entailment of Cioran's hedonistic views on contemplating suicide: if we kill ourselves, we cannot experience the pleasure of contemplating our own suicides. We know for certain that we can relish our own perverse visions here and now. But if we died, we would lose that source of pleasure. And we should not squander something so wonderful.

Contemplating suicide changes us. It builds confidence. Cioran imagines a critic asking him where he gets his "superior airs." He responds, "I've managed to survive, you see, all those nights when I wondered: am I going to kill myself at dawn" (2012 [1952]). Surviving those nights, we get a little swagger. The ability to intend our own deaths is uniquely human (2012 [1949], p. 38).¹² And God, that pitiful all-perfect being, could never die by suicide. Cioran writes, "In a single second we do away with all seconds; God himself could not do as much. But, braggart demons, we postpone our end: how could we renounce the display of our freedom, the show of our pride? ... [sic]" (2012 [1949], p. 36). Considering suicide sets us above animals, angels, and gods. And, oddly, that distinction makes life more worth living. Moreover, while the world may take everything from us, it can never take our freedom to kill ourselves. There is a supreme irrevocability and durability to the goods of contemplating suicide (2012 [1949], pp. 36-7).

3. The Sense of Endings

Cioran's remarks clearly indicate that he thinks the contemplation of suicide a necessary condition for living well. Without considering suicide, we die unaware, indifferent, mechanical. If we never consider the darker aspects of existence, we miss out on, perhaps, most of human life. Cioran writes, "Life breeds both plentitude and void, exuberance and depression" (1992 [1934], p. 8).¹³ Enjoying the happy moments is easy. But what about everything else? I think Cioran offers equalizing advice: nothing matters, so do not take your own life too seriously.¹⁴ By taking it all in, and seeing how meaningless everything is, we can more accurately assess the experiential value of all things. If we kill ourselves in thought and let our values ripen and rot, we move forward with fewer burdens.

Imagine you die. Then imagine the gods grant you a single day in the land of the living. Would you groan about any of your problems? Would you kill yourself as soon as you breathed air again? Cioran is betting no. I am too. And it is this perspective—savoring perverse pleasures and appreciating the elegant void—that I would recommend to strong minds. Life is suffering, but life ain't serious enough to kill yourself over.

Emil Cioran, and maybe he alone, makes sense of the fact that the universe is large and indifferent to humanity. But not just that. I think he inspires us to consider that things could always get worse, even in an after life (if such a state exists). Cioran also exposes the limits of reason. The very capacity that we use to perceive order and justify existence might not be up to its tasks. The uniqueness and complexity of the faculty of human reason does not entail its usefulness or value. After all, hagfish produce a rare slime that can choke any predator to keep them from being eaten. But even they must protect themselves from their defining characteristic, often by tying themselves in knots so that they do not choke on their own slime (see: Jensen, 1966).

We put weight on decrepit pretenses when we aspire to brute objectivity. Why not give that up before the structure crumbles? And when other things crumble, why think it matters so much we should kill ourselves? For Cioran, not by not suiciding, we give ourselves immediate opportunities to enjoy dark thoughts, and we delay the coming horrors of inexistence. We also avoid the atrocities of certainty, evidenced in any moral or political monstrosity. This does not, of course, mean that we cannot aspire toward Truth or fight for Justice. But it does mean that we will be humble enough to adapt to new data and adjust our strategies. No matter how grand our projects, we will always fail. No matter how abysmal our failures, a peculiar and hilarious human diddles in the wreckage. Thinking about suicide arms us with gallows humor. If we

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are all going to hang, we might as well enjoy twist of the rope and the carpentry of the platform. Or, as Cioran wrote:

I must struggle against myself, fly into a rage at my destiny, blow up all resistance to my transfiguration; let there be only my desire for light and darkness! Let each one of my actions be either triumph or fall, flight or failure! Let life grow and die in me with the speed of a lightning bolt! Let not the pettiness and rationality of commonplace existence spoil the pleasures and torments of my inner chaos, the tragic delights of my final despair and joy! (1992 [1934], p. 106)¹⁵

Notes

¹ Sartre explains:

Thus there are no *accidents* in a life; a community event which suddenly bursts forth and involves me in it does not come from the outside. If I am mobilized in a war, this war is *my* war; it is in my image and I deserve it. I deserve it first because I could always get out of it by suicide or by desertion; these ultimate possibilities are those which must always be present for us when there is a question of envisaging a situation. For lack of getting out of it, I have *chosen* it. (1984, p. 554 [emphasis in original])

² Camus puts the point starkly:

All the rest [of philosophical problems]—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. ... I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument. ... On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). (1983 [1954], pp. 3-4).

Of course, Camus here is connecting suicide to meaning in life. But he recognizes that no such necessary connection exists (see: 1983 [1954], p. 8).

³ It is worth noting that positive emotions are not the only response to absurdity, somehow transcending absurdity via happiness. Negative emotions also play a part. Camus emphasizes, “There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn” (1983 [1953], p. 121).

⁴ In this paper, I hope to make sense of Cioran’s written works on suicide. His life is more complicated, however. In his old age, he began to suffer from Alzheimer’s. So, he created a suicide pact with his partner Simone Boué to try to avoid dying in an institution. Unfortunately, he did not avoid the fate he feared

(Bradatan, 2016). Cioran's life might show that, under certain circumstances, suicide is indeed justified. But I am unsure of how to square that position with his original works.

⁵ Cioran also writes: "We dread the future only when we are not sure we can kill ourselves when we want to" (2012 [1973], p. 77).

⁶ Cioran writes, "Docile to malediction, we exist only insofar as we suffer" (2012 [1949]), p. 28).

⁷ Such wretched conditions imply, for Cioran, that we should never procreate. He writes, "To have committed every crime but that of being a father" (2012 [1973], p. 6). Having children is akin to the worst crimes of existence.

⁸ Pessimism could go deeper. For example, Walter Benjamin recounts a conversation that Max Brod told him about when talking with Franz Kafka. Max Brod recounts, "I recall ... a conversation with Kafka ... 'We are,' so [Kafka] said, 'nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts that arise in God's head.' This first reminded me of the worldview of the Gnostics: God as evil Demiurge, the world his fall into sin. 'Oh, no,' [Kafka] said, 'our world is only a bad mood for god, a bad day.' So there might be hope outside of this world of appearances that we know? [Brod asked.] Kafka smiled, 'Oh, hope enough, an unending amount of hope, only not for us.'" (1981, p. 14 [my own translation]). In this case, Kafka voices something common in cosmic horror: the gods are wholly indifferent to us, and we are so trivial that we do not even register as a mistake, much less as something beloved. Life is suffering, but no one really cares.

Similarly, David Hume begins Part X of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* with a discussion of suffering. The discussion is, perhaps, best summarized by Demea: "Were a stranger to drop on a sudden into this world, I would show him, as a specimen of its ills, a hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field of battle strewn with carcasses, a fleet foundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine, or pestilence. To turn the gay side of life to him and give him a notion of its pleasures; whither should I conduct him? to a ball, to an opera, to a court? He might justly think that I was only showing him a diversity of distress and sorrow" (1998, p. 61). In other words, human capacities and affairs are a parade of suffering, and even leisure activities might join the procession, rather than offer an alternative.

⁹ There is one caveat. Cioran seems to be a thoroughgoing subjectivist at times. For example, he writes, "We should repeat to ourselves, every day: I am one of the billions dragging himself across the earth's surface. One, and no more. This banality justifies any conclusion, any behavior or action: debauchery, chastity, suicide, work, crime, sloth, or rebellion. ... [sic] Whence it follows that each man is right to do what he does" (2012 [1973], pp. 118-9). But at other times, Cioran seems to defend adamantly that there are rights and wrongs, "'Since for you there is no ultimate criterion nor irrevocable principle, and no god, what keeps you from committing any and every crime?' 'I find in myself as much evil as in anyone, but detesting action—mother of all vices—I am the cause of no one's suffering. Harmless, without greed, and without enough energy or indecency to affront others, I leave the world as I found it. To take revenge presupposes

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a constant vigilance and a systematic mind, a costly continuity, whereas the indifference of forgiveness and contempt renders the hours pleasantly empty. All ethics represent a danger for goodness; only negligence rescues. Having chosen the phlegm of the imbecile and the apathy of the angel, I have excluded myself from actions and, since goodness is incompatible with life, I have decomposed myself in order to be good” (2012 [1949], p. 156). His condemnation of certainty and zealous action seem more than subjectivist opinions. Lastly, this could give rise to yet another novel argument against suicide: actively choosing to end your own life would mean presupposing some ethic or set of values, which is the root of dangerous zeal that is the source of all the world’s ills. It is much better to forgo action altogether, including an action like killing yourself.

¹⁰ Cioran’s advice about contemplating death rings of Epictetus: “Death, exile, everything appearing terrible, especially death—keep them in front of your eyes every day. Then you will take nothing base to heart, nor set your heart on anything excessively” (1928, s. 21 [my own translation]). The root of the words ἐνθυμηθῆσῃ and ἐπιθυμήσεις is θυμός, which is more than “mind” or “thought,” as is traditionally translated. There’s a deeper sense of spirit and desire, which I have rendered as “heart.” Similarly, I think Cioran’s considerations are not merely cognitive. Emotion and desire play large roles in his philosophy.

¹¹ Marcus Aurelius gives similar advice: “Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what’s left and live it properly” (2003, p. 94).

¹² Philosophers might dispute whether animals can kill themselves. For example, Aristotle tells a story about a stallion who was tricked into mating with his own mother. The stallion’s mother was a quality mare, and the child stallion did not want to mate with her. But the owner covered the mother’s head in a wrapping, and the stallion mated with her. After the cover was removed, the stallion ran away and jumped off a cliff to its death (Aristotle, 1984, IX.47).

¹³ Cioran shares this sentiment with Michel de Montaigne, who wrote, “We must learn to suffer whatever we cannot avoid. Our life is composed, like the harmony of the world, of discords as well as of different tones, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked only some of them, what could he sing? He has got to know how to use all of them and blend them together. So too must we with good and ill, which are of one substance with our life” (2003, p. 1237).

¹⁴ I have understated how opposed Cioran was to seriousness. He writes, “The devil pales beside the man who knows a truth, *his* truth ... The real criminals are men who establish an orthodoxy on the religious or political level, men who distinguish between the faithful and schismatic” (2012 [1949], p. 4). He also writes, “Courage and fear, two poles of the same disease, which consists in granting an abusive sense and seriousness to life. ... [sic] It is the lack of nonchalant bitterness which makes men into sectarian beasts; the subtlest and the crudest crimes are perpetuated by those who take things seriously. Only the dilettante has no taste for blood, he alone is no scoundrel ... [sic]” (2012 [1949], p. 72). This position led Susan Sontag to criticize his philosophy as somewhat conservative, maintaining the status quo through scorn of political reformers

and praise of inaction. But she also walks this criticism back because Cioran celebrates rebellion and lambasts aristocrats (1968, pp. 23-4).

¹⁵ I owe thanks to Avery Kolers and John Gibson for discussing the ideas in this paper with me, and for their encouragement in pursuing the ideas further. I also want to thank Thomas Tilton, MS, LPC, who drew my attention to terminology surrounding suicide. “Commit suicide” is a phrase that rings too much of “committing crime,” thus stigmatizing suicide. So, there are people who prefer more neutral terms such as “complete suicide” or “death by suicide.” I tried to respect this where possible.

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