Suicide: Do the greatest minds in history have anything to offer?

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The suicide scholars frequently claim suicide is "a major health problem" [1]. But, "health" is so loosely defined this phrase has lost any meaning and it would be better to refer to suicide as a "major human problem". Further, these scholars have accepted no thoughts/wisdom on the topic from the great thinkers of the last two and a half millennia [2]. We present some notions from such people for consideration.

Many have described the world as insufferable. Sophocles (Classical Greece; 497-406 BCE) said, "Never to have been born is much the best". Montesquieu (French Judge) wrote (1721) "A man should be mourned at his birth, not at his death". Schopenhauer (German philosopher, 1788-1860) wrote, "The two foes of human happiness are pain and boredom". Camus (French philosopher) wrote (1960), "It's common knowledge that life isn't worth living, anyhow", and Gary Shteyngart (Russian; born in 1972), Associate Professor in the Writing Programme at Columbia University wrote, "Everyone struggles. Each life comes with a long catalogue of pain".

Many have described suicide as a means of escaping the insufferable. Plato (Classical Greek) was opposed to suicide on religious grounds, but wrote (*Laws*; 360 BCE) that this action is acceptable if it occurs in response to "painful misfortune" and "irremediable and intolerable shame". Horace (Roman poet; 65-8 BCE) wrote, "many a good man may weep for his death". Shakespeare (England; *Hamlet*, 1609) asked whether it is appropriate to suicide in response to "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and "a sea of trouble". Jorge Luis Borges (Argentine essayist and poet) wrote (1975) in his poem, "The Suicide", "I will die and, with me, /the weight of the intolerable universe". In the same year, Jean Baechler (French sociologist) wrote, "Every suicide is a solution to a problem".

Our automatic reaction is to attempt to prevent death, but this is not the universally approved reaction. David Hume (Scottish philosopher) wrote (1777), "No man ever threw away life while it was worth keeping". And there is some argument against suicide prevention. Peter Zapffe (Norwegian philosopher and lawyer) wrote (1933), "The modern barbarity of 'saving' the suicidal is based on a hair-raising misapprehension of the nature of existence". And, Gene Lester and David Lester (American suicidologists) wrote (1971), "Preventing a suicide is not necessarily a beneficent act if it forces the potential suicide to continue in a life of misery".

Levi-Belz et al (1) tell of newly detected "impaired decision making" in people who make suicide attempts. They are working to "find psychological remedy for all of those struggling with suicide ideation and behaviour". Such medical/psychological concepts treat the individual as a chemical reaction and ignore history, culture and personal choice.

There is a need to explore the wisdom of other disciplines, to determine whether suicide is better considered a health or a human problem, to examine whether there are ways to make the world more tolerable/pleasant, to review the notion that suicide prevention is a given, and to consider assisting if suicide is determined the most appropriate response to circumstances.

References

1. Levi-Belz Y, Gvion Y, Alan Apter A. Editorial: The psychology of suicide: from research understandings to intervention and treatment. Front Psychiatry. 2019;10:214. doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2019.00214
2. Goldney D. Suicide Prevention. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2008.