

# Aesthetics as a Humanism

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**Abstract:** Philosophical treatments of suicide have largely proceeded along two canonical trajectories: ethical and existential. Ethical frameworks, grounded in normative assessment, often risk intensifying self-condemnation by situating suicidal desire within the register of moral failure. Existentialist accounts, by contrast, tend to aestheticize or romanticize self-destruction as a mode of authentic resolution, thereby introducing a different but equally problematic form of closure. Both frameworks may have structural vulnerabilities when applied to the lived phenomenology of suicidal crisis, where the demand is not for judgment or transcendence but for the reconstitution of meaning within immanent life. This paper proposes aesthetic philosophy as a third, comparatively underexplored framework through which to reconceptualize suicide. In particular, I draw upon phenomenologically oriented theories of everyday aesthetics that emphasize perceptual, embodied, and affective continuities of existence. These approaches reorient philosophical inquiry from normative justification to modes of attention, disclosing ways of remaining in contact with life that do not require prior demonstrations of life's value or coherence.

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.” Albert Camus opens *The Myth of Sisyphus* with this claim. “No,” presumably, should be the obvious answer to suicide. Yet understanding *how* one arrives at this seemingly obvious “no” proves considerably difficult, particularly for individuals in suicidal crisis who find “yes” more compelling. Some philosophical traditions suggest we should not attempt to *reason* through the suicide problem at all. Nietzsche suggests that evaluating life's value involves an inevitable circularity: the will to live is not a conclusion we reason toward, but a precondition that makes reasoning itself possible. To judge life, we must employ the very faculties and drives that life has given us.<sup>1</sup> The question, then, is not whether we can rationally prove life is worth living, but whether we can create or discover conditions that make living possible and desirable. This limitation does not undermine philosophical attempts to understand suicide. Rather, it situates philosophical reflection in its proper place, as a secondary attempt to articulate and interpret features of life that are more fundamental than the reasoning used to analyze them.

Typical philosophical approaches to suicide include ethical and existentialist frame-

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1 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 1997), §2.

works, which offer distinct conceptual resources but also may create structural vulnerabilities for someone in suicidal crisis. Ethical frameworks can inadvertently provide language for self-condemnation through normative assessment, while existentialist approaches may diminish agency through deterministic reduction or validate death as meaningful resolution. After examining these limitations, I explore how an aesthetic framework might offer a different route for understanding and ultimately dissuading an individual who is seriously considering suicide from committing suicide. Specifically, I focus on phenomenologically-oriented everyday aesthetics that emphasize immediate, present-tense sensory attention rather than theories of beauty or formal judgment. This aesthetic approach offers a mode of continuing contact with existence that does not require the individual to first establish that their existence meets standards of worthiness, authenticity, or meaning. We will explore the aesthetic approach to dealing with suicide in two distinct methodologies: one, the immediate aesthetic engagement that provides reasons to continue living by enabling continued contact with existence without justification, and second, the problem of suicide and aesthetics situated within a larger philosophical conversation that challenges the question of whether any *justification* needed for the existence question is needed altogether.

Ethical and existentialist frameworks have long dominated philosophical approaches to suicide, yet both traditions are better equipped to address the question of whether one should live than how one might continue to do so. I argue that aesthetic frameworks provide conceptual resources particularly well-suited to that question, resources that ethical and existentialist approaches have largely left unexplored. By suicidal crisis, I mean a condition in which an individual is seriously considering ending their life under acute psychological and moral distress. I identify distinctive vulnerabilities that ethical and existentialist frameworks may create for individuals in crisis, then explore what conceptual possibilities emerge when we turn to the aesthetic approach, which seeks to answer the “how” of existence rather than the “why.” Specifically, I explore a non-pharmaceutical approach to the problem of suicide, encouraging the individual in crisis to reflect phenomenologically on what makes life still worth holding onto. Aesthetic approaches to suicide remain relatively unexplored in philosophical literature compared to ethical and existentialist treatments, making this investigation both timely and necessary.

### **Suicide as a Philosophical Problem**

A philosophical problem requires conceptual analysis of fundamental categories like meaning, value, and existence rather than empirical observation alone. Suicide qualifies as such a problem because it directly concerns life and death with absolute stakes, demanding that substantive philosophical approaches incorporate practical understanding into one’s engagement with existence.

Philosophical frameworks themselves may play a role in understanding or exacerbating suicidal crisis. Regardless of suicide’s immediate causes, from either overwhelming pain, anticipated loss, or other circumstances, individuals who attempt to end their lives inevitably draw upon conceptual resources to understand meaning, value, and existence. The philosophical frameworks available to someone shape how suffering becomes intelligible, whether continued existence appears possible, and what language becomes available for justifying life or death. From this problem, we must ask if there are possible frameworks for thinking about life, existence, meaning, and value that inadvertently may give people the language to answer “no” to all those reasons to keep existing.

### **Ethical Dimensions of Suicide**

Ethical frameworks often draw upon the strongest reasons for living: purpose, meaning, relationships worth preserving, and goals worth pursuing. But ethics primarily works by establishing standards for value and significance, and this evaluative structure can cut both ways. When someone’s capacity for ethical self-assessment is compromised, the same frameworks that once sustained them can become weapons turned against the self.

Philosophers have traditionally condemned suicide on two foundational arguments: one deontological, one teleological. Kant treats self-destruction as a categorical violation; we have duties to ourselves as rational agents that cannot be dissolved by circumstance. Suicide wields one’s person merely as a means to escape suffering, violating the Formula of Humanity.<sup>2</sup> This constitutes a contradiction in which the rational will destroys the very condition of its own moral agency. Aristotle condemns suicide as cowardice, a failure to face life’s difficulties, and, more fundamentally, as a violation of our *telos*.<sup>3</sup> Suicide truncates this project, abandoning the possibility of living well. Both frameworks presuppose an intact ethical subject in their analysis, as they treat the person contemplating suicide as a rational agent capable of bearing duties and pursuing excellence, which is precisely what makes suicide a moral violation rather than a non-moral event.

Other ethical traditions permit suicide under certain conditions. Stoics like Seneca defend the “rational exit” when circumstances make virtuous living impossible. If reason and dignity are lost, departure becomes *justified*. Utilitarian ethics can justify suicide when continued existence produces more suffering than flourishing, accounting for effects on oneself and others. These permissive frameworks appear to offer escape from the Kantian-Aristotelian prohibition. However, each framework that permits suicide does so by invoking ethical *evaluation* itself as grounds for self-destruction. This evaluative structure can create a vicious recursion for individuals in crisis.

In the Stoic position, the “rational exit” is contingent on the agent’s capacity to judge that virtuous living has become impossible. But this judgment is itself supposed to be an exercise of virtue, specifically of practical wisdom and rational assessment. The Stoic must be rational enough to recognize they can no longer be rational, virtuous enough to see they can no longer be virtuous. The rational exit becomes permissible precisely when suffering has eroded one’s capacity for rational virtue, yet adjudicating whether this threshold has been reached requires the very rational capacity that such suffering has compromised. This coherence requires a stable observing self that can step outside its own degradation to pronounce judgment on it, unfortunately not the case for most suicidal individuals. And even where such capacities remain intact, the framework assumes that life requires justification—that one must be able to give reasons for continuing to live that can withstand rational scrutiny. This paper contests such a premise.

It should be noted that each of these ethical traditions contains more nuanced resources—virtue ethics, for instance, features sophisticated accounts of impaired agency through the concept of *akrasia*, and Kantian ethics has been developed in ways that complicate the picture of rational self-duty. However, what is relevant for the present argument is not whether these frameworks are ultimately defensible, but how their evaluative vocabulary functions when internalized by individuals actively engaged in suicidal ideation.

2 The Formula of Humanity: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (Kant 4:429).

3 *Telos* (τέλος) meaning “end,” “purpose,” “goal,” or “completion.”

Ethical frameworks provide the vocabulary for self-assessment: virtuous or vicious, authentic or inauthentic, net positive or net negative. This creates what I will call a recursive trap operating at multiple levels. In his analysis of Kurt Cobain's suicide note in *Expression and Survival*, Craig Greenman identifies how ethical vocabulary saturates Cobain's self-assessment: calling himself a "moody baby," confessing to feeling "emasculated," and apologizing for his inadequacy. Cobain describes himself as too sensitive, unable to feel the music anymore, "ripping people off" by continuing to perform. The note reads as though Cobain is measuring himself against standards of authenticity, passion, and integrity that he could no longer meet. As Greenman observes, "the language of the suicide note is consistent with the ethical argument against suicide."<sup>4</sup> Normative ethical theory may have provided the very measuring sticks against which Cobain found himself fatally deficient.

The recursive trap operates as follows. Ethics provides the vocabulary for self-assessment, then demands we take this self-assessment seriously as a guide to action. Finally, ethics insists we act with integrity, aligning our actions with our judgments. The synthesis becomes lethal; if I judge myself ethically deficient, and I take ethics seriously, and I value integrity, then continuing to exist in my deficient state becomes itself an ethical failure. The more rigorously one applies ethical reasoning, the more compelling the conclusion for life or against life becomes. Ethics, designed to guide human success, provides the logical language for assessing value that, when not met, can help an individual conclude that one should cease to exist.

### The Existentialist on Suicide

Existentialist approaches initially appear to avoid the recursive trap that can ensnare ethical frameworks. Rather than measuring the self against normative standards of virtue or authenticity, existentialism stems from radical freedom. Sartre declares that we are "condemned to be free," thrust into existence without predetermined essence or purpose, bearing total responsibility for what we make of ourselves. "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself," Sartre writes in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*.<sup>5</sup> This framework appears promising because it does not tell the suicidal person they are morally failing or merely sick. It acknowledges the genuine philosophical weight of the question of suicide without imposing external standards of worthiness. But if human existence is characterized by radical freedom and the burden of creating one's own meaning, then suicide becomes one legitimate expression of that freedom. Sartre's insistence that "existence precedes essence" means we define ourselves through our choices, and suicide itself is a choice.

It should be acknowledged that existentialism is not monolithic. Some readings of Sartre emphasize responsibility to others and commitment to ongoing projects as constraints on radical freedom, and other existentialist thinkers resist the conclusion that all choices are equally authentic. However, the structurally permissive tendency of the tradition, particularly as it has been popularly absorbed, remains a live concern for the present argument. The general trend of the existentialist framework treats self-destruction as a radical authentic choice, where choosing death is as authentic as choosing life. At minimum, the framework risks neutrality between continued existence and self-destruction in ways that may be dangerous for those in crisis.

4 Craig M. Greenman, "Cobain's Suicide Note as a 'Last Work': Art, Authenticity, and Ethics," in *Expression and Survival: Studies in the Aesthetics of Extreme Experience*, ed. Jonathan Mitchell (Routledge, 2014), 27.

5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Methuen, 1948), 22.

Jean Améry, an existentialist philosopher who survived Auschwitz, articulates what may be existentialism's most troubling philosophically justified endpoint in his *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*. Améry argues that "voluntary death is a privilege of the human."<sup>6</sup> An individual has the right to take complete possession of their life by defining its end. To Améry, suicide is essentially the ultimate self-determination in a universe where existence remains largely subject to external forces. Améry himself took his own life two years after publishing his discourse on suicide. While we might validate Améry's suicide as an authentic expression of existentialist freedom, his case exposes a structural risk within the existentialist treatment of suicide. Existentialism treats suicide as the ultimate authentic choice and, by doing so, risks elevating it as the pinnacle of human existence. For someone in suicidal crisis seeking reasons to live, existentialism may instead provide philosophical validation for death as a meaningful resolution.

This risk, visible in Améry's case, stems directly from existentialism's foundational commitments. Sartre's claim that we are "condemned to be free" means we bear total responsibility for what we make of ourselves. For someone already experiencing life as meaningless or unbearable, this may intensify rather than alleviate crisis. It suggests that their suffering is something they have chosen, something they are responsible for, and something only to be resolved by their own proper exercise of freedom. And when the burden of freedom becomes unbearable, existentialism presents suicide as one more authentic choice, as the ultimate exercise of freedom, the entire refusal of the burden.

Even Camus, who explicitly argues against suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, offers limited resources for someone in crisis. Camus claims that recognizing life's absurdity while refusing suicide represents authentic human dignity. He concludes: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."<sup>7</sup> This phrase is memorable but opaque, as it tells us *what* we should do (imagine Sisyphus happy, rebel against absurdity) without providing resources for *how* to do so if one does not already feel that rebellious vitality. For our purposes of understanding which philosophical frameworks can help individuals in active crisis, absurdism may not even register. His strongly rejects suicide but provides little conceptual ground for someone who does not already feel that pull towards life.

### The Aesthetic Approach

The ethical and existentialist frameworks that have dominated philosophical responses share a common premise, that evaluative judgment about life's worth is both possible and necessary for resolving the crisis. For someone experiencing suicidal crisis, however, this presupposition may be precisely what has collapsed, leaving them trapped in frameworks that demand the very capacities the crisis has rendered inoperative.

I propose a phenomenologically-oriented aesthetic approach to the philosophical problem of suicide meant to specifically address individuals in active crisis, one that sidesteps both the moralistic prohibition ("don't do it, life is valuable") and existentialist neutrality ("it's your authentic choice"). Aesthetics is a vast philosophical domain encompassing everything from Kantian formalism to evaluative theories of beauty, sublimity, and artistic creation. The framework proposed here lies outside the typical artistic analysis of aesthetics. The everyday

6 Jean Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, trans. John D. Barlow (Indiana University Press, 1999), 43. Originally published 1976.

7 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Vintage Books, 1991), 123. Originally published 1942.

aesthetics I describe to reckon with the problem of suicide emphasize immediate sensory attention. This approach does not escape the evaluative features of the previous frameworks entirely but relocates the question. Rather than asking “on what basis is life worth living?”, it invites attention to present moments like textures, sensations, and details. The former framework provokes a global judgement on life, while the latter requires only local attention. In a way, aesthetic engagement constantly appraises surroundings (“this moment matters,” “this sensation registers,” “this detail commands attention”) but does not require that life as a whole be found worthy, meaningful, or authentic for one to continue living. This framework offers a third path by neither encouraging life nor remaining neutral about death, but instead providing resources for *remaining in contact with existence* without first resolving whether that existence is justified.

It is crucial to distinguish this proposal from a superficially similar but fundamentally different approach, the claim that one should notice beauty as evidence that life is worth living. For example, take what could be a common line from a well-meaning but misguided person trying to help someone in suicidal crisis: “life is so beautiful; don’t kill yourself.” Trapped within evaluative frameworks that make a global judgement about the state of life, this approach provides a reason to stick with it. By asking that one assess whether the presence of beauty meets a standard sufficient to warrant continued existence, it still presupposes the precise evaluative capacities that may have collapsed in crisis.

Previous philosophical approaches to suicide largely seek to determine whether suicide is rational, permissible, or authentic. But for someone in an active crisis, these neglect the more urgent question: not whether life is worth living in the abstract, but *how to remain in contact with existence* when the capacity to justify that existence has collapsed. Recent work in everyday aesthetics establishes that aesthetic experience operates fundamentally differently from rational justification in ways that make it accessible even when other capacities have been compromised. Yuriko Saito’s development of the field in *Everyday Aesthetics* demonstrates that aesthetic experience pervades ordinary life in ways that require no special training, talent, or accomplishment. Saito distinguishes between art and non-art, noting the aesthetic experience of many non-art experiences as universal; “Most non-art objects and activities concern our everyday experiences of eating, clothing, dwelling, cleaning, and dealing with natural elements.”<sup>8</sup> A special mode of appreciation can come of noticing details like the texture of morning light falling across a table, the rhythm of walking down a familiar street, the taste of coffee, or the sound of rain against windows. These experiences demand nothing except attention to the qualitative dimension of ongoing experience as it unfolds moment by moment through whatever senses are available. One need not be talented, creative, or accomplished to notice these textures of experience. The specific modalities available vary for each person. Someone who cannot see might attend to textures or sounds; someone who cannot walk might notice the rhythm of breathing or the weight of their body in stillness. Regardless of sensory capacity, aesthetic engagement is accessible. For someone in crisis whose evaluative capacities have collapsed but whose sensory mechanisms persist, this accessibility proves crucial; aesthetic attention asks neither that the moment possess special beauty or significance, nor that one justify why this moment, rather than some other, deserves notice. Saito’s framework thus eliminates the requirement of achievement or expertise that might otherwise constitute a barrier to engagement.

This minimal requirement of simple attention to sensory experience might nevertheless

8 Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 88.

appear beyond reach for someone in suicidal crisis, whose capacity for sustained attention or coherent experience may be severely compromised. Sheri Irvin’s work in “The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience” addresses this concern by challenging the assumption that aesthetic experience requires unity, closure, and sustained conscious attention. Irvin argues against philosophers like Dewey who impose such requirements, demonstrating instead that aesthetic experience can be “simple, lacking in unity or closure, and characterized by limited or fragmented awareness” without losing its aesthetic character.<sup>9</sup> She describes experiences that exist in what she terms the “twilight of consciousness,” moments in which “one is vaguely aware,” but not “vividly present.”<sup>10</sup> The vagueness of awareness itself can constitute part of the aesthetic texture of a moment. Most significantly, these experiences need not build toward any resolution or culmination. Aesthetic attention can simply “drift away”<sup>11</sup> without reaching conclusion, without serving any larger purpose, and without accumulating toward judgment. One may notice the weight of a coffee cup, the texture of light on a table, or the sound of rain, all self-fulfilling moments. For someone whose attention fragments and drifts, Irvin’s framework does not disqualify aesthetic engagement. Even such a vague, drifting, fragmentary awareness retains aesthetic validity.

Granted one’s capacity to notice details without talent or sustained attention, why should one bother? What justifies attending to light or texture when one cannot establish meaning therein or come to conclusions about whether existence is justified? Martin Seel’s concept of *Erscheinen* (appearing) addresses this obstacle by revealing that aesthetic attention operates entirely outside the framework of justification. Seel differentiates between an object’s “being-so,” its fixed and conceptually determinable properties, and its “appearing,” the indeterminate process of how it presents itself in perception. Aesthetic perception, Seel argues, attends not to what an object is but to “the how of their givenness here,”<sup>12</sup> focusing on “the phenomenal simultaneity of the aspects sensitively perceivable in an object.”<sup>13</sup> Appearing is foregrounded when we “allow an object of perception to have effect without restricting ourselves to specific aspects of its constitution or function.”<sup>14</sup> The light appears; perception of it follows. No evaluative judgment mediates this engagement. Seel designates this mode “mere appearing,” (*Erscheinen*) where “we pay attention to nothing other than the repleteness of its momentary and simultaneous givenness”<sup>15</sup> with “no ambition to constitute a meaning of what is sensed.”<sup>16</sup> The appearing itself constitutes the engagement, requiring no intermediate evaluative step. For someone in suicidal crisis, this proves crucial because the collapse often occurs precisely in evaluative capacity: the ability to judge whether something matters, whether existence is justified, and whether this moment deserves attention. Seel’s framework reveals that aesthetic attention bypasses this collapsed capacity entirely. One can attend to the quality of morning light not by first establishing that one’s life has meaning or that such attention serves some larger purpose, but simply because appearing “is open to us at all times,”<sup>17</sup>

9 Sheri Irvin, “The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 1 (January 2008): 29.

10 Irvin, “The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic,” 36.

11 Irvin, “The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic,” 33.

12 Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford University Press, 2005), 46.

13 Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, 46.

14 Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, 47.

15 Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, 91.

16 Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, 92.

17 Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, 20.

demanding only presence to the here and now. In this phenomenological model of everyday aesthetics, Saito eliminates the requirement of achievement, Irvin eliminates the requirement of sustained attention, and Seel eliminates the requirement of justification itself.

Taken together, these three strands of aesthetic theory progressively dismantle barriers that would otherwise make engagement impossible during crisis. For someone who cannot trust any larger evaluative framework, these micro-engagements may be the only “reasons” that survive. Aside from premises in an argument for life, these reasons form concrete occasions to remain in touch with what is happening. They might be enough to get through the crisis moment, through the next hour, through the night, not because they prove anything about life’s ultimate worth but because they provide genuine reasons for engagement that persist independently of such proofs. Herein lies the practical import of recognizing aesthetic engagement outside evaluative structures, to continue without resolving the unresolvable and without that requiring capacities that crisis has compromised.

Suicidal crisis is not a passive state but an active one which must be continuously renewed through a repeated mental loop. The suicidal individual must constantly judge themselves deficient. Aesthetic attention breaks this loop not by introducing better reasoning, but by temporarily exiting the evaluative mode altogether. Instead of questioning the justification of their existence; an individual is simply perceiving. The question has not been answered; it has been abandoned. And in that absence, the immediate imperative of the crisis loses the cognitive fuel it requires to sustain itself. While this paper has focused on the recursive trap of ethical self-assessment as one prominent structure of suicidal crisis, the interruption that aesthetic attention provides may not be limited to this case. Whatever the specific content of the crisis logic, whether rooted in self-condemnation, unbearable pain, or perceived burden to others, the mechanism may operate similarly. Aesthetic attention does not engage the content of that logic but suspends the evaluative mode in which any such logic must operate.

Aesthetic attention, as this paper has argued, cannot be forced—crisis logic can sometimes be sufficiently dominant to foreclose the possibility of turning toward it entirely. Matt Haig, a writer who survived severe depression and suicidal crisis, documents both sides of aesthetic attention in relating to suicidal crisis in his memoir *Reasons to Stay Alive*. He describes standing at the edge of a cliff during a suicidal episode, looking out at what he calls the most beautiful view he had ever known and feeling nothing. The aesthetic experience was present, but his suicidal logic was too far gone to allow attention to turn toward it, occupied entirely with summoning the courage to jump. Yet the same author, from the other side of the crisis, offers his thoughts after he recovered: “Wherever you are, at any moment, try and find something beautiful. A face, a line out of a poem, the clouds out of a window, some graffiti, a wind farm. Beauty cleans the mind.”<sup>18</sup> Haig’s trajectory suggests that aesthetic attention cannot be forced during the depths of crisis, but that its cultivation remains one of the most reliable forms of contact with existence available when evaluative reasoning has collapsed.

This proposal does not claim that aesthetic experience shows life to be meaningful, or that beauty reveals an underlying goodness of existence, or that recognizing such beauty entails a duty to go on. Those moves would simply reinstall the evaluative machinery that crisis has rendered inoperative. Instead, aesthetic engagement is offered as a way of continuing that does not depend on resolving whether continuing is justified. The person in crisis need not infer “because I noticed something beautiful, therefore my life has value”; the noticing itself is the act of remaining, moment by moment, in the world.

18 Matt Haig, *Reasons to Stay Alive*, (Penguin Books, 2015), 249.

In this sense, aesthetic engagement does not answer Camus’s question of whether life is worth living, nor does it refute those who conclude that it is not. It simply refuses the demand for an answer as a precondition of continuing to exist. As long as light, sound, and texture remain, so does the possibility of an engagement that is neither evaluative nor justificatory, but nevertheless real. For some individuals in suicidal crisis, that may be the only form of contact with existence available, and the only one that does not immediately collapse back into the very evaluative structures that have become unlivable.

### Expanding Aesthetic Engagement with Existentialism

When Camus insists that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy,” he gestures toward a mode of endurance that is not reducible to moral duty or existential choice, but he leaves the nature of this happiness largely unspecified. His language of “revolt” and “lucidity” suggests an ongoing stance toward absurdity, yet he offers little account of the concrete practices that could sustain such a stance over time, especially for someone in crisis. The very image he chooses, of a man condemned to push a rock up a mountain eternally, contains, however, the seeds of a different answer than the one Camus explicitly develops.

If meaning cannot arise from hope for change or from retrospective narrative unity in Sisyphus’ case, then whatever sustains him must be located in the ongoing activity itself. Yet it seems insufficient to attribute this entirely to a conscious posture of absurdist rebellion; Camus gestures toward something more within the lived experience of the struggle, though he leaves its precise nature intriguingly underdeveloped. What remains is the immediate, embodied engagement with the task in the weight of the rock, the strain of muscles, the rhythm of breath, and the feel of the ground underfoot. This is precisely the register picked out by phenomenologically oriented everyday aesthetics.

Let us compare Sisyphus with a child kicking a rock down a sidewalk. While the child’s situation is temporary and leisurely compared to Sisyphus’ infinite labor, the dynamics of the activity are relatively the same: the contact of body and stone, the rock’s trajectory, the minor adjustments of force and angle, and the repetitive rhythm that emerges. That absorption exemplifies aesthetic attention to appearing in the how of the experience as it unfolds rather than the why of its justification. In such cases, the activity is complete, requiring no external purpose or evaluative endorsement.

On this reading, Sisyphus can be imagined as happy not primarily because he heroically affirms the absurd, but because he is capable of this kind of immediate, non-evaluative, sensory absorption in the task of pushing. The rebellion that Camus names but does not analyze would then consist of a mode of presence rather than a judgment about his condition. The rock’s resistance, the texture of stone under his hands, the warmth or chill of the air, and the cadence of effort and brief descent when the rock rolls back: all qualitative features of an experience to which Sisyphus can attend, rather than meanings he is tasked with creating. The labor remains meaningless in a global sense, but it is concretely present in a way that can sustain engagement without requiring that the entire situation be justified.

This suggests that existentialism, at least in Camus’s version, points toward but does not complete a turn from evaluative justification to concrete experience. Camus moves closer to lived experience, yet his emphasis on revolt and lucidity still leans on a demanding, ongoing stance that may outperform the resources available to someone in crisis. Aesthetic engagement completes this trajectory by eliminating the residual evaluative demand. Where the Stoic must judge that virtue has become impossible, the existentialist must take respon-

sibility for creating meaning, and even Camus's absurd hero must continually affirm revolt, aesthetic attention requires none of these. It asks neither that the person be virtuous, nor that they authentically choose, nor that they maintain a life-affirming stance toward absurdity. It asks only for minimal, local, sensorial presence: pushing the rock, feeling the rock, and noticing breath, light, weight, and texture as they appear.

The aesthetic framework does not oppose existentialism so much as extend one of its latent insights. Existentialism rightly turns philosophy's attention from abstract essence to lived existence; everyday aesthetics specifies how that existence can be inhabited when an individual is actively in crisis. It should be noted that the aesthetic framework proposed here is not intended as a complete philosophy of life, but as a resource for crisis specifically—a way of remaining in existence when evaluative approaches have failed, preserving the possibility of whatever justification may follow.

What remains when one cannot “choose meaning” or “rebel against the absurd” may be exactly what sustains Sisyphus in the image that has so captivated readers: an absorption in the aesthetic dimensions of bodily, temporal, and material experience that makes it possible to continue without first settling the question of whether continuing is justified.

### Death-Oriented Aesthetics

The aesthetic framework defended here must be distinguished from aesthetic representations that make death itself appear compelling. Consider the Werther effect,<sup>19</sup> named after Goethe's novel, which sparked imitative suicides across Europe. When suffering is aestheticized through compelling narrative, framed as tragic depth, authentic self-expression, or genuine feeling, suicide can become socially contagious. Certain aesthetic categories can make voluntary death appear formally attractive.

If aesthetic representations can make death compelling, what prevents the aesthetic framework defended here from doing the same thing in lived experience? I have argued for first-person aesthetic engagement with sensory phenomena as a response to suffering. But could this very framework make one's own death appear aesthetically necessary or compelling?

A paradigmatic example of this danger is explicit in writer Yukio Mishima's aesthetic theory and his 1970 ritual seppuku. For Mishima, genuine understanding of death required physical embodiment. In *Sun and Steel*, Mishima writes: “However much the closeted philosopher mulls over the idea of death, so long as he remains divorced from the physical courage that is a prerequisite for an awareness of it, he will remain unable even to begin to grasp it.”<sup>20</sup> Mishima believed that purely literary or intellectual engagement with mortality left him fundamentally incomplete as a person. He wrote extensively on death, but could never achieve the warrior's embodied understanding of it. Death appeared to him as the singular aesthetic and existential act in which his divided self might finally be brought into unity. Mishima's aesthetic ideal of harmony between art, body, and life does not just accompany his suicide as background context but progressively orients him toward it as the only act capable of fulfilling that ideal.

In 1970, Mishima committed suicide in the form of a choreographed coup attempt followed by ritual seppuku, timed to coincide with the completion of his final novel and

19 David P. Phillips, “The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect,” *American Sociological Review* 39, no. 3 (1974): 340–354.

20 Yukio Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, trans. John Bester (Kodansha International, 1970), 36. Originally published 1968.

performed when his body was at peak physical condition. Death became Mishima's ultimate aesthetic act. By committing seppuku in the manner of a samurai warrior, Mishima believed he could finally embody the ideals he had only written about. The suicide was designed to prove his genuine commitment to these values, or that he could live and die according to the samurai code rather than merely aestheticize it from a distance. We can call this orientation *death-oriented aesthetics*: death that appears compelling not in spite of aesthetic considerations but precisely because it seems to offer completion, coherence, and unity.

The objection is that if aesthetic categories can make such a death appear formally attractive, then aesthetic attention might be structurally dangerous for someone in suicidal crisis. If one can aestheticize the completeness of a finished life, why should that not be at least as compelling as attending to the textures of ongoing experience? On this view, aesthetics seems double edged. It can beautify continuation, but it can also beautify cessation by presenting death as the final brushstroke that allows the composition of a life to “make sense.”

The answer begins with temporal and evaluative structure. Death-oriented aesthetics privileges a retrospective standpoint that takes life as a whole and asks whether it achieves narrative or formal unity. It views existence as a work to be judged from outside and then recruits death as a permissible or even necessary means of securing coherence between values and actions, image and reality. In Mishima's case, his aesthetic demands to his writing and ethical demands to his bushidō code<sup>21</sup> intertwined so tightly that only a spectacular, publicly visible death seemed adequate.

Aesthetic experience, like any deep human capacity, has a shadow side: the same sensitivity to beauty and form that can anchor someone to existence can, in other configurations, make death itself appear the more compelling aesthetic act. This paper has focused deliberately on the constructive dimension of aesthetic attention—its capacity to provide non-evaluative contact with existence—while recognizing that the darker possibility Mishima represents is real and cannot be fully theorized away. The everyday aesthetic framework developed earlier does not stand outside life to appraise it as a completed work. It attends instead to the appearing of phenomena in the continuous present: to light, sound, texture, and bodily sensation as they are given now. This mode of engagement is inherently incomplete and cannot be perfected, because its very form is ongoing responsiveness to what continues to show up. It does not ask whether a life is coherent or justified. It asks only for local, momentary contact with what is present.

This difference also helps address a further concern, namely that everyday aesthetic attention may be profound in crisis yet feel trivial or even banal once someone has recovered. That worry is understandable if aesthetic engagement is treated as a substitute for richer ethical, relational, or narrative goods. The earlier account does not claim that everyday aesthetics should become the highest value or the permanent center of a flourishing life. It presents aesthetic attention as a minimal, crisis-suitable mode of contact with existence that remains available when more demanding capacities for evaluation, planning, and self-narration have collapsed. In crisis, noticing small details of existence can be genuinely life preserving because it does not require that one first answer whether life is worth living. Outside crises, such noticing may recede into the background of richer projects, relations, and commitments without losing its significance as a basic way of inhabiting experience.

Everyday aesthetic engagement does not have to be life-changing: it can function as a

21 Hurst, “*Bushidō* Ideal.” A code of samurai ethics, or the “way of the warrior.” A samurai would commit seppuku (ritual embowelment) as an honorable way to die.

low-threshold practice that keeps open a channel of contact with the world when other forms of orientation have failed for suicidal individuals in crisis, and it can continue, in more ordinary times, as one among many ways of inhabiting a life that also includes ethical striving, narrative reflection, and robust agency. Death-oriented aesthetics becomes dangerous at the precise point where aesthetic categories are conscripted into the service of evaluation, justification, and narrative completion. It is that conscription that makes suicide appear as the only act capable of securing coherence, authenticity, or wholeness. The version of aesthetics defended here resists this conscription. It does not try to show that life as a whole is meaningful or justified, but offers instead a way of remaining in touch with what appears when the very demand for justification has become unlivable. In crisis, that may be the most that can be asked of any philosophical framework, and for some, it may be enough to allow continuation without first resolving whether continuing to live can be fully explained.

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