

THE PROBLEM of SUICIDE

By David Hirsch

Albert Camus, the French existentialist philosopher, wrote in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942): 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.'

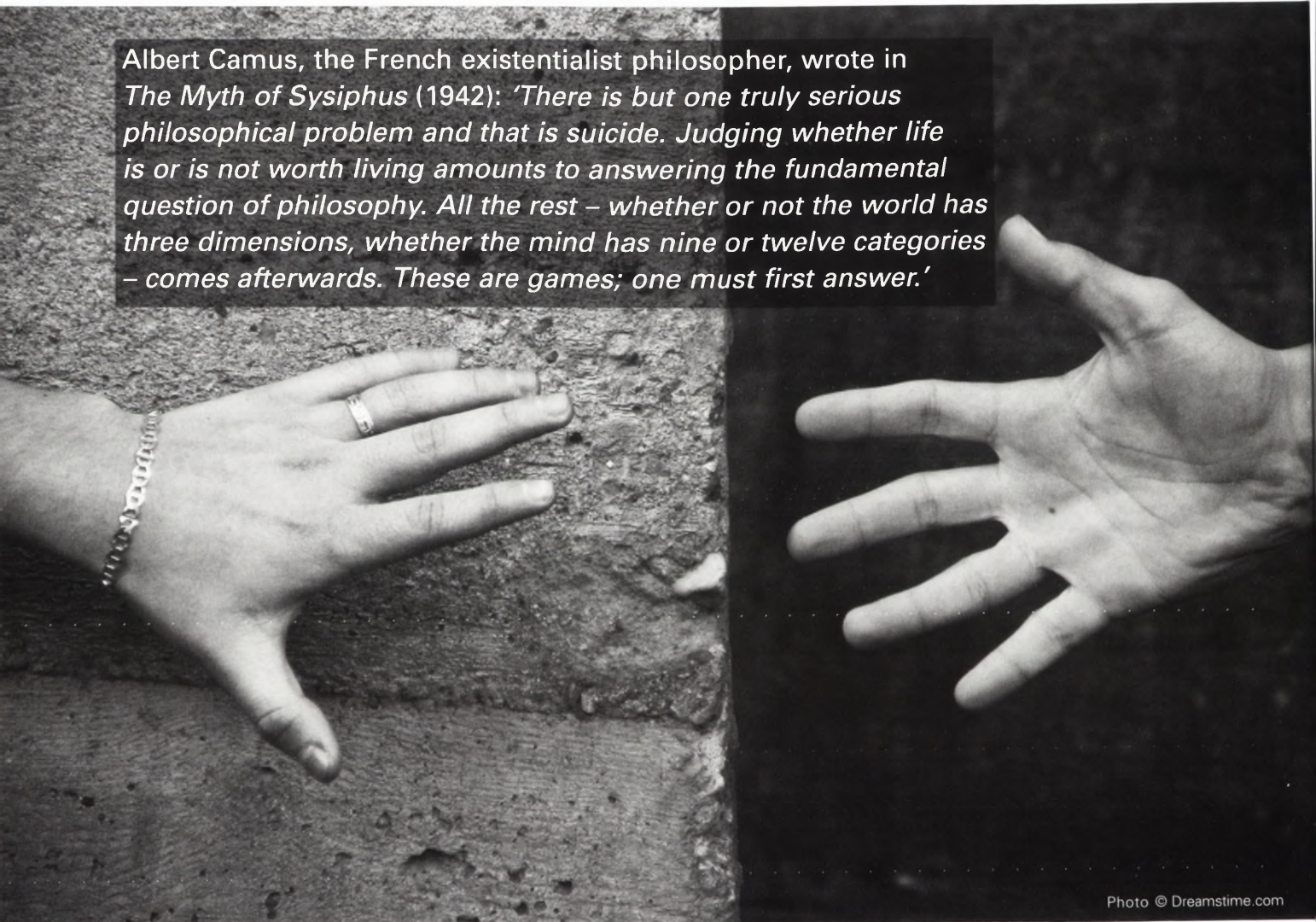


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The problem arises when we realise the futility of our search for meaning in an unintelligible, godless world devoid of universal values. The solution, for Camus, is to accept our predicament and battle on.

Roughly every four hours somebody takes their own life in Australia.¹ It is unlikely that many of these suicides result from philosophical realisations about the absurdity of life. For most, suicide is seen to be the only escape from intractable mental pain.

The causes of suicide and the involvement of mental illness and its treatment have been considered in three recent coronial inquests.²

In 2005, Rebekah Lawrence stripped naked and jumped to her death from the window of an office building in Sydney. Her death occurred two days after attending a self-development course titled 'The Turning Point', described as a

'journey to the core of the human spirit'.

At issue was whether Lawrence had formed the intention to commit suicide; if not, whether her death was the consequence of an underlying mental illness and, if so, whether the self-development course had played a role or was entirely coincidental.

In finding that her death was not a suicide, the coroner accepted the evidence of a psychiatrist who said that Lawrence 'did not have the capacity to form sufficient intent to carry out a suicidal plan'. Instead, she was affected by a psychosis brought on by the self-development course. This appears to have 'unlocked' some deep and troubling forces in her life and led to a loss of self-control. The coroner rejected the submission put by the course organisers that Lawrence had an underlying mental illness characterised by anxiety over having a child. He accepted the psychiatric opinion that Lawrence was 'a psychologically healthy person.

...she was blemished like all of us are, but to no greater extent than anyone else in the community.'

Alex Wildman was 14 years old when he took his own life in 2008.³ He was subjected to bullying at his high school in Sydney, where he had been threatened on a number of occasions and also assaulted. In 2007, Alex resolved to leave Sydney, where he had been living with his father, to escape the bullying. He moved to Lismore to live with his mother.

At his new high school, Alex was subjected to still more bullying. It seems that he was very popular with the girls in his new school and became friendly with one very popular girl in particular – much to the dismay of many of the boys at the school. Although taunted by these boys, Alex would not respond with violence. The bullying extended beyond face-to-face teasing and threats, and included threatening posts on a social networking internet site.

The coroner found that while it was impossible to know all of the forces at play, the bullying Alex experienced at the two high schools was at least a significant contributing factor in his decision to take his own life. Relevantly for this discussion, few if any people – and none with the maturity to have recognised and done something about it, notably Alex's parents and the teachers and counsellors at school – were aware of the nature or extent of the bullying that he endured, or that he ever contemplated killing himself. For them, Alex's suicide was totally unexpected.

In 2007, Charmaine Dragun, an accomplished newsreader with the Channel 10 network, jumped to her death at The Gap at Watson's Bay in Sydney. Unlike Rebekah Lawrence, Dragun did not appear to be affected by any psychosis, nor was she subjected to the kinds of external pressures that contributed to the death of Alex Wildman. Dragun had a high-profile career, a close and loving family and partner and – on the face of it – everything to live for. But Dragun had for years suffered from a mental illness, was taking antidepressant medication and had received extensive treatment by a psychologist and, latterly, by a psychiatrist.

The inquest heard evidence from a succession of Dragun's friends and work colleagues who (with one exception) had no idea that she suffered bouts of major depression or was receiving any treatment of any kind. Indeed, she was described as 'the happiest person in the room'. Her suicide came as a total surprise to almost all who thought they knew her.

There was expert evidence that Dragun's illness was not depression but a bipolar disorder characterised by often rapidly fluctuating changes in mood. Her situation may have been complicated by the fact that just weeks before her death her antidepressant medications had been changed by a psychiatrist that she had seen only once. It will be for the coroner to try to untangle the many threads that may have contributed to her death.

As these three inquests demonstrate, the problem of suicide is one that is confronted from time to time by the legal system. The objective of an inquest is to uncover the truth in the public interest. Strong recommendations were made in the Lawrence inquest regarding self-development courses, and in the Wildman inquest about bullying in schools. It

can be anticipated that recommendations dealing with the management of mental illness by health professionals will follow from the Dragun inquest.

Camus may have had a point about the absurdity of life. But these inquests demonstrate that the forces behind a person's fatal actions can be deep and complicated. They also demonstrate how those who suffer with unbearable emotional pain too often do so in silence, unrecognised by those who would be in the best positions to offer help. With the high suicide rate in Australia, one can only hope that the lessons learned in these inquests will be implemented and the problems that can lead to suicide will be exposed so that at least some of these tragedies may be averted in the future. ■

Notes: **1** According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there were 2,191 recorded suicides in 2008. This equates to six deaths per day. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/3392C53D12E8C51ACA2576F6001246CA?opendocument> **2** Full decisions of the Lawrence and Wildman inquests can be viewed at http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/coroners_court/ll_coroners.nsf/pages/coroners_findings. The findings in the Dragun inquest are pending. All three were heard by Coroner Malcolm MacPherson. **3** There is a non-publication order on certain details of this case.

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