

Letter**Jesus, Socrates and suicide prevention**

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Those who make public statements that all suicide is preventable should be required to detail appropriate mechanisms.

Durkheim¹ offers a definition, which has survived 120 years: "...the term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result." Importantly, Durkheim included "a...negative act", which refers to failure to take evasive action.

In writing of The Crucifixion, Minois² states, "Christianity's founding event was a suicide, and the writings of Jesus' disciples glorified voluntary self-sacrifice". Some Christians reject this view, but using Durkheim's definition which includes failure to take evasive action, many accept it. If this view is accepted, those who claim that all suicide is preventable need to detail the advice they would give The Son of God to prevent this suicide.

Socrates was found guilty corrupting the youth of Athens and not believing in the state gods. When the authorities asked him what his penalty should be, he suggested he be given a reward. This was rejected and instead he was instructed to kill himself by drinking hemlock. Socrates had opportunities to escape which he eschewed. He did not approve of suicide as he believe individuals were made and owned by the gods – that man possesses no actual ownership of himself. However, he did believe that death is the ideal home of the soul – that in death the soul is no longer restricted by bodily sensations of pleasure, pain, sight and sound.³ He drank poison and died, and the case is made that this was suicide.⁴ What could be said or done to prevent the suicide of this eminent figure in Western philosophy?

More recently (in 2004) Dr Harold Shipman who had been gaoled for life for killing some two hundred patients, when he exhausted all avenues of appeal, hanged himself in his cell. Then (in 2009) Roh Moo-hyun, a former President of South Korea who portrayed himself as a corruption fighter, when summoned to the Supreme Prosecutor's Office on charges of dishonesty and the receipt of bribes, jumped to his death.

Baechler⁵ states that every suicide is a solution to a problem. Those who contend that all suicide is preventable need to provide sensible alternative solutions.

1. Durkheim E. *Suicide a Study in Sociology*. New York: Routledge Classics, 1951. p. xlii.
2. Minois G. *History of Suicide Voluntary Death in Western Culture*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999. p.26
3. Frey R. Did Socrates commit suicide? *Philosophy* 1978; 53(203): 106-8.

4. Plato. *Phaedo*. 65c.
5. Baechler J. *Suicides*. New York City: Basic Books, 1979. p.11