

Suicide and Sanity

By Robert Green Ingersoll

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QUESTION: Is a suicide necessarily insane? was the first question, to which Colonel Ingersoll replied:

ANSWER: No. At the same time I believe that a great majority of suicides are insane. There are circumstances under which suicide is natural, sensible and right. When a man is of no use to himself, when he can be of no use to others, when his life is filled with agony, when the future has no promise of relief, then I think he has the right to cast the burden of life away and seek the repose of death.

QUESTION: Is a suicide necessarily a coward?

ANSWER: I cannot conceive of cowardice in connection with suicide. Of nearly all things death is the most feared. And the man who voluntarily enters the realm of death cannot properly be called a coward. Many men who kill themselves forget the duties they owe to others -- forget their wives and children. Such men are heartless, wicked, brutal; but they are not cowards.

QUESTION: When is the suicide of the sane justifiable?

ANSWER: To escape death by torture; to avoid being devoured by a cancer; to prevent being a burden on those you love; when you can be of no use to others or to yourself; when life is unbearable; when in all the horizon of the future there is no star of hope.

QUESTION: Do you believe that any suicides have been caused or encouraged by your declaration three years ago that suicide sometimes was justifiable?

ANSWER: Many preachers talk as though I had inaugurated, invented, suicide, as though no one who had not read my ideas on suicide had ever taken his own life. Talk as long as language lasts, you cannot induce a man to kill himself. The man who takes his own life does not go to others to find reasons or excuses.

QUESTION: On the whole is the world made better or worse by suicides?

ANSWER: Better by some and poorer by others.

QUESTION: Why is it that Germany, said to be the most educated of civilized nations, leads the world in suicides?

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ANSWER: I do not know that Germany is the most educated; neither do I know that suicide is more frequent there than in all other countries. I know that the struggle for life is severe in Germany, that the laws are unjust, that the government is oppressive, that the people are sentimental, that they brood over their troubles and easily become hopeless.

QUESTION: If suicide is sometimes justifiable, is not killing of born idiots and infants hopelessly handicapped at birth equally so?

ANSWER: There is no relation between the questions -- between suicides and killing idiots. Suicide may, under certain circumstances, be right and killing idiots may be wrong; killing idiots may be right and suicide may be wrong. When we look about us, when we read interviews with preachers about Jonah, we know that all the idiots have not been killed.

QUESTION: Should suicide be forbidden by law?

ANSWER: No. A law that provides for the punishment of those who attempt to commit suicide is idiotic. Those who are willing to meet death are not afraid of law. The only effect of such a law would be to make the person who had concluded to kill himself a little more careful to succeed.

QUESTION: What is your belief about virtue, morality and religion?

ANSWER: I believe that all actions that tend to the well-being of sentient beings are virtuous and moral. I believe that real religion consists in doing good. I do not believe in phantoms. I believe in the uniformity of nature; that matter will forever attract matter in proportion to mass and distance; that, under the same circumstances, falling bodies will attain the same speed, increasing in exact proportion to distance; that light will always, under the same circumstances, be reflected at the same angle; that it will always travel with the same velocity that air will forever be lighter than water, and gold heavier than iron; that all substances will be true to their natures; that a certain degree of heat will always expand the metals and change water into steam; that a certain degree of cold will cause the metals to shrink and change water into ice; that all atoms will forever be in motion; that like causes will forever produce like effects, that force will be overcome only by force; that no atom of matter will ever be created or destroyed; that the energy in the universe will forever remain the same, nothing lost, nothing gained; that all that has been possible has happened, and that all that will be possible will happen; that the seeds and causes of all thoughts, dreams, fancies

and actions, of all virtues and all vices, of all successes and all failures, are in nature; that there is in the universe no power superior to nature; that man is under no obligation to the imaginary gods; that all his obligations and duties are to be discharged and done in this world; that right and wrong do not depend on the will of an infinite Being, but on the consequences of actions, and that these consequences necessarily flow from the nature of things. I believe that the universe is natural.

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