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Suicide: A philosophical enquiry

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Abstract

The word 'suicide' is difficult to define. It is a value laden term. When an individual's death is termed as 'suicide', it is typically presupposed that a number of significant moral or ethical issues are connected with it. The philosophical dispute regarding discussions on suicide starts from characterizing 'suicide'. The philosophical discussions on suicide date back to the Stoics' school of thought. Till date the discussion is going on. In this paper I have focused on the discussions of Stoics School of thought, Plato, Aristotle, Medieval Philosophers, John Donne, Benedict Spinoza, Immanuel Kant and David Hume. Then in the light of this discussion I have tried to understand the different types of suicides viz, indirect suicide, murder suicide, physician assisted suicide, rational suicide and suicide pacts. Here I should mention that there are also other types of suicide (as there are many discussions relating to Suicide). However, I have focused on these only.

Keywords: Suicide, Plato, Aristotle, Medieval Philosophers, John Donne

Introduction

Life is of supreme value because without life there can be no value at all. But what is it that makes life so valuable? Most people think that there is no reason to prefer a permanent vegetative state to death. In many ways, a permanent vegetative state is worse because it prolongs the agony of loved ones and takes resources away from others in need. It is a matter of fact that we value the life of a human more than, the life of a pet. It must be kept in mind that if life has a value, it is surely because of what life makes possible, i.e, love, aesthetic experience, great moments, creativity, laughter and so on. But even these are not judged as unqualified goods. The context in which they appear matters also. For example, we do not value the laughter of a torturer.

If life has such a supreme value then under no circumstance it is acceptable that one has the right to end it. But it happens in this world that people either end their own life or take away the life of others though they have justification behind their act. The former is called suicide while the latter is called murder. In this article, we deal with suicide. Etymologically, the word "Suicide" is derived from two Latin words "Sui" meaning "One's Own" and "Cida" meaning "one who kills". Hence, Suicide "is the act of purposefully ending one's own life. Suicide is a puzzle. It is difficult to define. Throughout history, discussions on suicide have led to a wide range of reactions, which include sympathy, anger, moral or religious condemnation. It is full of controversy. Suicide is now a multi-disciplinary scientific study. Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, Psychiatry provide important insights into this realm. The philosophical problem of suicide arises when there is a bid to characterize suicide. As there is always a strong negative emotional and moral connotation attached with suicide, neutral discussion regarding it is difficult to find. In this paper, the first section deals with different theories of suicide from Stoics to Hume. In the second, I have cited different kinds of suicide and in the final section, I have tried to analyze the different types of suicides from the perspectives of the theories stated in the first section.

Discussions regarding suicide date back to antiquity. In the ancient days, we find Stoics who held that, whenever the means to living a natural flourishing life are not available to us, suicide might be justified.

This may be regardless of the character or virtue of the individual in question. The Roman Stoic Seneca engaged himself in suicide. He prescribed a wise person should "live as long as he ought, not as long as he can". In other words, it is the quality of life not the quantity that matters.

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Next, there was Plato, who discussed his view on suicide in two of his works – *Phaedo* and *Laws*. Firstly, in *Phaedo* dialogue, we find in the words of Socrates, a guarded enthusiasm for the thesis as well as the Pythagorean view that suicide is wrong because it represents our releasing ourselves (souls), from a "guard post" (our bodies) the gods have placed us in as a form of punishment. Later in the laws, Plato claimed that suicide is disgraceful and its perpetrators should be buried in unmarked graves. However, he spoke of four exceptions to this principle:

1. When one's mind is morally corrupted and hence one's character cannot be salvaged.
2. When the self-killing is done by judicial order, as in the case of Socrates.
3. When the self-killing is compelled by extreme and unavoidable personal misfortune
4. When the self-killing results from shame at having participated in grossly unjust actions.

A part from these situations, the act of suicide is an act of cowardice or laziness undertaken by individuals who are delicate to manage a change of circumstance or fortune.

Aristotle did not discuss much about suicide. He discussed suicide in *Nicomachean Ethics* in the midst of the discussion of the possibility of treating oneself unjustly. According to Aristotle, suicide is a wrong to the state or to the community. He does not outline the nature of this wrong. What is seen in the writings of Plato and Aristotle is absence of concern for individual well-being or rights. Both of them limit their justifications to considerations about an individual's social role and obligations.

During the medieval times, institutional Christianity was an important event in the philosophical history of suicide. Christianity opposed suicide. To them, suicide is morally wrong but it should be kept in mind that there was no clear scriptural guidance regarding suicide. The first justification against suicide from a Christian scriptural perspective came from St. Augustin. According to him, prohibition of suicide was a natural extension of the fifth commandment. For example, God's command "Thou shalt not kill" is to be taken as forbidding self-destruction. Suicide is an unrepentable in. Later St. Thomas Aquinas defended this prohibition on three grounds:

1. Suicide is contrary to natural self-love. The aim of natural self-love is to preserve us.
2. Suicide injures the community of which an individual is a part.
3. Suicide violates our duty to God. God has given us life, as a gift and if we take our lives we violate His right to determine the duration of our earthly existence.

In the middle ages, there was law that a suicide corpse is to be dishonored, his individual property was confiscated and he was denied a Christian burial.

Renaissance intellectuals affirmed the Church's opposition to suicide and were not sympathetic to the attitudes of the ancient thinkers. But exceptions were Thomas More and Michael de Montaigne. In "Utopia" Thomas More is rather confused. At one time here commends voluntary suicide for those who are suffering from painful and incurable diseases and other times he seems doubtful of this fact. In "Essais" Montaigne also did not take any firm position regarding suicide though he pointed out incidents of individuals taking

their lives and related them to the writings of Roman writers who praised the act of suicide.

The first defense of suicide came from the writings of John Donne. In his "Biathanatos" (which he never intended for publication), he argued that from the perspective of classical and modern, legal and theological sources Christian doctrine of suicide could not hold. His justification was that in Christian thought suicide is not contrary to the laws of nature, of reason or of God. If it were contrary to the laws of nature, then every act of self-denial would be similarly unlawful. Finally, Donne serves that biblical scriptures also lack a clear disapproval of suicide in the sense that the Christian doctrine has permitted other forms of killings such as martyrdom, capital punishment and killing in war time.

Donne's argument set the stage for the Liberalized Enlightenment attitude of the 1700s. As these people started to examine suicide from the perspective of science and psychology, the Thomistic natural-law position came under attack. There was change in outlook among the enlightenment philosophers. In this era we find, conflicting views of suicide. On the one hand we find David Hume's new approach to suicide, while on the other hand we find Kant and Spinoza's view that suicide is irrational. They tried to relate the concept of suicide to the concept of humanity. It may sound quite questionable that how come Spinoza and Kant argue in the same manner, when there is a basic difference among them regarding epistemology, metaphysics as well as ethics. But it can be observed that, in spite of a huge ontological and epistemological difference in their philosophical theories, they agree about some points regarding issues relating to human nature.

Both Kant and Spinoza argue that human beings have double nature. According to both, human nature is partly rational and partly instinctive. They both did not explain the relation between this rational and instinctive nature of man. Rather they both stated that the rational aspect of man is more fundamental. They both held suicide to be an irrational act, which is never done freely (rationally). This way, they related suicide to the concept of humanity. Moreover, Kant's theory of ethics is different from Spinoza's theory of ethics. For Spinoza, the notion of "Good" is primary while for Kant the notion of "Right" (Duty) is primary. Hence their method may be different but both denounced suicide.

The discussion changes with the views of David Hume. According to him, philosophy is an antidote to superstition and irrationalism that makes our lives miserable. The superstitions take away a man's sleep, as they get haunted in sleep. They cannot take away their lives, as well, as they think that this act of them would offend Gods, which they fear. To Hume, suicide "restores men to their native liberty". He distinguishes between the laws by which Gods govern nature and the laws by which, humans govern themselves. He argues that, just as nature works without considering the interests of the humans, so humans can use the power the Gods have given them regarding their own happiness. Thus, if man uses his power given by God, it would not offend Gods. Furthermore, he argues that just as according to the laws of nature an insect can destroy a human life; it would be strange if humans were not granted such powers regarding their own lives. He strongly believed that God has given us the power to escape bad life. He compares suicide with a situation in life where when a person grows old and infirm, he retires from job and hence cease to contribute to the society, in the same sense a person can quit his life if his

continuation of life is a burden to the society. Hume rightly respects an individual's autonomy.

So far, we have discussed how the notion of suicide has been interpreted by philosophers from antiquity to enlightenment stage. Discussions on suicide has not ceased thereafter. Rather it has gained impetus with the development of our society, education, and politics and more importantly by the way we view life. The act of suicide has been divided into. Indirect suicide, Murder suicide, Physician- assisted suicide, Rational suicide and suicide pacts. In this paper, I wish to review these different types of suicide taking insights from the above stated philosophical views. In this connection, it needs to be mentioned that Durkheim in 1897 had spoken about different types of suicide *viz.* Egoistic suicide, Altruistic suicide, Anomic suicide and Fatalistic suicide. But all these types of suicide have been on grounds of social stress. Apart from social stress, there are other factors that may lead one to take the path of suicide. Hence, Durkheim's analysis is not taken into consideration here. Now, let me define the different types of suicide as stated above that I shall discuss here:

Indirect Suicide

There is a wide range of indirect suicidal behaviors in which death results gradually rather than immediately. The pioneer suicidologist Edwin Shneidman talks about four categories of suicide - Intentioned, Sub-intentioned, Un- intentioned, Contra-intentioned. Suicide, by definition, generally falls under intentioned death. Accidental deaths fall under unintentioned deaths. Contra- intention includes people who pretend to be affected by death and threaten death. Under sub-intentional category he spoke of four sub-types:

- a. **Death Chancer:** One who gambles with death by doing things that leave death „up to chance“. These are such suicidal behaviors, where there appears to be a calculated expectation for intervention and rescue.
- b. **Death Hastener:** Individuals who unconsciously aggravate a physiological dis-equilibrium to hasten death. They may indulge in dangerous lifestyle such as a busing the body, using alcohol or drugs or not eating a proper diet.
- c. **Death capitulators:** These individuals, by virtue of strong emotions, play a psychological role in hastening their own demise. These individuals scare themselves to death“.
- d. **Death experimenter:** One who does not wish consciously to end his or her life, but who appears to wish for a chronically altered state of existence. Example alcoholics or addicts.

All the sub-intentional category falls under indirect suicide.

Murder Suicide

It is an act in which, an individual kills one or more people before killing oneself. It can be of several types:

- a. Murder linked with suicide of a mentally unstable person.
- b. Murder which entails suicide such as, suicide bombing.
- c. Suicide after murder to escape state punishment.
- d. Suicide after murder as a form of self-punishment.

Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS)

This type of suicide occurs when a physician facilitates a patient's death by providing the necessary means and information to enable the patient to perform the life ending task. Proponents of PAS have the following ethical reason to support this stand:

- a. **Patient autonomy:** A patient should have the right to control the circumstances of his/her death and to determine how much suffering is too much.
- b. **Mercy:** If there is no realistic alternative left for the physician to lessen the suffering of the patient, he can assist his death, as that would relieve him from suffering.
- c. **Non-abandonment:** The physician should be by the patient's side all through the dying process and should be responsive in troubling circumstances.

The arguments against PAS areas follows

- a. **Wrongness of killing:** Purposefully helping a patient to die is wrong under any circumstance.
- b. **Physician integrity:** Physicians take a sacred oath never to knowingly harm a patient.
- c. This PAS will affect the underlying trust between patient and physician.
- d. **Risk of abuse:** Allowing PAS would pose a risk for the vulnerable patients. Their lives could be ended against their will or when treatment may be expensive or difficult for the physician to treat the patient.

Rational Suicide

It is a term that has been used for nearly a century to describe the taking of one's own life based upon logical decision making. Many argue that, suicide can never be rational. Proponents of rational suicide believe that the taking away of one's own life is personal right that should be allowed to be exercised for whatever reasons an individual deems fit. This extreme position holds even if the individual has an illness that can respond to treatment. But if the individual so chooses, suicide is available option to him. Opponents argue that suicide under any circumstance is unacceptable. I fit is not irrational it is definitely immoral.

Suicide pact

Suicide pact is an agreed plan between two or more individuals to commit suicide. The plan may be to die together or separately or closely timed. Suicide pact connotes small groups and non-ideological motivations, such as bonding of romantic or married partners, family members or friends or criminal partners.

In case of indirect suicide Stoic's explanation gets exploited. Stoic observed that, It is the quality of life that matters not the quantity“. The advocates of indirect suicide can apply this explanation and can become alcoholic. Alcoholics or addicts are of the view that alcohol or any sort of addiction helps them to shove away their burdens and relieves them of the mental pain. But they shorten their life expectancy by doing so. Hence Stoics“ explanation here is unacceptable. In this case Plato's view will be quite apt. this type of suicide is disgraceful. Following Aristotle, it can be said that this type of suicide is wrong for the society because alcoholics generally influence other sane people whose life also gets jeopardized. Following St. Augustine, it can well be said that it would be an un-repentable sin. It would destroy one's family as well as the family of others. Hence, it is not acceptable. Hume, a supporter of suicide would also, like to

admit the fact that in case of indirect suicide (especially alcoholics and addicts) an individual exploits his power of autonomy. The dependence of these people then becomes a liability for the society. Hence, Hume also would not admit indirect suicide.

To my view, Murder suicide is out and out unacceptable to all the philosophic view stated above. Let us see how. First, the Stoics who spoke of "quality life" will definitely not admit a person killing another person, due to lack of quality life. The concerned person can be the judge of himself. At no cost can he decide the fate of others. The suicide bombers for example, have no right to kill others. They are in no position to take decision of others' lives. Following Plato, it can be said that performers of the act of Murder suicide "should be buried in unmarked graves. Aristotle here would say that these people not only treat themselves unjustly but are also a threat to the society and their acts should be condemned. Medieval philosophers would definitely criticize this act as it would be against Christian laws. Though John Donne would suggest that, this is against Christian laws, as Christianity admits other forms of killing such as martyrdom, capital punishment etc. Here, I would like to say that murder suicide is different from martyrdom and capital punishment. Martyrs are those who die for the country. They love the country (which includes the inhabitants) and respect her. The person performing murder suicide is on the contrary a threat to him as well as the innocent people of the country. John Donne, would never admit such acts of suicide. Spinoza and Kant would never admit this act, as it is irrational and instinctive. Hume would say that humans have power on their individual life but not on others' lives. He can take his own decision, but cannot take the fate of others in his own hands.

Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS) are acceptable to Stoics as it would help people to get rid of pain and suffering and help people to get a quality life. However, there is always a chance of misusing this power. Hence, it is not acceptable. Following, Plato and Aristotle, it can be said that this can bring good to the society as people suffering from untreatable diseases will find solace. But again misuse can be fatal to the society. Kant, in a sense can admit this act as here the patient is treated as an end in himself and not as a means. Hume also I suppose would admit this where a patient takes his own decision along with the doctor, whose action is good for him. He should have scope to apply his autonomy which he gets here.

I think Stoics would favor Rational Suicide. A person here rationally chooses his own life. While doing so, it is quite obvious that he would focus on the quality of his life. Plato would admit this type of suicide if:

- a. The person's mind is morally corrupted.
- b. It is due to extreme and unavoidable personal misfortune.
- c. When it is done as a result of shame at having participated in unjust actions.

Apart from these situations, Plato would not admit this sort of act. If rational suicide is good for the society and does not treat the individual concerned unjustly, then I think Aristotle would also not disagree. But it should be kept in mind that, rational suicide is perspectival. The perspective needs to be assessed carefully and I think there is always a chance that the concerned person is under extreme stress that can act as a hindrance to rationally perceive the situation. Medieval philosophers would not accept suicide in any form as it

would be contrary to natural self-love. It violates our natural duty to God. God has given us life, as gift and taking it away for whatever the reason may be would violate that. Donne's argument would not be acceptable here, as suicide in any form can never be equated with martyrdom. Kant and Spinoza would admit if it is not irrational. Kant particularly would be in favour if the individual is seen as an end in himself and not as a means. Hume would accept rational suicide. It gives individual the autonomy to decide his well-being. But all of this is applicable if the person is not influenced by others. It is his decision.

Lastly, to comment anything about Suicide pact, we need to find out why such an act is done. If it is done to do away with a bad quality of life, then the Stoics would admit it. But I think in this case there is always a chance to change the decision if discussed with others. If the persons in the pact are not mentally stable or not in serious legal difficulties or misfortune then Plato would also not admit it. Aristotle also would not admit such act. Spinoza and Kant would never as it irrational and immoral. If not for proper reasons Hume would not subscribe this act, as the concerned persons exploit the power given by God.

What I think is before giving any final comment on any form of suicide, it is essential to find out the psychological condition of not only the concerned individual but also other persons, who are closely connected with him. This is one of the main factors, though there are other factors like economic condition, social status, political framework to name a few. Hence, Suicide is definitely a puzzle that needs many other discussions to get solved. As a consequence, several studies have come up namely Brain study, Neurophysiology, Physiology, Sociology, Political philosophy etc. But my point of discussion in this paper, is that though the discussion has come up a long way and still has a long way to go, we cannot give up the discussions from antiquity that laid the stepping stone of all these discussions.

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