Moral Philosophy and Suicide*

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There are two main moral issues regarding suicide: first, whether suicide is morally permissible, and if so, in what circumstances; and second, whether a person who knows that someone is contemplating or attempting suicide has an obligation to intervene and if so, how strong that obligation is. With respect to the first issue, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that suicide is not wrong in itself. To characterize suicide as murder of one's self is incorrect. Even if people who commit suicide deprive the community of some good, there is no general duty to provide good services to others. Theological objections to suicide are not persuasive. And suicide could be rational. For example, if one's scheme of values is to maximize the overall value of experience, and if at some point in the future negative value outweighs positive value, suicide would be rationally indicated. With respect to intervention, different considerations apply to persons involved with someone contemplating or attempting suicide, professionals, and the general public. Those who are involved have their own lives to live and need not alter them even when another person's life is at stake. Professionals should not become paternalistic authorities who keep subjects alive against their will and miserable for indefinite periods. The general public has only a weak duty to save strangers from suicide.

What are the moral issues regarding suicide? Two, prominently. The first is the obvious one: whether suicide is morally permissible, either in general or only in special circumstances, and if the latter, what are those circumstances? The second issue concerns second parties. If we know that someone is contemplating suicide, or even attempting it, do we intervene or don't we? If we do, how strong is our obligation to do so, and what are the grounds of this obligation? And how much do we have to do? In this brief essay, I will consider both of these matters in turn.

The Moral Status of Suicide

I have expressed the first question in a deliberately negative way: is suicide *permissible*? Is it wrong? We could have asked it in a more affirmative way: is it *right*? But this would be less appropriate because unlike 'wrong', 'right' is importantly ambiguous. In what we might call the "weaker" meaning of the term, to say that something is right is simply to say that it is not wrong. But there is a "stronger" meaning, where to say that an act is right is to say that it is a duty — it is morally required, something one *ought* to do. Now there is a real question, in very special cases, whether committing suicide would be right in the latter sense — one thinks of spies apprehended in enemy territory carrying secrets that must not be revealed at any cost, for instance. But by and large, we are concerned only with more usual cases, in which it would be at least a very unusual view that suicide was obligatory. In those far more usual cases, our main question is whether it would be wrong, that is, whether it would be right only in the weaker sense of that term. This is the question I shall address. If we answer in the affirmative, concluding that suicide is right, meaning not wrong, this is not at all to imply that in typical cases people who commit suicide are doing what they positively ought to be doing. But this narrower and essentially negative question is fundamental, for its answer tells us whether we may or should do such things as making attempted suicide a criminal offense.

Another and perhaps still more satisfactory way to put this question is: do we have the right to commit suicide? Are we violating anyone's rights (example: our own) in doing so? Some will say yes. They may say that suicide is, after all, self- murder and being murder it is wrong. If that characterization were correct, this question would be settled forthwith, for it is not seriously debatable whether murder is wrong. But is it correct? There is a major reason for denying that it is: suicide, by definition, is intentional and voluntary. The victim is identical with the killer, and thus there can be no question of the "victim's" consent. Murder, on the other hand, is necessarily contrary to the will of the victim. (That is not all there is to it, of course; executions are likewise contrary to the will of the "victim". But further definition is unnecessary here.). This factor of victim consent is so serious that it raises the question whether suicide can be *wrong* in itself.

This last remark calls for a further distinction. Murder, I think, qualifies as necessarily wrong, wrong in itself. Once that description of an act clearly applies, no further information is needed to conclude that it is wrong, in any remotely normal cases at least. But that is not the only way acts can be wrong. They could be wrong for extrinsic reasons, reasons having to do with the act's further effects. Now suicide, no doubt, is sometimes or perhaps often wrong in this latter way. The person who commits

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suicide in order to avoid paying his debts is unjust to his creditor; the sole provider of a family wrongs them, quite likely, if he commits suicide. And so on. But all these are special to their cases. One might have no dependents, or have squared it with them before the act; one might have made adequate provisions in one's will; and so on. Is there any circumstance about suicide that obtains in typical cases which might make us think it is wrong for those reasons? One possibility is worth considering. When one dies, one's community, nation, state and the like are deprived of one's contributions. Most people, I think it safe to say, are of some use to their fellow man and many are of quite considerable use. In committing suicide then, they deprive the community of the good they would or could otherwise do. Is this wrong?

Again, I think, the answer is no or, less misleadingly, not normally. We do not normally owe it to people that we do all the good things we could possibly do for them. In general, our obligation is negative: we are to refrain from harming people, in various ways, but beyond that it is not a matter of duty. We perform further good services out of special contractual arrangements, or out of the goodness of our hearts, but not because morality demands it. In addition, of course, the premise that everyone contributes some good would sometimes be very implausible and in many cases debatable. Some people are unlikely to be missed much. But we need not get into that, for the normally negative character of our duties to our fellows is sufficient to head off the argument we are now considering.

What else? At this point, some will very likely want to raise theological objections to suicide. Now such objections could be brushed aside as irrelevant since our concern is whether suicide is wrong for any publicly acknowledgeable reasons and religious reasons appeal only to the religious. But since many people are inclined to appeal to religious premises on such matters as this anyway, it is worth pausing to consider them. There are, I think, basically three arguments along these lines. (i) The first has it that we *belong* to God, since He is our Creator. (ii) Or it may be urged that life is a gift from God, so that we slight Him in terminating it. Or finally, (iii) It may be thought that God does not want us to commit suicide because He knows what is good for us and wishes our good. To all these there are insuperable objections.

If we are created by God, would it follow that we are His slaves — that He owns us? No more so, I suggest, than that our parents own us. Do our parents have absolute command over our lives for their entire duration just because they are our parents? Surely not. The "gift" argument, in turn, runs into the problem that to give something to somebody else normally leaves that person in charge of it, not *us*. If the recipient tosses it into the trash can, that suggests that his opinion of the giver is not terribly high, but it is certainly his *right*. In the case in question, moreover, there is the further complication that life cannot be given to someone, literally, for until he is alive there is no such someone to give it to; but once he is alive, there is no longer any possibility of refusal! And as to God's knowing what is good for us, the question here is why we should think that God would always think our best option is to stay alive rather than to kill ourselves. Whether it must always be the best option will be considered below; but meanwhile the argument in question does not permit us to say that it must be the best option because God says so. For if God wants what is best for us, then the question whether it *is* best is an independent one. Why attribute to God a view that is wildly at variance, as it might well be, with the evident facts of the case? The basic point is that religious people often think they know, independently of the facts of a case, what God knows about it. But this is to make God out to be a cruel and mindless tyrant instead of a loving being who really does care for the welfare of people.

Altogether, it seems to me difficult to resist the conclusion that suicide is not wrong in itself, although some do not like to put it in these terms. It seems to me that the issue may reasonably be framed thus: do we own ourselves, or don't we? To "own" oneself is to be the person in rightful authority over the disposition of one's life — just as to be the owner of any other object is to be the person who gets to decide (within the limits of others' rights) what happens to it. The owner of something is free to use it as he or she pleases, and some of those ways might be seen by others to be misuses. Moreover, some of them might *be* misuses. But the question of rights is the question of who gets to make those decisions, not whether the decisions taken are well-advised or not. And in the end, one must wonder whether any view to the effect that persons are owned by others makes any sense. For what about those others? Apparently *they* own *themselves* or else they could not really be the owners of us. But where did they get that authority over themselves which we somehow lack? If they had it simply by virtue of being independent beings with minds of their own, then the reply is that the same is true of ourselves. Free beings must, in the end, be recognized to be free by any coherent moral outlook.

None of this, however, answers or even addresses particularly the question of when, if ever, one should intentionally terminate one's own life. Nor, I think, should it be expected that we can say very much that would be helpful in the abstract. But we might start with the suggestion that committing suicide is never rational, so that suicides are automatically to be presumed insane. What about that?

We need, obviously, a characterization of rational behavior. This is a contentious matter, but it is not all that contentious, for practical purposes. Any agent has desires, interests, wants, values. Explaining what it means to have rational desires and values is not easy; but negatively, we can say that they pass the most basic tests of rationality if they are not founded on beliefs that are obviously false or illusory in the sense that modest reflection by the individual concerned would readily reveal the error. After this we assess the rationality of an agent's

actions by seeing whether those actions are calculated, on the whole, to achieve the agent's ends, to realize his values. This means, unsurprisingly, that whether to commit suicide is, so far as rationality is concerned, a matter of whether that action is prescribed by a rational assessment of one's values, where 'rational assessment' refers to the marshalling of relevant information and error-free application of it, as far as possible in the circumstances. If a person's actions are, in this sense, prescribed by his or her interests and values, then they are rational, which is not to imply that they are morally commendable for instance.

To see whether suicide could ever be rational, then, we have only to ask whether it could be recommended by a scheme of values passing the above rudimentary tests. Here is a relatively simple example which serves nicely for deliberation. Consider the hedonist, whose only aim is to maximize the net amount of pleasure in his life as a whole, where 'net' means that one subtracts, as it were, the pain from the pleasure. For such a person, it is more than conceivable that a point could arrive in his life where the future promised little but pain and virtually no prospect of pleasure. Terminal cancer would do the trick, for instance. How could one deny that for such a person, suicide at that point was rationally recommended?

Obviously some would want to criticize our hypothetical hedonist's values. But I do not wish to get involved in this criticism, only to note that hedonism has been one of the respected candidates in the history of thought for the status of Ultimate Value, and to point out that our machinery of rationality does not obviously permit dismissing such a scheme as irrational, which is all that is in question here. But more interestingly, we can generalize. Let us talk not of maximizing pleasure but instead, maximizing the *value* of one's life. Each moment of one's experience will have some value, positive or negative, and the scheme I now want to consider says that one ought to maximize the overall value of experience. Thus, if at some point the future will be on balance of less than zero value (of disvalue, rather than value, in other words), then suicide would be indicated. And I would challenge anyone to prove that this is irrational, whatever else one may think of it. Indeed, I am not entirely sure that this would not do for a general schema for anyone's life: by whatever standards you ultimately measure value, maximize it throughout your life.

There might, of course, be some who value life itself, no matter what it is *like* (example: no matter how excruciating, they will cling to it). Most of us, I think, would find that particular value unacceptable. Is life, in and of itself and completely independently of what it holds, credibly held to be valuable? I doubt it, as do most thinkers on these matters.

Another aside for the religious: some people, of course, think that there is life after death. Strictly speaking, such people do not believe in death. They believe, instead, that when what we call "death" occurs, what really happens is that there is a major change of address, but Life continues on, presumably with substantial alterations in the agent's experience. Naturally, this will alter materially the relevant calculations of one wishing to maximize the value of his or her life, at least if one believes that what one does in the present life has a major influence on one's future life. It is not clear that people with such beliefs have any business discussing, indeed whether they can meaningfully discuss, the subject of suicide.

If we set aside such hypotheses and ask ourselves whether any reasonably forseeable set of circumstances might make it clear that life, beyond some point, is not worth living; I find it hard to deny the possibility that there are many. The prospect of nearly complete unusability of one's body and of severe and unmitigated pain, for instance, will surely strike most of us as a plausible example. To charge a person who in such circumstances opts for self-termination with insanity is, it seems to me, to show quite remarkable rigidity of mind. It would, on the contrary, be plausible to argue that any sane person would opt for suicide if such were his prospects, and that to insist on remaining alive would itself be more nearly a sign of insanity. However, I have no wish to insist on the latter. Instead, I simply submit that for persons of different temperament either course might be perfectly sane.

This is the kind of issue where people will be inclined to ask, "Who are we to judge?" I have considerable sympathy with this, in a vague sort of way. But what, we must ask, is being judged, anyway? *Which* judgement is there to be made, whoever makes it? Sometimes, as I shall suggest below, we can be quite sure that an error has been made, without any need to invoke an Infinite Intelligence for support. But one who has made no relevant errors of fact presents, no doubt, a more difficult case. However, the arguments of the earlier part of this treatment are surely enough to supply us with an answer in one entirely germane respect: the person who "is to judge" is certainly the person making the decision. It is for him or her to decide whether the future holds sufficient promise to hang on to life. Although it is not easy to determine what the coin of this calculaton may be, to the point where 'calculation' must seem rather too bloodless a term, it still seems to me that we make no major mistake in supposing that the judgement is essentially as described: whether the future is such as to be worth enduring for the person in question. Which brings us to the other of my two questions.

When and How Do We Intervene?

Can any general case be made for intervention in the life of a person contemplating suicide? We should first point out that very different considerations are relevant here, depending on which of several positions one occupies. For example, there is (a) the person (or persons) on account of whom our subject is contemplating it in the first place. This applies in the many, and probably typical, cases in which there is, for instance, a beloved who has turned cold or taken up with another, or in which close friends, family members, or the like are the per-

ceived problem. Then (b) there are persons with expertise, training, and an interest in suicides as such. Most importantly, however, we have (c) persons ranging from friends outside the (d) radius but acquainted with the subject, to random members of the general public who just happen on the scene. A few comments about each are in order here.

(a) This group — the Involved Group, as we might call it — presents particularly ticklish problems. Here we have the stuff of which novels are made, and it would be foolish to try to generalize very definitely about the welter of shades of human relatedness that enter into different cases. But a main area of concern here, certainly, is this: how much effort must members of this group be willing to devote to the suicidal person in order to prevent him from terminating his life? In typical cases, as I have suggested, it is a change of mind about the direction of his life on the part of an Involved person that leads the suicidal person to the brink. He feels unloved, and it is quite possible that he *is* unloved, in the way and to the degree that he deems necessary. And indeed, his proposed suicide is very likely to be a challenge to one of the Involved to do something: "Either you alter the course of your life in a way that will make mine worth living, or I get off!" A person faced with such a challenge is having a very heavy "trip" laid on him indeed. And it seems to me that whatever else we may say, we must not sentimentally embrace the view that the Other Person simply must drop everything and come to the suicidal person's aid. Each of us has our own life to live, and our right to live it extends to refusing to alter it even when another person's life is at stake in this way. To deny this is to invite, on a grand scale, emotional blackmail.

(b) As to the obligations of professionals, it seems to me that two fairly critical questions arise. One is that of financing: are we to claim a general right to unlimited professional assistance to would-be suicides? This is a large issue, but it does seem extremely implausible to think that there is such a right. The other issue arises from the point of view of the subject — whom I was about to refer to as "the patient", which raises precisely the point I want to bring up here. It is all too easy to make professionals into paternalistic authorities who have the power to keep a subject alive, against his will and miserable, for an indefinite period. I suspect that most suicides are solvable, as we will see below. But I also suspect that some are not, and it is entirely possible in those cases for the professional intervening to make the suicidal person's life still more miserable than it already is by prolonging what the professional insists is "treatment", and what the subject regards as, simply, a refined variety of torture.

(c) What about the general public? Here we need to ask: what is the probability that a given encountered suicide attempt is founded on error of some important kind? My suspicion is that this probability is quite high. For example, a man attempting suicide thinks he cannot live without her and that no one else could possibly do. That is what he thinks *now*. But older and wiser heads know that in six weeks' time, especially if accompanied by a substantial change of locale and activities, he will begin to see that this just isn't so — there are other fish in the sea after all! If he commits suicide at the end of the first week, however, then quite literally all is lost for him. On the other hand, if there is no error, an intervention of the kind that a mere acquaintance or even a stranger might make will prolong the agony a relatively short time. Our first impulse, therefore, should be to intervene, pending further information. But how strong a duty is this? Not, in my opinion, terribly strong. That is to say, I do not think we are justified in imposing on the general public the duty to devote a great deal of time and energy to saving strangers from suicide. They, too, have their lives to live! But surely we all benefit from a general tendency to try to prevent suicides whenever we readily can and are not familiar enough with the case to have satisfied ourselves that it is one of those rare cases where the deed is rationally justified.

In moral matters, said Aristotle, we "must be content . . . to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better" (1). I should like to have reached a "more exact" truth about this important matter here, but I cannot. Let us hope that further thought and investigation will enable us to do better.

References

1. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. I.3.

Résumé

Le suicide soulève principalement deux questions d'ordre moral : d'abord, le suicide est-il permis au nom de la morale et, si oui, dans quelles circonstances; en second lieu, celui qui sait qu'une autre personne veut se suicider ou tente de le faire est-il obligé d'intervenir, et si oui, quelle est l'étendue exacte de sa responsabilité. Pour ce qui est de la première question, il n'est pas difficile de conclure que le suicide n'est pas un acte mauvais en lui-même. Il est incorrect de dire que le suicide est le meurtre de l'individu par lui-même. Même si les personnes qui se suicident privent ainsi le reste de la société de leurs bons services, aucune obligation n'est faite à l'individu de rendre service à la société. Les objections d'ordre théologique à cet égard ne sont pas convaincantes. Le suicide peut être une décision rationnelle. Par exemple, si quelqu'un adopte un système de valeurs selon lequel il veut tirer le meilleur parti possible de son expérience de vie et qu'un jour le négatif l'emporte sur le positif, le suicide serait un choix rationnel. Pour ce qui est de l'obligation d'intervenir, elle n'est pas la même pour ceux qui vivent avec celui qui veut se suicider ou qui tente de le faire, pour les professionnels et pour le public en général. Les premiers ont leur propre vie à vivre et ne sont pas tenus de se sacrifier, même pour sauver la vie d'une autre personne. Quant aux professionnels, ils ne doivent pas jouer le jeu du paternalisme et forcer quelqu'un à vivre contre son gré, malheureux, indéfiniment. Enfin, le public en général n'a qu'une responsabilité relative d'intervenir pour sauver quelqu'un du suicide.