Suicide : Historical Perspective

Suicide deaths have puzzled the minds of social scientists philosopher and jurists since the dawn of civilization. The life is so precious to one self that a person does not hesitate in killing another when his own life is threatened. Even small birds, animals and insects resist their best to being killed or trampled. It is really surprising why a man decides to end his precious life by himself? Life is very complex. It is full of goods and evils, pleasure and pains; and perhaps all these mixed together make the life livable, or it would become monotonous and unenthusiastic. Difficulties, hurdles and miseries are part of life and reality and for many they instill freshness and provide zeal and motivation for achieving the goal of life, but for some they become the cause of self destruction. Thee people who cannot face the realities and decide to end the precious gift of life have been a cause of concern for the society. Religion, morality and law have always tried to put a check, change mind or punish such tendencies but the results have been far from satisfactory.¹

Classical Theory :

A relaxed attitude towards the whole concept of suicide could be seen in ancient Roman Culture, a practice that was only finally outlawed with the advent of the Christians, who condemned it at the Council of Arles in 452 as the work of the Devil. In the middle Ages, the church had drawn-out discussions on the edge where the search for martyrdom was suicidal, as in the case of Martyrs of Cordoba. Despite these disputes and occasional official rulings, Catholic doctrine was not entirely settled on the subject of suicide until the later 17th century. For instance, John Donne’s Thoughts on Emergent Occasions is a long argument in favor of suicide as divinely appointed opportunity.

There is some echo of later Christian hostility in ancient Greek thinkers. Pythagoras, for example, was against the act, though more on mathematical than moral grounds, believing that there was only a finite number of souls for use in the world, and that the sudden and unexpected departure of one upset a
delicate balance. Aristotle also condemned suicide, though for quite different, far more practical reasons, in that it robbed the community of the services of one of its members. A reading of Phaedo suggests that Plato was also against the practice, inasmuch as he allows Socrates to defend the teachings of the Orphics, who believed that the human body was the property of God, and thus self-harm was a direct offense against divine law. Yet, it's not quite so simple, because after Socrates says that no man has a right to suicide, this is then qualified by the statement "...unless God sends some necessity upon him, as has now been sent upon me."

In Rome suicide was never a general offense in law, though the whole approach to the question was essentially pragmatic. This is illustrated by the example given by Titus Livy of the colony of Massalia (the present day Marseilles), where those who wanted to kill themselves merely applied to the Senate, and if their reasons were judged sound they were then given hemlock free of charge. It was specifically forbidden in three cases: those accused of capital crimes, soldiers and slaves. The reason behind all three was the same - it was uneconomic for these people to die. If the accused killed themselves prior to trial and conviction then the state lost the right to seize their property, a loophole that was only closed by Domitian in the first century AD, who decreed that those who died prior to trial were without legal heirs. The suicide of a soldier was treated on the same basis as desertion. If a slave killed her or himself within six months of purchase, the master could claim a full refund from the former owner.

But the Romans fully approved of what might be termed "patriotic suicide"; death, in other words, as an alternative to dishonour. For the Stoics, a philosophical sect which originated in Greece, death was a guarantee of personal freedom, a way out of an intolerable existence. And so it was for Cato the Younger, who killed himself after the Pompeian cause was defeated at the Battle of Thapsus. This was a 'virtuous death', one guided by reason and conscience. His example was later followed by Seneca, though under somewhat
more straightened circumstances. A very definite line was drawn by the Romans between the virtuous suicide and suicide for entirely private reasons. They disapproved of Mark Antony not because he killed himself, but that he killed himself for love.

**Religious Panorama**

(i) **Christianity**

**Early Christianity**

There are seven incidents of suicide in the Holy Bible, most notably in Matthew 27:3, the suicide of Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus.

The most notable pro-suicide group was the Donatists, who believed that by killing themselves they could attain martyrdom and go to heaven. They jumped off cliffs, burned themselves in large numbers, and stopped travelers, either offering to pay them or threatening them with death to encourage them to kill the Donatist would-be martyr. They were eventually declared heretics.

In the fifth century, St. Augustine wrote the book The City of God, in it making Christianity’s first overall condemnation of suicide. His biblical justification for this was the interpretation of the commandment, "thou shalt not kill", and the rest of his reasons were from Plato's "Phaedra".

In the sixth century, suicide became a religious sin and secular crime. In 533, those who committed suicide while accuse of a crime were denied a Christian burial, which was a requirement for going to heaven. In 562, all suicide were punished in this way. In 693, even the attempt of suicide became an ecclesiastical crime, which could be punished by excommunication, with civil consequences following. In the 13th century Thomas Aquinas vilified suicide as an act against God and as a sin for which one could not repent. Civil and criminal laws were enacted to discourage suicide, and as well as denying a proper burial and degrading the body. Property and possessions of the deceased and their family were confiscated.
Many Christians believe in the sanctity of human life, a principal which, broadly speaking, says that all human life is sacred - a wonderful, even miraculous creation of the divine God - and every effort must be made to save and preserve it whenever possible.

**Modern Catholicism**

In Catholicism, death by freely chosen act of suicide is considered a grave and mortal sin. The chief Christian argument is that one's life is the property of God, and to destroy that life is to wrongly assert dominion over what is God's. In point 2281 of the Catechism it is stated:

"2281 Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God."

The 1997 Catechism of the Catholic Church indicates that suicide may not always be fully conscious - and thus not one-hundred-percent morally culpable: "Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide."

The essential context regarding the Catholic Church's condemnation of suicide is the Church's absolute insistence on the sanctity of life. It is in this regard, and taking into account the clear deliberation of the act by a thinking person, that the Church regards suicide as being among the gravest sins a person may commit and therefore creating the risk of eternal damnation. However, the commonly-held position of most Catholic theologians is that because suicide is not a rational act but a desperate one, clear deliberation is tautologically not possible for the individual who attempts or succeeds in committing suicide: as such it does not meet the conditions required for wilful sin against God and is to be treated with compassion and not condemnation.
The gravity of the Church's position resides in a twofold argument. Suicide is a rejection of God's love for mankind, and mankind's love for God. Suicide causes fracture to the social community of friends, loved-ones and broader human society.

Modern Protestantism

Conservative Christians (Evangelicals, Charismatics and Pentecostals) have often argued that because suicide involves self-murder, then anyone who commits it is sinning and is the same as if the person murdered another human being. A number of Biblical figures committed (or attempted) suicide, most notably Saul and Judas Iscariot, who hanged himself after betraying Christ. While suicide is certainly treated in a negative way in the Bible, there is, however, no specific verse that explicitly states that suicide leads directly to Hell. Yet because Jesus Christ took the punishment for the sins of mankind, and suicide is seen as a sin, the result would be that the person who commits suicide would not be culpable, and that all his sins (including the killing of himself) would be covered by Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Consequently, there is a growing belief that Christians who commit suicide are still granted Heaven.

"You have heard that the ancient people were asked murder and not murder any one who would be eligible for punishment in the Court."

Bible-Matti - 5/21

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1) Suicide is a rejection of God's love for mankind, and mankind's love for God.

2) Suicide census fracture to the social community of friends, loved -ones and broader human society.

(ii) Islam

Islam, like other Abrahamic religions, views suicide as sinful and highly detrimental to one's spiritual journey. For those who formerly believed, but ultimately rejected belief in God, the result seems unambiguously negative.

A verse in the fourth chapter of the Quran, An - Nisaa (The women) instructs; "And do not kill yourselves, surely Allah is most Merciful to you." (4:29)

The prohibition of suicide has also been recorded in authentic statements of hadith. For example; "He who commits suicide by throttling shall keep on throttling himself in the Hell - fire, and he who commits suicide by stabbing himself, he shall keep stabbing himself in the Hell - fire."5

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"He who commits suicide by throttling shall keep on throttling himself in the well-fire, and he who commits suicide by stabbing himself, he shall keep stabbing himself in the hell-fire."6

Hazrat mohammad said that every person God has given to his reputation
and fortune, but his death would come when the, clock, it kept its decision. So people always conform to the will of God. Must be the work of Islamic "Sharia". The suicide is for bidden to say that your life is virtually the property of God and the heritage you so that you have been of the fix period of time for takes work. So that you do not destroy it. Islam has a large, strong words of condemnation of suicide.

(iii) Hinduism

In Hinduism, murdering one's own body is considered equally sinful as murdering another, with the exception of the currently defunct practice of sati. Scriptures generally state that to die by suicide (and any type of violent death) results in becoming a ghost, wandering earth until the time one would have otherwise died, had one not committed suicide.⁷

(iv) Judaism

Judaism has traditionally, in light of its great emphasis on the sanctity of life, viewed suicide as one of the most serious of sins. Suicide has always been forbidden by Jewish law in all cases. It is not seen as an acceptable alternative even if one is being forced to commit certain cardinal sins for which one must give up one's life rather than sin. Assisting in suicide and requesting such assistance (thereby creating an accomplice to a sinful act) is also forbidden, a minimal violation of Leviticus 19:14, "Do not put a stumbling block before the blind," for the Rabbis interpreted that verse to prohibit any type of stumbling block: theological (e.g., persuading people to believe in false doctrine), economic (e.g., giving bad financial advice) or in this case moral stumbling blocks, as well as physical ones.⁸

The prohibition against suicide is not specifically recorded in the Talmud. The post-talmudic tractate Semahot (Evel Rabbati) 2:1 - 5 serves as the basis for most of later Jewish law on suicide, together with Genesis Rabbah 34:13, which bases the biblical prohibition on Genesis 9:5 "And surely your blood of your lives will I require."⁹
According to Chassidic philosophy, a soul descends into this world to perform a mission, which cannot be performed in the "spiritual worlds". This is the Chassidic interpretation of the Talmudic statement "One second in the world - to -Come is more pleasurable than the whole life in this world. But one good deed in this world is more important than the whole eternity of the World - to -Come" (Ethics of Our Fathers, Mishna). According to Chabad school of Chassidism, although spiritual beings (souls and angels living in spiritual worlds) have access to knowledge of God's existence, they have no access to God's Essence. During performance of Torah's Commandments, a person's body and soul gain access to the Creator's Essence (since Torah represents God's will, which is one with his essence) and purify both the body and the soul, as well as the physical world. The purification of the physical world through performance of Commandments leads eventually to Messianic Era, which is the goal and purpose of Creation. Therefore, life in the physical world presents a person's soul a unique opportunity, and to consciously and willfully break away from this opportunity is regarded as a gravest sin.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, the body of scholars of Jewish law in Conservative Judaism, has published a responsa on suicide and assisted suicide in the Summer 1998 issue of Conservative Judaism, Vol.L, No.4. It affirms the prohibition, then addresses the growing trend of Americans and Europeans to seek assistance with suicide. The Conservative teshuva notes that while many people get sick, often with terminal illnesses, most people do not try to kill themselves. The committee believes we are obliged to determine why some seek help with suicide and to ameliorate those circumstances.

**The Conservative response states:**

"...those who commit suicide and those who aid others in doing so act out of a plethora of motives. Some of these reasons are less than noble, involving, for example, children's desires to see Mom or Dad die with dispatch so as not to squander their inheritance on 'futile' health care, or the desire of insurance companies to spends as little money as possible on the terminally ill."
The paper says the proper response to severe pain is not suicide, but better pain control and more pain medication. Many doctors, it asserts, are deliberately keeping such patients in pain by refusing to administer sufficient pain medications: some out of ignorance; others to avoid possible drug addiction; others from a misguided sense of stoicism. Conservative Judaism holds that such forms of reasoning are "bizarre" and cruel, that with today's medications there is no reason for people to be in perpetual torture.

It then investigates the psychological roots of hopelessness felt by some patients, and asserts:

"Physicians or others asked to assist in dying should recognize that people contemplating suicide are often alone, without anyone taking an interest in their continued living. Rather than assist the patient in dying, the proper response to such circumstances is to provide the patient with a group of people who clearly and repeatedly reaffirm their interest in the patient's continued life .... Requests to die, then, must be evaluated in the terms of degree of social support the patient has, for such requests are often withdrawn as soon as someone shows an interest in the patient staying alive. In this age of individualism and broken and scattered families, and in the antiseptic environment of hospitals where dying people usually find themselves the mitzvah of visiting the sick (bikkur Holim) becomes all the more crucial in sustaining the will to live."

Judaism has many teachings about peace and compromise that present physical violence as one of the last possible options. Although killing oneself is forbidden under normal Jewish law as being a denial of God's goodness in the world, under extreme circumstances when there has seemed no choice but to either be killed or forced to betray their religion, Jews have committed suicide or mass suicide. As a grim reminder of those times, there is even a prayer in the Jewish liturgy for "when the knife is at the throat", for those dying "to sanctify God's Name". These acts have received mixed responses by Jewish authorities;
some regard them as examples of heroic martyrdom, and others saying that while Jews should always be willing to face martyrdom if necessary, it was wrong for them to have then their own lives.  

Because Judaism focuses on this life, many questions to do with survival and conflict (such as the classic moral dilemma of two people in a desert with only enough water for one to survive) were analysed in great depth by the rabbis within the Talmud, in the attempt to understand the principles a godly person should draw upon in such a circumstance.

(v) Buddhism

According to Buddhism, individuals past acts heavily influence what they experience in the present; present acts, in turn, become the background influence for future experiences (the doctrine of karma). Intentional action by mind, body or speech have a reaction. This reaction, or repercussion, is the cause of conditions and differences we come across in the world.

Buddhism teaches that all people experience substantial suffering (dukkha), which suffering primarily originates from past negative deeds (karmically), or just from being in samsara, the cycle of birth and death. Another reason for the prevalent suffering individuals experience is impermanence and illusion (maya). Since everything is in a constant state of impermanence or flux, individuals experience dissatisfaction with the fleeting events of life. To break out of samsara, Buddhism advocates the Noble Eightfold Path.

For Buddhists, since the first precept is to refrain from the destruction of life, including oneself, suicide is clearly considered a negative form of action. Despite this view, an ancient Asian ideology similar to seppuku (hara-kiri) continues to influence oppressed Buddhists to choose the act of honor suicide. The most well-known instance of this was Thich Quang Duc's suicide by self-immolation to protest the government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Also in modern times, Tibetan monks have used this perceived ideal to protest the Chinese occupation of Tibet and China's human rights violations against Tibetans.
Philosophical Aspect of Suicide

(A) Arguments against suicide

There have been many philosophical arguments made that contend that suicide is immoral and unethical. One popular argument is that many of the reasons for committing suicide, such as depression, emotional pain or economic hardship, are transitory and treatable through therapy and lifestyle changes. A common adage in the discourse surrounding suicide prevention sums up this view: Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Ken Baldwin, a depressed 28 year-old who attempted suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, recalls his first thoughts after he jumped: "I instantly realized that everything in my life that I’d thought was unfixable was totally fixable - except for having just jumped". However, the argument against this is that while emotional pain may seem transitory to most people, and in many cases it is, in many other cases it may be extremely difficult or even impossible to resolve, even through counseling or lifestyle change, depending on the severity of the case and the persons ability to cope with their pain. Examples of this are incurable disease or severe, life long mental illness.

(i) Classical Liberalism

John Stuart Mill argued in his influential essay On Liberty that since the sine qua non of liberty is the power of the individual to make choices; any choice that one might make that would deprive him or her of the ability to make further choices should be prevented. Thus, for Mill, selling oneself into slavery or killing oneself should be prevented, in order to avoid precluding the ability to make further choices. Concerning these matters, Mill writes in On Liberty:

Not only persons are not held to engagements which violate the rights of third parties, but it is sometimes considered a sufficient reason for releasing them from an engagements, that it is injurious to themselves. In this and most other civilized countries, for example, an engagement by which a person should sell himself, or allow himself to be sold, as a slave, would be null and void; neither enforced by law nor by opinion. The ground for thus limiting his power of
voluntarily disposing of his own lot in life, is apparent, and is very clearly seen in this extreme case. The reason for not interfering, unless for the sake of others, with a person's voluntary acts, is consideration for his liberty. His voluntary choice is evidence that what he so chooses is desirable, or at the least endurable, to him, and his good is on the whole best provided for by allowing him to take his own means of pursuing it. But by selling himself for a slave, he abdicates his liberty; he forgoes any future use of it, beyond that single act. He therefore defeats, in his own case, the very purpose which is the justification of allowing him to dispose of himself. He is no longer free; but is thenceforth in a position which has no longer the presumption in its favor, that would be afforded by his voluntarily remaining in it. The principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free. It is not freedom, to be allowed to alienate his freedom.

Yet at the same time Mill believes the individual to be the best guardian of their own interests. Mill uses the example of a man about to cross a broken bridge: we can forcibly stop him and warn him of the danger he faces if he continues but ultimately we should not prevent him from crossing the bridge; for only he knows the worth of his life appear well within their rights to end it.

(ii) Deontologism

Immanuel Kant, considered by many to be the father of deontologism, argues against suicide in Fundamental Principles of The Metaphysic of Morals. In accordance with the second formulation of his categorical imperative, Kant states that "He who contemplates suicide should ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. Kant's theory looked at the action and not the outcomes and consequences. You would then have to think whether you would be willing to universalise the act. Kant then argues that if the person chooses to commit suicide that he/she is using themselves as mean to satisfy him/herself. The reason that sex in marriage is acceptable (and in Kant's eyes, this is the only acceptable place for it) is because there is no other person to use as a means, so it is impossible to take advantage
of a non-existent person, and it is not capable to take advantage of oneself. Thus it would seem that suicide to satisfy oneself must be unacceptable to Kant on other grounds than self-satisfaction.

(iii) Absurdism

The French-Algerian absurdist philosopher Camus saw the goal of absurdism in establishing whether suicide was necessary in a world without God. For Camus, suicide was the rejection of freedom, He thought that fleeing from the absurdity of reality into illusions, religion or death was not the way out. Instead of fleeing the absurd meaninglessness of life, we should embrace life passionately. Emistentialist Sartre described the position of Meufsault, the protagonist of Camus' L' Etranger, who is condemned to death in the following way: "The absurd man will not commit suicide; he wants to love, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusions.... and without resignation either. He atares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him. He experiences the 'divine irresponsibility' of he condemned man".14

(iv) Social Contract

Social Contract, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, argues that every man has "a right to risk his own life in order to preserve it."

Hobbes and Locke, reject the right of individuals to take their own life, Hobbes claims in his Leviathan that natural law forbids every man "to do, that which is destructive of his life, or take away the means of preserving the same". Breaking this natural law is irrational and immoral. Hobbes also states that it is intuitively rational for men to want felicity and to fear death most.

(v) Christian - inspired philosophy

Devid Hume let an essay on suicide to be published after his death. Most of it is concerned with the idea that it is an affront to God. He argued that it was no more a rebellion against God than to save the life of someone who would
otherwise die or to change anything else in the environment's position. He spent much less time dismissing arguments that it was an affront to duty to others or to oneself. He said that it could be compared to retiring from society and becoming a total recluse, which is not normally considered to be immoral - although this comparison of his would not seem to justify a suicide that left children or dependents vulnerable, in its wake. He saw it as obvious that there would be times when it would be desirable not to continue living and thought it ridiculous that anyone would consider suicide unless they had considered every other option first. G.K.Chesterton called suicide "the ultimate and absolute evil, the refusal to take an interest in existence". He argued that a person who killed himself, as far as they were concerned, destroyed the entire world,

(vi) Other arguments

The writer Dorothy Parker, who attempted suicide several times, wrote a famous blackly comic poem contemplating and ultimately rejecting suicide, entitled Resume.¹⁵

(B) Arguments for suicide

There are arguments in favor of allowing an individual to choose between life and suicide. Those in favor of suicide as a personal choice reject the thought that suicide is always or usually irrational, but is instead a solution to real problems; a line of last resort that can legitimately be taken when the alternative is considered worse. They believe that no being should be made to suffer unnecessarily, and suicide provides an escape from suffering.

(i) Idealism

Some thinkers have had positive or at least neutral views on suicide. Some philosophers, such as Goethe and Schopenhauer, view suicide as the greatest comfort in life.

Herodotus wrote: "When life is so burdensome, death has become for man a sought-after refuge". Schopenhauer affirmed: "They tell us that suicide is the greatest act of cowardice..... that suicide is wrong; when it is quite obvious
that there is nothing in the world to which every man has a more unassailable title than to his own life and person".

Arthur Schopenhauer would be expected to take the subject seriously, due to his bleak view of life. His main work - The World as Will and Representation - occasionally uses the act in its examples. He denied that suicide was immoral and saw it as one's right to take their life. In an interesting allegory, he compared ending one's life, when under great suffering, to waking up from sleep, when experiencing a terrible nightmare. However, most suicides were seen as an act of the will, as it takes place when one denies life's pains and is thus different from ascetic renunciation of the will, which denies life's pleasures. This seems somewhat contradictory - but it is clear that, all in all, Schopenhauer had a lot of sympathy for those who commit suicide.

(ii) Liberalism

Liberalism asserts that a person's life belongs only to him or her, and no other person has the right to force their own ideals that life must be lived. Rather, only the individual involved can make such decision, and whatever decision he or she does make, should be respected.

Philosopher and psychiatrist Thomas Szasz goes further, arguing that suicide is the most basic right of all. If freedom is self-ownership, ownership over one's own life and body, then the right to end that life is the most basic of all. If others can force you to live, you do not own yourself and belong to them.

Jean Amery, in his book On Suicide: a Discourse on Voluntary Death (originally published in German in 1976), provides a moving insight into the suicidal mind. He argues forcefully and almost romantically that suicide represents the ultimate freedom of humanity, attempting to justify the act with phrases such as "we only arrive at ourselves in a freely chosen death", lamenting the "ridiculously everyday life and its alienation". He killed himself in 1978.

Philosophical thinking in the 19th and 20th century has led, in some cases, beyond thinking in terms of pro-choice, to the point that suicide is no longer a
last resort, or even something that one must justify, but something that one must justify not doing. Many forms of Existentialist thinking essentially begin with the premise that life is objectively meaningless and proceeds to the question of why one should "not just kill his or her self?". It then proceeds to answer this by suggesting the individuals has the power to give personal meaning.

Neutral and Situational stands

(i) Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism can be used as a justification or an argument against suicide. Although the death of a depressed person negates his or her sadness, the person's family and friends may grieve.

(ii) Nihilism

Nihilist thinkers reject this emphasis on the power of the individual to create meaning and acknowledge that all things are equally meaningless, including suicide.

(iii) Other Arguments

Those who support Right to die argue that suicide is acceptable under certain circumstances, such as incurable disease and old age. The idea is that although life is in general good, people who face irreversible suffering should not be forced to continue suffering.

Leonard Peikoff states in his book, Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand, that "Suicide is justified when man's life, owning to circumstances outside of a person's control, is no longer possible; an example might be a person with a painful terminal illness, or a prisoner in a concentration camp who sees no chance of escape. In cases such as these, suicide is not necessarily a philosophic rejection of life or of reality. On the contrary, it may very well be their tragic reaffirmation. Self-destruction in such contexts may amount to the tortured cry: 'Man's life means so much to me that I will not settle for anything less. I will not accept a living death as a substitute."
References


2. http://www.new-life.net/faq022.htm Article includes a list of suicides found in the Old Testament, with links to Bible passages.

3. "Pips Project - THE STIGMA OF SUICIDE A History".

4. "Ophelia's Burial".


6. H.P. Vol II Part II pp. 924 to 929.


8. See Talmud Bavli (B.) Pesah.im 22b; B. Mo'ed Katan 5a; B. Bava Mezia 75b. and B. Nedarim 42b).


