A common reason given to support a right to suicide is that it allows the suffering person to end his or her pain. One does not commit suicide in order to obtain death, but rather to get relief from a painful and intolerable situation. Objections to suicide can be religious, based on some duty to the God as Creator, or based in the nature of duty itself (Kant), the dignity of human life, or in ignorance of the afterlife. What comes after might be worse than the present life. But in each of these cases there is a presumption that there is an afterlife, and that violations of the various duties will be punished in some way.1 “Don’t kill yourself, because something worse might happen to you.” But what if there is no afterlife? What arguments can be made to convince those who do not believe in an afterlife that suicide is wrong? Could any argument be made against suicide in this case? I will argue that suicide is an irrational act. It does not fulfill the requirements of a rational act, that it be directed towards an attainable end. The suicide desires an end to pain, but he or she never gets there, since the suicide ceases to exist before the pain stops. All that the suicide gets is pain.

1Even for Kant, there is a need for a practical belief in God, since we are required to act so as to deserve happiness. We must therefore presume that there is a God who will reward us in the afterlife for adhering to duty. See Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), A810, B838.
Some Arguments against Suicide

St. Thomas Aquinas says that suicide is not permitted for three reasons: first, because it is a violation of one’s duty to oneself; second, because one has a duty to society; and third, “because life is God’s gift to man, and is subject to his power, Who kills and makes to live. Hence whoever takes his own life, sins against God, even as he who kills another’s slave, sins against that slave’s master.” We have duties to the God who made us, most of all, but also to ourselves and to the community in which we live. None of these duties can withstand the atheist objection, for if there is no afterlife, there is no place for one to undergo a punishment for violating the duty one has to oneself or to society. What would I care about failing in my duties? Who is going to punish me? As the scholastics might have said, one cannot punish that which does not exist. Finally, if God does not exist, then we are not God’s possessions, and can have no scruple about killing ourselves and depriving the nonexistent God of his property. So Aquinas has nothing to say that would prevent the atheist from killing himself if he so chose.

Kant is also opposed to suicide, and gives several reasons for it. First and most importantly, suicide is a contradiction. We exist for the sake of our free will: “If freedom is the condition of life it cannot be employed to abolish life and so to destroy and abolish itself. To use life for its own destruction, to use life for producing lifelessness, is self-contradictory.” We consider ourselves alive by virtue of our freedom. Kant therefore asserts that to use one’s freedom to destroy the body, which is the condition for one’s freedom, is contradictory and should not be done. Suicide is a violation of the categorical imperative. An action may only be willed if it can be universalized without contradiction. The test is whether one’s choice could be willed as a universal law of nature. The maxim that one ought to kill oneself leads to a direct contradiction, since if universalized, it would lead to a destruction of the nature that is required for the possibility of committing suicide. To use one’s free will in order to destroy the life that is the basis for free will is self-contradictory; however, it is difficult to see how this self-contradiction is going to bother one who has chosen to commit suicide. The act may be a violation of duty, but the suicide has presumably chosen to abandon all claims of duty. In addition, Kant argues that a society that allows or promotes suicide will be a frightful place: “How dreadful everyone would find them. For he who does not respect his life even in principle cannot be restrained from the most dreadful vices; he recks neither kings nor torments.” If suicide is a permissible act, how can there be any act which is not allowed? To allow people to destroy themselves will lead to disregard for the laws of God and man. But once again, what would the atheist who is a potential suicide care for the state of the

---

2St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1952), II-II 64.5c.


world he or she leaves behind? The suicide is choosing nonexistence, and to hell with existence.

Patrick Lee argues that suicide is always wrong because “the intentional killing of an innocent human person unavoidably includes a profound disrespect for the good of human life.” Human life is one of the basic goods against which one can never directly act. The human person is intrinsically good; to destroy an innocent human person intentionally is an evil act, and one can never do evil even if good will come of it (Rom 3:8). Therefore, one can never commit suicide, since that would be taking an innocent human life. Once again, however, the potential suicide who does not believe in an afterlife will say that although he or she may be acting disrespectfully towards the intrinsic good of human life, there can be no penalty for this act, since the suicide will cease to exist. The appeal to the intrinsic value of the human person will fall on deaf ears.

One way of arguing for suicide is on utilitarian grounds. What one is doing is comparing future possible world-courses. As Richard Brandt puts it, “The problem, I take it, is to decide whether the expectable utility to me of some possible world-course in which I go on for another twenty years is greater than or less than the expectable utility to me of the one in which my life stops in an hour.” If faced with a future of miserable pain and nonproductivity, one can make a calculation of the utility of the world where I live and the world where I die. If it is a better world without me, then I should commit suicide. Even disregarding the difficulty of calculating the utility of different situations or the impossibility of determining the future, the argument founders on the unknown. As Phillip Devine points out, it is not the case that we are choosing between two different possible world-courses. We are rather choosing life or death. Brandt argues on the assumption that there is no afterlife. Devine points out the impossibility of making a definite determination on this topic: “What I am contemplating is much more intimate than a world-course. It is my own (self-chosen) death, and such a choice presents itself inevitably as a leap in the dark.” There is no guarantee that the future where I have ended my life is going to be better, because I cannot be sure that my situation will not be intolerable after I die. An eternity in Hell would weigh very heavily against the utility of a world-course where I commit suicide.

But presume Brandt is correct. What if there is no afterlife? Of course no one can be sure that there is not an afterlife; it is something that if it exists, exists in a reality different from that normally perceivable by humans. But let us assume that there is no afterlife. Is there any argument that can be made against suicide? I suggest that there is. Suicide is an irrational act. It is a goal-directed act that does not tend

---


towards its goal. The action chosen (suicide) does not conduce to the desired end (end of pain, either physical or emotional).

**Suicide Is Irrational**

Often the best way to defeat an argument is to show that even if its premises are true, the argument fails. Certainly if there is an afterlife and if one’s state in that afterlife depends on one’s actions here, then suicide might be a poor choice. But what if the atheist is correct? Presume that there is no afterlife, and that death is simply oblivion, the end of existence. If this is the case, then suicide is still an irrational act, because the act of suicide does not lead to an absence of pain.

What is the structure of an act? It consists of physical or mental activity directed toward some goal. As Aristotle puts it, “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”9 There is some goal or telos at which all actions aim. Individual actions may have different ends: for example, I eat to satisfy hunger, and I study to gain knowledge. Sometimes the act and the end are identical: I eat ice cream not so much to satisfy hunger as to enjoy the act of eating, and I play music not for an audience but for the joy of the activity itself. If the action and the goal are not the same, the action is willed for the sake of the goal: I do not enjoy lifting weights in itself, but because of the increased strength and health that result from it.

How does suicide fulfill this schematic of an act? The act of suicide is the action of taking poison, pulling the trigger of the gun, hanging oneself, or any of the various ways people take their own lives. It is clear that for suicide, the act is not the same as the end, for who would choose the act of killing oneself for itself? No, there is some goal for the sake of which the act of suicide is chosen. The goal is an end to an intolerable situation. The potential suicide wishes to have pain end. Brandt gives a list of possible justifications for suicide: “Among the problems that have been regarded as good and sufficient reasons for ending life, we find (in addition to serious illness) the following: some event that has made a person feel ashamed or lose his prestige and status; reduction from affluence to poverty; the loss of a limb or of physical beauty; the loss of sexual capacity; some event that makes it seem impossible to achieve things by which one sets store; loss of a loved one; disappointment in love; the infirmities of increasing age.”10 All of these examples can be reduced to the goal of ending a difficult or painful situation. The potential suicide wants the state of illness to end, the state of shame at lost status, poverty, or reduction of sexual capacity to end, or the pain of losing a loved one to end. The key is that the goal is to end some sort of physical or mental pain.

Is this a rational goal? A rational goal is one that can be reasonably expected to be reached by means of the proposed action. Suicide will be rational if the act of

---


suicide can be expected to end the offending situation. It seems at first glance that suicide can be rational, since the act of suicide destroys the subject experiencing the pain of the bad situation. If there is no sufferer, there is no suffering. But we must look closer: the goal was not the end of the subject, but the end of the pain. Pain is an experience had by an experiencing subject. What is desired is the elimination of the experience, not the elimination of the subject. The act of committing suicide gives more than one bargains for.

The elimination of the subject eliminates any possibility of achieving the desired goal. Achieving the goal (the end of pain) requires that one be around to experience the achievement. For example, I cannot achieve the goal of winning the Boston Marathon if I drop dead moments before my corpse crosses the finish line. My body might win the race, but I will not, because I will not exist at that point. In order to achieve a goal involving some experience such as the end of pain, one has to be alive to achieve it. Suicide by its very nature precludes the achievement of any end, since the act destroys the person doing the act. There is never a moment when the suicide achieves the goal of the end of pain, since the person committing suicide is gone. It is as if in order for me to obtain cookies, I needed to hang myself from the kitchen ceiling with a rope around my neck. I might then be able to reach the cookies, but I wouldn’t be there anymore to eat them. It is an irrational act, since the goal cannot be achieved.

The potential suicide may object “but there is no more pain, and that was the goal.” Yes, but consider the experience stream of the suicide. He is in pain before he takes up the shotgun, he is in pain when he puts the muzzle in his mouth, he is in pain when he pulls the trigger, and he is in pain moments before the shotgun blast ends his existence. All that the suicide experiences is pain, pain, and more pain. There is never a moment where there is no pain. “Ah yes,” responds the suicide, “but there is oblivion!” Yes, but the suicide never even obtains oblivion, since, as the scholastics might have said, nothing can obtain nothing, not even oblivion. One cannot achieve oblivion if one does not exist, since there is nothing there that can achieve it. Whatever it is that reaches oblivion, it is not the person committing suicide. All the potential suicide will know is pain, up to the last moment of existence, without a moment of peace.

It may be objected that one can choose actions for goods one will never experience: Leonidas sacrificed himself at Thermopylae for a victory he would never experience. Could not one commit suicide for similar motives? For example, the sick person could decide that his or her continued life would be a burden to loved ones, and that suicide is therefore a duty. By ending the life, one is doing one’s relatives a favor. But suicide rarely leads to relief. As E. Joanne Angelo says, “The suicide of a loved one is never a gift.... Grieving the loss of a family member or close friend is never easy, but bereavement after suicide is often prolonged and difficult, and the issues it raises can last a lifetime. If the bereaved person has had a role in bringing about a premature end to the life of the deceased, issues of guilt may become overwhelming over time.”

family and friends is that it does not generally make things better. Suicide is most often chosen for the relief of pain, but as we have seen, this relief never comes.

No Relief in Suicide

Suicide is an irrational act, since it is an act that does not lead to its intended goal. Even assuming that there is no such thing as an afterlife, the act of suicide cannot be justified, since the relief of pain or suffering that is sought is never achieved. The potential suicide should understand the nature of the contemplated act and its goal. If existence ceases with death, and if what one really desires is the end of pain, then there is no possibility of ever getting the desired release from suffering through suicide. Death is the wrong choice, since the person who commits suicide will never see an improvement to the situation. What one ought to choose is to continue living and to seek some remedy for the pain. For example, if there is an intolerable division in the family, one should seek reconciliation. If one is in disgrace from a scandal, one should attempt to make amends. If the pain from a disease is too great, one should seek alternative treatments. These are the only alternatives, since there can be no possible relief for the potential suicide if there is no afterlife, because the one who commits suicide ceases to exist before relief comes. For an atheist, at least, the only relief from pain will be in this life. To commit suicide would be irrational.