Irrationality of the Irrationality Argument against Suicide

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It appears that some ethicists have become increasingly more interested in arguments against suicide that take the following form:

*Suicide is irrational because the agent does not survive to experience the postsuicidal benefits of the suicidal act.*

Indeed, a version of this argument, authored by Karl Schudt, has recently found a place within the pages of this journal.¹ I contend, however, that this argument falls short of the goal of ethical demonstration, and I shall set forth the reasons why I believe this to be the case. It is not my motivation to defend the permissibility of suicide, but rather, I intend to show that this particular argument is inadequate when it is considered to be an *ethical* argument demonstrating the impermissibility of suicide. First, I shall review the argument as presented in the recent issue of this journal. Second, I shall contend that the argument suffers from an equivocation and suggest that Schudt’s defense of it has striking parallels with a celebrated ancient logical sophism. Finally, I shall maintain that the argument conflates rhetorical considerations with genuine moral reasoning.

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I would like to thank Editor of the NCBQ Edward Furton and an anonymous reviewer for comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am also grateful for suggestions made by Michelle Ruggaber and Lawrence Masek.

Schudt holds that the act of committing suicide is irrational because it presents the case of an agent seeking a goal whose achievability is, in principle, unattainable. The suicidal agent seeks the desired goal of a cessation of pain, yet, since the act of suicide destroys the agent, the agent never temporally experiences the sought-after cessation of pain. Schudt explains:

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. (613)

[The agent committing suicide] 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 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. (613)

Presume that there is no afterlife, and that death is still ... an irrational act, because the act of suicide does not lead to an absence of pain. (612)

Schudt concludes that the act of suicide is irrational, since it strives for a goal (i.e., an absence of pain) that cannot be attained. He champions his argument against suicide as unique in its potential to convince atheists because his argument, unlike others, does not require the “presumption that there is an afterlife.” For the sake of argument, Schudt accepts the atheist’s claim that the soul does not survive bodily death and, therefore, that there is no afterlife where one committing suicide could receive punishment for the sin of suicide. It should be noted that Schudt’s argument is not intended to be one that will hold weight with those who accept the Catholic teaching that the soul survives the body. I shall have more to say about this below. For the sake of the argument here, however, I shall join with Schudt in temporarily accepting the premise that the soul does not survive death.

**Examining the Argument**

Let us admit, then, for the sake of argument, that there is no afterlife, and thus it follows that one who has successfully committed suicide does not survive to experience time without pain. In this sense, it is uncontroversial that there is no “absence of pain” after the successful suicide, and one can happily agree with Schudt on this point. However, there is in fact an absence of pain after a successful suicide insofar as there is no longer an agent experiencing pain. Simply put, prior to the suicide, there was an agent enduring pain and, after the suicide, the agent with the attendant pain no longer exists. So, in one sense, contra Schudt, it must be maintained that a suicide leads to an absence of pain, in the sense that there is no longer a subject existing who experiences pain. Thus, one can still meaningfully speak of an absence of pain subsequent to the commission of a successful suicide. Now, the question becomes whether an agent committing suicide, who seeks an absence of pain in this latter sense, acts irrationally. Can one rationally seek a good that one does not

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2Schudt, “Choosing Oblivion,” 609.
personally experience? Schudt seems to acknowledge this possibility later in his paper. First he states that “It may be objected that one can choose actions for goods one will never experience” (613). Then Schudt responds to this objection by simply stating that suicide “rarely leads to relief” and “does not generally make things better” for others (613, 614). Here Schudt gives us an empirical claim whose veracity is difficult to discern. Indeed, one who commits suicide might acknowledge that this action will be painful to others, but still believe (rightly or wrongly) that not committing suicide would result in more pain and, thus, still choose suicide under this aspect. Or, the agent could simply judge that it would be better not to exist in a state of continued pain. It would appear that all that is required is that the agent intend an achievable good for the rational structure of the act to be established, along Schudt’s definition of a rational act.

Schudt’s argument seems to require the premise that only goods that one experiences are rationally defensible goods worth pursuing. This premise seems controversial at best, especially in light of Schudt’s mention of Leonidas’s sacrifice at Thermopylae. Surprisingly, here Schudt appears to leave room for the possibility that, by means of suicide, an agent may attain goods that he or she will not experience, even though, in his view, he believes such situations may be rare. With this admission, one wonders on what grounds such a suicide would be irrational according to Schudt’s argument, since such an act appears to fulfill the definition of an act as a rational, goal-directed, attainable endeavor that Schudt uses earlier in his paper (see page 612).

The Nonexisting Agent

In defense of Schudt, one might consider that ethicists have noted in passing the puzzling character of the intentional structure of acts that result in the nonexistence of an agent. In a brief mention of suicide in his popular introduction to Thomistic moral philosophy called Ethica Thomistica: The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, Ralph McInerny notes:

I will be in a logical difficulty in maintaining that my fulfillment or perfection consists in not being at all.... The nonexistence of the human agent can scarcely qualify as the good, perfection, or fulfillment of the human agent.3

Are there ever instances where nonexistence can be meaningfully considered to be a perfection? Indeed, it is arguable that theologians have reason to answer in the affirmative.4 However, to the point here, it seems reasonable to hold that agents who seek escape in suicide are seeking nonexistence under the aspect of some desirable good, such as relief from pain. Indeed, the agent in a successful suicide does not survive to experience a relief from pain, but the agent does succeed in not experiencing a continued existence of pain, and in this latter sense, the agent does succeed in achieving an “absence of pain.”


4One might consider the logical structure of the words of Christ in Mt 26:24: “It would be better for that man if he had never been born.”
In my judgment, Schudt’s argument for the irrationality of suicide is strikingly similar to an ancient logical sophism traditionally associated with the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. Epicurus argued that one should not fear death, for it is impossible to experience one’s own death. This sophism suggests that one cannot experience one’s own death, since death destroys the agent who fears the experience of death. Epicurus’s version of the sophism is present in his Letter to Menoeceus:

The most frightful of evils, death, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist.\(^5\)

Schudt’s argumentation is very similar to Epicurus’s formulation, for he writes:

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. (613)

Epicurus contends that, since, after death, there is no subject to whom evil can be ascribed, then it follows that death is not an evil for human beings. In his argument, Schudt has resurrected this old “missing subject” theme of Epicurus—a theme that is still broached in discussions of whether one’s death is an evil to one who dies.\(^6\) Recently, philosophers have found reason to disagree with Epicurus’s view on this matter, by rejecting the premise that, if one does not personally experience an evil, then it cannot be an evil for that person. The most recent contribution to this debate is a monograph by Jack Li, Can Death Be a Harm to the Person Who Dies? In this study, Li sets forth numerous examples where an individual does not personally experience a particular harm, yet it must be concluded that the harm is a harm for that individual.\(^7\) If criticisms such as these are correct, then, a fortiori, there are problems with this part of Schudt’s position.

Rhetoric or Demonstration

I have tried to show that the particular argument against suicide noted above is not a sound piece of bioethical argumentation, principally because it equivocates on

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\(^5\)See A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, eds., The Hellenistic Philosophers, vol. 1, Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 150.


\(^7\)Jack Li, Can Death Be a Harm to the Person Who Dies? Philosophy and Medicine series (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002). A typical example is: “Case Seven. Suppose a person P has a lovely family—with a beautiful and sweet wife, a clever and cute son, and a friendly dog. P was a good man and had a very good reputation which he was proud of. Q was P’s best friend. Two years ago, P went to an island to do some business for six months. After he left for this island, Q started trying to convince P’s wife and son that P actually was an evil man. Unbelievably, they had fallen for the malicious lies of Q and come to hate P. Sadly, from that time on, P’s wife had an affair with Q. Q also passed vile false rumors to all of P’s friends to damage P’s reputation. All P’s friends believed Q’s lies. P was completely unaware of this. When he came back, he still lived with his family and treated Q as a good friend. And he was still proud of his ‘good’ reputation. However, P did not suffer as a result. In Case Seven, although P does not actually experience the misfortune, we would judge that he was severely harmed by this event” (29).
the key term “absence of pain.” Further, it seems to resurrect an ancient logical sophism and press it into service in a debate about suicide. But it occurs to me that perhaps the argument is not intended to be ethical argumentation. At times Schudt seems more concerned with issues of persuasion or rhetoric rather than ethical reasoning. Indeed, the author couches his argument in the context of strategies to induce atheists who desire to commit suicide not to do so. He asks, “What arguments can be made to convince those who do not believe in an afterlife that suicide is wrong?” Admittedly, I am not in a position to judge whether the above argument can be rhetorically helpful in preventing suicides. However, insofar as it is an argument, it can be examined with respect to its soundness.

Even if the argument were free from equivocation, one would still need to refrain from considering it to be a piece of ethical argumentation, insofar as it requires at least two false premises, namely, that God does not exist and that there is no afterlife. I can see that, rhetorically, one might prefer to concede these two false premises (at least briefly, for a short time), but a conclusion, even if it happens to be true when drawn from false premises is not considered to be a demonstrated conclusion. My motivation in criticizing the argument is neither to be contentious nor to defend suicide, but merely to point out that the argument is not a sound piece of bioethical argumentation. The desirability of the conclusion cannot be substituted for the need for a demonstration. One will have to turn elsewhere to defend the impermissibility of suicide.

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8Schudt, “Choosing Oblivion,” 609, emphasis added. Further, after suggesting that one of Aquinas’s arguments against suicide makes reference to God, Schudt contends, “So Aquinas has nothing to say that would prevent the atheist from killing himself if he so chose.” Ibid., 610, emphasis added. Schudt does admit that Aquinas possesses arguments that do not explicitly presuppose the existence of God, such as the argument based on an obligation to oneself or one based on an obligation to society, but he considers these arguments to be weak insofar as atheists presumably will not fear punishment in an afterlife. To Schudt’s references to Summa theologiae, II-II, Q. 64.5, one should add Summa theologiae, II-II, Q. 59.3, reply 2; Summa theologiae, II-II, Q. 124.1, reply 2; and In V Ethicorum, lect. 17, §1092–1096. Although Schudt concludes that Aquinas may not have much to say to someone who 1) denies the existence of God; 2) rejects that someone has obligations to oneself; 3) does not believe that someone has obligations to society; and 4) denies there is an afterlife, one might note that Aquinas has written much on each of these premises denied by Schudt’s atheist, and perhaps such writings could release Aquinas from the silence ascribed to him.