

## Suicide: is it morally justified?

Abhinshyam Tiwari

Department of Philosophy, University of Lucknow  
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this paper, I would like to give an account for the issue of whether committing suicide is morally wrong or not. I would take my thesis along the line of thoughts of three philosophers - St. Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant, and Albert Camus. I would (1) try and give a clear and uniform definition of the term 'suicide' (2) describe the famous 'Myth of Sisyphus' which focuses mainly on the idea of suicide by the existentialist thinker Albert Camus, (3) give a comparison between theistic theory of 'Divine Law' advocated by St. Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant's 'Categorical Imperative' arguments against suicide, and (4) giving out an expedition for an outline of the question which is prima facie for justifying taking one's own life: "Do I own my body?" I would argue and discuss that suicide, looked upon from an objectively moral point of view, is never allowed as rational action, be it in medieval times or the age of Enlightenment*

**KEYWORDS:** *Suicide, Moral Philosophy, Applied Ethics, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Aquinas, Western Philosophy, Social Problems*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Philosophy always has been misunderstood as some act of making castles in thin air or a profession in which your abstractive quality plays a better role than your handiness in really human affairs. However, when dealing with problems like Euthanasia, Utopia, or, as is the topic here, Suicide, we should not turn our heads away from the variety of responses philosophers gave to these notions that form the fundamental stepping stone for a civilization's spirit. The idea of Suicide has been one of the major concerns from the days of enlightenment to the world we live in right now. There have been myriad responses coming from the writings of literature to the researches done in cognitive sciences on whether it is a morally justified choice or not. Philosophy, as a subject, has had a fair share of theses for and against the topic of taking one's own life.

#### I. Definitions of suicide

One can best define suicide as "the intentional termination of one's own life" (Brandt 61) "no matter what the conditions or precise nature of the intention or the causal route to death." (Beauchamp and Childress, 87) However, certain conditions alongside the act imply such life-changing (or life-ending should I say) circumstances being intentional. An act may be a 'suicide' if and as long as "a person intentionally brings about his or her own death in circumstances where others don't coerce him or her to action." (Beauchamp 77) It is more clarified and filtered once we put stipulative statements defining it as an act of doing an action "with the intention of ending one's life or to cause some state of affairs (such as relief from pain) that one thinks is for certain or highly probable only after death." (Graber 57-58) It seems pretty clear from this definition by Graber that the attempt of suicide is usually through with a future in mind (whether it's attaining peace, or ending the pains forever) and thus, constitutes a bigger framework of what appears to be a Transcendence during which a body goes beyond its present situation ('Facticity' to 'Transcendence' as Sartre defines it in *The Transcendence of Ego and other Phenomenological Texts*). This transcendence transforms everything because it takes it up and assigns it an area within the dialectic of existence. For instance, a bit like when a person sees a woman who is attractive to him; he transcends himself during a wanting situation together with her not only of her body but also of her consciousness. This shows that suicide, when it's thought within the mind, always takes a bodily existence alongside the psychic constituents of the doer in imagining things after the act has been done. But suicide needn't end in death always; our motives and intentions are probable but the results to them are affected by external forces<sup>5</sup> We should always seek contentment by defining Suicide as an effort to inflict death upon oneself and is "intentional instead of consequential in nature" (Fairbairn 58). These conditions imply that suicide must rest upon an individual's intentions, where an intention implicates an individual's beliefs and desires about her action. Now if we are conceiving a consequence that motivates us to act, we may also take our thought process further and think 'whether I need to do X act for Y consequence?'

This is often partly almost like the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus". For those that are unfamiliar, here, Camus essentially tries to answer one among the foremost fundamental philosophical questions: 'Should I commit suicide?' Or in other words: 'Is life worth living?' His answer goes something like this: Yes, life is worth living, but it's your responsibility to seek out meaning in life, and from that meaning, it's your responsibility to seek out happiness. Here we shall take a look on the account of the analogy given by Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* and an attempt to examine whether there comes a time when the sole option left is ending your life whilst facing 'The Absurd.'

## II. The 'Myth of Sisyphus' and meaning of life

The central concern of the myth of Sisyphus is what Camus calls "the absurd." For Camus, there is a fundamental conflict between what we would like from the universe (our "Bad Faith" as he terms it), whether it is meaning, order, or reasons, and what we actually find within the universe i.e. our *facticity* which is a formless chaos. In a broad outline only for those that are not acquainted with the story, Sisyphus is a man condemned by Gods to push a boulder up a hill for eternity, just for it to fall back down every day; he has no choice to commit suicide but to only enjoy this confrontation with 'Absurd' by pretending to be happy, tricking the Gods to eternity. But what if he could prefer to kill (not a 'philosophical suicide' as Camus distinguishes it with the bodily suicide to save the plot of his allegory) and, therefore, cease to exist? What if he could end his 'suffering' a bit like all the others who choose this action of ceasing to be? In my reading of the essay and as far as my perspective goes, I feel Camus was saying that if one commits suicide, it might mean that the person answered the question of life's meaning because only then are you able to rationally decide whether the meaning is worthwhile or not. But Camus says that it is impossible to answer this question due to the absurdity of life which he compares to Sisyphus's task. He is suggesting that we will never possibly know whether Sisyphus' task is actually suffering or not, but it is surely absurd. Acknowledging this fact of the Absurdity of life and therefore the fate of it can cause you to be in content acceptance. Basically what question Camus puts before us is one among those dreading from which one may end his life more reasonably than the other cause: 'Whether Life has meaning at all? Whether all the actions for our purpose meaningless?' Ultimately Camus believes that yes, the universe has no account what our purpose is, but that is no reason to take your own life. You want to "rebel" against the "absurd" and still push the rock up the hill. Camus doesn't seem to argue that meaning is present in life. Rather, he suggests to the reader that you simply are often happy despite the dearth of meaning. In his view, it is all about creating a meaning in the world which is all along meaningless; the "Freedom to choose" as Sartre defines it.

From this allegory, we get to know that philosophers and humanitarians alike, after the War, started deconstructing the shape of life which constituted actions and choices based upon a fundamental meaning or 'essence'. While the famous phrase 'Existence precedes Essence' is uttered in a different context (that of war times and people being used as machines), most suicidal attempts by people have the meaninglessness of life as the *prima facie*. This ability to shift perspectives from seeking a foundation, a stick to float across the river of life, to conceiving life as a center-less bubble that will spin out eventually, is a shift in a paradigm of living rather than a single theory. It is equal to writing a novel with no particular heroes in it, just like the '*Vanity Fair*' by William Thackeray, rather than writing about the objectivity of morality and finding your true values in life (which is more irritable to find in real life than to be enjoyed in fictions).

## III. Thomas Aquinas' Divine Law and Kant's Categorical Imperative

While many of the theses anticipate an account of Thomistic doctrine refuted by the Empiricist apex David Hume, I thought that it would be much interesting to shed light on the theories on taking one's own life coming from the Medieval Philosopher St. Thomas in contrast and parallel to the Critical, and probably one of the highest-ranked philosophers of all time, Immanuel Kant's argument from his Categorical Imperative.

Aquinas relies on the natural law, the holiness of life, and his "theological principle" (as Beauchamp calls it) that is, an appeal of an act's conformity to the Divine Law. Aquinas builds his case primarily from Augustine, Aristotle, and The Bible. He argues that suicide is "altogether unlawful" because it violates the Fifth Divine Law – "thou shalt not kill" – which applies to everyone without exception (even to ourselves); it also contravenes the law of self-preservation, our obligations to our family, neighbors and the society. "Because life is God's gift to man, and is subject to His power... whoever takes his own life sins against God" (Aquinas 64.5) just as one cannot intervene on a piece of property (the man) and the way it is enjoyed and used by the owner (God). Man is free to do what he wills in many aspects of life, but his transition from this life to another, in a hope to acquaint him with a happier one, is beyond the limits of human freedom; a man cannot anticipate his future by taking his own life. The conscious and willed suicide is to take over God's power of judgment in a cause that lies outside his (the doer's) competence.

For Aquinas, death is the last and the greatest evil a man commits before his life ends. The act of suicide out of guilt of any crime is never permissible for one cannot hope for something good (i.e. a happy

afterlife) being followed from evil actions; the bad means cannot lead to good ends. Suicide is the greatest evil and no matter what sins you will commit in the future, they will be lesser and even uncertain evils. God is merciful and will help us salvaging ourselves from the evil deeds which we have done by making us do penance.

Before taking into Immanuel Kant's account on suicide, some points are to be noted here which can make us see some flaws in this argument given by Aquinas. Firstly, there is that plethora of presuppositions that God, not only as a creator being but as a being conceived by Christian and Biblical notions, exists; he helps the weak and forgives the sinners by his benevolence. This belief, even if taken to be true, can be of very weak value for someone who is experiencing mental or physical, or both traumas to that extent that he is forced to even think of taking his own life which he dearly loved ones. We have got many instances where God or Divine Will is taken as an inspiration rather than a prohibition to take one's life; a man may thank god before ending his life, being grateful that this 'courage' intuited upon him before he would be tormented by more pains in this world. The second point which must be taken into account is that not all suicides are done by being 'guilty' or as a 'repentance' of some criminal deed. People are said to die more by taking pity on themselves and apathy towards the miseries which the world provides them. What about that man who seeks peace rather than repentance? For that, we shall now turn to the use of this question of suicide by Immanuel Kant for explaining more broadly his theory of Categorical Imperative.

Kant creates a thought experiment in which he hypothesizes a man whose misfortunes and miseries have led him to complete despair, the only choice left for him to be free from these torments is to take his own life. The principle maxim, Kant argues, for such a conclusion of an argument, proceeds from self-love. The person attempting suicide does so in hope (or certainty?) to free himself from the difficulties he is toiling right now (as we saw in the above passage; peace rather than repentance). But the basic premise, that is, of self-love, Kant argues, cannot justify suicide because the idea of self-love necessarily presupposes the continued existence of the actor. It is like saying that to 'get X in conjunction with Y, we have to negate Q which is a necessary condition for X to exist.' As for the rule of Categorical Imperative, one should "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 51). The maxim on which the doer proposes to act could not become universal as it would destroy the very ground on which possibility of morality exists. Since self-love cannot motivate agents to use themselves both as merely means to further their lives while also as a means to destroy their lives, the maxim to commit suicide contradicts itself. To construct an argument, it would go something like this Suicide is motivated by misfortunes in life and founded on the premise of self-love, which means improving one's life.

1. It is contradictory to think that we can improve life by destroying it. Self-love is presupposed by self-preservation
2. Therefore, an agent should strive to preserve his own life

If this was not enough refutation of the life-ceasing act, Kant is also of the notion that not to commit suicide is "first, though not principal, duty of a human being to himself as an animal being" (Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:1421) since the body is the vessel from which humanity and, consequently, autonomy, is manifested. The human being is not merely a "thing"—"an instrument of animal gratification" (Kant, *Lecture on Ethics*, 27:1427)—and hence cannot be used merely as a means, but must always be regarded as a person, an end-in-itself (Kant 429). Kant continues the rejection of the ignorance of physical in favor of soul as he states in his '*Metaphysics of Morals*' "However, even on the hypotheses that man had a soul, still a duty owed by man to his body... would be quite incogitable" (p.234).

While many of the contemporaries of Kant argued that prohibition of suicide was against reason and even more, frivolous, Kant takes us full circle to the Platonic and Judeo-Christian arguments that our lives are not ours to dispose of as we will. Though we are autonomous human beings, we have some imperatives *a priori* given to us. These are one of those arguments in which we see the premises and conclusion coming solely from the natural, perceivable world ('Phenomena' as Kant calls it) without any intervention of an Eternal entity in our conduct. With all these arguments being plausible, there is a basic assumption, a tacit premise which underlies every decision, every action we take with respect to society or ourselves; the question which I think should be asked first and foremost but I hope after throwing light on these definitions and perspectives of different thinkers on this grave topic, it is better to ask the question which is a controversy for another important question of objective and subjective nature of morality: 'Do I own my body?'

#### **IV. Do I own my body?**

A question that can get traced in the borders of metaphysics as well as the sphere of political philosophy, body ownership is by and large a problem which is the measuring scale of the tug of war between the nature of morality. But my scope here, as already stated (in the introduction), is not going into that conversation for it would require manifold experiences of various cases and also of various definitions offered which will make this paper go out of focus while also making it a mere trifling of paraphrases. There are a

plethora of moral theories and considerations that can be a guide to tell you how you ought to act treat your body. Body ownership is one of those questions which a man can, without a moment of hesitation, reply “yes, I do own my body”. But given a moment of consideration on this topic, we are likely to get to the point where our bodies “are not quite ever only our own”<sup>11</sup> but is depended on a whole network of human relationships from the very beginning. While views of the libertarians may differ as they will be of the claim that we wholly own our bodies, this notion, it seems to me, is a clearly an abstraction without taking into account the idea that Private Property is but a convention i.e. it is mine because the laws, social institutions, government and military powers recognize it. Conventions, as history made us witness, can be changed. There is one more aspect which can be looked upon in the matter of ownership of our bodies – the theory which says that the claims to ‘own’ one’s body are category mistakes for ‘ownership’ refers to some external property and Ian Carter, in his paper ‘*Self Ownership and importance of human body*’, states that “rights over one’s body are morally distinct from rights over other objects because the former are not contingent on certain natural and social facts in the way the latter are.”Lippert-Rasmussen too in his article ‘*Against Self ownership*’ maintains that“Ownership of external resources is intrinsically different, morally from ownership of one’s mind and body” (p.88)

Even if taken that we wholly ‘own’ our body, there are guidelines for us as to how ought to treat a thing we own. Let us taken an example by saying that if one person ‘owns’ an animal, there is an immorality and, as usually in every state, a constitutional violation to torturing and needlessly killing an animal. There are certain limitations to our ownership of everything. Even in the matters of any inanimate property, say a land, we have certain prohibitions issues to us by the government. Suppose, you own a piece of land constitutionally, you cannot still do some things which are not allowed, for example, setting the place on fire, growing crops which are not allowed, or petting animals which are endangered or harmful to the society or oneself. In the same way, taken analogously, we have certain rights over our body which others do not possess; these are called ‘ownership rights’ which have their limitations but that cannot be the reason to call them non-existent. We have the right to act according to our choices towards our body but when it comes to taking one’s life, family obligations, social duties, moral considerations, and constitutional allowance play the major role in making a rational and justified decision

## II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can see that Camus is ready to accept the absurdity and the meaninglessness of life imposed on man as for him, we create our meaning, and the point of taking one’s life is as useless as the point of searching for an *essence* in life. Even if we take a theological approach such as Aquinas’s, or a critical approach such as Kant’s, it is evident that both are upholding the rejection of the act of suicide in their own ways – Aquinas taking the course of Bible and the ‘Divine Law’ while Kant maintaining the ‘rationally autonomous’ character of the human being. The ownership of the body is a topic that is highly disputed even in recent times, but there is much evidence to perceive that we are not alone when we are having a physical body for a whole social context and relations are being tied to us as soon as we are in this world. The ownership of our body is partly given to us and partly limited by the moral considerations and social constructions that play a major role in making the notion of ‘I’ for us.

## END NOTES

- I. Also see Brenkert, George B., “Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Autonomy,” *Journal of Ethics* 2 (1998): 27–55; Attas, Daniel, “Freedom and Self-Ownership,” *Social Theory and Practice* 26 (2000): 1–23; Fabre, Cécile, *Whose Body is it Anyway? Justice and the Integrity of the Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) for critiques of self ownership.
- II. The argument put forth in this paper does not tend to be at the least bit ground-breaking. The contents and judgments given by the author are completely arbitrary and subjective to his own line of thought. It is just to show a point of view towards the topic as to invoke a feeling of rejection towards suicide and activities which can harm oneself or the society.
- III. When talking external forces affecting the results of our action, it is useful to see William Lillie, in his ‘*Introduction to Ethics*’, stating that “when we talk of action in ethics, it is generally the self exertion we mean; the outward movements produced by this self exertion are generally determined to some extent by other circumstances than our own willing, and so are less suitable as objects of moral judgments.” (p.35)

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