

## Matters of life and death – 8 – Suicide

### 1 The rationality of suicide

When would suicide be rational? When is it a sensible option from the perspective of the subject?

Is suicide **rational** whenever there is good reason to believe that one's present and future life are and will be full of pain and suffering, containing few subjective satisfactions? E.g. whenever one suffers such a painful terminal illness that death would no longer be a *harm*?

**No** – because desires and projects can give *reasons* for life independent of subjective satisfactions.

There may be projects which give me reason to go on living even though sudden death would not be a harm to me. E.g. wanting to leave a large inheritance for my descendants.

Is suicide **rational** whenever one has good reason to believe that one's present and future life are, and will be on average, not worthwhile? I.e. where one would presently prefer unconsciousness to one's mode of living, and where one will, in fact and on average, continue to make such an assessment in the future?

**Still no** – because it can be true that I prefer unconscious now, and true that I will prefer unconsciousness at each moment in the future; but it can fail to be true that I *now* prefer unconsciousness at *every* moment in the future. This is the goals and projects point again.

There may be things that I want to *achieve*, where I would prefer to be unconscious at each moment of time *only* on the understanding that I shall have the chance to achieve them at a later time.

**Proposal** – suicide is rational whenever present and future existence aren't, on average, worthwhile *and* where, knowing what the future will bring, I now prefer to be unconscious throughout that future.

This means that I do *not* have any goals or projects which provide me with sufficient reason for going on living despite my sufferings.

Is suicide **only** rational under the above conditions? That depends upon one's conception of *prudential rationality*. If rationality is a function just of *present* desires, then suicide may be rational even where future life *would* be worthwhile.

**Two conceptions** of prudential rationality – *present-based* and *time-neutral*.

*Present-based*: rationality depends just on the goals I *currently* have.

*Time-neutral*: rationality depends on present *and* future goals (weighted equally?).

E.g. is it only irrational to smoke if you *now* want not to get lung-cancer, *or* want in general that your future wants be satisfied? Suppose someone says, "I neither care about getting lung-cancer, nor care about my future wants". Then, plainly, there is nothing we can say to persuade them to give up. But still we might want to say that they are irrational in smoking, because they *will* regret it? This would be to take a time-neutral view of rationality.

The depressive who sees no point in living and couldn't care less about his future desires – Surely we want to say that suicide here might be irrational. (Suzie again.)

Does this commit us to a time-neutral conception of rationality? Not necessarily, because the suicide will normally have false beliefs about his future life – we can insist that choices are only rational if grounded in truth.

But either way, 'rational' turns out to be an 'objective' notion, in the sense that: – someone can be choosing wisely in the light of their current beliefs and goals but still not be choosing rationally (*either* because of false belief, *or* because of their actual future desires).

### 2 Suicide for Utilitarians

Plainly many suicides are prudentially mistaken. E.g. Suzie who commits suicide together with her dying husband. As a matter of fact she would quickly have got over his death, and we may know this. (She may be a person of intense but temporary enthusiasms.)

Does Suzie act *wrongly*? And would we be morally justified in trying to prevent her suicide? A utilitarian will normally say 'yes' to both questions.

*However* the costs of our intervention have to go into the equation – e.g. if Suzie would need to be kept

secure until she is over her grief.

If these costs involve more total loss of utility than would be gained in Suzie's future worthwhile life, then intervention will be *wrong*.

Note that for a Utilitarian the happiness of self and of others are weighted equally. ('All to count for one, none to count for more than one.')

So a suicide that would be prudentially rational may still be morally wrong, e.g. if the happiness of others will be affected. (Equally, a suicide can be morally required of us by a utilitarian, if others stand to gain enough thereby.)

Is this right? Isn't there a distinction between those others whose happiness *deserves* to be taken into account, and those where it doesn't? (Hume, in 'Of suicide' makes a similar point.)

E.g. the distinction between the happiness of dependants and the happiness of strangers.

– Is the pop-star who doesn't find life worth living obliged to stay alive for the sake of his fans?

A Contractualist will want to distinguish between the concern which a suicide *owes* to (some) others, and that which the suicide isn't required to consider.

### 3 The justice of suicide

What should a Contractualist say about the rightness or wrongness of suicide? How can there be any violations of right on Susie's part which might justify our interference? Surely we are forced to respect her autonomy here, even though she is acting foolishly?

**Proposal 1:** In such a case, suicide may be thought of as violating the rights of the *future person*?

That future person (who would have had a worthwhile life, remember) could legitimately complain that they have been prevented from coming into existence?

**But (a)** we have to buy into a metaphysics of the person which allows the two to be distinct, **and (b)** this would seem to commit us to saying that most contraception is wrong too.

**Proposal 2:** Is all suicide, like murder, inherently unjust? Do those who commit suicide violate *their own right to life*?

**But** presumably, if they have such a right they *waive* it? Just as it is impossible to violate your own property rights (stealing from yourself), surely it is impossible to violate your own right to life?

**But** are there some rights so fundamental that they *cannot be waived*? (See Mill *On Liberty* and on selling oneself into slavery.) Don't we also feel that most suicides *should* be prevented?

**But** if the right to life were this fundamental, then capital punishment would also be ruled out (Hume).

**And:** the rule against selling yourself into slavery is a restriction on freedom to preserve something (normally) of value to the possessor (namely, freedom).

It surely isn't absolute. E.g. a case where you sell yourself into slavery in order to free many others *from* slavery. Surely this is heroic rather than wrong?

And there may also be cases where freedom is no longer of value to the possessor.

**Similarly** the rule against killing is a restriction on freedom designed to preserve something (normally) of value to the possessor (namely, life and autonomy).

Why would rational contractors insist that this rule should apply irrespective of the wishes and life-chances of the one killed? Why would they insist that the right to life, alone amongst rights, cannot be waived? Surely they wouldn't.

**So:** although Suzie does not act unjustly (she violates no rights), it *may* still be right for us to prevent her committing suicide?

Here we temporarily infringe her autonomy *in order to preserve her future autonomy*.

**But** there is no reason to think that the right to life is literally *inalienable*. It is a right that *can* be waived.

**So** there will be cases where we *should not* intervene to prevent a suicide, because the person's future life will *not* be worthwhile and/or they will be unable to exercise any genuine autonomy in the future.