

Suicide: Is it really anti - life ?

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Abstract:

The word 'Suicide' is familiar to human civilization from the early stage of it and it is still a hard reality in spite of so much development in human civilization. The dark shadow of suicide or self killing covers all time, every corner of the world and each and every society. The percentage may vary from country to country or on the basis of individual social structure, but incidents of suicide is omnipresent. For an example, we can talk about Japan's alarming situation regarding suicide. Sociologists and psychologists mainly blame work culture of Japanese society for this shocking reality. Suicide has been a recurring theme that evokes passion and in recent time the rate of suicide has gone up due to hectic work schedule and stressful modern lifestyle. This present study is a philosophical attempt to look into what causes suicide and whether it has any ethical basis which may validate the act. As suicide is, from the ethical point of view, is a waste of life and therefore unethical and wasteful and so people should steer clear of it whatever be the temptations. Some philosophers supports it as the necessary corollary to a life which has become meaningless and absurd. So the arguments are quite interesting and the dialogue and the dialectics between the proponents and the opponents of suicide as the last resort always throw some searchlight into it and brings to light interesting possibilities. After looking into some of the leading causes of suicide that span from socio-economic to deterministic, different types of suicide are briefly touched upon. Though suicide are broadly divided into two types such as egoistic and altruistic, the main focus of the piece lies on egoistic suicide as altruistic suicide is mostly appreciated positively in most cultural set up. This study focuses on arguments both for and against suicide. In the process the discussion also touches upon the psychological basis behind any motive that drives one to take his or her own life.

Keywords: Suicide, philosophical aspect, religious aspect, Psychological aspect, Self killing, Human dignity.

Introduction:

Suicide is the act of voluntary and intentional self destruction by various means. Suicide is universally frowned upon in almost every culture all through the ages; however, in some religious practices, like Jainism, suicide at the fag end of life is often encouraged. Suicide is doing harm to oneself and this is recognised as homicide but in this curious case the killer and the person killed is one and the same person. Here the method of killing is determined by the self and he/ she is well aware of the consequences arising from such an action.

All acts of self sacrifice is not universally condemned. For example a soldier often fights for the cause of his country knowing fully well that he is going to die in the process as the odds are very heavy against him. This kind of self sacrifice is not considered as suicide nor is it discouraged; rather it is often encouraged as something necessary.

Now we can investigate the psychological roots that lead one inevitably towards suicide by following the theory advanced by Freud. In the book *On Narcissism*, Freud develops the concept of two opposing instincts deep within human psyche, one of them being Eros that is equated with survival instincts and the other being Thanatos which drives one towards his self destruction. The struggle between these two opposing forces determine the fate of individuals. Though Thanatos propels an individual towards self destruction, the real reason lies deeper within in the second layer of human minds known as the realm of the subconscious. This subconscious mind is the result of accretions of all the experiences that humans have throughout their lives. As it is constantly modified by experiences that keep coming with time, it cannot be intrinsic; rather it is the sum total of all the experiences most of which are forgotten. Experiences like pain, trauma, childhood abuse, bullying, anguish of separation and many other unsavoury sundry lived experiences increase the volume of his subconscious mind and these uneasy unsettling subconscious mind strengthens his self destructive instincts called Thanatos to such an overpowering level that it decisively defeats his Eros or the survival instincts and hence the person in question attempts to commitment suicide or successfully does so.

There can be many causes that eventually lead a person to take his or her own life. They can be classified into different categories. Let us discuss each one of them to arrive at the proper understanding of what really impels a person to commit suicide.

Socio-economic causes

Though suicide is an intensely personal experience, noted sociologist Durkheim thinks that the real driving motive behind suicide is that the individual in question has failed to adapt himself adequately to the social norms and therefore he feels himself to be a total misfit in the social structure where he finds himself. Poverty, social norms, bigotry, superstition, puritanical religious beliefs often hinder him to adequately adapt himself to the outside world and changing realities. Hence after finding himself a fish out of water, he decides a way out of this labyrinth of pain and meaninglessness through the liberating door of death.

Instances of poverty driving people to their doom of death can be found in ample measure even in works of literature. In *Balidan* by Girishchandra and Attohottar Odhikar, we find how acute poverty can slowly exhaust the living spirits of people and lead them towards a choice of taking their own lives. In these literary works the abject economic poverty of Bengal in the late 19th and early 20th century has been beautifully delineated and they also show how countless people lose their lives at the altar of poverty.

Sometimes people often take their lives when their religious feelings are hurt very badly or as a protest to perceived injustice or as a testament to their unwavering faith which runs contrary to dominant view. The chosen way of death by Socrates is a case in point. He sacrifices his life in his unwavering faith to his ideals which came in conflict with the dominant views of the people in the corridors of power.

Personal reasons:

The reasons that often drive an individual towards taking one's life are more often personal than social. Depression, failure, pain and anguish resulting from a heartbreaking break-up, loneliness in old-age, turbulent conjugal life, guilt, regret and remorse, worries and tension because of worsening disease etc., can make people go off from the delicate mental balance and ultimately lead him to commit suicide.

In the Bengali novel *Atmohottar Adhikar (Right to Suicide)* by Manik Bandopadhyay, there is a character called Pise. He has long been suffering from a chronic disease of difficult breathing. In spite of all his efforts he cannot get enough oxygen into lungs and he becomes hypoxic, struggles for every last bit of air and pants desperately. He has been in the throes of such excruciating pain for a long time and he begs the doctor for a potion to help his ease into death, ridding him of all these gasps and pants and pain that has become integral parts of his life. Through this character the novelist is presenting a deep moral question: whether suicide should be allowed in cases like this without any stigma attached.

Turbulent family conditions

A lot of suicide happen because of intractable family issues. Most of those suicides are results of unresolved issues within the family. The issue comes to such a head that either there is no solution to it or either or both of the parties involved in not seriously interested in resolving the issue and therefore it culminates to such a proportion that one individual may decide that enough is enough and now is the time to end life and thereby solve the problem once and for all. He or she is often the person who blames himself or herself and then takes the ultimate step. It is unfortunately true that a lion's share of this suicide is done by women. It is seen that suicide happens in society and it affects people of different age groups and both the genders and it is widely prevalent in wide varieties of cultures across time and geographies. So it becomes almost imperative on our part to ask probing questions about it. Questions about wide variety of causes

and ethical implications arising from such acts are pertinent questions that need to be taken with all seriousness.

There are two opposing schools of thoughts on whether suicide is ethically right or not. Both groups have advanced their arguments for or against it.

Those supporting suicide says that it is true that suicide is socially and ethically wrong but there are situations where suicide is the only and most human way out of the quagmire. For example a terminally ill person suffering from pain in every waking moments without any hope for palliation or relief craves death as the only balm to his pain. Moreover, the condition of that person will only get worse as time progresses and he/she is without any real value either to his/her family in particular and society at large. In such cases it is neither unwise nor should it be unethical to allow him what he craves through the gates of death.

Suicide may also be ceremonial. For example a Japanese samurai chooses suicide to protect his honour and the act of hara-kiri was widely revered throughout Japanese society. In Hindu culture, a widow chose the lolling tongues of flame on the same pyre of her husband to protect her chastity and it was quite a celebrated act of self sacrifice in the then Hindu society in India. Rajput women would throw themselves into the fire to protect their honour against the winning invading armies. These are some of the more widely known examples of ceremonial suicide admired by those societies at large. Now we can delve a bit deeper into suicide by classifying the different types of suicide as is discussed by the experts.

Types of suicides

Durkheim talks about four types of suicide in his book, *Suicide*. They are -

Altruistic suicide: This type of suicide is committed for the benefit of the nation or group or society etc.

Egoistic suicide : This type of suicide is committed by people who think that life is no more worth living due to a variety of causes.

Anomic suicide: Anomic suicide is committed by people who are not able to realise their dreams and ambitions and find the subsequent reality to be too much at variance with his or her expectations. This is all about the incompatibility between high ambition and harsh realities on the ground.

Deterministic or fatalistic suicide: This type of suicide is quite unique as it is motivated by firm belief in destiny. These people believe that an omnipotent entity determines everything in advance and there are nothing anybody can do to alter it. They feel like they are mere puppets in the hands of Destiny and therefore they feel quite down and out and fall into the maze of depression and being totally powerless to come out of that, he or she commits suicide.

After we have discussed the causes and types of suicide, we are now ready to discuss at length the different arguments for and against suicide. In fact suicide is vociferously condemned by a lot of cultures and societies and religious groups while on the other hand counter arguments to the necessity or legality or ethicality of suicide are also defended by rational arguments. This aspect of suicide is hotly debated though the overwhelming majority lies with those who whack it out of the ground but we as philosophical community can never settle for any position without fair and in-depth analysis and discussion. Let's see the arguments from both the angles.

Arguments for suicide :

Socio- economic pressure:

Abject poverty, unemployment makes life miserable and individuals often commit suicide to get rid of them. Socio-economic problems of this kind give rise to many more problems that entangle individuals in such a way that he/ she feels only death can be the path to freedom from all these ills of life. If the individual feels life has become totally meaningless and is not worth living, he or she is then justified to commit suicide.

Suicide is not against human nature:

Edmund Freud talks at length about Thanatos, which is the death instinct in humans. So if a person takes his own life due to any reason, he is only following his own human instincts.

Religious justification of suicide:

Though in some religions like Islam, death by suicide is condemned and actively discouraged, in other religious practices they are not stigmatised as such. In fact in ancient Indian history we find some kings like Chandragupta have ended their lives as per Jaina ritual of self starvation. When we come to modern day a western philosopher like Hume ratiocinates that God has endowed humans with intelligence and wisdom. If the person in question after exercising his own God gifted intelligence decides to end his life, he is not doing any act that defies the covenants of God. So it is rational and logically consistent that from the religious point of view, suicide is not a social aberration, rather it is compatible within the tenets of religion.

Suicide is compatible with freedom of choice

Every person is entitled to make his or her own choices as long as it does not infringe on other people's rights. So taking his own life constitutes a freedom of choice and hence it should not be unduly criticized. In fact right to life also means that he/she has the right to take his or her life as well. Right to death should also be properly established in societies that puts a premium on freedom of choice. In those societies when a person feels like it is worthless to drag on in the vortex of meaninglessness and absurdity, he should be able to put an end to it without societal contempt and derision and disapproval.

Now let us turn our gaze on what is being said on the other side of the divide. The arguments against suicide are pretty strong and also they are backed by majority of societies and cultures through time in civilisations.

Arguments against suicide

There are strong arguments against suicide. Lets take a look at some of them.

Suicide is a religious sin :

As God has created life on earth, He and only He has the right over life and death of all living organism. To take one's own life is a direct interference of what is otherwise God's absolute right and hence it constitutes a cardinal sin. According to Locke, humans must try to preserve his or her life in order to submit to divine will. Kant also expressed the same opinion that to commit suicide is to disrespect the will of God who created him or her in the first place.

Suicide cannot be justified from social view point:

Suicide is the most extreme form of escapism. Nobody claims life is a bed of roses and the famous English poet P B Shelly cries out in pain as he finds himself on a path full of thorns and but he also gives a clarion call to revival and rejuvenation. So to commit suicide simply because one finds himself neckdeep in problems instead of exerting himself or herself and find a way out is the worst loss of precious lives which could have benefited the immediate family and society. Hence such a waste of human life cannot be defended.

Suicide goes against human nature:

Self love and hence its preservation is the law of nature. Suicide is in direct contravention to this law and hence it is a crime. According to Sigmund Freud, humans are endowed with Eros or survival instincts and it is only in the fitness of things that every individual will act to bolster this instinct to achieve fulfillment in life and prevent any thoughts which may lead him to self-destruct.

Conclusion

Suicide is a topic that invites diverse opinions from the scholars. The divergence of views can be traced to main two types of suicide. One of them is egoistic and the other one is

altruistic. Feelings of loneliness, depression, pangs of separation, old age and other intolerable life situations often make people take their own lives. This type of suicide is known as egoistic suicide. Altruistic suicide is most often justified and hence they do not evoke sharp response of disapproval from any quarters. Ethical questions of whether suicide is right or wrong are mostly centred on egoistic suicide. Hume defended egoistic suicide when life gets stuck in the quagmire of difficulties, sorrows and pain with absolutely no way out of that. When life gets stuck in a smoky room which will eventually lead to slow but sure asphyxiation, isn't it wiser or desirable to step out of that room which is totally unsupported of life? A noted German philosopher **Schopenhauer** echoes the above statement, "Leave the world as you might leave the smoky room." So he also defends egoistic suicide on specific grounds. But all egoistic suicides cannot be justified. According to Socrates, egoistic suicides cannot be defended and they constitute moral crimes. Even if pain and frailty from debilitating diseases touch the limits of human endurance, sometimes it may get better with proper therapeutic intervention or even the attempt to try it out is more than worth it rather than choosing the escapist route of suicide which is a human low in terms of moral courage. As regret, humiliation or loss of reputation can be alleviated through efforts or even complete reversal of fortune with noble attempts and courage is possible, then it must be said that suicide as a way out is certainly very reprehensible. Life is a collection of lived experiences and any attempt to escape from them simply because some of them turns out to be unsavoury is definitely escapism at its worst.

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