

## Kant On Suicide

All Enlightenment thinkers who wrote on the subject – Hume, Voltaire and Rousseau among others – agreed that the religious condemnation of suicide was not only preposterous but also entirely lacking in charity. Kant, on the other hand, denounced suicide in the most unqualified and indeed quite furious terms. According to him “suicide is in *no* circumstances permissible.” The man who commits suicide “sinks lower than the beasts.” We “shrink from him in horror.” “Nothing more terrible can be imagined.” “We look upon the suicide as carrion.” And if a man attempts suicide and survives, he has in effect “discarded his humanity” and we are entitled to “treat him as a beast, as a thing, and to use him for our sport as we do a horse or a dog.” (from *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 1797.)

Kant maintains that man is God’s property, and hence has no right to dispose of his own life. However, Kant also has a number of purely secular arguments, two of which deserve some discussion. According to the first of them, the suicide is abasing and degrading his humanity by treating himself as no more than a thing:

“Man can only dispose of things; beasts are things in this sense; but man is not a thing, not a beast. If he disposes of himself, he treats his value as that of a beast. He who so behaves, who has no respect for human behavior, makes a thing of himself.”

Kant is surely wildly wrong here. I am treating somebody as a thing (and thus debasing his humanity) if I try to dominate him so that he will, under the force of my superior will, automatically do what *I* want. And setting aside the notion of treating somebody as a thing, it is unquestionable that people do frequently debase other human beings. I am debasing a person if I humiliate him, if I get him to the point at which, to preserve his job which I control, he has to fawn and beg for mercy or to confess to wrongs he never committed. In such circumstances I have no regard for his feelings, especially for his pride and dignity. In reply to Kant, it must also be emphasized that a great many cases in which people have committed or have attempted to commit suicide do not at all resemble debasements of the kind just described. If I commit suicide I may do so *freely*. I am not necessarily the victim of the stronger will of someone else. Nor am I indifferent to my own feelings or my own dignity; but on the contrary I may *compassionately* decide to terminate what I regard as my pointless (or even perhaps degrading) suffering. In such circumstances I have not become a thing, and I have not at all debased myself.

Kant’s other argument is based on the undeniable fact that if a person commits suicide he can no longer perform any moral acts. “It cannot be moral,” in Kant’s words, “to root out the existence of morality in the world.” The suicide “robs himself of his person. This is contrary to the highest duty we have towards ourselves, for it annuls the conditions of all other duties.” To this it must be replied that the person who commits suicide does *not* root out the existence of morality itself from the world, any more so than when he dies a natural death or is killed in battle. He ‘roots out’ any new moral acts on his own part, but presumably there would be other people left who could engage in moral behavior. He would root out ‘morality itself’ only if he wiped out the human race.

This argument involves a confusion between the following two statements:

(1) I ought to do my duty as long as I am alive; and

(2) It is my duty to go on living as long as possible.

Kant's basic value judgment that doing one's duty is the highest goal implies (1) but it does not imply (2); and only (2) could serve as a basis for condemning suicide. Let us suppose I live in Melbourne, Australia, next door to a man by the name of Samuel Blau. During a visit to my house Blau has a heart attack. In such circumstances it would clearly be my duty to call a physician. However, it is not my duty to live in Melbourne, Australia, as a next-door-neighbor of Samuel Blau.

It should be noted that in various places Kant himself rejects statement (2). In one place he remarks that "there is much in the world far more important than life," and that "it is better to sacrifice one's life than one's morality." Furthermore, it is apparently entirely permissible and even laudable "to risk one's life against one's enemies, and even to sacrifice it, in order to observe one's duties towards oneself." Kant also fully endorses the right of the sovereign to "call his subjects to fight to the death for their country." Those who die in battle, Kant goes on, are not suicides but "victims of fate." They are to be admired as "noble and high-minded," in contrast with soldiers who run away to save their lives. It should be pointed out that the death of the noble "victims of fate" roots out the existence of morality from the world just as much as the death of people who commit suicide, while the cowardly soldier who saves his life thereby preserves himself for further moral action. Hence the mere fact of not preserving 'the conditions of future moral action' cannot be a sufficient reason for condemning suicide.

It evidently never occurred to Kant that a person who committed suicide may have been suffering acutely from physical or mental pain, or both, and was not injuring anybody by his act. I wonder how he would have reacted if one of his best friends or one of his favorite students had committed suicide. Kant greatly admired Hume, who had awakened him from his dogmatic slumbers. But he was referring only to his epistemological slumbers. It is unfortunate that Kant did not have access to Hume's essay on suicide. Perhaps it would have made him a little less fierce.

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