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On Suicide

Arthur Schopenhauer

Translated by Rudolf Dircks

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On Suicide.

As far as I can see, it is only the followers of monotheistic, that is of Jewish, religions that regard suicide as a crime. This is the more striking as there is no forbiddance of it, or even positive disapproval of it, to be found either in the New Testament or the Old; so that teachers of religion have to base their disapprobation of suicide on their own philosophical grounds; these, however, are so bad that they try to compensate for the weakness of their arguments by strongly expressing their abhorrence of the act — that is to say, by abusing it. We are told that suicide is an act of the greatest cowardice, that it is only possible to a madman, and other absurdities of a similar nature; or they make use of the perfectly senseless expression that it is “wrong,” while it is perfectly clear that no one has such indisputable right over anything in the world as over his own person and life. Suicide, as has been said, is computed a crime, rendering inevitable — especially in vulgar, bigoted England — an ignominious burial and the confiscation of the property; this is why the jury almost always bring in the verdict of insanity. Let one’s own moral feelings decide the matter for one. Compare the impression made upon one by the news that a friend has committed a crime, say a murder, an act of cruelty or deception, or theft, with the news that he has died a voluntary death. Whilst news of the first kind will incite intense indignation, the greatest displeasure, and a desire for punishment or revenge, news of the second will move us to sorrow and compassion; moreover, we will frequently have a feeling of admiration for his courage rather than one of moral disapproval, which accompanies a wicked act. Who has not had acquaintances, friends, relatives, who have voluntarily left this world? And are we to think of them with horror as criminals? Nego ac pernego! I am rather of the opinion that the clergy should be challenged to state their authority for stamping — from the pulpit or in their writings — as a crime an act which has been committed by many people honoured and loved by us, and refusing an honourable burial to those who have of their own free will left the world. They cannot produce any kind of Biblical authority, nay, they have no philosophical arguments that are at all valid; and it is reasons that we want; mere empty phrases or words of abuse we cannot accept. If the criminal law forbids suicide, that is not a reason that holds good in the church; moreover, it is extremely ridiculous, for what punishment can frighten those who seek death? When a man is punished for trying to commit suicide, it is his clumsy failure that is punished.

The ancients were also very far from looking at the matter in this light. Pliny says: “Vitam quidem non adeo expetendam censemus, ut quoque modo trahenda sit. Quisquis es talis, aequem moriere, etiam cum obscoenus vixeris, aut nefandus. Quapropter hoc primum quisque in remediis animi sui habeat: ex omnibus bonis, quae homini tribuit natura, nullum melius esse tempestiva morte: idque in ea optimum, quod illam sibi quisque praestare poterit.” He also says: “Ne Deum quidem posse omnia. Namque nec sibi potest mortem consciscere, si velit, quod homini dedit optimum in taliis vitae poenis,” etc.

In Massilia and on the island of Ceos a hemlock-potion was offered in public by the

magistrate to those who could give valid reasons for quitting this life. And how many heroes and wise men of ancient times have not ended their lives by a voluntary death! To be sure, Aristotle says "Suicide is a wrong against the State, although not against the person;" Stobæus, however, in his treatise on the Peripatetic ethics uses this sentence: [Greek: pheukton de ton bion gignesthai tois men agathois en tais agan atychiais tois de kakois kai en tais agan eutychiais]. (Vitam autem relinquendam esse bonis in nimiis quidem miseriis pravis vero in nimium quoque secundis) And similarly: [Greek: Dio kai gamaesein, kai paidopoiaesesthai, kai politeusesthai], etc.; [Greek: kai katholou taen aretaen aokounta kai menein en to bio, kai palin, ei deoi, pote di anankas apallagaesesthai, taphaes pronoaesanta] etc. (Ideoque et uxorem ducturum, et liberos procreaturum, et ad civitatem accessurum, etc.; atque omnino virtutem colendo tum vitam servaturum, tum iterum, cogente necessitate, relicturum, etc.) And we find that suicide was actually praised by the Stoics as a noble and heroic act, this is corroborated by hundreds of passages, and especially in the works of Seneca. Further, it is well known that the Hindoos often look upon suicide as a religious act, as, for instance, the self-sacrifice of widows, throwing oneself under the wheels of the chariot of the god at Juggernaut, or giving oneself to the crocodiles in the Ganges or casting oneself in the holy tanks in the temples, and so on. It is the same on the stage — that mirror of life. For instance, in the famous Chinese play, L'Orphelin de la Chine,(1) almost all the noble characters end by suicide, without indicating anywhere or it striking the spectator that they were committing a crime. At bottom it is the same on our own stage; for instance, Palmira in Mahomet, Mortimer in Maria Stuart, Othello, Countess Terzky. Is Hamlet's monologue the meditation of a criminal? He merely states that considering the nature of the world, death would be certainly preferable, if we were sure that by it we should be annihilated. But there lies the rub! But the reasons brought to bear against suicide by the priests of monotheistic, that is of Jewish religions, and by those philosophers who adapt themselves to it, are weak sophisms easily contradicted.(2) Hume has furnished the most thorough refutation of them in his Essay on Suicide, which did not appear until after his death, and was immediately suppressed by the shameful bigotry and gross ecclesiastical tyranny existing in England. Hence, only a very few copies of it were sold secretly, and those at a dear price; and for this and another treatise of that great man we are indebted to a reprint published at Basle. That a purely philosophical treatise originating from one of the greatest thinkers and writers of England, which refuted with cold reason the current arguments against suicide, must steal about in that country as if it were a fraudulent piece of work until it found protection in a foreign country, is a great disgrace to the English nation. At the same time it shows what a good conscience the Church has on a question of this kind. The only valid moral reason against suicide has been explained in my chief work. It is this: that suicide prevents the attainment of the highest moral aim, since it substitutes a real release from this world of misery for one that is merely apparent. But there is a very great difference between a mistake and a crime, and it is as a crime that the Christian clergy wish to stamp it. Christianity's inmost truth is that suffering (the Cross) is the real purpose of life; hence it condemns suicide as thwarting this end, while the ancients, from a lower point of view, approved of it, nay, honoured it. This argument against suicide is nevertheless ascetic, and only holds good from a much higher ethical standpoint than has ever been taken by moral philosophers in Europe. But if we come down from that very high standpoint, there is no longer a valid moral reason for condemning suicide. The extraordinarily active zeal with

which the clergy of monotheistic religions attack suicide is not supported either by the Bible or by any valid reasons; so it looks as if their zeal must be instigated by some secret motive. May it not be that the voluntary sacrificing of one's life is a poor compliment to him who said, [Greek: *panta kala lian*]?(3)

In that case it would be another example of the gross optimism of these religions denouncing suicide, in order to avoid being denounced by it.

As a rule, it will be found that as soon as the terrors of life outweigh the terrors of death a man will put an end to his life. The resistance of the terrors of death is, however, considerable; they stand like a sentinel at the gate that leads out of life. Perhaps there is no one living who would not have already put an end to his life if this end had been something that was purely negative, a sudden cessation of existence. But there is something positive about it, namely, the destruction of the body. And this alarms a man simply because his body is the manifestation of the will to live.

Meanwhile, the fight as a rule with these sentinels is not so hard as it may appear to be from a distance; in consequence, it is true, of the antagonism between mental and physical suffering. For instance, if we suffer very great bodily pain, or if the pain lasts a long time, we become indifferent to all other troubles: our recovery is what we desire most dearly. In the same way, great mental suffering makes us insensible to bodily suffering: we despise it. Nay, if it outweighs the other, we find it a beneficial distraction, a pause in our mental suffering. And so it is that suicide becomes easy; for the bodily pain that is bound up with it loses all importance in the eyes of one who is tormented by excessive mental suffering. This is particularly obvious in the case of those who are driven to commit suicide through some purely morbid and discordant feeling. They have no feelings to overcome; they do not need to rush at it, but as soon as the keeper who looks after them leaves them for two minutes they quickly put an end to their life.

When in some horrid and frightful dream we reach the highest pitch of terror, it awakens us, scattering all the monsters of the night. The same thing happens in the dream of life, when the greatest degree of terror compels us to break it off.

Suicide may also be looked upon as an experiment, as a question which man puts to Nature and compels her to answer. It asks, what change a man's existence and knowledge of things experience through death? It is an awkward experiment to make; for it destroys the very consciousness that awaits the answer.

Notes

- (1) Translated by St. Julien, 1834.
- (2) See my treatise on the Foundation of Morals, § 5.
- (3) Bd. I. p. 69.