

## A Philosophical Reflection on Suicide

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**Abstract:** *Just as killing other animals is not morally justified, so is it morally justified to kill oneself? Various philosophers, sociologists, and psychoanalysts have given various arguments from ancient times to the present day. There are many religions in the world. Can suicide be acceptable according to that religion? That is also a matter of inquiry. The value of life is immeasurable; putting that life to death by suicide cannot be morally justified. Greek philosopher Plato and modern philosophers such as Locke and Kant do not accept suicide as moral. However, in ancient Greece, Aristotle's theory showed a different trend. Social scientist Durkheim said that social structure and tradition are the main reasons behind suicide. Psychologist Freud believes that the cause of people's suicide is their mental behavior. He said that apart from innate instincts, most people have two more instincts - the instinct to live and the instinct to die. He said, when the death instinct dominates the survival instinct, people want to commit suicide. Hinduism and Christianity support suicide somewhere. But there are also special restrictions. Suicide is recognized as a crime in Islam. Buddhism also not supports suicide but there is some exception. Suicide is morally, theologically, socially, and psychologically not acceptable except for very serious reasons because the value of life is above all.*

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### Introduction

When a human kills another animal with the intention of harming it, it is called murder. Peter Singer, in his article, *When killing is not wrong*, discusses various types of murder, for example, animal killing, homicide, suicide, feticide, euthanasia, etc. There is no doubt that killing is generally considered a reprehensible act. Taking another's life is not considered a moral act. Not only that, murder is legally considered a crime. But not all murders are crimes. When a person has lost the ability to walk or even to move under the grip of an incurable and painful disease, is suffering from a mental breakdown, has lost the meaning of life, and is busy dying, he can ask for the hand of a kind death assistant to end his life. This type of killing is called "euthanasia". Killing or losing a life is not an event. As a man can kill others, so he can kill himself. The first one is called "murder" but the second one is called "suicide". In murder, one kills another, but suicide is the intentional killing of oneself. Voluntary self-destruction of all signs of life is suicide. Albert Camus wrote in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that if there is one truly complex philosophical problem, it is suicide. Prof. R. B. Brandt, in his edited book, *Moral Problems*, said, Suicide is conveniently defined for our purpose as doing something which results in one's death, either from the intention of ending one's life or the intention to bring about some other state of affairs (such as relief from pain.)

People can commit suicide for a variety of reasons. But people choose the path of "suicide" to get rid of the unbearable pain of life. Most societies do not approve of "suicide" as legal. Even different religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, etc., do not accept suicide as legal. Even these different religions criminalize suicide. Suicide is not allowed, both psychologically and socially.

### Suicide in Greek and Roman Civilizations

Various views on suicide have been mentioned since ancient times. Since the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, various theories regarding suicide have been presented. Heroic narratives of suicide can be found in the Greek epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Homer's epics and his later works also consider suicide an honourable way to get rid of life's frustrations and despair. It has been recognized. Suicide has often been considered honourable in Roman civilization. The famous Roman philosopher Seneca called suicide the last free act of a free man. In Japan, it has been observed that Japanese heroes escape the worst failure and humiliation. He chose the path of suicide by killing himself with a knife. This Japanese practice of suicide is called Harakiri, which was considered very respectable in Japanese society at that time.

Suicide has been praised in some cases and condemned in others. The ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras and his followers never condoned suicide as honourable. According to them, human beings' natural birth and death are divine decrees. Such divine order is defied by suicide. Hence, it is regarded as a cognizable offense. They feel that there is no moral support behind suicide. Later, the famous Greek philosopher Plato also considered suicide inappropriate. Because he thinks that it corrupts the glory of God's sovereignty. Socrates also believed in the primacy of a divine being. Although he was forced to commit suicide by drinking poison, it can be said that he did so under the command of a divine being. However, he did not believe in suicide in general. Aristotle had the same attitude towards suicide. He believed that suicide was morally reprehensible. Because, according to him, suicide is cowardice and a kind of state crime.

### Suicide in the Middle Ages or Christianity

Much of the attitude we observe towards suicide in Western civilization is influenced by Christianity. Suicide is condemned in Christianity and labelled as a sin. Saint Augustine characterized suicide as a "crime" and a "sin". According to him, this sin is "unforgivable". Suicide, he says, is a self-directed act that forever destroys the possibility of repentance. It is a form of narcissism that violates the Sixth Commandment. 'Thou Shalt Not Kill': This Sixth Commandment declares suicide 'forbidden'. Thomas Aquinas considered the preservation of life to be a natural and universal instinct. According to him, the preservation of life is in accordance with the law of nature. Suicide is contrary to the principle of life preservation. This Christian monk has considered suicide an 'improper act'.

### Suicide in Hinduism

Suicide is condemned almost everywhere in the Hindu tradition. Suicide is condemned in the Parashara Samhita and Smriti literature: The soul of a man or woman who commits self-immolation lives in the darkness of hell for sixty thousand years. The body of a self-immolator is not worthy of cremation. No tears should be shed for him. Those who carry his dead body or perform cremation should be purified by performing auspicious austerities.

In India, too, respectable acceptance of suicide has been observed in the past through the observance of jaharvrata and the practice of sati-dahapratha. Whatever the motive behind all these things, they are definitely a form of suicide, no doubt about it.

Kautilya's Arthashastra also mentions suicide as a heinous crime, P. V. Kane describes it in his book, *History of Dharmashastra*, according to him if a man or woman commits suicide by poisoning or by hanging a rope due to failure of love, anger, or any other emotion, his body shall be tied with a rope and dragged publicly through the Chandal Path. His relatives do not have the right to cremate the dead body and perform other rituals. But "Despite the various ways to justify and commit suicide in Hinduism, the suicide rate of very old Hindus is low. Hindus over 60 years of age enter the 4th Life Stage, one characterized through increasing distance from worldly pleasures, and an increase of meditation and modest lifestyle. Thus, the elderly are highly revered, taken care of and supported. Especially their sons are encouraged to take care of them."<sup>1</sup>

### Suicide in Buddhism

In Buddhism, it is said that every human being has to live his or her appointed time. Karma has to be reaped. Just as he cannot avoid the miseries of life, which are the result of bad actions, by suicide, he cannot overcome the fruits of his good actions before the appointed time by willingly destroying life. There is no moral justification for this, as self-fulfilment overrides the recognition of the enjoyment of karma. "The Buddhist tradition forbids the killing of humans or animals. Nevertheless, the Buddha himself took an almost neutral attitude towards suicide, and described it as a possible situational self-sacrifice."<sup>2</sup>

### Suicide in Modern India

Constitutional laws against suicide have been introduced in modern India. It has been legally recognized that suicide is a reprehensible and punishable crime. Just as the person who commits suicide is defined as a reprehensible and legal criminal in Indian law, similarly, the person who induces suicide is also mentioned as reprehensible and legally criminal. Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code criminalizes suicide. That is why, according to the section, if the person who committed suicide survives, then legal action can be taken against him and the person who instigated the suicide as per the section. Action has been taken against a person who

incites suicide under Section 498 A of the Indian Penal Code. So, it can be seen that suicide is definitely considered a crime from a legal point of view. From the point of view of religion, it is considered a wrong and sinful action.

### Psychological Explanation of Suicide

Sigmund Freud's psychological explanation of the causes of suicide According to him, suicide is not organized only because of social complexities or religious views; the mental behaviour of people is responsible for it. In his book *On Narcissism*, Sigmund Freud pointed out that the opposite instinct of 'Eros' is 'Thanatos,' and it is because of this instinct that people choose to commit suicide. Freud thinks that people's suicidal tendencies are stored in their unconscious mind (the unconscious mind is the repository of suicidal activity). It is depression in the subconscious mind that leads people to commit suicide. Psychologists such as Slater, Slideman, Leonard, and Klarman followed Sigmund Freud and claimed that suicide is a complex mental behaviour, and it is not easy to present the exact cause. "Freud proposed that suicide resulted from internalised anger that had been originally directed at someone close to the person."<sup>3</sup> Of course, whatever the reason, it is admitted that the desire or drive that is very active in the minds of people in the case of suicide is the wish to die. Karl Meninger, in his book, *Man Against Himself*, places great importance on such a note in the case of suicide.

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### Durkheim on Suicide: The Sociological Perspective

Suicide is explained from the perspective of social problems by the famous social philosopher Emile Durkheim. He mentioned in his book, *The Suicide* that by suicide we can mean all those deaths - The term "Suicide" is appealed to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result. Durkheim in his analysis found the source of suicide through the individual's relationship with society. When the relationship between the individual and society is not normal and when it becomes unbearable, a person tends to commit suicide. Suicide is therefore always committed in the context of a breach in the relationship between the individual and the society, and such an act must be premeditated and its consequences known in advance. Durkheim's analysis of suicide is presented very seriously by James Rachels in his book, *Moral Problems: A Collection of Philosophical Essays*. "Durkheim analysed differences between Protestants and Catholics. He found a lower rate of suicide among Catholics and theorized that this was due to stronger forms of social control and cohesion among them than among Protestants... Additionally, Durkheim found that suicide was less common among women than men, more common among single people than among those who are romantically partnered, and less common among those who have children. Further, he found that soldiers commit suicide more often than civilians and that curiously, rates of suicide are higher during peacetime than they are during wars."<sup>4</sup>

### Modern Philosophers' Theory of Suicide

According to David Hume, this world is transitory and human life is worth less than an oyster. So, if a person voluntarily wants to depart from this world for his own peace and well-being and if there is no harm to society, then this injustice is not considered. For him, the way of doing any good in this world may be barred forever, and if there is any danger of harm as a result, it is so insignificant that it does not matter to society. According to him, when a person feels that he is a burden to society and he wants to remove himself from society, it will not be considered wrong, rather it will be considered a commendable act. "Hume's view of the morality of suicide may be right, even if his defence of the view is logically defective. My main concern is, in any event, the logical strength (broadly construed) of the case Hume makes for his contention."<sup>5</sup>

John Locke, the eminent philosopher of modern times, disapproved of suicide and termed it as an unjust act. According to him, although every person in society has freedom and equal rights and opportunities to express independent opinions, yet he does not have the freedom to commit suicide. He termed suicide as a criminal, dangerous to the human race and a fraud on the entire existence. He believed that man is God's creation. So even if they are free, committing suicide is nothing more than interfering with God's property. "That men are prohibited from committing suicide follows from Locke's attribution of our being to the creation of God."<sup>6</sup>

Kant's argument is that a law of nature that orders or dictates the destruction of life would be self-contradictory. If we universalize that person's maxim, that would be a contradiction. Why? In the first

paragraph of Groundwork, Kant argues that nature has "created us for the purpose of preserving life", and has therefore given us the means to preserve life and satisfy needs. For this reason, nature has also given us instincts, including the instinct of self-love. Since nature has given us the instinct of self-love to preserve life, we will oppose nature's purpose if this feeling is used to destroy life. "In his *Lecture on Ethics*, Kant proposes the thesis that suicide opposes the purposes of God, who created us."<sup>7</sup>

Where the law of nature aims to preserve life, it would be self-contradiction to destroy life because of self-love. As a result of such a self-contradictory rule, according to Kant, nature "would no longer exist as nature" since the maxim of the universality of the individual would create a contradiction that fails the test of unconditional order. That person is not obliged to destroy his life because he has failed. Positively speaking, that person is obliged to save his life. It is his duty to himself. There is an important difference between saving a person's life out of immediate impulse and saving a life out of duty. He asks us to believe that the person who is saving life from instinct has "no inner worth" and that the principle of personal intention has no "moral substance". Why? Answers Kant, we compare this event with another event. The first person gets joy by saving a life, but the second person saves a life by enduring various sufferings, disappointments, and intense grief. If this second person preserves his life "without loving life," it means that he preserves life for some reason other than immediate impulse. What motivates him to do this, according to Kant, is duty. "suicide is not a candidate to be a law of nature in the sense given in Kant's theoretical philosophy; it cannot be willed as one of the lawlike causal generalizations characteristic of natural scientific inquiry as Kant conceived of it"<sup>8</sup>

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## Conclusion

Ancient Athens did not refer to suicide as a sin. According to Plato, suicide is an act of cowardice. But Aristotle did not consider this unfair. Suicide is considered wrong in many places in Hinduism. In some cases, its approval can also be noted. Suicide is not considered a sin in either the Old or New Testaments. Suicide is considered a heinous sin in Islam.

Loneliness, isolation, depression, and lack of social and moral values often lead to suicide. But if you get an honest partner, a good environment, and good advice, you can forget the depression and sorrow and avoid the path of suicide. Every human being has wisdom, judgment, emotions, and feelings that control the human being. Every person should make a good combination of these things to build a beautiful life. Sometimes suicide and murder are considered by many to be a big deal. But when a man loses the least hope due to extreme illness and life becomes unbearable for him, he prays for death to the physician for the sake of himself and his family to get rid of all suffering and pain and then prefers his request and considers the judgment to cause death. Either that is a gracious death. But suicide is a completely different matter. So in the end it has to be said that the value of this life is more valuable than all the values. So we should protect this life. According to the scriptures, it is our supreme duty to protect this body: "śarīramādyam khalu dharmasādhanam".

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