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Notes on Suicide

Why is suicide seen as illegal, immoral or irreligious? Of course, the contrast between modern and ancient views of suicide is striking. Although Plato considered suicide a disgrace, he permitted notable exceptions, one of which allowed for self-killing by judicial order, as was the case with his teacher, Socrates. The practice of philosophy, then, begins with a suicide and to philosophize is to learn how to die, as Socrates argues in the *Phaedo,* while at the same time telling his disciples stories of the immortality of the soul. And Socrates was given the alternative of ostracism, which for him would have been even worse. The prospect of leaving Athens was worse than leaving life.

Faced with a more global and contingent imperial world, Stoics like Seneca took a more radical view of suicide, arguing that the brevity of human life was no source of woe. When a human life no longer flourishes because of bad fortune, it is permitted to end it. Seneca counsels that a wise person, a philosopher, 'lives as long as he ought, not as long as he can'. Famously, Seneca was compelled to die under the orders of Nero, although his suicide was somewhat botched and it seems to have taken him an inordinate amount of time to expire. Tacitus reports that being unable to die by bleeding, because of advanced age and a frugal diet, he asked for poison, like Socrates, but that also didn't work. Eventually, he was placed in a bath of hot water and suffocated to death by his servants.

Given this Greco-Roman background, what's the problem with suicide? How did our perception of suicide shift from its partial acceptance in antiquity to the prohibition on suicide that one can find in later centuries? The key to answering these questions is Christian theology. But I would like to approach the latter by way of a fascinating story about a little-known, indeed obscure, Italian philosopher called Count Alberto Radicati di Passerano e Cocconato (1698-1737). This will allow me to move through a series of arguments, positions and prejudices about suicide, almost in the manner of sweeping up debris, dead leaves and twigs, that might permit us to view the muddy ground beneath more clearly.

Born into an aristocratic family in Piedmont, Radicati converted to Protestantism and took up voluntary exile in London. In 1732, he published a 94-page pamphlet, *A Philosophical Dissertation upon Death,* where he sought to legitimize suicide against the moral and legal strictures of Christianity and the state. The pamphlet caused a huge stir in London and was declared by the Attorney General, at the repeated promptings of the Bishop of London, 'the most impious and immoral book'. Radicati was taken into custody, given a substantial fine and made his escape to the more tolerant United Provinces, the erstwhile name for the Netherlands. It is reported that, sadly, he died in complete destitution in Rotterdam some years later. He was attended by a Huguenot preacher who declared that, prior to his death, Radicati was filled with dread, renounced all he had written and was reconfirmed in the Protestant faith.

Radicati's simple thesis in his Dissertation is that individuals are free to choose their own death. This right to suicide was inspired by ancient arguments, notably from the Stoics,

that suicide is a legitimate act and indeed an honorable gesture of farewell from a state of unbearable pain, whether physical or psychical. So, why were Radicati's views so - well - radical? This was because they conflicted with Christian doctrine. For the Christian, and this is first formulated by Augustine and then refined by Aquinas, life is something given, it is a *datum*, over which we have the right of use *(usus),* but not governance *(dominion)*, which can only be the prerogative of God. To kill oneself is to exercise dominion over one's life and to assume the power that is only possessed by the deity. This is why suicide is a sin. A true Christian must battle with pain and fight on like a soldier.

The Christian view begins to break down in the 17th Century, with the rise of science and a materialist conception of nature. This builds from Hobbes' idea of reality as matter and motion and the atheistic interpretation of Spinoza, namely that when the latter begins the *Ethics* with the axiom 'God or Nature', what he really intends is material nature and nothing besides. On this view, death is simply the dissolution of clusters of atoms, the transformation of one lump of matter into another. Radicati writes, 'We cease to exist in one sort, in order to exist in another'. Or, as Spinoza puts it, 'A free man thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death.' In the demonstration of this proposition, Spinoza argues that a free human being is one who lives according to reason alone and is not governed by fear. To be free is to desire the good directly and to act and live in such a way as to persist in this desire without flinching or failing. This is why the free human being thinks of nothing less than death. Human life is simply an aspect of the vast, living vibrancy of a universe of matter. As Flaubert proposed a couple of centuries later, Spinoza's vision is extremely seductive, and it constitutes St Antony's final and irresistible temptation: matter is divine.

But if Radicati and Spinoza are right, then why do people fear death? This is where things start to get rather interesting. By definition, the fear of death cannot be based in experience as no one experiences death twice, as it were. Nor can the fear of death be ascribed to our natural, material constitution. Therefore, Radicati goes on, the fear of death has been imposed on humankind by,

> 'Ambitious Men, who, not contenting themselves with the State of Equality which Nature had given them, took it into their heads to thirst for Dominion over others'.

Who are these 'ambitious men'? Radicati is alluding to a book called the *Traité des trois imposteurs* (*Treatise of the Three Imposters),* also known as *L'Esprit de Spinosa (The Spirit of Spinoza)*. Written in French and published anonymously in the Netherlands probably in the 1690s, the *Traité* is possibly the most dangerous heretical text of the eighteenth century. It embodies the radical inheritance of the Enlightenment, evident in Spinoza and Hobbes. This is the tradition of what came to be known as 'free thinking', like the great Irish philosopher John Toland, who was labeled a freethinker by his idealist compatriot and relentless religious opponent, Bishop George Berkeley (whom Samuel Johnson famously refuted by kicking a stone – yes, matter is real). The *Traité* argues that Moses, Jesus and Mohammed are three imposters who have deceived humankind by imposing their 'silly ideas of God' and teaching 'the people to receive them without examination'.

Central to this imposition is the cultivation of the fear of death, a belief that the three imposters propagate through the offices of their priestly castes.

Although Jesus nowhere condemns suicide and there is no explicit prohibition against suicide within the Mosaic Law of Judaism (although a Sura in the Qu'ran expressly forbids suicide), one gets the general picture. The fear of death is not natural to human beings, but instilled into them by the spurious authority of the Rabbi, the Priest or the Imam. What is fascinating in Radicati's text and the radical philosophical context that surrounds it is the connection between scientific materialism, anti-religious freethinking and the right to suicide.

But this was (and remains, moreover) no mere theoretical debate. In April 1732, shortly after the publication of Radicati's pamphlet, the shocking suicide of the Smith family was widely reported in England. Richard Smith and his wife, living in dreadful poverty in London, shot their daughter before hanging themselves. In his extended and carefully reasoned farewell letter, Smith, a bookbinder by trade, makes allusion to Radicati's pamphlet. He writes that he and his family had decided to take leave of this friendless world rather than live in misery. They made this decision in complete cognizance of the laws prohibiting suicide, adding that it is, 'indifferent to us where our bodies are laid'. The Smiths' (and one ineluctably thinks of Morrissey – heaven knows I'm miserable now) only wish was for an epitaph, which reads,

> 'Without a name, for ever silent, dumb;
> Dust, Ashes, Nought else is within this Tomb;
> Where we were born or bred it matters not,
> Who were our parents, or hath us begot;
> We were, but now are not; think no more of us,
> For as we are, so you be turned to Dust.'

***Felo de se*, or how to punish the suist [1]**

Radicati's argument for the right to suicide was prefigured in an important treatise from 1644, by the great cleric and greater poet, John Donne. It was called *Biathanatos,* meaning literally death-force or even the violence or strength of death. Donne's book bears a long and revealing subtitle: *A Declaration of that Paradox, or Thesis, that Self-Homicide is not so Naturally Sin, that it may never be Otherwise.* Beginning from the fact that there is no condemnation of suicide in Scripture, Donne argues against the Christian doctrine that suicide is a natural sin and defends the right to 'self-homicide'. Fascinatingly, Donne confesses that 'a sickly inclination' compelled him to ponder the question of suicide, and when this sickness befell him, 'methinks I have the Keys of the Prison in mine own hand and no Remedy presents itself so soon to my Heart, as my sword'. When Donne's book

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[1] *Suist* = one who loves themselves, a selfish person. *Suicism* = selfishness, n.1654 R. Whitlock's *Zootopia,* "This Schisma of suicism, and Selfishness, hath spawned most of the Heresies and Schismes, that are abroad in the world".

was reissued in a second edition in 1700, the historian Silvia Berti notes that it 'had become the manifesto of the freethinker's right to die'.

The task of exposing the fallaciousness of Christian arguments against suicide, begun by Donne and Radicati, was completed with characteristic economy, aplomb and good humor by David Hume. He almost satirically unpicks Aquinas' position, which is based on the appeal to natural law enshrined in the alleged divine order of the cosmos. For example, Hume says, if the divine order means the causal laws created by God, then it must always be wrong to contravene such laws. But if that is the case, then *any* form of sickness, wounding or malady must not be treated since it is at odds with the laws of nature and divine will. Thus, the entire medical profession itself, insofar as it seeks to ameliorate the condition of the sick, should be outlawed. But that would be ridiculous, particularly as Christ was apparently rather fond of healing the sick and even, in the case of Lazarus, raising the dead (though he didn't ask to be brought back). Just as God permits us to divert water from rivers for the purpose of irrigation so too he ought to permit us to divert the blood from our veins. 'It would be no crime in me to divert the Nile or Danube from its course, were I able to effect such purposes. Where then is the crime of turning a few ounces of blood from their natural channel?'

If suicide is a criminal act, Hume writes, then it must be a transgression of our duties either to God, our neighbor or our selves. It cannot be a transgression of any duty to God because of the spuriousness of the appeal to natural law. It would be a malevolent and wicked God that wished me to suffer unbearable, unceasing pain. As for my duties to myself, let's imagine that I am in a condition of great suffering from an incurable disease and my existence has become an intolerable burden to me. What possible duty could I have to myself to continue in such a state if the alternative is something I wish for? With regard to my neighbor and society, Hume writes that someone 'who retires from life, does no harm to society. He only ceases to do good; which, if it be an injury, is of the lowest kind'. On the contrary, Hume adds, we do no harm to ourselves or to others when existence has become a weight that is too heavy to carry. On the contrary, he concludes, suicide is 'the only way, that we can then be useful to society, by setting an example, which, if imitated, would preserve to every one his chance for happiness in life, and would effectively free him from all danger of misery'. The legitimacy of the recourse to suicide, namely the foreknowledge that I do not have to experience endless pain with either legal blame or moral shame, is the key to any chance for happiness. This is still a strong and highly relevant argument in relation to current arguments for assisted suicide or accompanied dying. The wish of a terminally ill person is very often not so much happiness as death with dignity, without feeling they have acted illegally or immorally. Hume concludes that suicide 'may be free from imputation of guilt and blame'.

What is most shocking about Hume's arguments is that they still have the capacity to shock, some 240 years after they were written. This is because the moral and legal framework in which suicide is viewed and judged is still tributary to the Christian doctrine that Hume so elegantly demolishes. Consider the definition of suicide in the canonical Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-69), which is a compiled record and interpretation of common law. Within the tradition of English common law, suicide was considered a felony and the equivalent of murder. Blackstone's explains it in

the following way, 'Felonious homicide is…the killing of a human creature, of any age or sex, without justification or excuse…this may be done by killing one's self, or another man'. Warming to its theme, the text continues,

> '…(T)he law of England wisely and religiously considers that no man hath a power to destroy life, but by commission from God, the author of it: and, as the suicide is guilty of a double offense; one spiritual, in invading the prerogative of the Almighty, and rushing into his immediate presence uncalled for; the other temporal, against the king, who hath an interest in the preservation of all his subjects; the law has therefore ranked this among the highest crimes, making it a peculiar species of felony, a felony committed on one's self…a *felo de se*.'

With those words in mind, it might be recalled that Hamlet's first soliloquy expresses the vigorous wish to die, 'O, that this too too solid flesh would melt'. But he immediately restrains himself from the thought for it is criminal, 'that the Everlasting had not fix'd/ His canon 'gainst self-slaughter'. Canon law prohibits suicide.

In truth, suicide is a *double crime*: against God and against King (in Hamlet's case, this would be the imposter Claudius). Whoever takes their life is sinning against the eternal power of God and the temporal power of the King. To kill oneself is to usurp the sovereignty of God and King by assuming it for oneself. If one replaces the words 'God' or 'King' by 'state', 'society', 'country' or 'community', then it is clear that the situation hasn't really changed: rather than being seen as a free, sovereign act, suicide is seen as a usurpation of sovereignty, a morally embarrassing and reprehensible act of insubordination.

Of course, a rather obvious question arises: if suicide is a crime, then how can the perpetrator be punished? How does one discipline the dead? Once again, Blackstone's provides the neat answer,

> '…(W)hat punishment can human laws inflict on one who has withdrawn himself from their reach? They can only act upon what he has left behind him, his reputation and fortune: on the former, by an ignominious burial in the highway, with a stake driven through his body; on the latter, by a forfeiture of all his goods and chattels to the king: hoping that his care for either his reputation, or the welfare of his family, would be some motive to restrain him from so desperate and wicked an act.'

Never wanting to be outdone by the English, the French took matters a step further than a mere burial at the roadside with a stake through the heart. In 1670, Louis XIV declared a criminal ordinance for suicide, where it was decreed that the corpse must be drawn through the streets face down and then hanged or thrown on a garbage dump. Their property was also confiscated. The Sun King tolerated poorly the suicide of France's sons. In an English commentary on Chinese law, from as late as 1899, particular attention is paid to suicide pacts created for the profit of the surviving party. If it was proven that the parents entered into a suicide pact in order to aid the surviving child, then that child was to be decapitated. (It has to said that this does seem a little extreme).

Such punishments for the dead might seem either grisly or perhaps risible to us now, but it must be remembered that suicide is still a criminal offense in most Muslim countries. And closer to home, although physician-assisted suicide became legal in Oregon in 1997,

the great state of Missouri still classifies suicide as manslaughter (of course, the traditional, legal reasoning is perfectly logical: if someone else administers the fatal dose or lethal injection to the person who wants to die, then how can this qualify as self-killing?) Indeed, in New York State, although suicide is not considered a crime, it is still recognized by statute as a 'grave public wrong'. By implication, the deceased would be categorized as a grave public offender, even from their grave. Of course, the obvious and long-standing defense against suicide as a form of legal offense is to claim insanity, some form of diminished responsibility or to not be, in the words of Blackstone's, 'in one's senses'.

More examples could be given, but I think it clear how the Christian prohibition against suicide continues to shape our moral thinking, often unknowingly and subtly. If suicide is a free act, made 'in one's senses', then it is an offense to God, King and country; if suicide is adjudged to have taken place with diminished responsibility or some form of mental illness like severe depression, then freedom is eliminated. Either way, the moral, philosophical and existential space for the consideration of suicide as a free act is closed down. It is this space that I would like to explore.

God is love

It is sometimes said that suicide is wrong because only God has proper moral authority over our lives. We are God's property, as it were. But if so, humans are queer or weird property because we still somehow have the impression of acting under our own volition. People are not pot plants sitting passively in some divine greenhouse. However the capacity for free will is understood, it permits us to act against divine will. Although I might wish to align my imperfect will with the perfect will of God in order to act well, such alignment is, and moreover must, never be attained. If I claim that my will is God's will, then I am implicitly claiming that all my actions are divinely sanctioned, which is hybristic, if not sinful. Within the Christian tradition, as I understand it, I might incline my will towards God in an act of faith in the hope of receiving grace, but grace is never something I can bestow on my self or my actions. To be human is to be able to act contrary to God's will. If we are God's property, then we were created with the capacity to act improperly. Such is the lesson of the Fall and expulsion east from Eden.

Another religious argument is that suicide is prohibited because life is a gift from God. To kill oneself is to refuse that gift. But this becomes muddled if one thinks about it for a moment: if life is a gift from God, then what exactly is a gift? A gift is something one gives to another person. After the act of giving, the gift belongs to its recipient. By definition, the giver of the gift no longer has possession of the gift once it is given. So, if the prohibition against suicide is based on the idea that life is a gift from God, then life appears to be a gift with many strings attached, which entails that it is no longer a gift. Namely, a gift that we cannot reject is not a gift. In order to be a gift, life has to be capable of being refused, thrown away, re-gifted to someone else, re-sold for money or given away. If life is a gift from God, then God must allow for the possibility of suicide as the rejection of that gift. On the basis of this argument, suicide cannot be condemned.

The same objection works against secular versions of this position, which are not uncommon. If one says that suicide is wrong because of the belief that life is a gift, not from God, but from one's parents, one's community, or one's place in some more numinous natural or cosmic order, then this argument is also muddled. If life is a gift from one's parents, say, then in order to be a gift it has to be received along with the possibility of being refused, otherwise it is the attempted sheer imposition of will. Whatever bond or generational contract exists between parents and children, this must not exclude *a priori* the possibility of the suicide of one's child, as profoundly painful and deeply troubling as that must be (I can imagine nothing worse). If life is a gift, then it is given to its recipient with no strings attached.

It is sometimes said - in fact, it is quite often said - that God is all-loving. Let's imagine that this is the case. But if God is all-loving, then should not such love extend to permitting the suicide of one of his creatures when their suffering has become too hard to bear. How could an all-loving God demand the continuation of intolerable suffering? To demand such continuation would be confuse love with the sheer force of a commandment. God would be saying, 'I forbid you to take your life'. But that is not love. After all, what is love? I think Oscar Wilde is right when he defines love in *De Profundis* as giving what one does have and receiving that over which one has no power. To love is to commit oneself to another not without the *guarantee* that love will be returned, but with the hope that it might be. Love takes place in the subjunctive mood: it may be, it might be, would that it were the case. The logic of love is akin to the logic of grace. I give something that is truly beyond my capacity to control, I commit myself to it completely, but there can be no assurance that love will be reciprocated. At any point in a love relation, the beloved can and must be able to say 'I love you not'. If this is not the case, if the beloved cannot refuse love, then love is reduced to coercive control, to contractual obligation and command. None of these is love. If God if all-loving, then he, she or it has to allow us to refuse that love and take our life and death into our own hands.

Christian arguments against suicide turn on the extension of the sixth commandment 'thou shalt not kill', to the questionable interpretation that this commandment forbids self-killing as well. I do not see the entailment between forbidding the murder of others - which seems to me to be a wholly legitimate aspiration - to the prohibition of suicide, which is premised on a misunderstanding of the nature of human liberty. In addition, the prohibition of self-killing poses a huge problem in the interpretation of cases of martyrdom and the deaths of innumerable saints, particularly when one considers the early history of Christianity. The Christian martyrs chose to go to their deaths out of love of God and hatred of the state or any other form of temporal, pagan authority. If the crucifixion of Christ himself can be viewed as a quasi-suicidal act performed out of love, then this is *a fortiori* the case with the deaths of saints and martyrs who imitate Christ's sacrifice. It would seem to be completely contradictory to forbid suicide while celebrating the quasi-suicidal acts of the saints. Don't get me wrong, I love the idea of martyrdom, for the martyr is a witness who testifies to his or her deep love of God all the way to giving up their life because of that love. But the act of martyrdom, like witness itself, has to be a free act chosen out of love, otherwise the saints are simply God's puppets or robots. What we admire in the deaths of the saints is their freely chosen capacity to act out of faith in a way overrides their self-interest and selfishness. But their example cannot provide the basis for

an absolute prohibition of suicide. On the contrary: in order for there to be a world where saintliness is possible, then we have to allow for the precariousness of human freedom. Otherwise, God's love collapses into tyranny.

Related confusions can be found in the idea of the sanctity of life. One hears this a great deal. Someone might say: 'I object to suicide because I believe in the sanctity of life, and killing oneself is a violent and illegitimate denial of life's sacredness'. But what is the implication of this belief? Let's admit that life is sacred, which might indeed be the case. But if life is sacred, then it is not the case that only suicide is prohibited: all forms of killing are forbidden. A belief in the sanctity of life entails, for a start, an opposition to capital punishment. To believe that suicide is a crime because life is sacred while also believing in the death penalty (there are many Americans who appear to hold both beliefs) is a sheer contradiction. Similarly, if life is sacred, then all forms of killing are forbidden, for example during wartime. To follow through the logic of the argument for the sanctity of life would also forbid killing in self-defense. What possible justification could there be for killing another person - an attacker, a burglar, a rapist, a junky with a knife – in self-defense if I believe that life is sacred? In order to be consistent, a belief in the sanctity of life has to lead to a complete quietism and utter pacifism (some religious groups, such as The Society of Friends or the Quakers, have nobly tried to live and practice their faith in accordance with such pacifism). Also, if life is sacred, then *all* life is sacred, and it is also forbidden to take the lives of cows, sheep, chicken or fish in order to feed oneself. And why stop there? What about cockles, mussels and crustaceans (remember, I am writing overlooking the North Sea)? And are not fruit and vegetables also alive? What about wheat, barley and grass? A belief in the sanctity of life demands a saintliness of which not even Saint Francis was capable, let alone his eponymous successor in the Vatican.

To tell the truth, the inner lining of a belief in the sanctity of life is pretty ragged, ugly-looking and intolerant. If life possesses intrinsic value – and, for the purposes of argument, let's restrict this to human life - then this entails that all forms of life possess such value and it is not permitted in any circumstances to take a human life. This means that it is not permitted to end the life of someone who is in a permanently vegetative state, either as a consequence of an illness or perhaps due to a serious stroke. One must, in all circumstances, keep the person alive, however awful and intense their suffering, however pointless their life might have become, however they might have wished to end their life with dignity. For example, think of someone who has made an explicit agreement with their spouse or family that their life should be ended once they enter a permanently vegetative state. But let's also imagine that they live in within a jurisdiction – and this is not at all uncommon, especially in the United States – where it is forbidden to end the life of a patient because that state believes in the sanctity of life. In such a case, the person's life must be pointlessly extended and their freely chosen wishes simply ignored. How can that be right?

Is it right?

Religious arguments around the prohibition of suicide quickly become confused. But, sadly or happily (depending on one's point of view) non-religious arguments become equally muddled.

It might sound to the reader as if I am making a straightforwardly libertarian anti-religious argument about suicide, namely that I should be free to choose the time, space and means of my death when I wish. This position perhaps has something to recommend it, but sadly it is also flawed. If I claim that I have the right to suicide, the right to decide about my own death, then the major premise of this claim is that I enjoy complete self-possession, self-ownership or sovereignty over myself. It conceives of the relation to my self on analogy with the relation to my possessions, like a computer or a fridge? But do I enjoy self-ownership in the same manner in which I own a fridge? Not at all. Whatever my 'self' might be, it is something that is partially my own, but also partially shared with others, either those who formed me without my choosing them, like my parents, siblings and sadistic elementary school teachers, or those whom I choose to share my life with, like my friends and comrades, and those whom I love, like my spouse and children.

It is something of a banality to say that we are relational beings, but that doesn't stop it being true. If the right to suicide flows from some idea of self-ownership, then I would be inclined to say that we do not own ourselves. It is not that we are completely owned by others, but self-possession is something possessed *with* others, alongside them. Life is not lived in some lofty independence. We are dependent rational creatures and such dependency is not a limitation of my freedom. It is its condition. Think back to my fridge. To what extent is it mine? I might have paid for it, but it is something I share with the people I live with: family, guests, visitors and sub-letters. My computer might feel like it's mine, but the machine on which I am writing is marked on the underside with prison-like serial number and an indelible sticker proclaiming 'Property of The New School'.

The problem with any claim to the right to suicide based on self-ownership is that it is simply the dialectical inversion of the claims to sovereignty that we saw above in the quotations from Blackstone's commentaries on common law. If I choose to rebel against the idea that suicide is prohibited because it is a double crime against the sovereignty of God and King, then that does not entail that I am sovereign over myself. If I choose to refuse God and King, then that does not entail that I am my own God or King, like crazy Robinson Crusoe driven to psychotic delusions on his desert island. Such is the lie of all forms of possessive individualism. Sovereignty is something shared and divided in the complex networks of dependency that constitute a human life. In relation to the question of suicide, claims to sovereignty very quickly become murky.

Something similar flows from the claim that the right to suicide is the natural corollary to inalienable right to life. But this is also murky. Does it follow from the fact that no one – God, King or state – is permitted to kill me that I am permitted to kill myself? If the right to life is inalienable, then how can I alienate myself from life through a suicidal act? A moment's thought reveals the strangeness, if not absurdity, of the two-step logic to which I would then be committed. If I believe in the inalienable right to life, then I must somehow alienate myself from that right in order to then kill myself. First I must renounce the right to life and second I must then kill myself. But what is the justification

for the second step? It cannot be the right to life, as that has already been renounced. Is it necessary to invoke some second right: a right to death, perhaps? Or I could just admit that the right to life is indeed alienable. But what then would grant just me, myself and I the right to alienate myself from that right? Wouldn't it be equally justified for God, King or the state to claim that they too possessed the right to alienate me from my right to life? In which case, we are back where we started with the theological prohibition of suicide, except in a state of even deeper confusion.

Quietus

This leads to the provisional conclusion that perhaps all talk of rights in relation to suicide is doomed to severe conceptual confusion, whether that right is deemed to be exerted by God, King, the sovereign state or the sovereign self. At this point, it might helpful to turn from the language of rights to that of duties, but sadly the arguments here are equally confused and confusing. Do our duties to others override our personal claim to the 'right' to suicide? In other words, is suicide selfish? Suicide can and does cause immense grief to those we love and are close to and may also have significant effects on those further way (On August 12, 2014, the day after the suicide of Robin Williams, calls to the suicide hotline in the US doubled from a typical 3,500 per day to about 7,400). Suicide can cause considerable emotional harm on one's loved ones, as well as material harm in the form of its economic effects. This is undeniable, but it does not constitute an argument for an absolute prohibition of suicide. Questions of the harm to others have to be balanced against the harm that would be caused by forcing the suicidal person to continue to live in a situation of unendurable physical or psychical suffering. Should Robin Williams, who obviously endured intense depression, have been obliged to live for the sake of his family or his fans? I am dubious as to whether we can make that judgment with moral certainty.

There is also much talk about 'community' and one's duties to it in relation to suicide. But this is also muddy. Firstly, it is unclear what kind of 'communities' most of us live in at this point in the early 21st century, and what kinds of bonds bind us to them, imaginary or ideological, felt or real. At least the talk of God and King has more metaphysical substance than the largely wishful thinking about 'community'. Secondly, what kind of 'community' is it that forces its members to stay alive when they don't want to? Most people don't choose where they were born or where they live. What kind of duty does one have to something that one didn't choose? And if one is fortunate enough to choose to live in another 'community', then what duties does one have towards it? Even if one chooses to live in a certain 'community', does that necessarily remove the choice to end one's life? And if there exists (which I very much doubt) some kind of tacit or explicit 'social contract', then what kind of contract is it that does not have an opt-out clause, particularly when most of us didn't choose to opt-in in the first place?

Consider the inverse of this position. If I have a duty to society or the 'community' not to kill myself, then doesn't society have a reciprocal duty not to kill me or threaten me with death, either in the form of capital punishment or through military conscription, where I might die in a theatre of war or a terrorist attack? As we saw with the argument for the

sanctity of life, it seems to me that the only kind of 'community' that might be able to demand a duty of not killing oneself is a complete and thoroughgoing pacifist society. As lovely as the prospect of such a society might be, it is unclear whether it has ever existed or is indeed likely to exist.

Now, consider the perverse version of this inversion with the example of the brilliant 2006 movie *Children of Men*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón and based on the 1992 novel by P.D. James. The movie depicts a world, not unlike our own, where increasingly anxious, authoritarian regimes are obsessed with homeland security and where the business of politics is based on a cocktail of atavistic nationalism and a terror of immigration and immigrants. But at its core the story in *Children of Men* revolves around the fact that human beings have ceased to be able to reproduce and face the imminent prospect of extinction. Britain sees itself as the last country in the world to maintain any semblance of order and its crypto-fascist government has issued a drug called (with a nod to *Hamlet*) 'Quietus'. Citizens are encouraged to take their own lives for the benefit of the greater good. I think this scenario shows the problem with all arguments against suicide based on a duty to the 'community'. But in the case of *Children of Men* a citizen's duty consists in taking their own life for the good of the 'community'. It is not at all inconceivable, to my mind, to picture a slippery slope from a legal and moral position where suicide is permitted, whether assisted, accompanied or not, to one where society exerts a gentle or not so gentle force on those people it considers useless, surplus to requirements or free-riders to kill themselves: 'Go on, do the right thing by the community and kill yourself. At least someone may get your job and there will be one less mouth to feed'.

The final shore

In the name of ground-clearing, I hope to have shown that the arguments both for and against suicide based on conceptions of rights or duties begin to fall apart when gently pressed and prodded. The familiar claims and counterclaims about suicide tend to dissolve into a sea mist that evaporates into the air with the turning tide.

What about the claim that suicide is justified if it is rationally chosen? What if I spent the next few days calmly and rationally weighing the arguments pro and con as to whether I should kill myself? Let's say that I came to the conclusion, on the reasonable balance of evidence, that I should end it all now. I could even write these reasons down in form of a suicide note and leave it in an envelope on my hotel bed and disappear into the engulfing, ever-churning sea.

But how can the decision to end one's life ever be rational? In order for it to be rational, I would have to look at the reasons for being alive and assess them against the reasons for being dead. But as being dead is not something I have exactly experienced, how can I make a rational assessment of that state as being preferable to my current situation? The truth is that I obviously cannot. At which point, one is inclined to cite the sagacious Epicurus: when death is, I am not; when I am, death is not; therefore why worry? Epicurean wisdom was intended to be a cure for the fear of death by removing the

longing for immortality. But the point is that the justification for suicide on the basis of rationality has to confront the fact that reason cannot peer into death and make any rational assessment. Dead men don't do discourse.

The same line of argument could be extended to the claim that I am justified in taking my life because it is an autonomous decision. For some philosophers, like Kant, rationality and autonomy are two side of the same moral coin. The only law to which I am legitimately subject is one that I legislate for myself. But how can I be autonomous in relation to suicide? Am I not making an autonomous decision to rid myself of autonomy? How can autonomy be consistent with a definitive decision to abandon it? Is not the very fact of death heteronomous, a giving myself over to something outside of my control, some range of experience that I can never experience, namely death? Is not suicide therefore implicitly irrational? It is not a leap into the dark? A leap of faith?

The claim that suicide is an irrational leap of faith might seem to provide transient comfort. But it shouldn't. I am reminded of a terrifying moment in Maurice Blanchot's novel *Thomas the Obscure* that has stayed with me since I first read the book three decades ago. Blanchot writes,

> 'Just as the man who is hanging himself, after kicking away the stool on which he stood, heading for the final shore, rather than feeling the leap which he is making into the void feels only the rope which holds him, held to the end, held more than ever, bound as he had never been before to the existence he would like to leave.'

The awful prospect that Blanchot so powerfully describes is that all the suicidal person experiences after the leap into the dark is the rope that ties them ever more tightly to the existence they wanted to leave. The suicide experiences themselves bound as never before to the existence they rationally or irrationally wanted to leave behind. If suicide is an irrational leap, then why on earth should we rationally take it?

Isn't the perhaps conquerable fear of death always outweighed by the terror of *dying*? Maybe the experience of dying will be infinitely worse than the alternative, namely to stay and endure. Maybe that is the truth of Epicurean wisdom: as you know nothing of death, you should do nothing to bring it about: *live instead*. I am reminded of Dorothy Parker's famous lines on the comparative merits of various methods of dispatch:

> 'Razors pain you
> Rivers are damp
> Acids stain you
> And drugs cause cramp.
> Guns aren't lawful
> Ropes tend to give
> Gas smells awful
> You might as well live.'

Parker attempted suicide at least 5 times before succeeding with an overdose of barbiturates in 1967. Her final note read, 'Any royalties on my books are to go to John McClain, my clothes and my wristwatch to my sister, Helen Droste, and also my little dog, Robinson'. What is so poignant here is the precise attention to detail: the wristwatch, the little Crusoe-like dog.

The question of rationality with respect to suicide is severely complicated by the fact that would be self-killers often plan their demises with a meticulous precision that seems utterly reasonable to them at the time. Rationality is usually combined with severe depression, which causes havoc with one's reason. I think for example of the suicide of the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, with a ritual hari-kari, which he administered to himself with a deep 17 centimeters (nearly 7 inches) incision into his abdomen before which he shouted 'Long live the Emperor!' Sadly, the suicide was botched and one of Mishima's soldiers had to administer the final blow, but he missed…twice. The third blow was on target, but not strong enough. Another soldier had to finish the task with a decapitation. At which point, the room began to smell, as Mishima's intestines were lying on the ground. Messy. Mishima believed with consummate rationality that that his suicide could save Japanese honor in a dishonorable world. Whether it is dreams of martyrdom, delusions of paradise or fantasies of honor and revenge, there is a perverse rationality to depressive suicide where all reasons lead to the same fatal and seemingly inescapable decision. Reason runs headlong into one last, long tunnel with no exit.

Truly, one has to be inside such a mental state in order to fully understand it. I defer here to the testimony of Kay Redfield Jamison, a clinical psychologist and author of *An Unqiuet Mind.* She gives an extremely humane and informed account of suicidal depression, by someone who experienced it herself and who recovered through a careful combination of psychotherapy and drug therapy. She writes that,

> 'Suicidal depression is a state of cold, agitated horror and relentless despair. The things you most love in life leach away. Everything is an effort, all day and throughout the night. There is no hope, no point, no nothing'.

In an attempt to understand suicide and the fatal logic of its tunnel vision, I'd like to turn to the most compelling form of evidence that we possess: the suicide note.