



APPRAISAL OF SUICIDE IN KANT AND THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is an appraisal of suicide in Kant as a right principle towards dissuading suicide in Nigeria. Using the method of exposition and hermeneutics, the paper examines the degree to which suicide in Kant is appropriate towards dissuading suicide in Nigeria. Towards the success of the stated aim, the paper studies the concept of suicide, Kant's extremism and zero tolerance to suicide, increasing cases of suicide in Nigeria and the government role towards mitigating this devastation in Nigeria society. The finding reveals that suicide is on the increase in Nigeria and there seems to be no effort towards arresting this ugly situation. In the same vein, the finding identifies the causes of suicide as following: financial challenges, marital problems, mental disorders, drug misuse, alcoholism, academic challenges, depression, rejection, e.t.c. The implication of this study is that in spite of the challenges leading to suicide, the act is abominable and ought to be shunned not minding the degree of motivation or provocation. Hence for Kant, we do not have powers of willful disposal over our life rather a duty of self preservation. More so Kant condemned suicide for the reason that the act uses man as a means of escaping intolerable situations whereas the human person ought not to be a means but an end itself. Therefore, the paper makes a clarion call on the government to initiate programmes to enlighten and dissuade people from suicide. Keywords: Suicide, Kant, Nigeria, self preservation, freewill and moral duty.

Keywords: Appraisal, Suicide, Kant, Nigerian Experience.

Introduction

No doubt, some situations and experiences in human existence make human life very miserable and frustrating. Unfortunately, these ugly situations instigate some relenting individuals to choose suicide as a better alternative to miserable life. In the history of Philosophy, the concept of suicide has received a dose of philosophical attention thereof raising the fundamental question thus; do I not kill myself when it has become impossible for me to live and when life has become a burden? In keeping focus to this question, each epoch in the historical development of Philosophy from the early Greek through the Medieval, Modern and Contemporary Philosophers have always given answers to this question in either extremes of compliance or non compliance to suicide.

It is very unfortunate that suicide though not a very new experience in Nigeria but no doubt has developed much momentum recently. In times past, it used to be a rare news hearing people commit suicide in Nigeria but these days, suicide can be said have reached an unimaginable height with the highest record in Lagos lagoon. Hence this paper makes a critical appraisal of Kant's concept of suicide as a tool towards mitigating the menace of suicide in Nigeria. Kant understands that the life of a person is certainly of great moral importance to the universe such that as rational beings we are subject to the categorical duty of self preservation not to take our own life willfully¹. Every human life has some worth².

Each person has an incalculable worth and has inherent dignity bestowed on him by nature³. Suicide stands as a great challenge to the categorical duty of self preservation. Suicide can simply be said to mean one's right to do away with one's life when life's challenges threaten more evil to life that survival seems difficult⁴. Sometimes life challenges may be so frustrating, miserable and tormenting as warranted by economic hardship, sickness, emotional distress, psychiatric disorder, alcoholism, drug abuse, e.t.c., such that one may quickly think that a better solution is to commit suicide and escape these miseries.

Kant emphasized that it is our moral duty to take care of our body and life⁵. If a man destroys his body, and so his life, he does it by use of his will, which is itself destroyed in the process. Hence to use the power of a free will for its own destruction is self-contradictory. Kant argued that man is a steward and not the owner of life since life is a gift from God. Therefore, one ought not to do away with life until God who is the owner decides otherwise. Furthermore, Kant's second Categorical imperative also proves suicide unacceptable since by suicide, man's life is used as a means to solving challenging and tormenting situations. This paper also makes a review of some other authors and philosophers on the concept of suicide. It also draws a comparison between other Philosophers' thought and that of Kant's thereof exposing the richness of Kant's argument in defense of life. Nevertheless, in appraising Kant's concept of suicide, this paper also brings to the fore some necessary critiques of Kant's arguments. By and large, Kant's work on suicide serves as a good antidote towards dissuading Nigerians from suicide.

Conceptual Analysis of Suicide

Suicide is a derivative word from the Latin word *suicidium* which is a compound word with the stem as *sui*(self) and the ending as a verb *caedere* which means “to kill”. This implies self destruction or the act of intentionally causing one’s own death. This is a direct taking of one’s own life done on one’s own authority⁶. Here killing is direct when it is intentional and directly willed either for its own sake or as a means to something else such as escaping miserable situations⁷. Suicide as a human act can be positive or negative. This division does not mean the morality of the act of suicide rather it implies the direct or indirect means of committing suicide. It is positive when there is an active performance of some death-dealing acts against oneself⁸. An example of this is a person who hangs himself. It is negative when a person intentionally refuses some medical treatment which are the ordinary means of preserving life and without which the person will die⁹. Hence suicide in this second case is a result of inaction or omission.

Also, suicide can be through Physician-Assisted suicide. This is a case whereby the means of the act of suicide is provided by the physician while the patient acts on his or her own¹⁰. For example, the doctor leaves the patient with a lethal drug and instruction on the method of administration but not present when the suicide takes place rather allows the patient to complete the action¹¹. This form of suicide is often identified as euthanasia but it can ordinarily be referred as physician-assisted suicide¹².

Factors that affect the risk of suicide include: Psychiatric disorder, alcoholism, drug abuse¹³, psychological states, cultural, family or social situations, genetics¹⁴ and personality disorder¹⁵. Other risk factors include having previously attempted suicide¹⁶, the ready availability of a means to suicide, family history of suicide, or presence of traumatic brain injury, e.t.c.,¹⁷ For example, suicide rates have been found to be greater in households with firearms than those without them¹⁸. In the same vein, socio-economic problems such as unemployment, poverty, homelessness and discrimination may trigger suicidal thoughts¹⁹. It is on record that genetics account for 38% and 55% of suicidal behaviours. It is noteworthy that some of the victims of suicide leave a suicide note from which the family members come to the knowledge of²⁰.

The major methods applied in suicide include the following: hanging, pesticide poisoning and firearms²¹. Hanging is the most common method which accounts for about 53% and 39% male and female suicide respectively²². There are about 20 million non fatal attempted suicides annually²³. Unfortunately, such victims are left with emotional repercussions, injuries and long term disabilities that sometimes lead to death. Suicide can be taken to be among the 10th leading cause of death in the world²⁴.

One of the most popular and most devastating examples of suicide is the 1981 hunger strike led by an Irish, Bobby Sands²⁵. The suicide was a reaction following a five-year protest among the Irish republican prisoners in Northern Ireland. This was warranted by the British Government withdrawal of Special Category Status for convicted paramilitary prisoners in 1976. Special Category Status was the dispensation given to convicted paramilitaries such that they need not wear prisoners uniforms or do odd jobs like prisoners rather they were

housed within their paramilitary offices while they were allowed to receive visitors and special food. This developed to a number of attacks during the 'slot out' routine (slot out was the act of emptying buckets of excrement of human waste when the cells are unlocked in the morning)²⁶. This number of attacks led to the 'dirty protest' where prisoners refused leaving their cells for clearing rather covered the walls of their cells with excrement leading to the death of many prisoners²⁷.

Debate on the Morality and motivation to Suicide Arguments for Suicide

1. Suicide as a Legitimate Personal Choice: 'Human Right to Die'

Activists/Movement see suicide as a legitimate personal choice such that no one should be forced to suffer against his/her will, particularly from unfortunate conditions: incurable disease, mental illness and old age that have no possibility of improvement. Proponents of this view accept that suicide is a rational and valid last resort for those enduring major pain or trauma for whom life has become an intolerable burden²⁸. Since suicide is a choice and private affair; each person is entitled to his/her choice, no one has any right to interfere with another's choice by preventing him/her from committing suicide.

2. Suicide as a lesser evil and a more condonable Alternative: The imperative in the principle of double effect compels us to choose a lesser evil among two evils. Hence the defenders of suicide are of the view that life can become very unbearable that continuing to live becomes a greater evil than to die, thus, life will be at best ended. The supporters of suicide consider suicide as a more condonable alternative to living meaningless and absurd life. "If it is not wrong to interfere with nature to prolong life, as medical science does, why should it be wrong to interfere with nature to shorten life. In both cases it is done for the benefit of the person concerned and by his or her own consent"²⁹. One of the outstanding supporters of this school of thought is the Scottish empiricist David Hume.

3. Suicide as a wise management of the gift of life: Every gift is always for the benefit of one who receives it. If life is a gift, the beneficiary of life ought to manage it to his/her benefit. Consequently, the receiver uses it as it is good to him or her. However, just like any gift, when life is no more beneficial to the receiver and becomes useless and even harmful, it becomes only wise to call it a quit. Life is not merely to be lived but to be lived well such that a wise person lives as long as he or she ought, not as long as he can.

4. **Suicide not contrary to reason:** According to the defenders of suicide, to commit suicide is by no means contrary to the laws of nature, of reason or of God. Were it contrary to the law of nature, then self-preservation, all acts of self-denial and privation would be similarly unlawful. If by 'divine order' is meant simply that which occurs according to God's consent, then God appears to consent to all our act's at any point including suicide, otherwise why does he not intervene if it is contrary to his wish.. Therefore, if God has placed us upon the earth like a sentinel, then our choosing to leave this post when we consider the post not safe anymore is much more reasonable than to remain.

Argument against Suicide:

1. **Man is but a steward and not owner of life:** Life is received from God as a gift to be used in the service of God and humanity. Therefore, suicide is an usurpation of God's power. One who commits suicide does wrong just like one who usurps judgment in a matter outside his authority. Reacting against suicide, John Locke holds:

men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by His order and about His bare his business; they are his property.... Everyone... is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station willfully³⁰.
2. **Sacredness of Human Life:** The simplest outlook on suicide holds that it is necessarily wrong because human life is sacred. Human life is inheritably valuable and precious, demanding respect from others and reverence for oneself such that suicide violates this sacredness.
3. **Right to Life and not Right to Death:** That we have right to life not to death. The right we have to life is to take good care of life. Also that others are morally prohibited from killing me does not follow that I am permitted to kill myself. This conclusion is made stronger if we consider the right to life, since in order for me to kill myself, I must first renounce my inalienable right to life, which I cannot just do.
4. **Suicide as crime against Human society and family:** The society and family are the milieu of human existence. Since man is a member of the society; whatever we are or do affects others. This is to say that suicide deprives society of whatever individuals might contribute to society by way of charity, beneficence, moral example, etc. Suicide, according to its critics, harms the society and family which

depends on the economic and social productivity of the members. It also leaves the family members with some form of social stigma.

5. **Suicide as an act of cowardice and selfishness:** Life is loaded with various challenges and to cope with these challenges, one needs a degree of courage and self confidence. Hence suicide is therefore an act of cowardice and selfishness because the suicide does not consider the burden which the act loads on the living. Little wonder Plato described suicide as disgraceful and its perpetrators should be buried in unmarked graves. T.J. Higgins writes; suicide as a escape from overwhelming personal disaster, an evil life, misery, frustration, or dishonor far from being an act of fortitude, is an act of cowardice³¹.
6. **Suicide as against Natural Inclination:** Suicide runs contrary to the natural inclination of self preservation. Hence everything naturally seeks its own being and tends to keep itself in being as long as possible³². Such that suicide becomes a threat to this natural inclination in man. Suicide is therefore forbidden by natural law which does not allow anyone destroy his very life.

Understanding Suicide in Kant

Kant defined suicide as a maxim that “from self-love I make as my principle to shorten my life when its continued duration threatens more evil than it promises satisfaction”³³. Kant took an extreme position claiming that we have no right or powers of disposal over our body and life. According to Kant, it is our moral duty to take care of our body and life and not to destroy it³⁴. Therefore, it is obvious that the body constitutes a part of oneself. If a man destroys his body, and so his life, he does it by the use of his will, which is itself destroyed in the process. Hence to use the power of a free will for its own destruction is self-contradictory. If freedom is the condition of life it cannot be employed to abolish life and so to destroy and abolish itself. Hence to use life for its destruction, to use life for producing lifelessness, is self-contradictory. Hence man cannot rightly have any power of disposal with regard to himself and his life.

The argument that grows out of Kant’s second Categorical imperative also proves suicide unacceptable thus, “act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end”³⁵. Here, Kant wants to say that a suicide would be “making use of his person as a means to end an intolerable condition of life”. This is incompatible with the moral law, which demands that we treat people as an end in themselves, and never wholly as a means.

According to Kant, personhood gives a creature a dignity that is beyond price such that no matter what advantage we may gain by treating a person as a means to an end, this will never

be sufficient to offset the value of their personhood. This holds true considering Kant's first categorical imperative which states, "act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature"³⁶. Hence in treating myself as a mere means, I am denying my personhood and a maxim like this cannot be universalized without contradiction.

On an irrational consideration, the above argument sounds most plausible. A rational examination of the reason of free will as justification for suicide rather meets with internal logical inconsistency. We may treat our body as we please, provided our motives are those of self-preservation. If, for instance, his foot is a hindrance to life, a man might have it amputated. But in taking his life he does not preserve his person; he disposes of his person and not of its attendant circumstances; he robs himself of his person³⁷. This is contrary to the highest duty we have towards ourselves, for it annuls the condition of all other duties; it goes beyond the units of the use of free will, for this use is possible only through the existence of the Subject.

However, in spite of the landmark made by Kant in his position on suicide regarding a choice for life, Kant's concept on suicide needs an unsparing critique because of some noticeable loopholes in his argument. Kant rightly noted that man can only dispose of things like beasts but man is not a thing, not a beast. Hence according to Kant, when man makes an attempt towards disposing of himself, he treats his value as that of a beast. Therefore, he who so behaves becomes for everyone a beast or a thing and should be treated as such. Hence having discarded his humanity by himself, he cannot expect others to respect the humanity in him. Here, Kant's position on the treatment of an attempted suicide is dehumanizing. Thus he states;

man can only dispose of things like beasts but man is not a thing, not a beast. If he disposes over himself, he treats his value as that of a beast. He who so behaves, who has no respect for human nature and makes a thing of himself, becomes for everyone an Object of freewill. We are free to treat him as a beast, as a thing, and to use him for our sport as we do to a horse or a dog, for he is no longer a human being; he has made a thing of himself. And, having himself discarded his humanity, he cannot expect that others should respect humanity in him³⁸.

It is obvious that here, Kant went another extreme in his condemnation of suicide. Despite the attempt to suicide, humanity is still worthy of esteem. Even when a man is a bad man, humanity in his person is worthy of esteem³⁹. By the above statement, Kant meant to say that the human person is more valuable than beast and ought to be respected. Nevertheless, he recommends that one who has attempted suicide acts like a beast and ought to be handled like a beast and should be used for sports as is done to horse or dog. Kant is surely wildly wrong here. It must also be emphasized that in very many cases in which people have committed or have attempted to commit suicide do not at all resemble debasements of the kind just

described. Here one may ask Kant whether the attempt on suicide disrobes one of the substance of humanity which he earlier claimed is inalienable?

Kant's other argument is based on the undeniable fact that if a person commits suicide he can no longer perform any moral acts and it cannot be moral, in Kant's words, "to root out the existence of morality in the world"⁴⁰. 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' new moral acts on his part but not in the world. He would root out 'morality itself only if he wiped out the human race which is not possible for him.

Kant's argument here involves confusion between the following two statements of this:

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 possible⁴¹.

Suicide in Kant and Lessons for Nigeria

It is unfortunate that the World Health Organization's (WHO) suicide ranking shows that about 800,000 people die globally from suicide every year with about 15.1 suicide per 100,000 people annually. More so WHO shows that Nigeria now ranks 30th most suicide prone country out of 183 nations in the world⁴². Hence suicide can be said to be one of the major causes of mortality worldwide. A survey on suicide and suicide behaviours in Nigeria shows that in Nigeria, suicide cases are on the increase especially in big cities such as Lagos Lagoon and other capital cities in Nigeria. The incessant news of different methods of suicide in Nigeria are quite alarming and heartbreaking leaving very many persons as widows and fatherless. It is on record that the choice for suicide is higher in men warranted by poverty, failure in life, emotional cracks, e.t.c. In Nigeria, suicide rate is lower among women than men such that the major known reason that may warrant suicide in women is a betrayal in relationship. It is worthy of note that the incidence of attempted suicide is about twenty-five times more than completed suicide cases in Nigeria. The victims are either rescued while in the act or discouraged while they planned executing the act of the suicide. The most unfortunate part is that there are no programs to dissuade people from embracing suicide such as it is in HIV/AIDS. Also, it is unfortunate that there is inefficient documentation of health records, death and poor legislations and enforcement of legislations on suicide and suicide behaviours⁴³.

This attitude to suicide is a portentous sign of damnation to a nation like Nigeria. It is in attempt to rescue Nigeria from this jinxed state that this paper turns to the appreciable works of Kant on suicide towards dissuading suicide in Nigeria. Kant claims that we have no right or power whatsoever of disposal over our life rather our moral responsibility is to care for our life and not to destroy our body and life⁴⁴. Hence turning against oneself is self contradictory and Kant dissuades suicide minding the integrity of the human person. Thus for Kant the

choice of suicide is self destructive, thereby killing the one who makes the choice, hence such choice is obviously erroneous and self contradictory.

Similarly, in Kant's second categorical imperative he stated; "act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end"⁴⁵. This is a very important point to remind suicide disposed patients that even failure in business, hardship or difficult times, failure in relationship, etc. can never be substantive reasons to aid suicide. Following Kant's second categorical imperative, it is obvious that every other thing about life; business, relationship, property, e.t.c., are all means to one end which is the preservation of life itself. Hence to kill oneself for the failures of these mentioned means to life is obnoxious and highly regrettable. It is a double tragedy because those means to life are not only achieved but the one to enjoy them even when regained is no more there to do so. Ending one's life can never be an alternative to unachieved desires or dreams in life. Giving oneself further chances can lead one even to greater heights and better future. Hence it is cowardice ending one's life because of unachieved desires or failure in life. They do not really worth taking one's life.

Our most unfortunate condition is the lost of human dignity, integrity and values in life. Lost of human dignity to life and such replacement with material things shifts attention away from the real being itself. The human dignity is in the personhood not on material achievement. Material or other spiritual needs such as shame, sin, etc. are never sufficient enough to offset the values of personhood. This personhood gives a dignity beyond price and negates every attempt towards treating the human person as a means instead of an end in itself. This assertion is true, considering Kant's first categorical imperative when he claims, "act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law nature"⁴⁶. Attempt to suicide here cannot be universalizable rather queries the place of the virtue of patience and hope which are more universalizable. Though disturbing situation could persuade one to think of suicide, it is intolerable not minding the degree of disturbance, provocation, persuasion or motivation.

Conclusion

This paper has forthwith, given a critical examination of suicide in Kant towards dissuading suicide in Nigeria. Also, the paper considered the major motivating factors leading to suicide in Nigeria and their power of persuasion minding the excruciating, frustrating and often highly tormenting human experiences which make suicide seemingly plausible and imposing. In spite of these motivations, Kant has made a frantic effort with convincing reasons on why suicide ought to be shunned. Kant argued that suicide is immoral. He has many reasons why it is immoral, and they stem back to his believes in the categorical imperative with the corresponding unconditional commands. The second Categorical imperative proves suicide unacceptable minding the fact that suicide uses the human person as a means of escaping intolerable situations whereas the human person ought to be an end in itself. Kant denounced suicide in the unqualified and indeed quite furious terms. According to him; "suicide is in no circumstances permissible"⁴⁷. Kant went this extreme because of his ardent interest on the

great value of life and the categorical duty of self preservation not to take away our own life as earlier stated.

Those who argue in support of suicide quote the examples of 1976 hunger strike, Cato and Lucretia who committed suicide to avoid shame and preserve values. In the case of Cato, he committed suicide instead of surrendering to Caesar minding his numerous fans. Also, in the case of Lucretia, when Sextus Tarquin threatened to kill both her and a male slave and make it appear that she had been caught in adultery with the slave,⁴⁸ she committed suicide than face such degradation. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, very many young people indulge in suicide following experiences such as failure in business, frustration resulting from swindlers (popularly called 419), disappointment in relationship or betrayal, etc. In spite of these motivating situations, suicide is both abominable and inadmissible. Suicide is unconditionally abominable because it degrades human nature below the level of lower animal. Little wonder did Kant insist that misery gives no right to any man to take his own life⁴⁹.

We find, as a rule, that those who labour for their happiness are more liable to suicide; having tasted the refinements of pleasure, and being deprived of them, they give way to grief, sorrow, and melancholy thereof making them liable to suicide⁵⁰. To such persons, this paper advises that they ought to understand that suicide is in no circumstances permissible. The man who commits suicide sinks lower than the beasts. The life of a person is certainly of great moral importance to the universe such that as rational beings we are subject to the categorical duty of self preservation and not to destroy our life willfully.

If suicide is a solution to escaping life misery why do attempted suicides or suicide survivors regret their actions when saved from actualizing the act of suicide? More so by religious consideration, Kant claimed that man has been put on earth by God and suicide opposes the purpose of the creator. Thus life is a gift and the human person is only a custodian of the precious gift of life. Hence a suicide is compared to one who deserts his duty post and a rebel against the author of life. "Man is merely a sentinel on earth and ought not to leave his duty post till he is relieved by the beneficent hand who is God. God is our owner; we are His property; His providence works for our good⁵¹. Just like in the Nigerian army, a soldier who deserts his duty post is liable for imprisonment so it is very loathsome and odious for one to commit suicide since it implies deserting one's duty post.

It has been stated earlier that though disturbing situations could persuade one to think of quitting life, suicide is intolerable not minding the degree of motivation, inducement, persuasion or provocation. This is because, humanity in one's own person is inviolable and a holy trust such that man ought not to lay hands upon himself. Thus humanity is worthy of esteem such that even when man is bad or has failed in life, the humanity in his person is still worthy of esteem. This paper is therefore a clarion call on the government and NGOs to develop means of dissuading suicide in Nigeria. Though the Constitutional legislation on attempted suicides states that : "any person who attempts to kill himself is guilty of a misdemeanor and is liable to imprisonment for one year"⁵², this paper suggests that the government should understand that attempt to suicide is a cry for help. It is important that the

government works towards rehabilitating such persons through psychotherapy and other material aids rather than prosecuting the victims of suicide. Nevertheless, we emphatically state that misery or seemingly intolerable situations give no right to any man to take his own life.

End Notes

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