

THE MEANING AND THE MORALITY OF SUICIDE

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# **ABSTRACT**

## THE MEANING AND THE MORALITY OF SUICIDE

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The aim of this study is to examine the meaning and the morality of suicide through the history of philosophy. To this aim, firstly, the historical evaluation of the concept of suicide is explained in detail. The effects of sociological and the religious transformations on the meaning of suicide are analyzed. Afterwards, the moral theories about suicide are discussed. The anti-suicide arguments about suicide in the history of philosophy are classified under three parts mainly. These anti-suicide arguments — that suicide is a violation of our duties to God, to the society and to the self — are handled and explained in detail with their counter arguments. Then, the problem of the permissibility of suicide is analyzed and whether suicide is morally permitted under some conditions or it is absolutely forbidden is discussed. Next, the philosophical meaning of suicide in literature is investigated by analyzing the meanings that are given to suicide by Dante

and Dostoevsky. In the conclusion, a brief summary is given, and the moral theories about suicide are criticized.

Keywords: Suicide, Morality, Meaning, Permissibility, God, Society, Nature, Self, Freedom, Free Will, Sin, Duty, Immortality,

# ÖZ

## İNTİHARIN ANLAMİ VE MORALİTESİ

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Bu çalışmanın amacı İntiharın anlamını ve felsefe tarihindeki moral teorilerin çözümleme ve eleştirisini sunmaktır. Bu amaçla, ilk olarak, intihar kavramının tarihsel gelişimi ayrıntılı olarak sunulmuştur. Sosyolojik ve dinsel değişimlerin intiharın anlamı üzerindeki etkileri analiz edilmiştir. Sonrasında, intihar hakkındaki moral teoriler tartışılmıştır. Felsefe tarihindeki intihar karşıtı argümanlar temel olarak üç gruba ayrılır. Bu argümanlar — intihar Tanrıya, topluma ve kendine karşı olan ödevlerine aykırıdır — karşıt argümanlarıyla birlikte ele alınmış ve ayrıntılı olarak açıklanmıştır. Daha sonra, intiharın izin verilirliliği problemi analiz edilmiştir ve bazı şartlar altında intihara ahlaki olarak izin verilebilir mi yoksa mutlak olarak mı yasaklanmıştır sorunu tartışılmıştır. Bundan sonra, intiharın edebiyattaki felsefi anlamı Dante ve Dostoyevsky'nin intihara verdikleri anlamlar analiz edilerek araştırıldı. Sonuçta, kısa bir özetten sonra, intihar hakkındaki moral teorilerin günümüzdeki geçerliliği tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İntihar, Ahlak, Anlam, İzin verilebilirlik, Tanrı, Toplum,  
Doğa, Kendi, Özgürlük, Hür İrade, Günah, Görev, Ölümsüzlük

*to F. M. Dostoevsky*

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I here by declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by the rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

Date: 04.12.2003

Signature

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem  
and that is suicide.  
Albert Camus

The aim of this thesis is to examine the meaning and the morality of suicide. Suicide has always been one of the most important philosophical problems through the history of philosophy. The ethical debates about the permissibility of suicide have its own history, beginning with the Ancient Greece to our own age. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, almost all of the European philosophers have discussed about suicide; even though their ideas varied, all of them accepted suicide as an important philosophical subject.

Even though in our age, the problem of suicide is studied by sociology and psychology more than philosophy, it still has an ethical importance. Today, the moral permissibility of suicide is accepted as an important applied ethical issue. It generally focuses on the problems of permissibility of suicide and of suicide intervention. Moreover, the discussions about morality of suicide has value since it gives new perspectives to the more contemporary and essential subjects like euthanasia and suicide bombers.

I think that euthanasia and suicide bombers are the most important issues of ethics under today's conditions although their meanings are unrelated. While euthanasia is committed for humanitarian and merciful reasons, the latter is committed for destruction in the name of faith; still, both of them are voluntary acts to die. That's why, whatever their motives are, they must be accepted as suicides. Because in both of the actions, one decides to end his life voluntarily and consciously.

These issues need to be discussed by philosophers so that an ethical ground for them can be constructed. That's why; studying the history of philosophical discussions about voluntary death will be beneficial for further discussions. The aim of this thesis is to supply this background; therefore it is directly about neither euthanasia nor suicide bombers. These concepts belong to our age, yet we can find discussions about them in the history of philosophy, though in other names. The questions whether an incurable sickness and intolerable pain can be morally acceptable reasons for a decision to end one's life or whether the desire for being a martyr is moral have been asked for centuries. The answers given in the past will bring new dimensions to contemporary debates about voluntary death.

In this thesis, I will discuss the ethical theories about suicide in the history of philosophy. Almost in every age, philosophers asked the question whether some conditions of life could present one with a morally acceptable reason for voluntarily deciding to end one's life. Certain answers to the problem of suicide are various due to the ethical standpoints of the

philosophers. In other words, this difference in their attitudes is the direct result of their ethical systems.

This is the reason why Wittgenstein says that the permissibility of suicide throws a light on the nature of ethics. Because according to him, suicide is the pivot on which every ethical system turns. He states that “If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed. If anything is not allowed then suicide is not allowed.”<sup>1</sup>

The difference between the deontological and the utilitarian ethics is obviously crystallized in the problem of suicide. The utilitarian reasoning about suicide considers the consequences of one’s killing oneself. Under some circumstances, suicide can be justified, it is permitted, even required. However, the deontological ethics won’t accept these reasons, since to live is a duty and one should not commit suicide even though his life is wretched, filled with disappointments and misery. So, it condemns the act without regarding its reasons and consequences.

The permissibility of suicide has been a difficult ethical problem for philosophers, because an ordinary person may regard the issue as a personal choice which is neither moral nor immoral. However, whenever someone wants to set up a general moral rule for the permissibility of suicide, he will realize the difficulty. The prohibition of suicide is more reasonable according to heteronomous ethical systems, in which the standards of the moral life are derived from an objective authority which lies

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914-1916*, ed. By Anscombe, Rhees and Von Wright Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1961, p. 91e.

outside of the person; but, even for the autonomous systems, the individual counts as his own law-giver; and here it is not easy to advocate the right to suicide. Because, if I decide that I should kill myself, this rule should bind every other human being that exists in. If not, then we can't even talk about morality. Yet, such a rule as 'everybody should commit suicide' cannot exist as Kant stated in his discussions about suicide.

Kant provided an original anti-suicide argument. He opposed it in the name of freedom and autonomy. In his view, individual autonomy is the most important value and suicide is wrong because it is the loss of freedom. His reason to forbid suicide was different from St. Augustine and Aquinas' since he put the theological prohibition in blanket while claiming suicide was immoral:

He who contemplates suicide should ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. If he destroys himself in order to escape from painful circumstances, he uses a person merely as a mean to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life. But a man is not a thing, that is to say, something which can be used merely as means, but must in all his actions be always considered as an end in himself. I cannot, therefore, dispose in any way of a man in my own person so as to mutilate him, to damage or kill him.<sup>2</sup>

In all prohibitions of suicide, theological prohibition has always been the strongest one. Plato prohibited suicide because he thought that Gods were our guardians and killing oneself before they ordered was like escaping from prison. Even though death is better than life for him, one

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1949, p. 48.

should wait for his time patiently. Life is a gift from Gods and we should not reject it, for otherwise we will be punished.<sup>3</sup>

Like him, St. Augustine opposed suicide strictly and declared that it is the worst of all sins. He, too, thought that life is the gift of God and our sufferings are the will of Providence, rejecting life and shortening the decided time of suffering is a violation against God; it is not accepting the divine will. Also, believed in that God definitely forbids suicide with the commandment “thou shalt not kill”. Committing suicide violates this commandment. Because, this commandment not only prohibited killing others, but it also grasped denying of oneself.

After him, Thomas Aquinas developed his anti-suicide arguments. In *The Summa Theologica*, Aquinas gives three arguments against suicide. For him, every sin is a sin against God, self or the neighbor; and suicide is a sin against three of them at the same time. In fact, he collected all the existing anti-suicide arguments from the non-Christian sources in order to show that suicide should not be allowed.

First, suicide is a sin against self because it is unnatural. This argument that suicide is against man’s nature was first given by the Hebrew general Josephus while he was trying to convince his soldiers for not killing themselves after they had been defeated by the Romans.<sup>4</sup>

His second argument against suicide is that it is a sin against your neighbor. It is a utilitarian type argument. Suicide is not justified because of

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<sup>3</sup> Plato. *Phaedo*, ed. by Jeffrey Henderson, London: Harvard University Press, 2001, p.215.

<sup>4</sup> A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*. New York: Random House, 1972, p. 72.

the social harm that is done: it is an offense against community. That's why, it is also against justice. The second argument that suicide is against justice was taken from Aristotle's argument that suicide was an offense against the state and an act of social irresponsibility.<sup>5</sup>

The third argument is a theological one as suicide is a sin against God. Suicide is a sin because it is like stealing from God. Our lives are the properties of God and we are merely trustees of that property. His third argument that suicide is a sin against God was completely similar with Plato's opposition of suicide that since life is a gift from God, and its duration is in God's power, man may not, therefore, kill himself in order to pass to the more blessed life.

In his essay "On Suicide", David Hume took up the Aquinas' argument "Every sin is against self, God or Neighbor," and discussed whether suicide is a crime through these three cases. Hume followed these arguments against suicide and by refuting them one by one; he demonstrated that suicide is not a violation of our duties against God, society and oneself. He says that: "If suicide be criminal, it must be a transgression of our duty, either to God, our neighbor, or ourselves"<sup>6</sup>. Since it is not, suicide can be neither crime nor sin.

He is also opposed to St. Augustine in that the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' bans only killing others, and, there are no statements about the prohibition of suicide in the Bible. For him, under some conditions, human

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1975. p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998, p. 98.



beings have the right to kill themselves. Like Hume, Schopenhauer considered the problem in a different manner: he regarded suicide as a personal right:

We have to hear, accordingly, that suicide is the greatest cowardice, that it is only possible in madness, and similar twaddle, or even the entirely senseless phrase that suicide is "wrong," whereas obviously no one has a greater right over anything in the world than his own person and life.<sup>7</sup>

In his view, a person who commits suicide doesn't intend to rebel against God or violate something, but he only prefers death because the terrors of life outweigh the terrors of death. Suicide may also be regarded as an experiment—a question which man puts to nature, trying to force her to answer. The question is this: what change will death produce in a man's existence and in his insight into the nature of things? It is clumsy experiment to make, for it involves the destruction of the very consciousness which puts the question and awaits the answer.<sup>8</sup>

The importance of Hume's essay is that it shows the permissibility or impermissibility of suicide is not completely a matter of theology. Even though suicide doesn't violate our duty to God, it may be still prohibited. As Frey says; "by deflecting the argument about God, Hume can then focus the discussion upon the conditions of life and upon the effects of suicide."<sup>9</sup> With him, the question whether suicide is right or wrong is answered by the

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<sup>7</sup> A. Schopenhauer, *Selected Essays*, p.357.

<sup>8</sup> A. Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p. 138.

<sup>9</sup> Frey, R. G. "Hume on Suicide", in *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 1999, vol.24, No. 4, pp. 336-3516.

reasons and consequences of cases; that is why, his attitude toward suicide was a turning point in the history of the speculations about suicide.

David Hume started his essay by saying that there is a war between superstition and philosophy, and philosophy will triumph since superstition is founded upon false opinion.<sup>10</sup> Even in our age, all the monotheistic religions forbid suicide by calling it as an impious act against the Providence. Contemporary Ethics discuss the right to euthanasia and can't help releasing itself from the theological prohibitions on voluntary death.

I think, the war between philosophy and superstition still continues and suicide is one of the subjects that we can feel the temper of this war. To deflect all the common superstitions to set suicide free from every imputation of guilt or blame, we should examine them at first. My main aim in this thesis is to show that suicide is neither good nor evil. The act has to be considered as a personal choice. Not as a sin or a crime.

That's why, in Chapter One, I will examine the history of religious, sociological and legal attitudes towards suicide briefly. In the second chapter, there are four parts. Part One is about whether suicide is a violation of our duties against God. In Part Two, I will explicate another anti-suicide argument that claims suicide as a violation of duties against society. Part Three will be about the views against suicide: that it's being contrary to nature. These anti-suicide arguments that I will use belong mainly to Plato, St. Augustine and Kant. David Hume's counter arguments about the permissibility of suicide will be also presented in each part. In part four, I will

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<sup>10</sup> David Hume. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. p.98.

discuss some contradictions in the discussed philosophers concerning their condemnation of suicide.

In the third chapter, I will discuss the philosophical meaning of suicide in literature. I think presenting examples of suicide literally is more difficult than judging them philosophically. Because it is hard to reflect the nature of the individual who commits suicide since suicide may be committed because of pain, hate and self-loathing. To this aim, I choose Dante and Dostoevsky in this part. Because although both of them were firm believers, they gave imaginative meanings to their suicide that go beyond what the philosophers could think.

In Part One, Dante's *Divine Comedy* will be examined. Under the strict condemnation of suicide during the Middle Ages, Dante put suicide to the inferno by following St. Aquinas' classifications of sins, but he regards some suicides differently as a poet. Because for him, suicide is not the ultimate sin to decide how the sinner will be punished. He created a special place for the self-killers. Dante locates the ones whose suicide mean the lack of self-love since he accepts Aquinas' argument that man should love himself and ought to cherish above others. But, if the underlying motive of the act is not doing injustice against themselves, they are not accepted as a guilty of suicide.

In the second part of this chapter, I will examine the philosophical meanings of some suicides in Dostoevsky's novels. Suicide is one of Dostoevsky's favorite subjects as an author and a great problem for him as a Christian. He thinks that the disbelief in the immortality of soul causes

suicide. In this part, I will discuss his argument about the connection between the belief in the immortality of the soul and suicide in detail.

This dissertation is an inquiry into the meaning and the morality of suicide. My aim is to show that suicide is neither good nor evil. Existing moral theories are not satisfactory enough to show that it is a moral or an immoral act. We should try to understand the nature of the act at first. So it should be regarded in a different manner. Therefore any inquiry into the meaning and the morality of suicide, does not permit a conceptual framework of a Platonist kind such as 'What is the meaning and the morality of suicide?' A proper conceptual framework for the meaning and the morality of suicide would require answers to questions like 'Why?', 'Where?', 'How?' and 'When?' Such a conceptual framework would be a Wittgensteinian one. This conceptual framework inquires into the question of 'X means Y in context C to the person Z', rather than any inquiry into the question 'The meaning of X is Y'. Here, X means either 'the meaning of suicide' or 'the morality of suicide'. It is within such a conceptual framework that I will, in this dissertation conduct my inquiry into the meaning and the morality of suicide.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE HISTORICAL EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT OF SUICIDE**

The problem of the moral permissibility of suicide has a long history of philosophical tradition. In some cultures, suicide is regarded as an honorable act in some conditions, in others, it is blamed as an impious act against the Providence or as an illegal act against the laws of the state: for example, in some eastern countries like China, Japan or India, some forms of suicide are socially approved and committed in public with ceremony. The Hindu or The Chinese widows who killed themselves after their husband's death or the Japanese warrior who performed hara-kiri has been publicly honored for so doing; on the other side, the Western culture has condemned suicide for centuries.

So, some suicides that are based on specific reasons have received the approval by the group where they are practiced. Although the Chinese woman whose husband died or the Christian woman who is raped did not oblige to kill herself, their suicide is accepted as the right way of behaving.

The discussion has continued since the early philosophers of the Ancient Greece. Although the opposition to suicide was not as strong as it

was in the Middle Ages, suicide was accepted as a crime in the cities of Greece. For example, the suicides were buried in a special way in Athens. They buried the corpse outside the city, they cut off its hands and buried separately.<sup>11</sup> One of the most important reasons for the taboos against suicide was the linguistic similarity between self-murder and murder of a kindred:

The Greek language hardly distinguishes between self-murder and murder of kin (the worst offense). The suicide belongs to the class of the victims of violent and untimely death ... The murdered, the dead on birth or in nonage, the unborn victim of abortion, regarding the fate of whom the popular mind was peculiarly sensitive. It seems probable that these religious grounds, and not any speculative theories, were the really active motives at all periods of ancient Greece in contemning the practice of suicide.<sup>12</sup>

However, in literature and philosophy, the acts of suicide were mentioned without comment or blame in this period. Oedipus's mother, Jocasta's suicide was the first of all literary suicides and it was praised and accepted as an honored act in her insufferable situation.<sup>13</sup> Homer records self murder without a comment like it is a natural and heroic act. Many Greek legends were full of suicide stories. Aegeus threw himself into the sea because he thought that the Minotaur defeated his son Theseus, Erigone hanged herself from grief after she found his father, Icarius's corpse. Leukakas jumped off a rock since Apollo intended to rape her<sup>14</sup>. All of these

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<sup>11</sup> A. Alvarez. *The Savage God*, p.58.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted from A. W. Mair, "Suicide" *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, XII, 30-31 by R. S. Cavan, *Suicide*. New York: Russell&Russell, 1965, pp.12-13.

<sup>13</sup> A. Alvarez. *The Savage God*, p.58.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

legends approved suicide because they were committed out of grief; a high patriotic principle or to avoid dishonor.

The philosophical views on suicide was not quite tolerable at first. The Pythagoreans thought that suicide is disrespect to the gods and therefore they rejected it. Like them, Plato opposed suicide and discussed the issue in *The Phaedo*. For him, we are properties of Gods and that's why, we have no right to kill ourselves against their will. But, Socrates' arguments about the advantages of death confused the readers, like Cato, who read *The Phaedo* twice before his suicide, and The Greek philosopher Cleombrotus, who was inspired by *The Phaedo* and drowned himself.<sup>15</sup>

After Plato, Aristotle opposed suicide since it was "contrary to the rule of life"<sup>16</sup> For him, suicide was an offense against the state and an act of social irresponsibility because the city was thus weakened since, while you destroy yourself, you also destroy a useful citizen.

During the fifth century B.C., the compulsory suicide was used as a means of execution, as in the case of Socrates, who was compelled to drink poison in 399 B.C.<sup>17</sup>. Also, besides the occurrence of crime, under situations like illness and old age, suicide was approved by Greek customs. Even, the magistrates in Athens supplied poison for those who demanded their dead, but for this, they should convince the Senate and obtain official permission:

Whoever no longer wishes to live shall state his reasons to the Senate, and after having received permission shall abandon life. If your existence is hateful to you, die; if you are overwhelmed by fate, drink the hemlock. If you are bowed with grief, abandon life.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

<sup>16</sup> Aristo, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk, 5, Ch. 11.

<sup>17</sup> R. S. Cavan. *Suicide*. New York: Russell&Russell, 1965, p. 13.

Let the unhappy man recount his misfortune, let the magistrate supply him with the remedy, and his wretchedness will come to an end.<sup>18</sup>

With the decline of the power of Greece and with changing values, and with the rise of individualism, the meaning of suicide also changed. It became an approved act as the right of each person to decide whether he should continue to live or not. According to Cavan though, Greeks didn't institutionalize suicide as different from the Orient, they carried the process to a logical extreme and incorporated it into a definite code of behavior.<sup>19</sup>

During this period, the philosophies of both Stoics and Epicureans, though through different reasons, approved suicide. Epicureans thought that after the pleasures of life were abated, there was no reason to continue living. Epicurus warned men that they should weigh carefully whether they would prefer death to come to them, or would themselves go to death.<sup>20</sup> The philosophy of Stoics, by disregarding the material values and emotions, taught that death was more worthy than living. Stoic philosopher Epictetus thinks that since what a person can endure in this life differs, when things get too intolerable, that person may wish for death and in that condition suicide is permissible.

Since Rome is the cultural heir of Greece, she inherited her attitudes toward suicide as a means of adjustment to personal problems and since the Roman society was more sophisticated, their toleration to suicide increased. As Alfred Alvarez said, "The Romans looked on suicide with neither fear nor revulsion, but as a carefully considered and chosen

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<sup>18</sup> A. Alvarez. *The Savage God*, p.61.

<sup>19</sup> R. S. Cavan. , *Suicide*, p.14.



validation of the way they had lived and the principles they had lived by.”<sup>21</sup>

During this period, the public attitude towards suicide was affected from the doctrines of Epictetus and Seneca. For example Seneca expressed the question of the permissibility of suicide as follows:

If I can choose between a death of torture and one that is simple and easy, why should I not select the latter? As I choose the ship in which I will sail, and The house I will inhabit, so I will choose the death by which I will leave life ... In no matter more than in death should we act according to our desire... Why should I endure the agonies of disease, and the cruelties of human tyranny, when I can emancipate myself from all my torments, and shake off every bond? For this reason, but for this alone, life is not an evil-that no one is obliged to live. The lot of man is happy, because no one continues wretched but by his fault. If life pleases you, live. If not, you have a right to return whence you came.<sup>22</sup>

Stoicism taught that suicide is a natural way of ending life which is intolerable, that's why, committing suicide under such conditions are accepted as an honorable and a brave act. As Alvarez explains, the Roman view differs slightly from the Greek in finding life's goodness not only in a physical state of accord with nature, but also in an interior harmony. For the Stoics the ideal was the life in accordance with nature. If they couldn't survive in harmony with nature, they choose death as the rational choice that fitted to rational nature. When this moral quality failed in life, the way one chose to end that life “became a practical test of excellence and virtue”<sup>23</sup>. The founder of the school, Zeno killed himself because of “sheer

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>21</sup> A. Alvarez. *The Savage God*, p.64.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted from Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, I, 217-18 by R. S.,Cavan, *Suicide*, p.17.

<sup>23</sup> A. Alvarez. *The Savage God*. p.62.

irritation when he stumbled and wrenched his finger”<sup>24</sup> Stoic writing is full of exhortations to suicide like this one from Seneca:

Foolish man, what do you bemoan, and what do you fear? Wherever you look there is an end of evils. You see that yawning precipice? It leads to liberty. You see that flood, that river, that well? Liberty houses within them. You see that stunted, parched, sorry tree? From each branch liberty hangs. Your neck, your throat, your heart are all so many ways of escape from slavery ... Do you enquire the road to freedom? You shall find it in every vein of your body.<sup>25</sup>

Seneca really believed what he was saying; these poetic arguments were not only beautiful pieces of rhetoric. That’s why, in order to avoid the vengeance of Nero, he killed himself by stabbing as he, once, advised to his friend, Marcellinus who was suffering from an incurable disease:

Be not tormented, my Marcellinus, as if you were deliberating any great matter. Life is a thing of no dignity or importance. Your very slaves, your animals, possess it in common with yourself: but it is a great thing to die honorably, prudently, bravely. Think how long you have been engaged in the same dull course: eating, sleeping, and indulging your appetites. This has been the circle. Not only a prudent, brave, or a wretched man may wish to die, but even a fastidious one.<sup>26</sup>

Roman law was in harmony with public sentiment about suicide. It may be said that the practical and tolerated laws reinforced public’s attitude. According to Justinian’s Digest, suicide of a private citizen was not punishable if it was caused by impatience of pain or sickness, or by another cause, or by weariness of life, lunacy, or fear of dishonor.

Alvarez stated that suicide was punished only if it was not based on a rational causes; it was punished because it was an irrational act, not

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*,p.61.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*,p.62.

because it was a crime. However, it was accepted as crime under some specific conditions. For example, suicide was not permitted to slaves since they were thought to be the capital investments of their masters. Like slaves, soldiers were considered as the property of the state and the suicide of a Roman soldier was equal to desertion. Also, a criminal's suicide was thought as illegal since he was avoiding the punishment of forfeiting his estate. After the criminal's suicide, his relatives had the right to defend him and if he is found innocent, then they could take the inheritance, otherwise, it went to the state.<sup>27</sup> So, according to Roman law, suicide was neither a crime against morality nor religion. It was only a crime against the capital investments of the slave-owning class or the treasury of the state.

Life, in Roman society had no value and the Romans "turned the ancient world's toleration of suicide into a high fashion" and "frivolous act"<sup>28</sup>. They honored the persons who committed suicide for virtuous causes. Although many leaders like Virgil, Cicero, Apuleius, and Caesar were opposed to suicide, their opposition couldn't change the public opinion. Cato became a heroic figure after committing suicide like Lucretia. Marcus Brutus and Otho killed themselves; Otho's reason was to avoid being the cause of a second civil war. After his death, some of his soldiers imitated him by committing suicide before his corpse.<sup>29</sup> There were more records of suicides in Roman history, but the stories of Cato and Lucretia were essentially

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*,p.63.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted from Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, I, 218-19 by R. S.Cavan, *Suicide*, p.17.

<sup>28</sup> A. Alvarez, *The Savage God*. p.56.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted from Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, I, 215 by R. S. Cavan, *Suicide*, p.17.

important because they were taken as an example by almost all the philosophers who thought about suicide.

Cato the Younger committed suicide in 46 B.C in Utica after Caesar came with his army to the city. He was known as a good man, who trained himself to develop physical and moral excellence and became the master over his life. When he was defeated by Caesar, he helped the senators to flee and advised the soldiers to appeal Caesar. We know that he had read *The Phaedo* three times at the night before his death, so he died with the perfection of interior virtue in mind. Romans gave his suicide a philosophical meaning; he was praised as a monument of liberty. But, it was not a political liberty; it could be understood only in terms of Stoic's interior moral liberty. They believed that his decision of suicide was concerned with inner virtue, not with defeating to Caesar.

Lucretia, the wife of the Roman Collatinus, killed herself after she was raped by Sextus Tarquinius. She submits to the rape because he has threatened that if she does not, he will kill her and leave her body in the bed and defame her with the story of her infidelity. After rape, she understands that she alone has certain knowledge of her fidelity, and to defend her honor she must do something extreme. She exclaims, thus, "My body only has been violated. My heart is innocent, and death will be my witness". She sacrifices her life to guarantee her honorable reputation as a virtuous woman and in this way makes her life as a whole a triumph.

In the more primitive societies, an individual may effectively be born into the role of the sacrificial victim of a religious ritual, or, as in the practice

of hara-kiri, the individual's circumstances almost dictate the decision to die and the surrounding community expects the individual's death, having already a communally accepted interpretation of the meaning of the act. In contrast, Rome may have shared a causal acceptance of death with more primitive societies, but it did not share their unanimity of vision that would provide a predetermined meaning for the suicide. Lucretia and Cato are not born to end their lives, and there is no preordained understanding of the meaning of their deaths.

During the Middle Ages, the opposition to suicide was strengthened both by the church leaders and secular legislation. There are no statistics of suicide rates of this period, but it is generally accepted that suicide rates decreased and became very rare because of the rigid condemnation by the church.<sup>30</sup> The early Christian church opposed Roman attitudes towards violent death such as the performances in the arena, as Alvarez stated:

To the Romans of every class death it was unimportant. But his way of dying-decently, rationally, with the dignity and at the right time-mattered intensely. Their way of death, that is, was the measure of their final value of life. The early Christians showed the same indifference to death but changed the perspective. Viewed from the Christian Heaven, life itself was at best unimportant; at worst evil: the fuller the life, the greater the temptation to sin. Death, therefore, was a release awaited or sought out with impatience. In other words, the more powerfully the Church instilled in believers the idea that this world was a vale of tears and sin and temptation, where they waited uneasily until death released them into eternal glory, the more irresistible the temptation to suicide became. Even the most stoical Romans committed suicide only as a last resort: they at least waited until their lives had become intolerable whatever its conditions. Why, then, live unredeemed when heavenly bliss is only a knife stroke

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<sup>30</sup> R. S. Cavan, *Suicide*, p. 21.

away? Christian teaching was at first a powerful incitement to suicide.<sup>31</sup>

The Christian church doesn't have a consistent way of behaving towards suicides according to their causes. Though it condemns suicide in general, it honors some suicides by regarding its motives. For example, during the early part of the Christian era, women who committed suicide in order to avoid physical violation, were highly honored like Romans turned Lucretia to a symbol of virtue because of her suicide after being raped.

Although the Church regarded suicide as a sin of the first degree, it approved certain forms of it like avoiding apostasy or retaining virginity. Domnina's daughters and Pelegia committed suicide in order to retain their virginity and they were made saint by the church.<sup>32</sup> Later, St. Augustine absolutely opposed suicide, and blamed the men who kill themselves, but he couldn't have courage to blame the Christian virgins and cites them with toleration:

And consequently, even if some of these virgins killed themselves to avoid such disgrace, who that has any human feeling would refuse to forgive them? And as for those who would not put an end to their lives, lest they might seem to escape the crime of another by a sin of their own, he who lays this to their charge as a great wickedness is himself not guiltless of the fault of folly.<sup>33</sup>

However, the most obvious contradiction about the attitude to suicide was seen in the situation of martyrs. The Church's regarding martyrdom as an honorable release from life tended many believers to seek death.

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<sup>31</sup> A. Alvarez. *The Savage God*. pp.67-68.

<sup>32</sup> R. S. Cavan, *Suicide*, p.19.

<sup>33</sup> Saint Augustine. "The City of God" in *Basic Writings Of SAINT Augustine*. Ed. Whitney J. Oates, 2 vols, Volume Two, Michigan:?????, 1980, chapter XVII, p. 23.

Martyrdom was seen as a way of redemption and the guarantee of Paradise. Such ideas existed before Christianity, the Vikings and Iglulik Eskimos also believed in that a violent death in the war arena was a ticket to heaven. Martyrdom as a type of an intentional death is not accepted as suicide and honored also by Islam.

But, Christian martyrs did not die as warriors, they were passive victims. They wanted to die as soon as possible and tried every way to be killed. At last, the Church declared the Donatists as heretics since their lust for martyrdom was so extreme. St. Bruno called suicides as “martyrs for Satan” in the Eleventh Century.<sup>34</sup>

The rage of the Donatists was enflamed by a phrensy of a very extraordinary kind: and which, if it really prevailed among them is so extravagant a degree, cannot surely be paralleled in any country or in any age. Many of these fanatics were possessed with the horror of life and the desire of martyrdom; and they deemed it of little moment by what means or by what hands they perished, if their conduct was sanctified by the intention of devoting themselves to the glory of the true faith and the hope of eternal happiness. Sometimes they rudely disturbed the festivals and profaned the temples of paganism with the design of exciting the most zealous of the idolaters to ravage the insulted honor of their Gods. They sometimes forced their way into the courts of justice and compelled the affrighted judge to give orders for their execution. They frequently stopped travelers on the public highways and obliged them to inflict the stroke of martyrdom by promise of a reward, if they consented-and by the threat of instant death, if they refused to grant so very singular a favor. when they were disappointed of every other resource, they announced the day on which, in the presence of their friends and brethren, they should cast themselves headlong from some lofty rock; and many precipices were shown, which had acquired fame by the number of these religious suicides.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> A. Alvarez. *The Savage God*. p.71.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.69-70.

The desire to be a martyr was so exaggerated that St Augustine commented: "... to kill themselves out of respect for martyrdom is their daily sport." However, he was aware of the logical dilemma of Christian teaching about suicide, therefore he made an attack and declared his opinion as suicide was the most damnable sin that could be committed between baptism and divinely ordained death.

Then, the Catholic Church adopted St. Augustine's opinion since the fanaticism of martyrs needed to be suppressed. Self-murder was declared to be the worst form of murder; the self-murder was deprived of rights which were granted to all other criminals. In the Sixth Century, the Council of Orleans denied to bury self-murderers according to the usual rites of Christian funeral. Finally, in Seventh Century, even attempting suicide became a reason to be excommunicated.

The old Pagan legislation on this subject remained unaltered in the Theodosian and Justinian codes; but a Council of Arles, in the fifth century, having pronounced suicide to be the effect of a diabolical inspiration, a Council of Bragues, in the following century, ordained that no religious rites should be celebrated at the tomb of the culprit, and that no masses should be said for his soul; and these provisions which were repeated by later Councils, were gradually introduced into the laws of the barbarians and of Charlemagne, St. Lewis originated the custom of confiscating the property of the dead man, and the corpse was soon subjected to gross and various outrages. In some countries it could only made for the occasion in the wall; it was dragged upon a hurdle through the streets, hung up with the head downwards, and at last thrown into the public sewer, or burnt, or buried in the sand below high-water mark, or transfixd by a stake on the public highway.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted from Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* Vol. 2, p. 50 by R. S. Cavan, Suicide, p. 20.



In Thirteenth Century, St. Thomas Aquinas's teachings sealed up the whole question about suicide. He developed St. Augustine's argument and declared that suicide is not permissible because it is a mortal sin against God, justice and charity.

Although history of suicide is full of contradictory attitudes for blaming or honoring the act through its unique characteristics, suicide has always been regarded by both religiously and constitutionally as a crime and prohibited by both of them. Religiously, suicides are condemned and they are punished by burying them without religious funerals in this world as in Goethe's novel, *The Sorrows of Werther*. There was no priest in Werther's funeral because he committed suicide.<sup>37</sup> According to the both Christian and Islamic thought, the real punishment of suicides' crime will be given by divine judgment and the suicides will be judged for committing an impious crime against Providence.

The Christian belief blamed suicide completely without considering the self-murderer's social position, reason or method. Their attitude against suicide was so strict that they even believed that Judas's suicide was a greater sin than betraying his master Christ to a certain death. However, Dante did not place Judas to the circle of suicides in *The Divine Comedy*; he punished Judas for his betrayal.

This Christian attitude toward suicide reversed the tolerant and economically based Roman laws of suicide. Suicide was now regarded as not only a sin, but also a crime in itself. It became a crime more serious than

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<sup>37</sup> J. W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Werther*, p. 160.

others because suicide was accepted as a double crime; it was a crime against God and on the other hand, it was accepted as a murder. The Sixth Commandment "Thou shalt not kill" was not only about killing others according to St. Augustine's comment; also the man who kill himself broke this commandment and became a murderer. In fact, at first, the civil law could not decide what kind of a crime suicide was:

Up to this day, we do not know what crime suicide constituted, whether a crime sui generis or a particular instance of murder, the better view being that it was the latter. Another interesting feature of that crime is the manner in which it was formulated. In the case of all other offenses, the common law defines the crime itself. But in suicide, not the crime but the criminal is defined: 'felo de se is he who kills.' Obviously, as was Christian doctrine, so was the common law struggling with the dilemma of a crime in which the aggressor and the object of aggression are united in one person.<sup>38</sup>

Suicide is also prohibited by the laws of most of the states. In these states, a person can be arrested for attempted suicide or for conspiracy to commit suicide. The characteristics of the laws against suicide differed through time and region according to the society's and religious institutions' attitudes. Since in Rome, the punishment of suicide was economically based, during the medieval ages it was accepted as both a sin and a crime; that's why its punishment was too strict. These laws were not changed until the Nineteenth Century in most of the states and unbelievable penalties were found in order to punish suicides. For example, around 1860, Nikolay Ogarev wrote a letter that showed this terror in England:

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<sup>38</sup> Helen Silving. "Suicide and Law, in Clues to Suicide." In *Essays in Self-Destruction*. Ed. Edwin S. Shneidman. New York: Science House, 1967., pp. 81-82.

A man was hanged who cut his throat, but who had been brought back to life. They hanged him for suicide. The doctor had warned them that it was impossible to hang him as the throat would burst open and he would breathe through the aperture. They did not listen to his advice and hanged their man. The wound in the neck immediately opened and the man came back to life again although he was hanged. It took time to convoke the aldermen to decide the question of what was to be done. At length the aldermen to decide the question of what was to be done. At length the aldermen assembled and bound up the neck below the wound until he died. Oh my Mary, what a crazy society and what a stupid civilization.

Similar penalties were used through out Europe. In France, "... the corpse was hanged by the feet, dragged through the streets on a hurdle, burned, thrown on the public garbage heap. At Metz, each suicide was put in a barrel and floated down the Moselle away from the places he might wish to haunt. In Danzig, the corpse was not allowed to leave by the door; instead it was lowered by pulleys from the window; the window frame was subsequently burned."<sup>39</sup>

This attitude towards suicide has continued for centuries until the Renaissance. During this period, with the upheaval of the static social organization of the Middle Ages and the availability of the writings of Roman philosopher, philosophers could discuss the issue in a relatively free sphere. By the rising importance of freedom and individualism during Renaissance, some philosophers could even advocate the right to suicide.

After Renaissance, there was a relatively liberated attitude toward suicide and the rates of suicide increased, but it was still considered as a sin and a crime by authorities. The laws against suicide weren't changed until

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<sup>39</sup> A. Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p. 47.

Nineteenth Century. In England, the properties of suicides were still confiscated by the state and the suicides were deprived of religious burial.

As Sir William Blackstone's assertion, the law of England considered that no man had a power to destroy life and whoever committed or attempted suicide was guilty of a double offence; one spiritual, against The Almighty and one temporal, against the king.<sup>40</sup> The laws of Scotland was similar with the ones of England, suicide was accepted as a species of murder and by committing suicide, one disobeyed both God's law and man's law. There, John Erskine took the attitude that suicide was "as truly criminal as the murder of one's neighbor".<sup>41</sup>

In such an age that suicide is so strictly condemned, it was difficult to defend the right to suicide for even philosophers. That's why, David Hume's essay "On Suicide" can be published after only his death and criticized so harshly. In his essay, he regarded suicide in a different way than his contemporaries and argued that suicide is neither a violation of our duties of God, nor of society and nor of ourselves and claimed suicide is permissible. Because for him, some conditions of life can be morally acceptable reasons for anybody to decide ending his life autonomously.

When Hume was acting as secretary to Lieutenant General James St Clair and in France, he had direct experience of a man's suicide. He wrote a letter to his brother John Home of Ninewells, on 4 October 1746, and he recorded the death of one Major Alexander Forbes. This letter shows his

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<sup>40</sup> Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1765-1769, IV, p. 189.

<sup>41</sup> John Erskine, *A Treatise of the Law of Scotland*. Edinburgh: John Bell, 1773, p. 717.

toleration toward suicide. Though he tried to rescue his friend and did not want his death, he esteemed his decision and didn't condemn or criticized him:

He was, & was esteem'd a Man of the greatest Sense, Honour, Modesty, Mildness & Equality of Temper in the world. His Learning was very great for a man of any Profession, but a prodigy for a soldier. His bravery had been try'd & was unquestion'd. He had exhausted himself with Fatigue & Hunger for two days; so that he was oblig'd to leave the Camp, & come to our quarters, where I took the utmost Care of him, as there was a great Friendship betwixt us. He express'd vast Anxiety that he shou'd be oblig'd to leave his Duty, & Fear, lest his Honour should suffer by it. I endeavour'd to quiet his Mind as much as possible, & thought I had left him tolerably compos'd at Night; but returning to his Room early next Morning, I found him with small Remains of Life, wallowing in his own Blood, with the Arteries of his Arm cut asunder. I immediately sent for a Surgeon, got a Bandage ty'd to his Arm, & recover'd him entirely to his Senses & Understanding. He liv'd above four & twenty hours after, & I had several Conversations with him. Never a man express'd a more steady Contempt of Life nor more determin'd Philosophical Principles, suitable to his exist. He beg'd of me to unloosen his Bandage & hasten his Death, as the last Act of Friendship I could show him: But alas! We live not in Greek or Roman Times. He told me, that he knew, he could not live a few Days: But if he did, as soon as he became his own Master, he wou'd take a more expeditious Method, which none of his Friends cou'd prevent. I dye, says he, from a Jealousy of Honour perhaps too delicate; and do you think, if it were possible for me to live, I woud now consent to it, to be a Gazing-Stock to the foolish World. I am too far advanc'd to return. And if life was odious to me before, it must be doubly so at present. He became delirious a few Hours before he dy'd. He had wrote a short Letter to his Brother above ten hours before he cut his Arteries. This we found on the Table.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, not all of the philosophers advocated suicide and regarded it as a personal matter. Hegel and Kant were only two of the philosophers who opposed suicide. Kant condemned suicide with being an immoral act

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<sup>42</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. p. ix.

and one of the most horrifying crimes. Also, the Church didn't change their attitude toward suicide, and religiously it was still accepted as a great sin.

In the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth Centuries, suicide became one of the most fashionable subjects of literature following the success of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. European youth imitated Werther's style and turned suicide into a fashion. Flaubert told about this period that:

We lived in a strange world, I assure you; we swung between madness and suicide; some of them killed themselves... another strangled himself with his tie, several died of debauchery in order to escape in order to escape boredom; it was beautiful!<sup>43</sup>

The famous literary suicides have continued after Werther with *Emma Bovary* and *Anna Karanina*. In the Nineteenth Century, Dostoevsky was interested with suicide both as an author and a thinker. According to Alvarez, Dostoevsky is a bridge between the Nineteenth Century and our age.

In our age, suicide is not regarded as a crime. Today, sociology and psychology study suicide as a social fact like birth rate or a mental illness. This change in social attitude toward suicide found expression in law. Today, attempts of suicide aren't punished by state and the relatives of suicides don't have a problem like losing the inheritance. Although suicide is still accepted as a sin according to religion, there is no strict reaction to suicides as it has been in the past.

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted from Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance* 1887-1893 Vol. II, PP. 191-158, by A. Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p. 211.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **THE MORALITY OF SUICIDE**

#### **3. 1. Whether Suicide is a Violation of Our Duties against God**

Theological prohibition of suicide has always been the strongest anti-suicide argument through the history. According to all religions that believe in one supreme creator, the disposal of one's own life is a rebellion against our creator and therefore accepted as an impious act and as the worst of all sins. The suicides are not buried with religious funerals and it is believed that they will be punished after death because of their blasphemous crime. Suicide is generally taken as equal to unwarranted desertion of one's post.

In our age, the debates about the morality of suicide are generally released themselves from theology. However, almost until David Hume, the discussions have continued under the domain of theology. According to many theologians, only God has the right to terminate our lives because we are his property. It was nearly impossible to discuss the subject without regarding the religious prohibitions and superstitions. Hume showed that the morality of suicide has to be searched in the human nature, not in theology. Also, he rejected all the existing theological oppositions against suicide in his essay "On Suicide". But before examining Hume's argument, I think it is

necessary to look at the previous anti-suicide arguments which claimed that suicide is a violation of one's duty to God.

One of the three anti-suicide arguments of Aquinas is that suicide is a sin against God. For him, suicide is a sin because it is like stealing from God since our lives are property of God and we are merely trustees of that property. His argument is similar with Plato's opposition that since life is a gift from God and its duration is in God's power, man may not, therefore, kill himself in order to pass to the more blessed life. There is much opposition to the argument that we are God's properties. Even if it is accepted that God created us, this doesn't mean he owns us. Also, the assertion that life is a gift that is given by God does not mean that I cannot dispose of it. Because humans don't request a gift such this as Schopenhauer remarks. He says that a human being would have declined such a gift if he could have seen it and tested it beforehand.

Plato seemed a little bit confused about the permissibility of suicide. He wasn't so sure that suicide is absolutely forbidden since suicide can rationally be justified under a painful disease or intolerable conditions. He also thinks that since the human soul is immortal, the man, especially the philosopher should welcome death. The purpose of *The Phaedo* is to prove the immortality of the soul and consequently, this proof shows that death is not something to be feared. Although the greater part of the dialogue is about the benefits of death for good people who seek goodness and truth that transcends the physical world, it also presents anti-suicide arguments.



This is the reason why Cato and Cleombrotus preferred to kill themselves after they had read *The Phaedo*.

In the dialogue, the problem of permissibility of suicide is introduced by Cebes' question to Socrates. He asked: "Why in the world do they say that it is not permitted to kill oneself, Socrates?"<sup>44</sup> He said that he heard everybody saying the same thing that one must not kill oneself. Socrates answered as the prohibition of suicide was perhaps the only law without exception. For him, though for some human beings it is better to die than to live, they should not do this good to themselves, but they should wait. He accepted that this argument seemed unreasonable, if it was taken as "Now the doctrine is taught in secret about this matter, that we men are in a kind of prison and must not set ourselves free or run away."<sup>45</sup> However, he also believed that "the Gods are our guardians and that we men are one of the chattels of the gods."<sup>46</sup> For him, humans are the possession of the deity, that's why, the Deity would punish the one who killed himself before he sent a necessity upon him just like man would be angry to his chattel who killed itself without his permission. Socrates asked Cebes that:

If one of your chattels should kill itself when you had not indicated that you wished it you die, would you be angry with it and punish it if you could?<sup>47</sup>

Socrates thought that God sent him such a necessity and his acceptance of death would not be accepted as suicide. Cebes opposed to

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<sup>44</sup> Plato. *Phaedo*, ed. by Jeffrey Henderson, London: Harvard University Press, 2001, p.215.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p.217.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 217.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 217.

him by saying that if to run away from a good master was foolish and a wise man would prefer to stay with his good master as long as possible, Why Socrates was so ready to leave the gods and die. Socrates explained that though he thought he believed in some other gods who were wiser and better that he would meet after death:

For if I did not believe that I was going to other wise and good gods, and, moreover, to men who have died, better men than those here, I should be wrong in not grieving at death. But as it is, you may rest assured that I except to go to good men, though I should not care to assert this positively; but I would assert as positively as anything about such matters that I am going to gods who are good masters. And therefore, so far as that is concerned, I not only do not grieve, but I have great hopes that there is something in store for the dead, and, as has been said of old, something better for the good than for the wicked.<sup>48</sup>

It can be supposed that the argument against suicide is that the man who killed himself without the permission of Gods will find something bad after death while the man who waits his time to die patiently — though willingly— will be rewarded. And he was so sure that since he was a philosopher and lived a good life, death will bring him good things. He proves that the soul continues to exist after it is separated from the body by death and this depart from the body makes her free to attain truth unhindered and undeceived by bodily pleasures and pains since none of these things trouble her—neither sounds nor sights nor pain nor any pleasure, then death is good.

Like Plato, St Augustine opposed suicide because of theological reasons. He declared that suicide is the worst of all sins, since by

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 219-221.

committing suicide; one violates the commandment “thou shalt not kill” and rejects the life which is given by God and should be taken by only him. For him, Christians have no authority for committing suicide whatever the circumstances are. He said that in no passage of the holy books there is a divine order or permission to take away our own life. Moreover, the commandment “thou shalt not kill” definitely prohibits suicide. He claimed that this law is not only commanding that “ thou shalt not kill thy neighbor”; the law does not only prohibits killing others, because another commandment orders that “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”; so the love of our neighbor is regulated by the love of ourselves.

That’s why, although the commandment mentions the prohibition of false witness to neighbor, how it can allow being a false witness to one’s own harm. He asked “how much greater reason have we to understand that a man may not kill himself?” Because when commanding “Thou shalt not kill,” there is neither limitation added nor any exception made in favor of anyone, and least of all in favor of him on whom the command is laid!<sup>49</sup> Then, he discussed that since there is no limitation added to this commandment, why don’t we extend it to the plants and animals? He answered his question:

When we say, “Thou shalt not kill” we do not understand this of the plants, since they have no sensation, nor of the irrational animals that fly, swim, walk, or creep, since they are dissociated from us by their want of reason, and are therefore by the just

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<sup>49</sup> St, Augustine, “The City of God”, Chapter XX, p. 27.

appointment of the Creator subjected to us to kill or keep alive for our own uses.<sup>50</sup>

So, the commandment grasps only human beings; it is “thou shalt not kill man”. A person who kills himself is killing a man in fact; therefore what the law means is you should not kill neither another nor yourself. But he made two exceptions of this commandment which I will mention in part four. For him, if the person kills in order to obey a divine commandment or kills to save the public justice and security, under these cases, he is not responsible for his murder. Because he is not violating the commandment “thou shalt not kill”, but he only obeys another commandment which is stronger.

However, David Hume opposes this idea that the commandment ‘thou shalt not kill’ includes the killing of oneself. He says that it is evident that this commandment forbids only the killing of others, since we have no authority over their life. So, it is not possible to forbid suicide by considering this commandment. But even if this commandment were against suicide and prohibited self-killing, then it would have no authority according to Hume; because he claims that all the laws of Moses are abolished except the ones that are established by the natural laws. For him, most of the scripture must be modified by reason and commonsense at first. However, for the case of suicide, it is not needed since there is not a single text in Bible which prohibits it.

Kant did not accept Plato’s argument which claims life is a gift of gods. For him, suicide is impermissible because it is not moral, not because

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

of the reason that life is a gift. In his view, because, morality is superior to life. Yet he used Plato's other anti-suicide argument that men are placed by God like sentries and they shouldn't leave their posts before God orders; because, otherwise, it means rebellion against God. That's why, men should wait until God commands not to violate their duties to him. Kant says:

We have been placed in this world for certain destinies and purposes; but a suicide flouts the intention of his creator. He arrives in the next world as one who has deserted his post, and must therefore be seen as a rebel against God. So long as we acknowledge this truth, that the preservation of our life is among God's purposes, we are in duty bound to regulate our free actions in accordance with it. We have neither right nor authority to do violence to our nature's preservative powers, or to upset the wisdom of her arrangements. This responsibility lies upon us until such time as God gives us his express command to depart this world.<sup>51</sup>

Though Kant declares that committing suicide is a rebellious act against God and man is responsible to wait God's call to die, these theological reasons are not as important as moral reasons for him to prohibit suicide. Because a person who commits suicide is guilty according to morality at first. He, who kills himself, is guilty because he annihilates his freedom. Therefore, it is obvious that theological prohibition of suicide has a secondary importance for him, in regard to the moral prohibition. However, it doesn't mean that he is not guilty against God. He says that "all such illusions are lost, if we consider suicide in regard to religion". For, the person who commits suicide is guilty against God:

Suicide, however, is impermissible and abhorrent, not because God has forbidden it; God has forbidden it, rather, because it is

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<sup>51</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*. p. 148.

abhorrent. So all moralist must begin by demonstrating its inherent abhorrency.<sup>52</sup>

Hume opposes the argument that suicide is a sin against God. For him, suicide is neither a rebellious act nor an impious sin to our deity. Moreover, he thinks that the theological prohibition of suicide is a violation of the laws of nature, which are ordered and governed by God; it is the real blasphemy to the Almighty.

For Hume, God decreed the material world and the animal world through different principles. He has established general and immutable laws to govern the material world. These laws maintained all the matters in their proper sphere and function. But, The Almighty Creator gave both physical and mental powers like senses, passions, appetites, memory and judgment to all living creatures. By these powers, the living beings manage to survive.

These different principles of inanimate beings and living beings cause no disorder or agony, although they encroached each other's domains almost every time. The living beings are restrained and directed by the laws of nature, but at the same time, men are capable of changing the actions and modifications of nature for their benefit. He gave the example that:

Man is stopt by rivers in his passage over the surface of the earth; and rivers, when properly directed, lend their force to the motion of machines, which serve to the use of man.<sup>53</sup>

So, it is obvious that both the nature and the living beings have power to dominate each other. From the mixture, union and contrast of all these powers a harmony arises and Hume sees this harmony as the surest

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

evidence of supreme wisdom. In other words, all the events that occurred occurs according to the Almighty's will since he established the government of the universe by setting immutable laws and giving powers to his creatures at the beginning of the time.

That's why, the almighty Creator gave same importance to every event. Through his glance, there is no difference between a revolution of a state and a leaf's falling down from the tree. Nature continues her progress and operation without regard to the particular interest and situation of men and men do whatever they have to do to provide their ease, happiness and preservation at the expense of violating the Nature. Therefore, Hume asks:

What is the meaning then of that principle, that a man who, tired of life, and hunted by pain and misery, bravely overcomes all the natural terrors of death and makes his escape from this cruel scene; that such a man, I say, has incurred the indignation of his creator by encroaching on the office of divine providence, and disturbing the order of the universe?<sup>54</sup>

Because if a person interrupts the natural order of things by committing suicide, then anything he does to interrupt the order of nature must be objectionable and evaluated as impious to divine order. Suicide has no special position as an act against the established order:

Shall we assert that the Almighty has reserved to himself in any peculiar manner the disposal of the lives of men, and has not submitted that event, in common with others, to the general laws by which the universe is governed? This is plainly false. The lives of men depend upon the same laws as the lives of all other animals; and these are subjected to the general laws of matter and motion. The fall of a tower or the infusion of a poison will destroy a man equally with the meanest creature: an inundation

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<sup>53</sup> David Hume. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. p. 99.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

sweeps away every thing without distinction that comes within the reach of its fury. Since therefore the lives of men are for ever dependent on the general laws of matter and motion, is a man's disposing of his life criminal, because in every case it is criminal to encroach upon these laws, or disturb their operation? But this seems absurd. All animals are entrusted to their own prudence and skill for their conduct in the world, and have full authority, as far as their power extends, to alter all the operations of nature. Without the exercise of this authority they could not subsist a moment.<sup>55</sup>

So, since human life depends upon the general laws of matter and motion, every action of humans changes or disturbs these laws. Do we consider all these actions as an encroachment to order of providence? Why don't we blame a man who sets up barrages and interrupts the flow of the rivers, so disturbing the laws of nature; but we blame the man who decides that he does not want to live any more.

The only answer that can be given to these questions is suicide is a special case or an exception to these general laws. Because, though nature gave human the power to dispose his own life, he does not have the right to use this given power. To show a reason why this particular case is accepted Hume asks "Is it because human life is of so great importance, that it is a presumption for human prudence to dispose of it?"<sup>56</sup>

He answers his question negatively. According to him, "The life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster."<sup>57</sup> And if it were so important, how can we explain its fragile position in the universe.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*



A hair, a fly, an insect is able to destroy this mighty being whose life is of such importance. Is it an absurdity to suppose that human prudence may be lawfully disposed of depends on such insignificant causes?<sup>58</sup>

It is obvious that, when I die, the order of the nature will not be disturbed. My death causes a difference for me, but it is not an important event for the universe. Suppose a bus which is so crowded, and when I get off the bus, my absence in it causes no great effect, neither a negative nor a positive effect. But since I am the one who is in the open air and out of the bus now, it makes difference for me. My existence differs for me, it is important for me, but it is not important for the universe or its operation.

Hume asks “If it is impious to God to dispose my life, are not my actions of preserve my nature impious?” For Hume, if the decision of when we die can be only taken by the Almighty, then, our attempts to survive under the conditions that we must die are equally rebellious acts to his orders.

Were the disposal of human life so much reserved as the peculiar province of the almighty that it were an encroachment on his right for men to dispose of their own lives; it would be equally criminal to act for the preservation of life as for its destruction. If I turn aside a stone which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature, and I invade the peculiar province of the almighty by lengthening out my life beyond the period which by the general laws of matter and motion he had assigned to it.<sup>59</sup>

More examples can be given to the situation of our interruption to lengthen our lives. I can talk about the doctors who make the hearts beat again after they stopped or who connect the people in vegetable existence

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

to machines and make them survive. Are not they interrupting to God's will by lengthening their patient's lives? If it is, then every medical operation will be accepted as disturbing the course of nature. If it is not, if lengthening lives and curing bodies are not crimes, why shortening them is accepted as crime?

Also, the set of interruption to the nature is wider than we suppose. It is not enough to consider only the contra-attempts of self-destruction as the disturbance to the laws of nature. Since my attempts to take my life is considered as an interruption of the laws of nature, and thereby it is impermissible; so, all the interruptions to the nature should be impermissible.

Hume's example is that diverting Nile or Danube from its course is not accepted as a crime, so he asks "Where then is the crime of turning a few ounces of blood from their natural channel"<sup>60</sup>They are all of them therefore equally innocent, or equally criminal. In fact, Hume accepts none of these interruptions as crime since without interrupting to the laws of matter and motion, it will be impossible for us to survive.

That's why, God gave us the power to disturb the laws of nature and in order to survive we have to use what is given by him. We can divert rivers, cure the diseases, fly the airplanes, traverse the oceans and commit suicide. Committing suicide with the powers that are given by God is no more a violation of nature than the others. Neither is impious because in all

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

of these actions we use what the God has endowed us because in our every action we use God's gifts to us:

Its operations are his works equally with that chain of events, which it invades, and which ever principle prevails; we may for that very reason conclude it to be most favored by him. Be it animate, or inanimate, rational, or irrational; 'tis all a case: its power is still derived from the supreme creator, and is alike comprehended in the order of his providence. When the horror of pain prevails over the love of life: when a voluntary action anticipates the effects of blind causes; it is only in consequence of those powers and principles, which he has implanted in his creatures. Divine providence is still inviolate and placed far beyond the reach of human injuries.<sup>61</sup>

So, Hume showed that suicide is no violation of our duty to God. It is nonsense to consider a situation which my existence becomes unelidable and my decision to end it as a curse to my creation or a repine to providence? He mentions a case that "I thank providence, both for the good which I have already enjoyed, and for the power with which I am endowed of escaping the ill that threatens me."<sup>62</sup> Even, the real blasphemy is to imagine that suicide is a rebel against God's will because he, who can imagine this, thinks that there can be a person that possess powers and faculties which is not received from God and that person can disturb the order of the world, rebel against his authority. Hume says:

To you it belongs to repine at providence, who foolishly imagine that you have no such power, and who must still prolong a hated being, tho' loaded with pain and sickness, with shame and poverty.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Because for Hume, there is no being which has any power that isn't given by its creator. So nobody is able to do so irregular action that can disturb the order of the universe since nothing happens in the universe without the consent and co-operation of Providence. My death, however voluntary, cannot happen without his consent like my birth which is the effect of a long chain of causes that many of them depends upon the voluntary actions of men.

So, suicide is neither violation of our duty to God, nor a rebellious action against providence. Thereby, the invalidity of theological prohibition on suicide is demonstrated. Therefore, if suicide is wrong, it must be wrong for non-theological reasons. That's why; a different ground for the moral objection to suicide has to be found in order to prohibit it.

### **3. 2. Whether Suicide is a Violation of Our Duties against Society**

Not only firm believers, but also non-religious or atheist people generally oppose to suicide. Of course, their reasons to prohibit suicide are different from the reasons of religious people. Since the latter defines suicide as an impious act to providence, the former sees it as an escape from our responsibilities and duties to our family and our society. So, to justify suicide, it is not enough to show that it is not a rebellious act to providence or it is against God's will. Also, we have to find the answer of whether suicide is a violation of our duty to society.

Aquinas' second argument against suicide is about its being an offense to the society. This argument is similar to Aristotle's opposition of suicide. In Aquinas' view, by committing suicide, one causes social harm and that's why, acts against justice. He says:

It is altogether unlawful to kill oneself, because every part, as such, belongs to the whole. Now every man is part of the community, and so, as such, he belongs to the community. Hence by killing himself he injures the community.<sup>64</sup>

Aristotle's condemnation of suicide is different from Socrates', which resembles suicide to a willful desertion of one's post assigned by God. He opposes suicide since he thinks that suicide is contrary to the rule of life. For Aristotle, suicide is an act of social irresponsibility because one destroys a useful citizen by destroying oneself and this makes the city weaker. It is a form of injustice toward the community since the society needs every man's service. That's why; suicide is an offense against the state and the justice according to Aristotle:

Dying to escape from poverty, or the pangs of love, or anything that is simply painful, is the act, not of a brave man, but of a coward, because it is mere softness to fly from what is toilsome, and the suicide braves the terrors of death, not because it is noble to do so, but to get out of the reach of evil.<sup>65</sup>

For him, a man, who kills himself, is acting unjustly because for an act to be just, it should be in accordance with any virtue which is prescribed by the law. Since the law doesn't permit suicide, the man is violating the law

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<sup>64</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964. II-II.64.5.

and acting contrary to the right rule of life by committing suicide. Suicide is an unjust act like harming others although he is the one who acts and who is affected. So, he is voluntarily acting unjustly, but towards whom asked Aristotle. In his view, he is acting unjustly towards the state, not towards himself because he suffers voluntarily and no one is voluntarily treated unjustly. It is not possible to treat oneself unjustly. Since he treats the state unjustly, the state punishes the man who annihilates himself. He says:

No one acts unjustly without committing particular acts of injustice; but no one can commit adultery with his own wife or housebreaking on his own house or theft on his own property. In general, the question 'can a man treat himself unjustly?' is solved also by the distinction we applied to the question 'can a man be voluntarily treated unjustly?'<sup>66</sup>

Like Aquinas and Aristotle, Kant thinks that suicide is against to the benefits of society. At first glance, it is not seen as an immoral act against society, since the act of suicide doesn't include a direct harm against other people. It is clear that suicide neither interfere the other's freedom, nor violate their property; but, on the other side, to legitimize suicide cause great harm to society, in Kant's view. Because when suicide is justified, people can't be restrained from "the most appalling vices". One reason of this is that you cannot respect the free life of other people unless you respect your own free life. Also, since the one who thinks that he has the right to commit suicide and depart from the world whenever he wants, "fears no king and no torture"<sup>67</sup>:

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<sup>65</sup> Woodbridge Riley. *Men and Morals, The Story of Ethics*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. 1960. p.93.

<sup>66</sup> Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. p.68.

<sup>67</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 148.

For anyone who has already got so far as to be master, at any time, over his own life, is also master over the life of anyone else; for him, the door stands open to every crime, and before he can be seized he is ready to spirit himself away out of the world.<sup>68</sup>

It is obvious that the power to exit from the world in any time can be the reason of some virtues like courage and honesty. Because the person, who knows that he can depart from the world like going out of the country when he should, doesn't have to obey or lie to the tyrants. Yet, for Kant, to consider this power as freedom is an illusion because it is not the noble form of freedom. There is one immutable condition through which freedom can exist. It is that "I do not employ my freedom against myself for my own destruction, and that I do not let it be limited by anything external."<sup>69</sup> So, suicide is not permissible as a matter of freedom, even if it doesn't violate the rights of others.

Hume doesn't agree with the idea that suicide is a violation to society. Because, when a man voluntarily decides his death, and when he removes himself from the society, he, no more, has an effect on the society. That's why; he cannot do any harm to society as he cannot do any favor. So, if we accuse him, it will be because of not what he does. He is accused for what he does not do and nobody can be blamed or punished because of what he doesn't do. We may only condemn somebody, in some situations, for not choosing to do good since he has the power. Yet, in Hume's view, suicide is not one of these conditions. He says that: "[a] man, who retires from life,

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

does no harm to society: he only ceases to do good; which, if it is an injury, is of the lowest kind.”<sup>70</sup>

Because, all our obligations to do good to society is reciprocal. The advantage of living in a society is that you can take from society what you cannot obtain by your own. And the disadvantage of living in a society is you cannot continue taking without giving anything. Of course, there may be some situations in which you have no power to give any benefits to society or to your family, Hume asked that in these situations whether it is more honorable to stop taking than to live a dependent life to others. “I receive the benefits of society and therefore ought to promote its interests, but when I withdraw myself altogether from society, can I be bound any longer?”<sup>71</sup>

When I die, I no longer get any benefit from the society, that’s why I will be no longer obliged to society. This doesn’t mean that anybody who is dependent to others should commit suicide, but this means that in such a case, suicide is legalized. Even, suppose that I am not completely dependent to society, and also, they can take some benefits from my existence although it is a real burden on me; then do I have to live? According to Hume, since our obligations to do good are perpetual, if I take less than what I give; I don’t have to continue giving:

If upon account of age and infirmities I may lawfully resign any office, and employ my time altogether in fencing against these calamities, and alleviating as much as possible the miseries of

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<sup>70</sup> David Hume. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. p.103.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.103.



my future life: Why may I not cut short these miseries at once by an action which is no more prejudicial to society?<sup>72</sup>

For example, I am an ordinary doctor, nobody's life is dependent on me, and I hate my job, I don't get any pleasure by doing it. Am I obliged to work although what I do makes me absolutely unhappy and depressive? If I don't have any other chance, I may be. But if is there something else that I can choose? In such a case, almost everybody would choose the best for himself. Why can not we consider the choice between living and not-living through this perspective? Hume says that:

I am not obliged to do a small good to society at the expense of a great harm to myself. Why then should I prolong a miserable existence, because of some frivolous advantage which the public may perhaps receive from me?<sup>73</sup>

Now, let's turn back to our first case, in that I cannot give any benefits to society. Suppose that I am completely dependent to Society, I am a burden to my loved ones; even they cannot do their best to others in order to look after me, then isn't my resignation of life a benefit to society? It can be said that if the well-being of others can be taken to demand that I stay in existence, then under the condition that I am a burden for others my non-existence will be beneficial to them.

But suppose that it is no longer in my power to promote the interest of the public; suppose that I am a burthen to it; suppose that my life hinders some person from being much more useful to the public. In such cases my resignation of life must not only be innocent but laudable. And most people, who lie under any temptation to abandon existence, are in some such situation.

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

Those, who have health, or power, or authority, have commonly better reason to be in humour with the world.<sup>74</sup>

For Hume, there are some situations in which committing suicide is not only understandable; also it is beneficial for the society. One of them is the situation which involves the one who kills oneself in order not to reveal a secret under torture. If he reveals that secret, then it will be detriment of the public interest. On the contrary, if he prefers death when he realizes that he cannot stand the torture anymore, he will act due to the interest of the society:

A man is engaged in a conspiracy for the public interest; is seized upon suspicion; is threatened with the rack; and knows from his own weakness that the secret will be extorted from him: could such a one consult the public interest better than by putting a quick period to a miserable life?<sup>75</sup>

David Hume gives the example of Cato for this situation by saying “This was the case of the famous and brave Strozi of Florence”.<sup>76</sup> He thinks that Cato acted heroically, for he preferred dying than being captured by Caesar after his army was defeated. In the Roman period, Cato’s suicide was honored by both the society and his soldiers, though later St Augustine would say that “Cato had never conquered Caesar; and when conquered by him, disdained to submit himself to him, and that he might escape this submission put himself to death.”<sup>77</sup>

Like Augustine, Kant disapproved his suicide. They both valued his suicide as an escape from the disgrace of living under Caesar’s rule.

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.103-104.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> St. Augustine. “The City of God”, chapter XXIV, p. 30.

However, Hume thinks about Cato's voluntary death as a heroic act. After Cato killed himself, it was thought that he committed suicide in the name of love of liberty. It may be not only liberty in its political meaning as it is discussed later, but it is clear that by killing himself, he protected his society's honor. Because, though Caesar conquered Florence, he couldn't capture their military leader. So, he was not able to win a victory, even though won the war. On the contrary, Cato is the one who is remembered for his glory and courage for centuries because he protects his society's honor by not accepting to be captured. Another situation, for Hume, in which a person's suicide is better for the society, is involving a person who is condemned to death. Hume claims that a criminal's voluntary death will be beneficial to society, since by this way, society cannot be blamed for killing one of its citizen:

Again, suppose a malefactor justly condemned to a shameful death; can any reason be imagined, why he may not anticipate his punishment, and save himself all the anguish of thinking on its dreadful approaches? He invades the business of providence no more than the magistrate did, who ordered his execution; and his voluntary death is equally advantageous to society by ridding it of a pernicious member.<sup>78</sup>

By this, Hume shows that committing suicide is not a violation of one's duties against society as it is claimed by many philosophers like Aquinas and Aristotle. Moreover, he demonstrates the inevitability of suicide under some cases, since one's non-existence can be even beneficial for the society's interest. Of course, Hume doesn't mean you should kill yourself in

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

such cases, he means suicide is not absolutely prohibited and it is not a crime in every case.

At first, the conditions under which the decision of suicide is taken must be considered. Also, the consequences of suicide should be evaluated. If we consider the consequences and reasons of suicide, then we can justify some of the suicides. So, since the second common anti-suicide argument is eliminated, we can start investigating the last argument which forbids suicide. Our next question is whether suicide is a violation of our duties against self. In my view, it is the most important and reasonable reason to oppose suicide since suicide is an autonomous act that one takes about one's life over which he should have some authority.

### **3. 3. Whether Suicide is a Violation of Our Duties against Self**

According to David Hume, since the decision of suicide is a voluntary, autonomous one that we take to end our life, it is more about us than theology or our duty to society. So, the ground of morality of suicide comes to our hands from god's hands. That's why, finally and may be most importantly we should ask that whether suicide is a violation to ourselves and whether it is against our interest. The question can be asked as whether it is opposed to nature. Because, the opponents of suicide mostly

believe that to destroy oneself is contrary to nature, that's why it is an horrible offence against nature.

Aquinas' first reason for condemning suicide is its being an appeal to nature. For him, suicide is a sin against self because it is unnatural. It is contrary to the natural life asserting purpose of humans. In other words, it is contrary to the charity which every man bears toward himself like the instinct of self preservation of lower animals. Because every man should love himself. Through suicide, one does injustice to oneself. That's why, it is a greater crime than other crimes, and it is a mortal sin. For example in his system, suicide is worse than adultery: "And it is clear that fornication or adultery is a lesser crime than killing, especially killing oneself; this is so serious because it is a injury to oneself whom one ought to cherish above others."<sup>79</sup>

Although he rejects suicide as sinful, he believes that suicidal individuals expect some greater good in death. They are seeking a good that is greater than the good of continuing life. Because it is impossible for him to imagine that any person who is not mentally ill, will harm himself intentionally and knowingly without expecting some greater good. Otherwise, suicide indicates a lack of self-love as an act of self-annihilation. He says that: "a man sometimes knowingly and freely inflicts harm on himself, as in the case of suicide, though this be referred finally to some apparent good, for example delivery from some anxiety."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. 2a2ae 118, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. I-II, q73 a8 ad2.

Like Aquinas, Kant opposes suicide as it is contrary to our duties to ourselves. His main argument against suicide is that people are entrusted with their lives, which have a uniquely inherent value. By killing oneself, a person dispenses with his humanity and makes himself into a thing to be treated like a beast. Yet, the first right and duty of man in his person is “Man can never treat himself as a thing”. So, suicide is contrary to the supreme self-regarding duty, the duty of preserving our person, which is our highest and the most necessary duty to ourselves according to him:

He who contemplates suicide should ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. If he destroys himself in order to escape from painful circumstances, he uses a person merely as a mean to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life. But a man is not a thing, that is to say, something which can be used merely as means, but must in all his actions be always considered as an end in himself. I cannot, therefore, dispose in any way of a man in my own person so as to mutilate him, to damage or kill him.<sup>81</sup>

Kant argues that Human beings can not dispose over themselves, for they are not things and they can only dispose over things. He regards animals as things, as an example and says that a man who takes his life, behaves himself as a thing, as an animal. He is the one who lowers his value down to a beast's by turning himself into a thing, therefore other people can treat him as an animal or a thing, and he should not have the right to want respect from others because he is no longer a man. He has no humanity in himself which is worth of respect in any condition, since he throws it away by his free choice. That's why, committing suicide is similar to selling yourself into slavery: in both cases, one gives up one's free will,

one treats oneself as a beast or a thing. He showed this similarity with an example from the Roman period:

There was a period among the Greeks and Romans when suicide conferred honour, and hence, too, the Romans forbade their slaves to do away with themselves, because they belonged, not to themselves, but to their masters, and were therefore regarded as things, like any other animal.<sup>82</sup>

The second reason of why human beings cannot dispose over themselves is that they are not master over themselves, their personality, they only enjoy a sort of proprietorship. A person's inner freedom or humanity doesn't belong to him. He belongs to them like phenomenon is obligated to the noumenon; when the sensory being, man is taken as phenomenon and the intellectual being, reason is taken as noumenon. Because, in morality, the reason determines the man's action, this means man is dependent on his reason. The mind must have a supremacy over the body and it must guide it according to moral maxims. Therefore, suicide, as an act voluntarily taken by the sensory being can never be permitted under any circumstances.

A person destroys his own free will by committing suicide; therefore it cannot be a rational decision, since it terminates the ability and the possibility of making any further decision. So, freedom doesn't include the right to commit suicide because freedom is the condition of life and using it for its own destruction is self-contradictory. The decision of whether to live or not to live is not in the limits of free choice, because free choice can exist only under the condition that the subject exists. In other words, we can use

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<sup>81</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. p. 49.

our freedom only through our body and by annihilating our body, we annihilates our freedom.

In fact, our life is entirely conditioned by our body, so that we cannot conceive of a life not mediated by the body and we cannot make use of our freedom except through the body. It is, therefore, obvious that the body constitutes a part of ourselves. 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.

For Kant, a man who thinks about suicide should ask himself whether it would not contrary to his duty to himself to take his own life. To find the answer, he should ask a second question whether the maxim of his action could become a universal law of nature. "His maxim is: From self - love I adopt it as a principle to shorten my life when its longer duration is likely to bring more evil than satisfaction."<sup>83</sup> Since it contradicts with the system of nature, which impels to the improvement of life, this maxim cannot be a universal law of nature.

Because he believes that everything in nature seeks to preserve itself: "a damaged tree, a living body, an animal."<sup>84</sup> That's why; self-preservation is our highest duty to ourselves. This claim is similar with Aquinas' natural law argument. For Aquinas, you should not kill yourself because it contradicts with the natural laws since nothing destroys itself in nature. Kant turned this inductive argument to a deductive one as if a suicidal person is right in killing himself, then everything should destroy

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<sup>82</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 148.

<sup>83</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. p. 50.

<sup>84</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 147.



itself. Since a universal law like this is absurd and can't be, then suicide is wrong.

Like Aquinas, Kant thought that no living thing commits suicide. Of course, there is no such a case like a dog hangs itself but we know that many animals cause their deaths voluntarily because of emotional reasons. There are many agreed examples of this situation. For example, it is known that dogs commit suicide "usually by drowning or by refusing food, for a number of reasons-generally when the animal is cast out from the household, but also from regret or remorse or even from sheer ennui."<sup>85</sup>

Also, there are many other agreed cases like "horses foundering and dying after their master is slain in battle, dogs refusing to eat after their young master leaves for college, pelicans who open their chest to feed their starving young with their heartblood, or lemmings who, following their leader, march into the sea to drown."<sup>86</sup>

He asked whether men can use their freedom to justify their self-destruction. For him, this is the most horrifying thing imaginable. Because if a man thinks he is master over his own life, then he will think that he is also a master over the life of other. So, he can commit any crime since he is ready to remove himself from the world whenever he wants before punishment. That's why, suicide produce revulsion with horror, though it is not produce revulsion with disgust like *crimina carnis* which is another type of violation of the duties to oneself. He said that:

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<sup>85</sup> A. Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p. 72.

Suicide is certainly the most dreadful thing that a man can do to himself, but is not so base and ignoble as these *crimina carnis contra naturam* which are the most contemptible act a man can commit. For this reason, too, such crimes are unmentionable, because the very naming of them occasions a disgust that does not occur with suicide.<sup>87</sup>

*Crimina carnis contra naturam* involve a use of the sexual impulse that is contrary to natural instinct and to animal nature; *onania* (Masturbation) is a case in point. It is a misuse of the sexual faculty without any object, occurring, that is, when the object of our sexual impulse is totally absent, and yet even without any object the use of our sexual faculty by no means lapses, but is exercised. This obviously runs counter to the ends of humanity, and conflicts, even, with animal nature; man thereby forfeits his person, and degrades himself lower than a beast:

Moreover, the person who destroys himself is lower than a man who is extremely bad, for that man has his humanity and even if there is nothing about him to respect, it is his being a human being that should be respected because humanity is a holy thing, "the *justum aestimum sui ipsius vel humanitatis in sui ipsius persona*"<sup>88</sup>.

David Hume opposes this anti-suicide argument like the previous ones. Yet, for him, this is the most important reason to reject suicide since the ground of morality of suicide has to be searched in the human nature. Because suicide is a voluntary act that one decides autonomously to end his life. Therefore, it is more about himself than the duty to God or society. Then, if suicide is an act that should be forbidden, it must be a violation to

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<sup>86</sup> Halmuth H. Schaeper, "Can a Mouse Commit Suicide?" in *Essays in Self-Destruction*, ed. Edwin S. Shneidman, New York: Science House, 1967, p. 496.

<sup>87</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 161.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

\* just esteem of himself, or of humanity in his own person.

self. But, Hume do not agree with Aquinas or Kant in that suicide is a violation of our duties to ourselves. On the contrary, he thinks that it is consistent with our own interest and duty to ourselves:

That suicide may often be consistent with interest and with our duty to ourselves, no one can question, who allows that age, sickness, or misfortune may render life a burthen, and make it worse than annihilation.<sup>89</sup>

He believes that the act of suicide is always committed for good personal reasons. In his view, “no man ever threw away life, while it was worth keeping.”<sup>90</sup> To overcome our natural fear of death, which is very strong, there must be an equally strong motive. Therefore, one can commit suicide, only if he thinks that death is better than life for him:

For such is our natural horror of death, that small motives will never be able to reconcile us to it; and though perhaps the situation of a man’s health or fortune did not seem to require this remedy, we may at least be assured, that any one who, without apparent reason, has had recourse to it, was curst with such an incurable depravity or gloominess of temper as must poison all enjoyment, and render him equally miserable as if he had been loaded with the most grievous misfortunes.<sup>91</sup>

It is obvious that he thinks that under some conditions like health or fortune renders life a burden and if there is no hope for remedy, suicide can be a noble act:

If suicide be supposed a crime, ‘tis only cowardice can impel us to it. If it be no crime, both prudence and courage should engage us to rid ourselves at once existence, when it becomes a burthen ‘tis the only way that we can then be useful to society, by setting an example, which, if imitated, would preserve to every one his

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<sup>89</sup> David Hume. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. pp.100-101.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.

chance for happiness in life and would effectually free him from all danger or misery.<sup>92</sup>

What Hume tried to show is not that suicide is in each and every case justified. He claimed rather that in some conditions, it can be justified. Even after removing the theological prohibitions on suicide, we should still investigate whether in some conditions we can legitimate suicide.

### **3. 4. Whether Suicide Can be Approved Under Some Conditions**

Almost all of the ethical systems and religions don't allow a man to end his life in order to escape from suffering. Suicide is generally not approved if it is committed because of unhappiness or misery. But even the strictest systems that prohibit suicide, approves or at least justify self-killing under some situations. Because of this, there are many contradictions in the history of suicide. Philosophers and religious authorities couldn't condemn some kinds of voluntary deaths because of their motives which seems virtuous or necessary. In order to prevent contradiction in their system, some philosophers make distinctions due to the intention of the person who prefers death to life.

For example, according to Kant, although suicide is a matter of duty, not choice, there are some cases that people should choose to die. That's why; suicide may be an honorable act when one can't live in accordance

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

with virtue and prudence. One should live honorably as long as one lives because morality is more important than the life. He says that:

If a man can preserve his life no otherwise than by dishonouring his humanity, he ought rather to sacrifice it. It matters not that a man lives long (for it is not his life that he loses by the event, but only the prolongation of the years of his life, since nature has already decreed that he will some day die); what matters is, that so long as he lives, he should live honourably, and not dishonour the dignity of humanity.<sup>93</sup>

Therefore, it is far better to die with honour and reputation, than to prolong one's life by a few years through a discreditable action. Because for Kant, it is not necessary to live happily, so, lack of happiness in life, misery doesn't give the right to sacrifice life. For Kant, it is not pleasure what gives the life its worth, but it is the fulfillment of self-regarding duties. That's why, if you are in a position of making a choice between to continue a life in that you are violating your duties and to sacrifice it, you should choose the latter. He says:

Thus the preservation of life is not the highest duty; one often has to give up life, merely in order to have lived in an honourable way. There are many such cases, and although the jurists say that preservation of life is the highest duty, and that in a case of necessity we are bound to defend our life, this is not a matter of jurisprudence at all; the latter has only to decide the rights and wrongs of the duties that we owe to others, not those we owe to ourselves; nor can it compel any man to give up his life in such a case, for how does it propose to compel him? By depriving him of his life? The jurists have to regard preservation of life as the supreme duty, because only by threatening to deprive a man of life can they test him to the utmost. And so beyond it there are no other necessities; though where morality absolves me from concern for my life, no need, danger or hardship is any case of necessity for preserving it; for need cannot do away with morality. So if I can preserve my life only by disreputable conduct, virtue absolves me from the duty of preserving it;

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<sup>93</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 150.

because here a higher duty beckons and passes judgment on me.<sup>94</sup>

Another justifiable kind of voluntary deaths is the position of soldiers for him. Kant makes a distinction between offences due to the intention. To die in a war or while obeying a command is not a deliberate death. In his view, the offence with intention (*dolus*) is different from the offence without intention (*culpa*). For him, it is not a suicide if one doesn't intend to kill oneself. So, for such a case, there is no *dolus* but *culpa* for Kant. Such a person can be put responsible for his death, but since he doesn't intend to destroy himself, he couldn't be accused for suicide. Therefore, there is a difference between the imprudence in which a wish to live is still present, and the intention to do away with oneself.

By this way, Kant mainly wants to justify the voluntary deaths of martyrs. In many wars, soldiers are commanded to fight until death, they knew it is nearly impossible for them to be alive after the fight, but they still obey the command. Since these soldiers lost their lives by fate, without intention, they are not guilty of suicide. Moreover, if they run away to save their lives, then they will be guilty and not worthy of living. Because, for Kant, to risk one's life against one's foes even to sacrifice one's life is not suicide and also it is the honorable act. These soldiers are noble victims of fate, while cowardly soldiers who prefers saving their life to fighting till death cannot preserve the condition for further moral action. By this, Kant contradicts his claim that suicide isn't a moral act since it annihilates ground of completing our moral duties by destroying the self. He says that:

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

And on the opposite side, it is again no preservation of life to be fearful and faint-hearted in the face of death, with which fate inevitably threatens us already. He who runs away to save his life from the enemy, and leaves all his comrades in the lurch, is a coward; but if he defends himself and his fellows to the death, that is no suicide, but is held to be noble and gallant; since, in and for itself, life is in no way to be highly prized, and I should seek to preserve my life only insofar as I am worthy to live. A distinction has to be made between a suicide and one who has lost his life to fate.<sup>95</sup>

So, for Kant, a sovereign has the right to order his subjects to fight until death and be ready to die in the name of protecting the fatherland. However, he can't order them to kill themselves directly. In other words, he doesn't have the right to command them to commit suicide. Because there can be no universal law as 'you should commit suicide'. That's why, it isn't moral to order suicide although it is moral to order killing and dying in the war. By this, Kant's main goal may be to prevent any tyrant from coercing one of his subjects to commit suicide. He said that:

Nobody under the sun, no sovereign, can oblige me to commit suicide. The sovereign can certainly oblige the subject to risk his life against the foe for the fatherland, and even if he loses his life in doing so, it is not suicide, but depends on fate.<sup>96</sup>

Like Kant, St. Augustine wants to justify the acts of Christians warriors and the ones who die in the name of Christianity. He declares that committing suicide is against the commandment 'thou shalt not kill' since one kills a man by killing himself and that's why, suicide is not permitted. However, he made two exceptions of the commandment 'thou shalt not kill'.

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

For him, these exceptions are justified either by a general law or by a special commission granted for a time to some individual.

The first exception, according to Augustine, is the situation of the person who kills in the name of obedience to the divine command. This person is not responsible for the death he deals like the warriors according to him. Also, he wants to justify the death accusations which are given due to the laws of the state. That's why; his second exception to the commandment 'thou shalt not kill' is for the persons who order the death of wicked persons to protect the public justice.

In other words, he thinks that a person who kills to obey a general law which should have higher authority than his will, is not guilty for his murder. This order can come either from the commander under a war or from the laws of the state that are made by humans. Since a soldier has slain a man cause the authority under he is lawfully commissioned ordered, is not accepted as a criminal by any law of his state and also if he hasn't slain him, he is accused of not obeying the orders and punished.

Then, if a man should obey the commands of his commander or the state, he is more responsible for the commands that are given by God. He asks when the command is given by God, can he neglect the order? He should obey the command of God although he knows that it is not right to kill. But, he should be careful that the command is given by God, Augustine



warns “Only let him be very sure that the divine command has been signified”<sup>97</sup>:

And so one who accepts the prohibition against suicide may kill himself when commanded by one whose orders must not be slighted; only let him take care that there is no uncertainty about the divine command. We have only hearsay acquaintance with any man’s conscience. <sup>98</sup>

By this way, he justifies Abraham, who was ready to slay his son, or Jephthah who killed his daughter or Samson who drew down the house on himself and his foes together on the ground. Because, none of these men killed or were ready to kill for their passion or through their decision. They killed or attempt to kill in obedience to God since they all believed that God had ordered them these crimes. They did not think why God wanted something like this from them because their faith was strong and unquestionable. Because a complete belief requires not thinking about faith like Abraham never thought why God wanted him to sacrifice his son. When they really believed that God commanded them, they did what the commandment asked. Because it is not possible to neglect the command of God, if it is certain that God commands. Augustine asks that: “When God enjoins any act, and intimates by plain evidence that He has enjoined it, who will call obedience criminal? Who will accuse so religious a submission?” <sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> St. Augustine. “The City of God”, Chapter XXVI, p. 32.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

For, Augustine, if the act of killing doesn't belong to one of these cases which are justified either by a just law that applies generally, or by a special intimation from God himself, whoever kills a man— either himself or another— for whatever reason is a guilty of murder. Augustine mentions about some reasons which are generally thought as just reasons for suicide and rejects all of them: For example, in his view, no man should kill himself to obtain a better life after death, since many firm believers are willing to die and get rid of their physical existence. Because as Plato claimed there is no better life for those who commit suicide, moreover they will be punished by the divine judgment.

Also, according to Augustine, no man should put an end to his life because of his past sins, because they are the ones that need more of this life for repenting. Whatever he did before, he is more innocent of that offence for which he doomed himself to die and he is guiltier of his own death. Augustine believed that even Judas committed a greater crime by killing himself than betraying Jesus Christ.

Do we justly execrate the deed of Judas, and does truth itself pronounce that by hanging himself he rather aggravated than expiated the guilt of that most iniquitous betrayal, since, by despairing of God's mercy in his sorrow that wrought death, he left to himself no place for a healing penitence? How much more ought he to abstain from laying violent hands on himself who has done nothing worthy of such a punishment! For Judas, when he killed himself, killed a wicked man; but he passed from this life chargeable not only with the death Christ, but with his own: for though he killed himself on account of his crime, his killing himself was another crime. why, then, should a man who has done no ill do ill to himself, and by killing himself kill the innocent to escape another's guilty act, and perpetrate upon himself a sin

of his own, that the sin of another may not be perpetrated on him? <sup>100</sup>

Another failed motive for suicide according to Augustine is to avoid sharing another man's sins. Nobody should commit suicide because of another man's sins. For, then, he commits a greater crime while trying to escape a crime that he is not guilty. Augustine gives the example of Lucretia for this case. As I mentioned in the second chapter, Lucretia, the wife of Collatinus, became a heroine for his suicide during the period of Rome. She committed suicide after King Tarquin's son had violated her body. For Augustine, she committed a greater crime and became a sinner although she was innocent and no guilty of the adultery that was done as it was said to praise her "There were two, but the adultery was the crime of only one". <sup>101</sup>

That's why, for him, a Christian woman, who suffered as she did, should not take the same decision because she shouldn't let her shame drive her to homicide, as the lust of her enemy had driven him to adultery. She should avoid adding a crime to hers because of another crime in which she had no share. In such a case, a Christian woman should survive and consider only God's judgment, since her only witness is her own conscience and if it is clean, then, in the sight of God, she is esteemed pure and this should be enough for her.

Kant agrees with Augustine's comments about Lucretia. He did not believe that Lucretia's desire to preserve her honor wasn't "surrendered for

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

selfish and voluptuous purposes”.<sup>102</sup> For him, Lucretia killed herself because she wanted to prove her innocence and to take revenge. For Kant, it would be better for her to fight until death in order to defend her honor than to submit to rape. Then, she would be right in her voluntary act which is not suicide though it is voluntary. However, in this case, Kant didn't consider the fact that Sextus Marcilleus had threatened her that if she hadn't submit to him, he would have killed her and left her naked with a suspicion of her innocence.

One of the most heroic reasons of suicide is accepted as killing oneself in order to prevent an enemy doing so. Augustine discusses the example of Cato, who committed suicide in Utica for this case. As I mentioned earlier, the suicide of Cato has always been the examples of defenders of suicide to show that it can be virtuous. But both Augustine and Kant evaluated their suicide in a different manner. For Augustine, this is because “he was so esteemed as a learned and excellent man, that it could plausibly be maintained that what he did was and is a good thing to do.”<sup>103</sup>

But, Augustine thought that this is a misjudging, because “Cato had never conquered Caesar; and when conquered by him, disdained to submit himself to him, and that he might escape this submission put himself to death.”<sup>104</sup> Just as him, Kant says that Cato, was “the champion of freedom”<sup>105</sup> and the symbol of resistance against Caesar, killed himself because he was aware that he couldn't avoid falling into Caesar's hands.

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<sup>102</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Lectures of Ethics*, p. 145.

<sup>103</sup> St. Augustine. “The City of God”, Chapter XXIII, p. 29.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>105</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Lectures of Ethics*, p. 45.

In other words, they think that Cato's intention was escaping from the disgrace to live under Caesar's rule. However, if Cato's reason to commit suicide is to save his honor by avoiding to be captured, then, Augustine asks "why he didn't persuade his son to die along with himself?"<sup>106</sup> Moreover, we know that Cato encouraged his son to trust absolutely Caesar's generosity like he advised his soldiers. Then, there might be another reason in Cato's suicide, a reason like Cleomrotus since we know that he read *The Phaedo* twice before killing himself.

According to St. Augustine, even if we accept that Cato killed himself in order not to obey Caesar with the love of his love of freedom, it is still not an honorable act. For, all the books about Saints showed that they preferred captivity and oppression of their enemies rather than commit suicide since Jesus Christ advised to his apostles to "flee from city to city if they were persecuted". Augustine argues that since Jesus Christ didn't advise them to kill themselves to escape their persecutors, then reasons like avoiding torture or humiliation can't be just reasons to commit suicide.

St. Augustine opposed the attitude which honored the self-murderers as magnanimous and brave persons who has virtuous souls. Because, for him, the greatness of soul can be understood by not killing himself under hard circumstances, but rather bearing up against them. He says that, we have to honor Marcus Regulus rather than Marcus Cato. Regulus, when he was defeated by Carthaginians that once he had conquered, he preferred to be their captive rather than escape from their torment by committing suicide.

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<sup>106</sup> St. Augustine. "The City of God", Chapter XXIII, p. 30.

That's why, Marcus Regulus was the best man among all the famous and remarkable citizens of Rome, since he was neither corrupted by prosperity, nor broken by adversity and he strictly declared how a great crime suicide is with his patience under all tortures, and although he was a man who killed many according to the custom and right of war, he didn't kill himself even when conquered by his enemies. And this man and all the heroes who prefer suffering slavery than committing suicide are the ones that had false Gods, therefore Christians, the worshippers of the true god, have no right or justification to prefer suicide.

Kant thinks just as same as Aquinas that it would be more honorable and courageous for him to submit his enemies tortures. That's why; he condemns Cato, although he doesn't think that Cato committed suicide because he was afraid of being captured by Caesar. So, Cato's suicide isn't an act causes from fear, but even though it is not cowardice, it will be more courageous to stand all the tortures of Caesar. He said that:

If Cato, under all the tortures that Caesar might have inflicted on him, had still adhered to his resolve with steadfast mind, that would have been noble; but not when he laid hands upon himself.<sup>107</sup>

Like Kant, Augustine praises those who choose to endure life's suffering. That's why, the reasons of suicide like personal suffering, fear of possible punishment or dishonor can't be accepted as just reasons. Therefore it is a cowardice act besides it is homicide and there is no magnanimity in suicide.

If suicide is to be esteemed a magnanimous act, none can take higher rank for magnanimity than that Cleombrotus, who (as the story goes), when he read Plato's book in which he treats of the immortality of the soul, threw himself from a wall, and so passed from this life to that which he believed to be better. For he was not hard pressed by calamity, nor by any accusation, false or

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<sup>107</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Lectures of Ethics*, p. 145.

true, which he could not very well have lived down; there was, in short, no motive but only magnanimity urging him to seek death, and break away from the sweet detention of this life. And yet that this was a magnanimous rather than a justifiable action, Plato himself, whom he had read, would have told him; for he would certainly have been forward to commit, or at least to recommend suicide, had not the same bright intellect which saw that the soul was immortal, discerned also that to seek immortality by suicide was to be prohibited rather than encouraged.<sup>108</sup>

He can see only one sound reason for suicide and it is the reason of avoiding sin. But, he rejects this sound reason by claiming that if it were a good reason, then, we should advice everyone to destroy themselves and escape all the future sins. He thinks that it is wicked to claim this; therefore it is wicked to kill oneself. So, since this is the most just cause of suicide and it is so, then there is no just cause of suicide. It is obvious that suicide is not permitted under any conditions. So, in his view, whatever said to defend suicide is the product of nations that forget God.

In short, Augustine doesn't have the courage to condemn the Christian's willingness of being martyrs. Also, he approves killing others in the name of obeying a command if it is sure that it is given by God or he justifies the murders of state to punish criminals and the ones which are committed during war. But, he condemns the act regardless of its reasons whenever one wishes to depart from the world. So, some reasons of suicide like to escape from hardship of fortune or illness and pains or to avoid future sins are not just reasons for Augustine. Suicide that is committed because of one of these reasons is a cowardice act besides it is homicide. And it is a crime and a sin in the first degree.

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<sup>108</sup> St. Augustine. "The City of God", Chapter XXII, p. 29.

Kant prefers to consider the problem through morality than theology, for he thinks that suicide is a violation of duties against self at first. For him, one shouldn't kill himself because of unhappiness, illness or the misfortunes which turns life into a burden. Under these cases, he should ask himself whether it would not be contrary to his duty to himself to take his own life. He accepts that in some cases, when one can't save his honor and can't live in accordance with virtue; he should prefer fulfilling his duties than continuing his life.

But, in his system, such a rule cannot exist, since it is inconsistent with the supreme principle of all duty. Because it would be a maxim to destroy life. Destroying life is the annihilation of free will and the possibility of the improvement of life. That's why, such a maxim contradicts itself. Therefore, in Kant's system, suicide is an immoral act and shouldn't be permitted under any conditions.

But, as opposition, for many philosophers an incurable illness or extreme pain is just reasons for suicide. Plato allowed some exceptions in his prohibition of suicide. Moreover, as I mentioned, he praised death and justified the conditions of being voluntary to die. After him, many Stoic philosophers claimed that it is better to commit suicide than continue living under painful circumstances. Hume goes one step further and claims that under some conditions, suicide is not only justifiable, but also it is necessary. He says that:

Suppose that I am a burden to society; suppose that my life hinders some person from being much more useful to society. In



such cases, my resignation of life must not only be innocent, but laudable.

I agree with him that in some cases, suicide of some person can be beneficial for the rest, although saying such a thing seems too merciless. Dostoevsky's protagonist, Stavrogin kills himself not to harm Dasha, since he ruined many women who love him. Or Cato, he preserved the honor of Florence by not being arrested by Caesar and although the latter won the war, the glory stayed with him and his country.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PHILOSOPHICAL MEANING OF SUICIDE IN LITERATURE

I think that presenting examples of suicide in literature is more difficult than judging them philosophically because of the extreme nature of the act of suicide. Suicide may be committed because of pain, hatred of life or self-loathing. Thus, the author or the poet has a hard task as reflecting the nature of the individual. In this chapter, I discuss about how Dante as a poet and how Dostoevsky as an author, regard suicide.

#### 4. 1. The Meaning of Suicide in Dante

Dante's ideas about suicide are interesting because he was a medieval Christian poet who was familiar with Augustine and Aquinas' teachings and accepted Church's condemnation of suicide. In *The Divine Comedy*, he recites many stories of suicide. He created a special punishment for the ones who killed themselves by following Aquinas' classification of sins. According to Aquinas, 'every sin is against either God,

self or neighbour<sup>109</sup> and so Dante divides the seventh circle of hell into three parts. Virgil explains Dante in Canto XI as:

My son, within the circle of stone,  
He then began, 'there are three smaller circles  
Of graduated size, like those you are leaving.  
The first circle is given over to the violent;  
But as force may be against three persons,  
The circle is construed in three distinct rings.  
Force may be used against God, one's self or one's neighbour,  
And against what belongs to each of them,  
As you will hear openly explained.<sup>110</sup>

Dante thinks like Aquinas love of God is more important than love of self. For him, the violence that is done to the Deity by denying him or blaspheming him is a greater sin than the violence to the self. That's why; he put the suicides into the second round of this circle.

A man can lay violent hands on himself  
And on his goods; and therefore the second ring  
Is properly for the profitless repentance. (40)<sup>111</sup>

So, Dante punishes suicides because of violating one's self. In other words, the person who kills himself is guilty because suicide as an act of self-annihilation indicates a lack of self-love. However, as Aquinas says man should love himself and "ought to cherish above others"<sup>112</sup>. For Dante, a man should love God first, then himself and then others. So, by committing suicide, one violates his duties to himself and because of this, suicide is sinful. In this round of *The Inferno*, Dante punishes the ones whose suicide means this lack of self-love. They are punished since they are despising

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<sup>109</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. 2a2ae 118,1.

<sup>110</sup> Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1980, p. 90.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

themselves, destroying the God's highest creation with hate and self-loathing. In other words, as Kant thinks they dispose over their humanity.

Dante did not place all of the suicides into this place by considering their motives. He gave some imaginative meanings to their suicide that go beyond self-loathing. These self-murderers are placed to other parts of hell, because Dante was careful to keep all the self-killers inside the Inferno due to the teachings of the Church. However, he broke this rule for Cato by placing him in the Purgatory. I mentioned Cato for many times in this thesis. As I mentioned earlier, many philosophers discussed his case as an example. Although he was praised by the public and some philosophers, both St. Augustine and Aquinas condemned him.

However, Dante did not follow their teachings in this case. He believed that Cato died for his love of liberty. He did not kill himself with hate or to escape from this world where he might be captured by Caesar. He did not loathe his self or his life. Moreover, Cato remembered his life with pleasure as we can see in his words for his wife Marcia. In fact, he committed suicide because he thought that he completed his duties in this world and he sought some higher good in death. We know that he had read Plato's *The Phaedo* twice before his suicide. It is obvious that he believed in Socrates' argument that there is a higher good after death, so a good and wise man should prefer death. That's why; Dante didn't locate him in the Inferno. He meets Dante and Virgil in the Purgatory.

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<sup>112</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a2ae 64,5.

I saw near me an old man, alone,  
With looks deserving as much reverence  
As ever any son owed to his father.  
He wore his beard long and there were white strands  
In it, like his hair which tumbled down  
In two white bunches over his chest and shoulders;  
The beams which came from those four holy lights  
So played upon his face and lit it up  
That I saw him as if he had been facing the sun. <sup>113</sup>

Dante praised him for his love of liberty. He represented political liberty in *The Divine Comedy*. But, also his suicide has a metaphysical meaning of liberty. Cato was presented as a holy being, he appeared and disappeared suddenly. Virgil honored him with his words and praised his love of liberty for which he choused death in Utica. Then, he requested him to let them in the Purgatory.

Now treat his coming as acceptable:  
He looks for liberty, which is so loved,  
As he knows who gives up his life for her. <sup>114</sup>

In Dante's period, suicide except martyrdom was strictly condemned. Dante, however, as a poet, gave different meanings to some known suicides. For example, he located many famous self-killers like Lucretia, Seneca, Dido, Socrates and Zeno in the Limbo without judging them for their rejection of life. Limbo is the first circle of the Inferno and many virtuous heathen souls are placed there. In this place, the souls are not tormented like the other circles of the Inferno, but they are not happy and will never be. The philosopher in the Limbo, who kill themselves or accept death voluntarily, as in the case of Socrates, gave their lives in searching for a

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<sup>113</sup> Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy*. p. 200.

higher good. They found dishonorable to fear death and to desire the pleasures of life when they believed the time had come. Their suicides were not self-loathing or rejecting life, that's why they are not punished for their suicides by Dante.

Another interesting point in *The Divine Comedy* is Dante's punishment of some known suicides like Dido, Cleopatra or Judas for their other sins in different places of the Inferno. Dido and Cleopatra are in the second round and they are punished for their sin of lust. Dante followed Aquinas' argument that lust is a lesser crime than suicide. That's why; the souls who are guilty of self-killing are located in the lower parts of the Inferno.

It is also remarkable to note the case of Judas. As I said in Chapter Two, St. Augustine thinks that suicide is the ultimate sin and even Judas will be punished for this sin. However, Dante judges Judas' ultimate sin as betraying his master. It was Judas who condemns himself and then kills himself. Dante accepted his own judgment and punishes him at the deepest section of the hell, in the fourth zone of the ninth circle. Also, Brutus and Cassius are punished there because of their betrayal to Julius Caesar although they also committed suicide.

'That soul there, which has the worst punishment,  
is Judas Iscariot,' my master said,  
'With his head inside, and kicking his legs.'  
Of the two other, who hang upside-down,  
The one who hangs from the black face is Brutus;  
See how he twists and says not a word;

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

And the other is Cassius, whose body looks so heavy.<sup>115</sup>

For Dante, suicide is not the ultimate sin to decide how the sinner will be punished. If the underlying motive of the act is not doing injustice against themselves, they are not guilty of self-killing according to Dante. If it is, Dante isolated these souls who have done violence to themselves in the second ring of seventh circle. There, Dante met Piero delle Vigne and a nameless shrub. They are the typical examples of suicidal souls that are located in this place. It is dark and lonely forest where poisonous shrubs and thorns cry. Harpies, which have human faces and broad wings, make their nests on these plants and eat their leaves. Dante described them as follows:

The foliage not green, but of dark colour;  
The branches not wholesome, but knotted and twisted;  
There were no apples but poisonous thorns.  
The undergrowth is not so rough or dense,  
Where the wild beasts, which hate all the cultivation,  
Live between Cecina and Corneto.  
It is there that the filthy Harpies make their nests,  
They who hunted the Trojans from the Strophades,  
Announcing dismally their future loss.  
They have broad wings, with human necks and faces,  
Feet with claws, their great bellies covered with feathers;  
They make lamentations on strange trees.<sup>116</sup>

There, Dante heard cries although he could see nobody around. He became bewildered and stopped walking. Then, Virgil said to him to break off a branch of one plant for understanding the reason of those cries. Dante

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192-193.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

did what Virgil said, he broke a little twig. So, he understood that they were not plants, but the souls of the self-killers.

Then I stretched out my hand a little way,  
And picked a little branch from a great thorn;  
And the trunk of it called out: 'Why are you tearing me?'  
It grew a little dark with blood and said,  
Once again: 'Why are you dismembering me?  
Have you no spirit of compassion?  
Once we were men, now we are stumps and shoots:  
Surely your hand should have been more merciful,  
Even if we had been the souls of serpents.'  
As a green stick, which is burning at one end,  
Sweats at the other end at the same time  
And hisses as the stream goes out of it;  
So, from the broken shoot, came out at once  
Both words and blood; which made me let fall the top,  
And I stood there like man afraid.<sup>117</sup>

Dante was afraid and could not say anything. That's why; Virgil apologized from the trunk gently and said it was his mistake. He wanted the trunk to introduce himself, so that Dante could bring his name to life once more in the world, since he was allowed to return to the world. Then, the trunk began to talk again to tell his story.

I am the man who held the double keys  
To Frederick's heart, and I it was who returned them,  
Locking and unlocking, so delicately.  
That I kept almost everyone from his secrets;  
I was so faithful in my glorious office  
That, for its sake, I lost both sleep and strength.  
The whore who never turned her lecherous eyes  
From the palaces where Caesar entertained,  
The common death of men, the vice of courts,  
Inflamed the minds of everyone against me;  
And those who were inflamed, inflamed Augustus,  
Till all my happy honours were turned to sorrow.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.



From this part, it is understood that this trunk is Piero delle Vigne, who was the counselor of Frederic II. He was accused of intending a political treachery against Frederic II and stealing from the state. Because of this accusation, he lost all his esteem and he was put into jail after he was blinded. There, he killed himself by hitting his head to the walls.

My mind, with its taste for scorn and anger,  
Thinking by death to escape the scorn of others,  
Made me unjust against my just self

Pierro committed suicide for rejecting the blame and dishonor. His main motive is not rejecting the gift of life. He would choose to life if the situation was different or less painful to resist. In this point, his suicide resembles the suicide of Lucretia. She also killed herself to reject the dishonor of adultery. However, Dante located Lucretia in the Limbo. The reason might be that Dante believed Lucretia was completely innocent, but he was not so sure about Pierro. That's why, the meaning of two suicides are taken differently. Since Dante writes 'champion of fidelity' for her and praises her act, he criticizes Pierro to make unjust against his self by finding his life loathsome and unbearable. In fact, he wouldn't hate life if it continued in normal conditions. Moreover, he still had enough love for his life and he still was concerned with his reputation. It is understood from his willingness for defending himself to Dante in order to convince him to make his name respectable in the other world. He says to Dante and Virgil:

By the new roots which shoot out from this tree,  
I swear to you that I never broke faith  
With my lord, who was so worthy of honour.  
And if one of you is going back to the world,

Comfort my memory, which is still abject  
Because of the reproaches made by the envy.

From this conversation between Dante and Pierro, we learn that Minos throws the suicidal souls to a tree and there the soul germinates like a grain of barley. The Harpies feed themselves with its leaves to give pain again and again to punish the soul that harmed his body. Also, though after the Judgement Day all the souls and the bodies would reconnect, only the bodies of suicides would continue hanging on a tree. Because the souls could never get their bodies back, since they had thrown it away voluntarily.

Like others, we shall look for our mortal bodies,  
But none of us will ever put his on again;  
It is not just for a man to have what he takes from himself.  
We shall drag them here, and through the mournful wood  
Our bodies will be hung, each one upon  
The thorny tree of his tormented shade.<sup>119</sup>

Another suicidal soul in this part was a small shrub. It is the most suitable example to the ones who destroy themselves with hate and disgust. This small shrub hated his human life and rejected the gift of life. He disgusts everything, humanity in general, his country. That's why, he doesn't say his name, Dante only mentions that he kills himself in Florence. He says 'I made a gallows for myself of my own house.'<sup>120</sup> this shows that this man committed suicide in his house in Florence. He has no other identity in the poem and loses it for eternity. But, he tells his story:

He said to us: 'O you souls who have arrived  
To see the shameless waste and laceration  
Which has so taken my leaves away from me,

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Gather them to the foot of this sad bush.  
I was of the city which changed its first patron  
For John the Baptist; for which reason the first  
Will always try his tricks to make it grieve;  
And if it were not that, at the crossing of the Arno,  
Some slight trace of his image still remains,  
Those citizens, who built the city again  
Upon the ashes which Atilla left,  
Would have carried out all that work in vain.<sup>121</sup>

From this passage, we understand that the soul in the shrub is from Florence. Because Florence's god was Mars at first and then after Christianity, it changed. This soul thought that it was the reasons of the conflicts in Florence. Dante might intend to make a connection between the crime of a man's destroying himself with hate and the civil war that destroys the city because of the mutual hate the citizens feel for each other. Dante picked up the scattered leaves and gave them back to him in Canto XIV because of the love he has for his own country. Virgil and Dante then leave this part of The Inferno.

According to Alvarez, Dante is interested to this part of The Inferno more than other parts. He seems like being affected from the sorrows of these souls of self-killers like he can understand why they committed suicide. He cannot condemn these suicides like he does with disgust for the other sinners. He hesitates in this canto like the poet Dante and the Christian Dante struggles. Nevertheless, the Christian Dante says the last word and these souls will be punished to eternity.

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

## 4. 2. The Meaning of Suicide in Dostoevsky

Dostoevsky is interested in the problem of morality in suicide in almost all of his major novels. He provides us with a wide range of minds that have tendency for suicide. His way of regarding suicide can be accepted as the beginning of modern approaches to suicide. I think studying the subject of suicide in his novels is a subject of a unique thesis going beyond the confines of one single chapter. The reason why I will limit myself in this chapter is to explore his views in a general way.

In all of the suicide cases mentioned in his novels and stories, Dostoevsky connects suicide with morality, immortality and free will. For him, disbelief in immortality causes immorality and leads one to misleading ways to prove his free will. Before giving examples to this formulation, I would like to summarize his ideas about suicide in his own words.

In *A writer's Diary*, he formulated this connection between immortality and suicide. In October 1876, he wrote an article called "The Verdict" in which he described a logical suicide. In this essay, he made a metaphysical formulation of such a frame of mind. It was in a form of suicidal note of materialist who was determined to end his life without any apparent reason. This man argues for several metaphysical principles. First, he thinks that human beings are incapable to stand the design of the higher forces, though they have an ability to suffer.

According to the heavenly designs there is an absolute harmony of the whole for the sake of which people should patiently endure their earthly ordeals but people find it hard to agree with these designs.<sup>122</sup>

Secondly, for him, since everything of this world will be lost and turn to zero, human aspirations and hopes are meaningless. Therefore, no man desire to continue living for the sake of suffering. This is the reason of Dostoevsky's materialist hero's for committing suicide. He writes at his suicide note:

I take upon myself the role of both the judge and the accused and give a death sentence to myself and to nature that so impudently and unceremoniously condemned me to suffering. And since it is not in my power to liquidate nature then I can only liquidate myself for the sole reason that I find it unbearable to put up with the tyranny where there is no guilty party.<sup>123</sup>

After this fictitious suicide note was published, Dostoevsky was criticized to justify suicide. That's why; he decided to write another article to clarify his own ideas about suicide in his own voice. For this aim, in December 1876, he wrote an essay called "Unsubstantiated Statements" in his Diary. In this text, he tied suicide to the disbelief in immortality mainly.

For him, the materialist committed suicide because he lost his faith in the idea of immortality. According to Dostoevsky, immortality is the supreme idea of human existence from which all other worthy ideas flow. Dostoevsky claims that the belief in immortality of the human soul is a necessity and inevitability and without it human existence is unnatural, unthinkable and intolerable. He writes:

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<sup>122</sup> Vladimir Bachinin. "Dostoyevsky's Metaphysical Self". In *Social Sciences*: Vol. 29, No.

The point of this confession of a person committing 'a logical suicide' is the necessity of an immediate conclusion that without faith in the immortality of one's soul human existence is unnatural, unthinkable, and unbearable.<sup>124</sup>

By this way, he claims that NN's argumentation is true logically. Since it is a general axiom that everything which has a beginning also has an ending, NN only fails in his disbelief in the immortality of his soul and that's why, he is mistaken. Because for Dostoevsky, by denying the life after death, man degrades himself to the level of animals and becomes a creature "who lives only for the sake of sleeping, eating, excreting, and sitting on soft seats"<sup>125</sup>. A life like that will be unbearable and insulting according to him. This makes the person indifferent to existence or non-existence, since he thinks that after a shot in the head he will turn into an absolute zero.

Dostoevsky was always impressed from the news of someone killing himself without any obvious reason. He found such suicides mysterious and created several stories about the protagonists who take their life without a reason. The hero of "The Dream of a Ridiculus Man" intends to kill himself suddenly while he is sitting his armchair in a nasty autumn night. He has no valid reason or any justification for his intended suicide. Because he thinks that since everything is void and meaningless, there can be no justification for anything. He resembles Krillov who wants to curse everything and draw an ugly mug with a sticking tongue to the world.

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3/August 1998, p. 18.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

The Ridiculous Man decides to solve the only important philosophical problem for him before he will commit suicide. However, he begins to sleep, may be because of his hidden will to live. In his dream, he has the chance to experience all the metaphysical consequences of suicide and being still alive. His dream is a skyward journey into the supernatural world existing outside physical time and space. This story reflects Dostoevsky's ideas that he wrote in his Diary.

He also objected to the idea that belief in immortality of the soul might have bad consequences like making the believer less attached to earthly life and hence making him more likely to desire to leave it. He thought that it is precisely the absence of belief in immortality that creates disenchantment with earthly life. Because if the individual cannot find a higher meaning that can sustain them in the midst of suffering and unhappiness; although they are told that their suffering is somehow necessary for the harmony of the whole, they cannot understand such harmony and are sure that they will never be able to share in it. When all the trials of life lead simply to annihilation, what is the point of living? The argument then proceeds as follows:

Only with faith in his immortality does a person comprehend his whole rational purpose on earth. And without the conviction of his immortality, a person's links with the earth are severed; they grow weaker, they decay, and the loss of the higher meaning of life (which he senses if only in the form of the most unconscious melancholy) indubitably brings suicide in its train. From that, by inversion, comes the moral of my October article: "If the conviction of immortality is so necessary for human existence, it

must be the normal condition of humanity, and if so then the actual immortality of the human soul indubitably exists.<sup>126</sup>

In short, without believing in life after death one cannot understand the true purpose of earthly life, and without such understanding earthly life becomes something from which anyone above the purely animal level must desire to escape. Thus a belief in immortality is a necessary condition of continued human existence, from which the argument concludes that the belief must be true. This argument is different in many ways. It doesn't depend on ethical ideas; it does not presuppose the existence of God, it is manifestly a universal argument which introduces an empirical premise, a factual claim about human psychology on which its soundness hinges. It claims that the loss of belief in immortality promotes suicide.

In order to prove this claim, Dostoevsky mentions that suicide has 'so increased ... among our intelligentsia' and asks: 'Are suicides more prevalent among people who deny the immortality of the soul?' This claim was investigated by Irina Paperno. According to her study, the rate of suicide in the country between 1860s-1880s was increased to epidemic proportions. This increase can be easily seen by looking at the Russian newspapers and magazines which the accounts of individuals' suicide as well as statistical analyses of the supposed epidemic can be seen.

As Paperno points, during the late eighteenth century, among many Russians the increase in the rate of suicide and the growing influence of positivist and atheistic thought were related. They thought that the denial of

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<sup>126</sup> Scanlan, James P. 'Dostoevsky's Arguments for Immortality.' *Russian Review: An*



the immortality was the reason of suicide, which was widely attributed to the growing influence of positivist and atheist thought. She points out that as early as the late eighteenth century, some Russians linked suicide with denial of immortality.<sup>127</sup>

In short, without believing in life after death one cannot understand the true purpose of earthly life, and without such understanding earthly life becomes something from which anyone above the purely animal level must desire to escape. Thus a belief in immortality is a necessary condition for continued human existence. Otherwise, human beings can find no meaning in living and cannot tolerate its hardness. So, suicide becomes inevitable as an escape from this meaningless and unbearable world.

In his letter to an admirer, Nikolai Lukich Ozmidov in February 1878, Dostoevsky mentions about this connection between the belief in immortality and the love of life once more. For him, humanity is an organism as a whole. And he says that 'every organism exists on earth in order to live, and not to destroy itself'.<sup>128</sup> The reason for this argument is the immortality of the soul and God, since they are the one and the same idea. If the soul is not mortal, then no organism will continue his life and complete his moral duties; so, the consequence of this situation will be extremely terrible:

Now imagine that there is neither God nor the immortality of the soul Tell me why I should then live properly, do good, if I shall die on earth completely. Without immortality, surely the whole point is just to finish my term, and then everything can go to hell. And if

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*American Quarterly Devoted to Russia Past & Present.* Jan2000, Vol. 59 Issue 1, p.1.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

that's so, then why shouldn't I (as long as I can count on my adroitness and wit to keep me from getting caught by the law) kill someone, rob ... live at other people's expense, just to satisfy my own belly? After all, I shall die, and everything will die, there will be nothing! In that way it will in fact turn out that only the human organism fails to fall under the universal axiom and lives only for its own destruction, and not to preserve and nurture itself. For what kind of society is it if all its members are enemies of each other? And the result is dreadful nonsense.<sup>129</sup>

In short, disbelief in immortality leads one to an ethical indifference such as if everything will die, then everything is permitted. If everything is permitted, he can do whatever he wants, he can either kill another person or himself. So, the way that begins at the disbelief in immortality can go through either an immoral life or suicide.

As it is generally supposed, the belief in immortality of the soul does not weaken man's desire to live thus causing a personal suicide. On the contrary, it strengthens the desire to live and to maximize their own individual advantage on earth and so causes a self-serving behavior. Preservation of organisms than would the incidental destruction wrought by unrestrained self-serving behavior.

Dostoevsky did not believe that love of liberty, of equality, of fraternity is enough to be a good person because of the nature of mankind. As the Underground Man explains, man is so strange and irrational in fact that he can do something against his interest consciously only for proving his free will. So, even if humanity construct a perfect order in which everybody is happy and wealthy someday, some man still will be displeased and try to get rid of this mathematical order and destroy it. That's why, worldly ideals or

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

rationality are not enough to satisfy humans, only faith in god (in immortality) can bring a desire to good things. However, in his novels, some of the protagonists claim contra-arguments like Rakitin in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Rakitin says:

And did you hear recently his [Ivan's] stupid theory: `Since there is no immortality of the soul, there is no virtue either, which means that everything is permitted'? ... His whole theory is vile! Humanity will find in itself the strength to live for virtue even without believing in the immortality of the soul! It will find it in love of liberty, of equality, of fraternity.<sup>130</sup>

For Dostoevsky, freedom is the most important ideal of humanity; it is a must for a human to feel himself as a human being. If this desire to be free does not balance with a faith in immortality, man can do the craziest things to feel free. He can loose morally like Svidrigaylov or Stavrogin and cannot stand his sins if he has not lost his conscience wholly; at last he commits the biggest sin for a Christian: he takes his own life. Some man may jump to the last step directly; like Krilov who committed suicide in order to prove he can act through his own free will. He argues that if God exists, he is not able to act through his will and God will not let him kill himself. Yet, if he manages to kill himself, he can act opposed to God's will and so, he will be God.

He differentiates himself from everybody who commits suicide through the history, since none of them kills themselves for this purpose. He will be the first man who kills himself for only proving that he is not acting according to God's will and he is free. He thinks that by this way, he will

open a new gate for humanity and he will be the first Man-god. The reason of Krillov's suicide may be an example of the suicide as a rebellious act to the Deity.

In *The Idiot*, Ippolit did not commit suicide, but he wrote a suicide letter to explain his planned suicide. In this letter, he said that since he had only three-week life, suicide was the only thing that he could start and finish. Also, it was the only thing that he could do opposed to the nature's will. So, suicide is the only act he can demonstrate his freedom.

Smerdyakov, In *The Brothers Karamazov* is a different case, since he can't be accepted as a real man, but only a puppet of Ivan's devil side. He has no worth in himself, he killed his father, took his money and he didn't consider his brother Dimitry, who was accused because of this crime. Although he committed suicide in the end, there was no regret or a higher meaning in his suicide.

So, for Dostoevsky, the disbelief in the immortality of the soul or, in other words, the disbelief in the existence of God causes immorality. The person, who doesn't believe in life after death, thinks that since he will completely lost when he dies, then he is not responsible for his acts. Also the lack of belief in immortality takes the person's will-to-live away. Because he can find no meaning in life since everything will be destroyed, will turn into zero. All of these consequences lead the one to test his freedom in many forbidden ways. After such a life, that person realizes that he cannot

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<sup>130</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*. . Harmondsworth: Peguin Books Ltd., 1958.

get satisfaction from anything. He decides to make one last attempt to demonstrate his free will. And he takes the decision of suicide.

I think Dostoevsky generally imagines a self-killer's story through this perspective. Consequently, it can be said that, according to him; if God does not exist, then everything is permitted. Then, as Wittgenstein states, if everything is permitted, then suicide is allowed. However, Dostoevsky wanted to believe in the existence of God and the immortality of the soul to feel his life as meaningful. That's why, it can be said that although he gives different meanings to the acts of suicides committed by his heroes and feels sympathy for most of them, he does not approve suicide. In other words, his situation is similar with that of Dante's. As an author, he may justify some suicides but as a Christian, he thinks suicide is not permitted. Dostoevsky and Dante, from the viewpoint of the conceptual framework I have stated in the introduction, fit best to the question: 'X means Y in context C to the person Z.' Here, all the heroes who committed suicide are individuals Zs, to which the meaning and the morality of suicide varies in different contexts.

## CONCLUSION

As I maintained in this thesis, there are different traditions about the ethics of suicide. Suicide has been accepted as an immoral act by monotheistic religions and also by many philosophers. These anti-suicide arguments can be generalized under three parts. At first, suicide is prohibited as a mortal sin against God by most of the philosophers who oppose suicide. Secondly, it is condemned to be socially harmful. And at last, suicide is accepted as an immoral act since it is against the nature.

The opposite tradition begins with Stoics and continues with some of the Enlightenment philosophers. I think David Hume is the most remarkable advocate of the right to commit suicide in the history of Philosophy. According to the philosophers that defense suicide, suicide is not immoral. Maybe it is sometimes unwise and it may cause needless suffering; but it can be rational and even heroic.

The difference between attitudes towards suicide is more understandable when we look at how death is regarded. According to Cavan, when death is regarded as a natural event like in pagan Greece and Rome, it is easy to justify suicide. However, the Christianity changed the attitude towards death and life and death became unnatural events that belonged to superhuman powers. This made suicide a forbidden act. For

Cavan, the individualism of the Renaissance again placed the right to die in the hands of the individual. He also argues that suicide is seen more natural during the periods of social disorganization:

The coincidence of outbreaks of suicide with periods of social disorganization. The decline of Grecian power, the fall of the Roman Republic, the freedom of the Renaissance all mark periods of change and of confusion when accustomed ways of doing and thinking were no longer adequate to meet the problems of the social situation in which people found themselves.<sup>131</sup>

The relation between the social situations and the philosophical views regarding suicide can be seen easily. In Greece, when the City was strong, suicide is condemned by Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle regards suicide as an unjust act towards society since by eliminating one citizen; it causes the weakening of the State. Then during the decline of Grecian power and the Roman Republic, many philosophers like Epicurus and Seneca thought that suicide was a heroic and rational act; it is condemned only if it is based on irrational reasons.

With the rise of Christianity and the authority of the Church, suicide was absolutely prohibited as the greatest sin. Both St Augustine and Aquinas have an important role in this condemnation. They oppose suicide strictly and their philosophical systems strengthen the Church's teachings. St. Augustine opposes suicide on the ground that it is a violation of the sixth commandment 'thou shalt not kill' and also it defies the will of God. Aquinas uses this theological opposition to suicide and moreover, he gives two

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<sup>131</sup> R. S. Cavan. *Suicide*. p. 23.

secular arguments against suicide; adding that suicide is also contrary to self and society.

With the rise of individualism and emphasis on freedom during the Renaissance, suicide is regarded as a personal choice by many philosophers. Hume wrote an essay about the subject, which was published after his death. Because, though it was relatively easier to defend the right to suicide, both the state's laws and the Church didn't change their strict opposition against suicide. In his essay, Hume showed the invalidity of most common anti-suicide arguments and tried to shift the ground of debates from theology to philosophy. This essay can be regarded as the classic statement of the Enlightenment viewpoint. I think this essay is a turning point in the ethics of suicide. That's why; I use it as my main source in this thesis.

Following Hume, Kant declared that suicide is always morally wrong. He opposed suicide mainly because of moral reasons. For him, the one who kills himself, treats himself as a thing and disposes of his humanity. He turns himself into a beast. That's why, suicide is a horrified act and it is contrary to the duties to self which is the highest duty. Also, he claimed that suicide is not permitted because one cannot perform any moral act after suicide. Along with several secular anti-suicide arguments, he maintained the tradition that God forbade suicide since human beings were the sentinels that are placed by him and should not leave their post until God would order.



In this thesis, I examined the philosophical attitudes towards suicide. I agree with Wittgenstein in that suicide is the pivot over which every ethical system turns. In order to understand a philosopher's ethical standpoint, it is necessary to investigate how he regards the question of the moral permissibility of suicide. This question is a small part of their ethical systems that throws light on the whole body.

Wittgenstein asks "is even suicide neither good nor evil?"<sup>132</sup>. Until Twentieth Century, it was hard to ask such a question, even for a philosopher. People used to think so for centuries. The moral permissibility of suicide has been one of the most important problems of history of Philosophy. Therefore, I intended to study this subject and find an answer to the question whether suicide is permitted or not. During my search for an answer, I found no sound argument that defends the prohibition of suicide. Of course, all the anti-suicide arguments were seemed strong enough under the religious and social circumstances of those ages. But, according to the present mentality, they are not convincing enough. In our age, suicide is generally accepted as a personal matter caused by some psychological or social problems. I do not think that suicide violates any duties towards God, society or self.

I think that suicide is neither good nor evil. So, it should be discussed in a different manner. As Schopenhauer says a person who commits suicide does not intend to rebel against God or violate something, but he only prefers death because the terrors of life outweighs the terrors of death. He

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<sup>132</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914-1916*, p.91

offers to regard suicide as an experiment- a question which man puts to nature, trying to force her to answer. The question is this: what change will death produce in a man's existence and in his insight into the nature of things? For him, it is clumsy experiment to make, for it involves the destruction of the very consciousness which puts the question and awaits the answer.<sup>133</sup>

So, as I have indicated at the introduction of this dissertation, it would be better to show its being a meaningless act and its absurdity to understand the nature of suicide. Because the moral theories of suicide are not satisfactory enough to demonstrate it as a moral or as an immoral act. Therefore, again as I have mentioned in the introductory part, any inquiry into the meaning and the morality of suicide, doesn't permit a conceptual framework of a Platonist kind such as 'What is the meaning and the morality of suicide?'

A proper conceptual framework for the meaning and the morality of suicide would require answers to questions like 'Why?', 'Where?', 'How?' and 'When?' Such a conceptual framework would be a Wittgensteinian one. This conceptual framework inquires into the question of 'X means Y in context C to the person Z', rather than any inquiry into the question 'The meaning of X is Y'. Here, X means either 'the meaning of suicide' or 'the morality of suicide'. It is with in the aforementioned conceptual framework that I have inquired in this dissertation, into the meaning and the morality of suicide.

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<sup>133</sup> A. Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p. 138

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