

SUICIDE: ITS MORAL, LEGAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSES

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ABSTRACT

Voluntary decision to take one's life is termed suicide. The issue of suicide has generated heated and controvertible argument as some were inclined to recommend suicide on certain grounds while others spoke vehemently against suicide. It is from the foregoing that this paper seeks to underscore some arguments for and against suicide taking into cognizance the moral posture regarding the subject matter (suicide). Does man's free moral agency license him to do anything even to include willful taking of his life? Is there any gain living when all hope is gone, or in the face of suffering a terminal and incurable disease? Sometimes one loses the essence of life and comes face to face with suicide as a better and only option. What is the socio-economic, political, legal and moral stand on suicide? These and more are the concern of this paper which in conclusion negates suicide.

Keywords: Suicide, Morality

INTRODUCTION

Morality often submits to actions that attune with the social norms and values of a given group of people or community. It bothers on praise worthy life style. It connotes a life of virtue as against vices. Conversely, immorality is the direct opposite of all said about morality. Unfortunately, these two aspects of ethics have generated heated and controversial debate on virtually every human issue to include suicide supposed to be spurnful morally appraised. The debate of suicide seems to have no bound as both scholars and even men in the street participate keenly. It is controversial in that, while some feel in the wake of unending difficulties or insurmountable pain and conflicts one could subscribe to suicide as a panacea, others are rather inclined to uphold that one should in no account intentionally take his or her life. This school of thought frowns at suicide and so considers it immoral. One will not but admits that, moral problems are perennial; hence we only attempt reconciliation with morality and eschew immorality. Moral problems are indeed multifarious, manifesting in discrete manner but whichever way it surfaces, it remains retrogressive to human relationship and social coexistence.

It could be the problem of an unmarried girl being pregnant itching to procure abortion, a cultist who could not satisfy the human demands incumbent on him by his sinisterous members, seeks to take his life through suicide; a patient with a terminal disease imploring for mercy killing (euthanasia) or a case of despair resulting from loss of prestige either as a student or public servant choosing suicide in his desperation to end its attendant ignominy. Admittedly, among many other, issues of life and death are the most serious and deserving of our attention. It could also be discerned that all efforts at different segment of time from a right frame of mind are geared towards the preservation of life. Also most rewarding and most consolidating are life's support programme.

It is in recognition of the sacredness of human life that the people of Yala see suicide as a taboo and that whosoever commits it automatically draws the entire family members to sacrilege and demands some sacrifices or deliverance conducted for the cleansing of said family. This is so because man to a large extent is a product of the society. A part from his biological frame, his ideas, values, norms attitudes derive from what he has internalized during the period of socialization. Man's total environment is arranged to imprint on him and to an extent tailored to assist him cope with moral problems facing or that may confront him in his milieu. His moral choices are predicated on the moral guidelines set up by the society. And sometimes in vain he tries to avoid situations of making decisions that affect his or her life and those of others. Again, sometimes beyond his wishes he is faced with the task of defining himself by the choices and actions he makes (retributive justice).

The society sets the standard by which an act can be judged moral or immoral and strives to ensure compliance to its norms, values and rules of conduct by its subjects. Though one acknowledges the apparent difficulties to subscribe tenaciously without violation to the moral standard by which the society sets because of its concomitant ambiguities, adherences to it is mostly profitable to the individual first and for the furtherance of communal life. Accordingly, Illori (1975:123) the reflective person begins to experience vague feelings of doubt and dissatisfaction with the everyday morality of our society as soon as he becomes aware of its many ambiguities and contradictions. And furthermore, these feelings usually are reinforced rather than presented by an extensive consideration of the conflicting values, which characterize our time. For not only is there a wide disparity between what is preached and what is practiced, there are also divergent positions being preached. Hence in order to maintain a constant adjustment to our many faceted society, it seems necessary to become a moral chameleon to change one's moral principles as rapidly as is necessary to conform to the standards and practice of our immediate surroundings. Illori's position

has given rise to where some philosophers argued that suicides are reprehensible in all circumstance. To which end this paper attempts to examine arguments in favour and against suicide. These arguments will be evaluated on the basis of Natural law, ethics, before advancing our recommendations, and drawing conclusion.

Literature Review

Conceptual Elucidation

Given the significance of this paper with the associated concepts involve, ("morality and "suicide"), we shall attempt at making the terms involve as clear and simple as possible.

Morality

The term "moral" took its root from the latin word "moralis" perhaps in the same manner ethics took from the Greek word "ethos" both moral and ethics refer to "custom or way of life". Many scholars use moral and ethics synonymously to depict a life that accords a system of code that is upheld in any given society. One is said to be moral if his actions conform to the acceptable standard of behaviour. Himmeifarb (1968:42) lend credence to this when he observes, "morality refers to free decision and the values upon which it is based and not to the resulting act in itself. The moral life has to do with the very core of personal existence and not with the externals and observable of existence". Similarly, Onimhawo (1999) defines morality as that which has to do neither with the overt act itself nor even necessarily with values consciously subscribed to in making decision but with the actual, often deeply hidden, motives which determine choices. When a man has to choose between right and wrong he makes a moral choice. The general agreement in a society on what is right and wrong in human conduct constitutes an ethnical system.

Suicide

According to Webster's Dictionary of English Language (1988:420), suicide is "the taking of one's own life; ruin brought on by ones' own actions". It entails the direct and deliberate taking of one's life done on one's authority. The act must itself be deliberate and intentional. Benhoeffter (1955:123-124) defines suicide as "the ultimate and extreme self justification of man as man, and it is therefore from the purely human stand point, in certain sense even the self accomplished expiation for a life that has failed". Suicide involves man's attempt to give a final human meaning to a life that has become humanly meaningless.

Among the Yala people of Cross River State, Nigeria suicide (Otu-oriokor) is a taboo and sacrilegious. According to Makinwa (2000:123), "In Uganda, poor people chose to die because death was more promising than life... if you missed the news, a total of about 1000 cult members of the movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandment of God committed suicide this year in Uganda...In France 12,000 people attempted suicide every 40 minutes. One out of every three French persons has experienced the trauma of having someone close to, committing suicide". There are numerous causes of suicide. They include frustration, poverty, impotence, fear, shameful events or acts, disagreement with parents, loses, hopelessness, alcoholism, drug abuse, terminal illness etc which often result in depression and despair.

In Japan, suicide is described as a national affliction and a problem of epidemic scale. In 1998, a record of 32, 863 suicides were reported, three times the number of traffic fatalities. The numbers are rising. Failure, no matter how you measure it, in business or farming is sufficient reason for many, especially men to take their lives and that of their families. Indeed, in Japan, death is seen as a way to preserve the honour of the family in conformity with tradition (Makinwa, 2000). In Africa, due to religious and cultural practices some young ladies committed suicide over their parents' refusal refusal to their choice of spouse. According to Simpson (1947) methods adopted in committing

suicide include drowning, fire arms, hanging, running to a moving vehicle, jumping from a height, suffocation, poisoning and self-inflicting wounds or cult. Some may even starve to death. With the waves of terrorists activities occasioned by religious and ideological extremism especially in the Middle East, suicide bombing has also become a popular way of taking one's life.

Sociological View of Suicide

Suicide is widely belief to be an individual act (Haralambos, Holborn & Heald, 2004). To sociologists suicide is more than just an individual act, but a function of the individual and the society. Durkheim argued that particular circumstances could lead to a person taking his or her life, but personal reason may not adequately explain suicide rate. Durkheim explained that industrialization in causing rural-urban shift, which is responsible for anonymity and impersonality, making many people to become isolated from the family and friends; and this could lead to frustration and suicide. He also associated high rate of suicide to group solidarity and societal stability (Tischler, 2002).

Durkheim established the relationship between suicides and social facts (Pope, 1976). He observed that suicide rate is high among protestant countries than in Catholic ones; that married people are prone to suicide than those who are single, and that married women who remained childless experience high incidence of suicide. Durkheim further observed that low suicide rate is associated with political upheavals and war. He argue that in Bavaria, Germany high education correlated with high levels of education, but this contrast with that of the Jews who had how suicide rate despite their high level of education (Haralambos, Holborn & Heald, 2004).

Durkheim identified four types of suicide viz Egoistic, anomic, altruistic and fatalistic guide. His classification of suicide was base on the belief that suicide rate is determined by the relationship between individuals and society especially the degree of individuals integration into social groups and the level to which society through set laws, roles, values, norms, morals, etc regulate individual behaviour (Tischler, 2004). According to Durkheim egoistic suicide occur as a result of individual sufficient integration into the society of social group (Berk, 2006). Anomic suicide occurs through its norms and value when society cannot sufficiently through its norms and value regulate individuals' behaviour; because of the rapid change occasioned by industrialization. Altruistic suicide occurs as a result of individuals over integration or affiliation to a social group or society to the extent that they can sacrifice themselves /life out of sense of duty. Fatalistic suicide this occurred when the individual is over regulated or control by social group or society (Giddens, 2006; Ritzer, 2008).

Suicide or suicidal behaviour is an act of responding to and try to solve problem. This behaviour is adopted when there seem to be no alternative solution to a problem (Baechler, 1979). Suicide here is classified base on the solution they offer and the situation in which they occurred (Haralambos, Holborn & Heald, 2004). Baechler (1979) therefore identified four types of suicide, viz; Escapist suicide this occurred when an individual takes his/her live to escape social, ills or grief. Aggressive suicide is carried out to harm other persons. Oblative suicides are undertaken by individuals who give up their lives to solve or save other people. While Ludic suicides when an individual embark on risks that could lead to death.

According to Taylor (1990), suicide can be classified into four, viz: submissive, thanatation, sacrifice and appeal suicides. Submissive suicide occurs when an individual is so certain about their life, believing that life is over and that there are dead alive. Consequently they submit to death by killing themselves. Thanatation suicide is the opposite of submissive suicide. It occurs when individuals are uncertain about themselves and their life. Sacrifice occurs when an individual feels he/she is treated unfairly or other have made their life unbearable. Victim of this type of suicide attribute the cause of their actions death to others. Appeal suicides occur when an individual is feeling uncertainty over other members of society's or social groups' attitude towards them (Haralambos, Holborn & Heald, 2004).

Arguments for Suicide

As noted earlier, opinion differs on the subject matter of suicide as could be examined in turn below. There are those whom though see suicide as morally wrong, still create obligatory grounds to commit suicide and advanced some arguments with moral backups in favour of suicide. Thus giving us the chance of raising the question whether man has the moral right to die or take his or her life.

Moral Right to Die on Account of Terminal Illness

Suicide is one of the ways in which people can exercise a right to die, refusal to eat, to life saving device, are some other methods victims of terminal and debilitating sickness, severe accident injuries, burn victims resort to, and claim they have a right to die of which any prevention of their intention to die is seen as a breach of their right to die. Accordingly Slater (1990:88), a British psychiatrist opines "that individuals do have a right to die and that some people with mental illness or an incurable physical illness may wish to exercise the right and should be allowed to do so. Reasons being that the chances of such people recovering from such illness is bleak rather with surmounting assurance that they will die hence be allowed to exercise a right to die in order to prevent avoidable suffering. Satris (1988:89) argues "Suicide is probably the most obvious way in which a right to die can be exercised, but we should also include cases in which people who refuse life saving or life-preserving medical techniques and subsequently die. Some people (example victims of terminal diseases, severe fire burn) refuse even food, with the idea that death will result...many people in these circumstances claim that they have a right to die, and they view the intervention of others even to help as an invasion and an intrusion upon their right.

Losses and Shameful Acts

Here suicide is argued to be morally right in the instance of losses or shameful events Mappes et al (1986: 341) citing R. B. Briand adumbrate among the problems that could be considered good and sufficient to end life in addition to serious or terminal illness, are events that could bring real shame or cause him to loss his prestige and status example reduction from affluence to poverty; loss of a limb or physical beauty; loss of sexual potency etc.

Self Justification and Meaninglessness of Life

This argument hinges on the fact that suicide is morally right when the individual in question cannot ascribe any meaning to his life given the high level of depression, no relief can be procured. Also, posited is the argument that a man's life belongs to him, hence he is at liberty to take it without denial. To lend credence to this, Bonhoeffer (1955:123) posits: "suicide is the ultimate and extreme self-justification of man as man, and it is therefore, from purely human stand point, in a certain sense event of self-accomplished expiation for a life that has failed.

Man as Free Agent

To those who see man as a free agent, suicide is morally permissible so far as the intending suicide does not violate the proprietary rights of others. For avoidance of ridding himself into disgrace, misfortune and torment, he is at liberty to rob himself of a full life.

Virtuous Suicide

This argument recommends suicide when a person can no longer live conformably to virtue and prudence is morally right to die. Altruistic suicide is also morally right. This is evidence when a person refuses to give information to an enemy camp in order not to endanger the lives of others; killing himself to save others is said to be morally justifiable.

Death Control

This argument sees death as being preferred to leading a life of suffering, misery, disgrace and degradation. So, suicide is herein right. Also, in the words of Slater, "Death is equal partner with birth in the renewal of life, for human societies for human kind, and indeed for the entire world of living things... He who does not accept and respect those who want to reject life does not truly accept and respect life itself; that, causing one's own death should be called suicide only by those who disapprove it; and should be called death control by those who approve of it" (Satris, 1988:94).

Appraising the various arguments in favour of suicide on grounds of terminal illness and shameful events are classified under emotivism. And to adopt feelings or emotions as the standard of morality will bring about chaos in society because there will be lots of competing feelings from every member of the society; the self-justification and meaninglessness of life, man as a free agent and death control arguments are equally emotivistic. However, the meaninglessness of life and virtuous arguments have utilitarian dimension. Emotivism and utilitarianism are not adequate in making or taking moral decisions on their bases. Ethical model predicated on cost and benefit analysis lacks the independent nature of the human person and therefore inadequate. Whichever of the aforementioned moral systems one adopts, it would be discovered that human values are being calculated quantitatively, without taking adequate account of the unified, hierarchical independent structure of the human person, its relation to a community and sharing higher values, or its openness to transcendence (Onimhawa, 1999 75).

Argument against Suicide

Every society has cultural prescriptions intended to be adhered to by its members. Unfortunately, not all do so. Consequently, the non-adherence to cultural prescriptions gives rise to deviant behaviour. As a result, the ideal of what to do and not to do, why certain behaviour patterns are to be preferred to certain others are as old as man. Therefore, having looked at the arguments in favour of suicide, it becomes pertinent to consider some objections to suicide below:

Suicide is Unhealthy Approach to the Problems of Life

Most people who opt to die are somehow begging for help in order to solve the problems of life. "If a man really does not wish to live, then we think he must be insane, and unfit therefore, to decide his own fate. It becomes our duty to save him first to save his life and then to cure his melancholy" (Slater cited in Satris, 1988:90). The import from the above is that the depressive situation occasioned by frustration, losses, shame, fear etc are not enough to warrant ones to commit suicide. After all there are societal approved means of coping with human problems not suicide.

Suicide Degrades Human Worth

Kant (1964) and Mappes, et al (1986) argue on the immoral nature of suicide, also that it degrades human worth. Granted that man is an image of God, he occupies a very special place in creation and to commit suicide reduces his nature below the level of animal nature hence man should abhor suicide.

Suicide is Against the Law of Self-Preservation

This argument proceeds from man's natural instinct of self-preservation so; killing oneself is a direct negation of this natural law of self. Egoists desire for self-promotion have the following in mind:

- Desire for one's own happiness
- Desire for self-preservation
- Desire for self-respect
- Desire to be a self of a certain kind

- Desire to get and keep property
- Desire for self assertion
- Desire for affection (Broad cited in Beauchamp, 1982:56).

Aquinas (cited in Iroegbu and Echekewebe, 2005:142) lend credence to this when he observe that “It is altogether unlawful to kill oneself, for three reason. First, because everything naturally loves itself, the result being that everything naturally keeps itself in being, and resists corruption as far as it can. Wherefore suicide is contrary to the inclination of nature and to charity whereby every man should love himself. Hence, suicide is always...contrary to the natural law and to charity”.

Suicide is an Act of Cowardice

“Suicide is a terrible aberration which is diametrically opposed to a well ordered self-love and the natural instinct of self-preservation. Suicide seen as an escape from overwhelming personal disaster, evil, life misery, frustration, or dishonour, far from being an act of fortitude, is an act of cowardice. Persons who take their lives under such circumstances have a fundamentally false view of life namely, that happiness in this life is man's last end. Suicide as an escape from being a burden to others also manifests the erroneous conception that the purpose of life is temporary felicity (Higgins: 140, 203).

Suicide Destroys the Basis of Morality

Kant (1964:85) observes that suicide destroys the basis of morality. He adds, when the subject of morality in one's person is destroyed, it means that morality itself is rooted out of existence.

Theological Objections

Suicide as a Sin of Lack of Faith

Suicide is declared wrongful because it is regarded as a sin of lack of faith. According to Bonhoeffer (1955:124) “If suicide must nevertheless be declared wrongful it is to be arraigned not before the forum of God. A man who takes his own life incurs guilt solely towards God the maker and master of his life. It is because there is a living God, that suicide is wrongful as a sin of lack of faith...lack of faith takes no account of the living God. That is the sin. There is no other cogent reason for the woefulness of suicide, but only the fact that over men there is God. Suicide implies a denial of this fact”.

Suicide Violates Theological Virtues of Hope and Charity

This argument footnotes on the Holy Scriptures, God insists in His supreme right, “I alone am God...who brings both death and life (Deut 32:39). Suicide is self-destruction, an offense against all virtues to include theological virtues of hope and charity. Virtue of hope is necessary to care for man's earthly vicissitudes, suffering, frustration etc without recourse to suicide. The future kingdom of God characterized by justice, peace community and love, provides the guidelines and motivation for Christians aspiration. New Dictionary of Theology (1988:360) adumbrates: But a Christian's hope is not utopian. He expects progress but not the perfection which will only come by God's own act at the final coming of Christ. He can cope with human failure without despair, because he trusts the God of hope whose kingdom is surely to come.

Suicide Violates God's Supremacy

This argument proceeds from the fact that God is the creator and Lord of life. Kant (1964:91, 140) rightly observes: But suicide is in no circumstance permissible. Humanity is one's own person as inviolable; it is a holy trust, man is master of all else, but he must not lay hands upon himself...man can only dispose over things ... if he disposes over himself, he treats his value as that of a beast. Man

is placed on earth under certain conditions and for specific purposes. The act of suicide therefore opposes the very purposes of the creator. To St. Augustine and others, God prohibits suicide and that we are under obligation to obey a divine command. It is true that Christian theology, Islamic theology, sacred writings and African theology condemn suicide in all ramifications.

Legal Objection to Suicide

Under the Nigeria law, a successful suicide is not an offence. However, section 326 of the laws of the Federation of Nigeria provides that any person who:

- a. Procures another to kill himself; or
- b. Counsels another to kill himself and thereby induces him to do so; or
- c. Aids another in killing himself, is guilty of a felony, and liable to imprisonment for life (716).

Also, section 327 of the criminal code of law provides for attempting to commit suicide, it states;

“Any person who attempts to kill himself is guilty of misdemeanor and is liable to imprisonment for one year (716)”. It is adjudged to be morally wrong and inhuman before God hence left to be punished by God. The law forbids suicide but it must be noted that culprits are always not alive to face the wrath of the law.

As could be observed in consideration of some of the objections to suicide, seen as an unhealthy response or approach to the problems of life falls within the context of utilitarianism, which has been criticized in some quarters for reducing human values to quantitative terms (Imaekhai, 2005: 140); suicide degrades human worth can be categorized under Kant's formalism. This ethical model is also inadequate because it cannot solve the problem of how to determine our duty when two or more duties are in conflict; self-preservation argument is explainable within the context of egoism instead of natural law ethics. As we know, egoism seldom farewell among philosophers, variously adjudged to be improvable, false, inconsistent and at variance with morality; the lack of faith argument, the violation of theological virtues of hope and charity, violation of God's supremacy or sovereignty are lucid within the context of natural law ethics, which is more adequate in handling issues of morality as it imposes real obligation as well as taking cognizance of man's worth and dependence.

Recommendations

We recommend the following as possible means of curbing the incidence of suicide in our society:

1. Inculcation of proper human values and moral education on our children, the home, schools, socialization agencies, churches etc is intensified.
2. Those traditional values, among which life is held sacred, be upheld.
3. Government at all levels should be people-oriented, create employment opportunities, eradicate or curb poverty, depression from the citizenry, viable programmes that will take care of the productive sector of the economy.
4. Government should be concern about human resource development.
5. Hard and dangerous drugs such as: cocaine, heroin, marijuana etc should as much as possible be eradicated.
6. Government effort should be directed towards channeling the energy of our vibrant youths adequately and gainfully to avoid youth restiveness.

Conclusion

The study reveals that life is meaningful and sacred and does not possess its right in itself, but only in God. Also, man's dignity is upheld by his freedom which must be used with a sense of responsibility and faith in God. Suicide must be abhorred; willful self killing for any reason is

sacrilegious. A life of challenges is what showcases the real essence of man's ingenuity, and subordination to his creator God. To commit suicide is degrading and an act of cowardice.

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