

Different views on suicide philosophy essay



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For some, suicide represents the ultimate sacrifice, be it for love, religion or a political cause. For others it is the ultimate release, an escape from the earthly prison to which we are confined at birth. Whatever it represents to the individual, a range of great thinkers agree that it must be the effect on those around you that is afforded the greatest consideration when it comes to justifying suicide.

From an existentialist viewpoint is “ essential to die unreconciled [to the absurdity of the world] and not of one’s own free will” (Camus). To die of one’s own free will, for Camus, would be a repudiation of one’s responsibility to oneself. Immanuel Kant argues in agreement with Camus in his work *Fundamental Principles of The Metaphysic of Morals* arguing that “ He who contemplates suicide should ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself.” However Kant’s theory looks at the act only, and not at its outcomes and consequences. If you deem suicide to be permissible you would then have to think whether you would be willing to universalise the act: to claim everyone should behave that way. Clearly this is ridiculous, thus he rubbishes the notion of suicide outright. Kant argues that if a person chooses to commit suicide one is using oneself as a means to satisfy oneself, but a person cannot be used “...merely as means, but must in all actions always be considered as an end in himself.” Therefore, it is unethical to commit suicide to satisfy oneself. Hobbes and Locke, two eminent deontologists also argue that suicide is fundamentally impermissible on the grounds that that natural law forbids every man “ to do, that which is destructive of his life, or take away the

means of preserving the same." Breaking this natural law is irrational and immoral and by extension so it suicide.

Veering slightly away from the philosophical but towards the religious temporarily it is quickly noted that many religions are fundamentally opposed to suicide on the grounds that life is a God given gift and thus to destroy it is to disregard that God's love. However, both Christianity and Islam are conducive to martyrdom; the line is very thin between suicide, martyrdom and self-sacrifice in the eyes of many religious organisations. Here cynics will claim that the Church (or other religious organisation of your choice) is simply using the lives of its followers to glorify itself however I disagree, there is a marked difference between the taking of one's life to escape life and the taking of one's life for a higher purpose.

Despite what you may think, the majority of schools of philosophy conclude that it is justifiable - if not encouraged - to commit suicide under the right circumstances. Asian subcultures, although not schools of thought, are powerful advocates of 'honourable' suicide, portraying it as a privilege of only the highest ranking males. In this case suicide is seen as honourable and brave as opposed the cowardly act it is seen as in Western culture.

Nihilists are very simplistic regarding this topic, they take the view that since nothing matters, nothing means anything, suicide doesn't matter, life doesn't matter, so there's no reason for you not to commit suicide.

Whereas existentialists would argue that suicide is a somewhat permanent solution to a temporary issue (if suicide is motivated solely by personal problems) Leonard Peikoff argues suicide is justified when man's life, owing

to circumstances outside of a person's control, is no longer possible; an example might be a person with a painful terminal illness, or a prisoner in a concentration camp who sees no chance of escape. In cases such as these, suicide is not necessarily a philosophic rejection of life or of reality. On the contrary, it may very well be their tragic reaffirmation. Self-destruction in such contexts may amount to the tortured cry: "Man's life means so much to me that I will not settle for anything less. I will not accept a living death as a substitute." Idealists tend to use the allegory, comparing ending one's life, when subject to great suffering, to waking up from sleep when experiencing a terrible nightmare. However, most suicides are seen as an act of the will, as it takes place when one denies life's pains, and is thus different from ascetic renunciation of the will, which denies life's pleasures.

Liberalism asserts that a person's life belongs only to them, and no other person has the right to force their own ideals that life must be lived. Rather, only the individual involved can make such decision, and whatever decision they make should be respected. Philosopher and psychiatrist Thomas Szasz goes further, arguing that suicide is the most basic right of all. If freedom is self-ownership-ownership over one's own life and body-then the right to end that life is the most basic of all. If others can force you to live, you do not own yourself and belong to them. Jean Améry, in his book *On Suicide: a Discourse on Voluntary Death* provides a moving insight into the suicidal mind. He argues forcefully and almost romantically that suicide represents the ultimate freedom of humanity, justifying the act with phrases such as "we only arrive at ourselves in a freely chosen death" and lamenting "ridiculously everyday life and its alienation".

Philosophical thinking in the 19th and 20th century has led, in some cases, beyond thinking in terms of pro-choice, to the point that suicide is no longer a last resort, or even something that one must justify, but something that one must justify not doing. Many forms of Existentialist thinking essentially begin with the premise that life is objectively meaningless, and proceed to the question of why one should not just kill oneself; they then answer this question by suggesting that the individual has the power to give personal meaning to life. Confucianism holds that failure to follow certain values is worse than death; hence, suicide can be morally permissible, and even praiseworthy, if it is done for the sake of those values. The Confucian emphasis on loyalty, self-sacrifice, and honour has tended to encourage altruistic suicide. Confucius wrote, " For gentlemen of purpose and men of ren while it is inconceivable that they should seek to stay alive at the expense of ren, it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have ren accomplished."

Summarising all these arguments is a somewhat tricky task giving the wide-ranging nature of the opinion, however I think it is fair to say from this that an individual does have the right to take one's own life however it is the responsibility of the individual to consider the effect this will have on those around them. A popular family man going through a rough patch at work should not commit suicide, whereas a soldier in the field of combat should be prepared to lay his life down for his colleagues and the cause for which he is fighting to give but a pair of examples. However, when it comes down to it, our lives are in our hands and our hands only however the hands of a

suicidal mind are often shaky and emotionally charged. Do we even have any free will anyway?