

# Suicide as Protest

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In the afternoon of January 16, 1969, Jan Palach, a 20-year-old student of history and political economics, walked onto the busy Wenceslas Square in the New Town of Prague. Without saying anything, he doused himself with gasoline, lit a match, and set fire to his clothes. Three days later, he died of his burns in a hospital. Palach did not kill himself because he was ill or depressed or because his future did not hold promise for him – on the contrary, he was on his way to become a member of the elite. Instead, he killed himself to protest the political repression that followed the August 1968 Warsaw Pact military invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the apathy of his fellow citizens in the face of it. Hoping to inspire resistance to censorship and oppression, he signed his letter to the public as “the first torch”.<sup>1</sup>

Palach’s act exemplifies many characteristic features of a protest suicide. While suicide is typically associated with personal despair, people do sometimes kill themselves in the hope or expectation that their death will advance a political cause by way of its impact on the conscience of others, or in extreme cases simply as an expression of protest against a status quo felt to be unjust. In this chapter, I discuss the nature of suicide as protest, its characteristic instrumental function in mobilizing resistance and directing attention, the exceptional nature of merely expressive protest suicide, and some potential motivations. I then turn to the ethics of protest suicide. I argue that when the value of the aim pursued by way of instrumental protest suicide is great enough and publicly killing oneself is near enough the only way to bring it about, instrumental protest suicide can be a morally permissible and even admirable act of self-sacrifice. Some of the standard moral objections to

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<sup>1</sup> For information about Palach’s suicide and its context, see <https://www.janpalach.cz/en/default/index>.

suicide do not apply to such cases – but at the same time, novel ethical questions arise concerning manipulateness and using oneself as a means for the greater good. Even purely expressive protest suicides, which are not intended to result in desirable social change but simply amount to fundamental refusal to accept submission to injustice, can possibly manifest a kind of virtue. This might serve as a kind of moral excuse, if not justification. Finally, I will argue that killing oneself as a protest can contribute to the meaningfulness of one's life, if the cause is good enough and the act is suitably related to it. However, both in terms of meaning and ethics in general, suicide remains a supremely risky choice, both because one might be mistaken about the worth of one's cause and because even these extreme acts typically have limited effect.

### **1. Instrumental and Expressive Protest Suicide**

As a type of suicide, protest suicide involves intentionally bringing about one's own death, typically by way of performing an action that amounts to killing oneself, though I take it that arranging oneself to be killed by another – for example, by stepping in front of a tank – can also constitute a suicide. The distinguishing mark of a *protest* suicide is evidently its *aim*. As has often been observed, people almost always kill themselves in order to achieve something beyond death itself, for example to end one's suffering. In protest suicide, the aim is, minimally, to protest against something. Here are some of the targets of the hundreds of social and political protest suicides in recent decades, drawn largely from Wikipedia<sup>2</sup>:

Persecution of or discrimination against a group (Buddhists, Tamils, Tatars, Kurds, women in Iran)

Government corruption (Tunisia, Bulgaria, US, Thailand)

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<sup>2</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_political\\_self-immolations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_self-immolations).

Political system (military dictatorship in Greece, communist Romania, Belarus, Russia)

Economic system/labour practices (France<sup>3</sup>, China<sup>4</sup>, South Korea)

War (Vietnam, Iraq, invasion of Czechoslovakia) / peace (Israel, Korea) / occupation (Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Basque country, Tibet, Udmurtia, Northern Ireland)

Refugee policy (Australia)

Unemployment (Turkey)

But what is it to protest? Etymologically, the English word is derived from the Latin *protestari*, meaning roughly ‘to bear public witness’. And it does seem that protesting has an essential link to publicity. Fundamentally, to protest is to act in a way that expresses firm opposition or objection to something in a more or less public context. Interestingly, when it comes to the manner of expressing opposition, there seems to be a difference between the semantic content of the verb “to protest” and the noun “a protest”. It is natural enough to say that a member of parliament ‘protested’ that a proposed law would have bad consequences if she simply made an argument to that effect. But to report presenting such an argument by saying that “There was a protest against the law at the parliament today” would be false or at least highly misleading. The same goes for talk of ‘holding’ or ‘staging’ or ‘engaging in’ a protest. Talk of engaging in a protest at least connotes action that goes *beyond* verbal expression of dissent. Indeed, it seems to me that we characteristically engage in *a* protest when we have given up trying to persuade the powers-that-be by way of reasoned argument – when *they* are not willing to change their minds about something that matters to us and that

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<sup>3</sup> Waters 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Foxconn workers against labor practices; Chan and Ngai 2010.

we are not willing to change *our* minds about. It is protesting in this narrow staging-a-protest sense that goes beyond arguing against something that is the topic of this chapter.

One aspect of my definition of a protest is its *publicity*. On this view, when we talk of inner or inward protest, we mean having the kind of attitude that protesting expresses, an attitude of being set against something. One indication that having such an attitude falls short of actually protesting is that if someone did nothing when their expressing opposition against something bad might have made a difference, we would not let them off the hook on the grounds that they did inwardly protest. It is more natural to say that they did not, in fact, protest the bad thing, even though they were opposed to it and could have protested. (They may, of course, have a good excuse.)

We can protest against many sorts of things. One kind of protest that we can set aside here is protesting against *someone* on account of their *having done* something. It may be, as several philosophers have recently argued, that *blame* essentially involves modifying our relationship to its target as protest against what they did (Smith 2013). But what is of interest here is what I will call *social* protest. Its object is not, at least in the first instance, an individual wrongful act, but rather a *practice* or an *institution* or a *norm* or a *policy*, something that continues to exist and have an impact that is perceived to be morally unacceptable by the protester. No wonder, then, that blame is secondary to this sort of protest. Even when we say that people march ‘to protest an unjust killing’ (such as that of George Floyd or Anna Politkovskaya), what makes the event a social protest is that the real target is the whole institution or practice that is behind such killings or turns a blind eye to them.

There are a lot of things that we can do as a protest against a practice or policy – that is to say, a lot of ways of publicly expressing our attitude of firm opposition to it beyond verbal argument. I have mentioned marching against something. But people can also resign, withdraw advertising, boycott a product, wear certain type or colour of clothing, or sign a

public letter, and do many other things besides. What unites such acts of protest seems to be just that they are publicly recognizable as expressions of resistance in their context, either because they have a *negative causal effect* on their target (in cases like boycotting or resigning from an institution) or because they conventionally or non-conventionally *symbolize* opposition (an example of the latter might be wearing the colours of the Ukrainian flag in Russia while the countries are at war, or holding up a blank piece of paper to symbolize restrictions on free speech). These acts of protest are typically intended to be *instrumental* in the sense that they seek not only to make one's opposition to the target known to others, but also to *invite* (or *incite*) the audience to join in the opposition by drawing their attention to the problem and arousing emotion, and thereby promote the desired change.

Sometimes these forms of social protest are effective, but often they fail. Typically we can somehow live with such failure. But for some people in some circumstances that is not the case. Instead, they decide to take the protest to the extreme of killing themselves. I will focus here on cases that are 'pure' in three ways. First, there is no aim to kill *others* as well as oneself. This rules out suicide bombers. Second, death is *intended* by the suicide. This arguably rules out hunger strikers such as Bobby Sands, who use their own suffering and gradual wasting away as a means of pushing their demands, and as it were make a bet on their life, accepting death if nothing less works. Third, I will focus on cases in which death is not in the narrowly understood self-interest of the suicide, so that they would not be killing themselves if not for the social and political situation perceived as unjust.

So, in the paradigm case of *instrumental protest suicide*, the suicide thinks that some policy or practice simply has to change, and they are willing to sacrifice themselves "in order to inspire [resistance] among half-hearted activists and apathetic bystanders", as Hyojoung Kim (2008, 573) puts it, and perhaps guilt in the perpetrators. In one of the few existing discussions of this type of suicide, David Wood labels it "expressively instrumental", and

emphasizes that the effects of one's death depend on its being recognized as self-inflicted, so that a natural death at the same moment would not have the same consequences (Wood 1980, 154). As Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp says, an instrumental protest suicide can be seen as a form of rhetoric, "a method to persuade others of the importance or correctness of a cause, a symbolic means to 'induce to attitude or action' those who are left behind." (Jorgensen-Earp 1987, 83; as noted above, I think talk of 'persuasion' is misleading). Since death is not in the self-interest of pure protest suicides, we may presume that they would not resort to this means of changing people's minds unless they believe other means are exhausted. For example, by the time Palach set himself on fire, the Warsaw Pact occupation of Czechoslovakia that he found intolerable had been going on for almost half a year, and other forms of protest, such as posters and student meetings, had not made a dent – indeed, at least in Palach's eyes, resignation had set in for most of the populace.

One clear indication that a protest suicide is intended to be instrumental is that it is performed in a manner, place, and time that the suicide has good reason to believe will reach a large audience, who will understand the message that the suicide is sending. Palach, for example, wrote several letters (to authorities, media, and friends) explaining his action, and performed the act at a busy time in a central location, and in a dramatic manner that was certain to catch the attention of bystanders and shock people who read or heard about it.<sup>5</sup> In her discussion of protest suicide as a form of rhetoric, Jorgensen-Earp suggests that the manner of killing oneself can also carry symbolic significance related to the cause:

Morrison and LaPorte [Americans who set themselves on fire to protest the war in Vietnam] were seen as joining themselves with the deaths by napalm in Vietnam; the hunger striker, MacSwiney [who went on hunger strike to protest British captivity of

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.janpalach.cz/en/default/jan-palach/priprava>.

Irish freedom fighters], could be seen as representing the slow, wasting death which is that of a society without freedom (1987, 85; cf. Kim 2008, 570).

Similarly, Palach's self-immolation echoed the burning at stake of the Czech reformer Jan Hus, in front of whose statue his body lay in state for several days (Andriolo 2006, 106).

Suppose, then, that instrumental protest suicide is performed in a way that captures the attention of an audience. In order to be effective in bringing about social or political change, it must then make a difference to the audience's behavior. We should distinguish between two mechanisms for this. First, the suicide may simply *focus attention* not just on itself but also on the issue that motivated it, and consequently result in *questioning* the practice and its justification, which in turn may lead to its rejection. For example, the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức in 1963 certainly brought the topic of persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government to the global political agenda, leading the US to press for better treatment and contributing to President's Diệm's fall.

Second, and probably most importantly, a protest suicide may prompt an *emotional response* in its audience or audiences. This is one point where it is important to emphasize that an instrumental suicide has *many different audiences*: people in the suicide's own group, those upholding the target institution or practice, and third parties. (There may be an overlap between the first two.) Insofar as the suicide focuses attention not just on the practice but also its wrongness or bad consequences (the leading thought may be "P is so horrible that people are willing to die rather than live under it!"), the natural emotional response is some form of *righteous anger*, such as indignation, towards the 'villain' (Jorgensen-Earp 1987, 61) responsible for the practice. Such feelings are apt to motivate members of the group and third parties to join in resistance to the practice – though it is highly contingent how strong and lasting this motivation is. Insofar as suicide focuses attention on one's own failures – either as

a member of the group who could have resisted more, participant in the oppressive institution or practice, or a third party who could have done more to help – the natural emotional response is *shame* or *guilt*. The latter, in particular, motivates reparative action. And while the action tendency of individual shame is to hide, when it is felt collectively, and mutually known to be felt so, it seems it can also motivate collective action to remove its stain.

Hyojoung Kim (2002), who found that shame for one's own inaction was the most commonly expressed emotion at the graveside of a South Korean suicide protester, proposes that shame achieves this by raising the salience of one's common identity with the suicide (e.g. as an activist or as a student), thus boosting associated motivation.

So far, I have talked about instrumental protest suicide, whose distinguishing feature is that the suicide is chosen at least in part as a *means to the end* of promoting a cause by way of its anticipated effects on the audience. As I have been suggesting, I do not think this is the case for all protest suicides. Some of them can be categorized as merely *expressive* in that the agent has no further purpose beyond making public their attitude of opposition to a policy or practice. This is not to say that they are necessarily expressive actions in the sense introduced by Rosalind Hursthouse (1991). Hursthouse argued that such emotion-motivated actions, such as rolling around in one's dead husband's clothes in grief, are not performed for a reason, but simply manifest being in the grip of an emotion. As Monika Betzler emphasizes, this sort of expressive action is not undertaken even *in order to* express one's emotion, but is simply the causal result of having the emotion: "emotional states are not deliberately endorsed but just cause the agent to act" (Betzler 2009, 274). It is hard to believe that protest suicides are ever expressive in this merely causal sense – after all, it takes a fair bit of design to make the relevant preparations to set oneself on fire, especially when one does not do so in the comfort of one's own home. Instead, they are expressive in that while thought goes into



how to best make one's fundamental objection to some policy or institution public, there is no further aim of inciting others to act.

While it is difficult in practice to be certain of a suicide's communicative intentions, the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's protest suicide may well be a purely expressive one. Bouazizi was a poor street seller whose life was a constant struggle. On the morning of December 17, 2020, he was harassed by the police who tried to extort money from him and confiscated his scales. He tried to complain to his local governor, who refused to hear his complaints. In response, Bouazizi bought a can of gasoline, stood in the middle of the traffic outside the governor's office, and shouted "How do you expect me to make a living?" He then poured the gasoline over himself and lit himself on fire, suffering burns to 90% of his body and dying in a coma a few weeks later.<sup>6</sup> It is at least possible that Bouazizi was not in any way aiming to change the corrupt system, but simply to make it very public that he could not live within it. (Ironically, his protest suicide turned out to be one of the most consequential ones, sparking large protests that caused the collapse of the government and indirectly inspiring what is known as the Arab Spring of 2011.)

Let me summarize the results of this section. I propose that there are the following two basic types of social or political protest suicide:

*Instrumental Protest Suicide*

S commits an instrumental protest suicide if S sees to it that she dies in a manner that is, by her lights, apt to convey to an audience that she is firmly opposed to a policy, practice, institution, or norm and to inspire similar opposition in the audience by way of drawing their attention to what is wrong (or its wrongness) and/or by triggering negative emotion towards the target.

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<sup>6</sup> I'm drawing on [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohamed\\_Bouazizi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohamed_Bouazizi).

*Expressive Protest Suicide*

S commits an expressive protest suicide if S sees to it that she dies in a manner that is, by her lights, apt to convey to an audience that she is firmly opposed to a policy, practice, institution, or norm.

One practically and scientifically important question that I will only briefly discuss here is *why* people commit protest suicides of one kind or another. Psychologists and sociologists offer a wide range of answers to this question. In his classic study *Suicide*, Émile Durkheim distinguishes between egoistic, altruistic, and anomic suicides. In terms of this distinction, protest suicide best fits into the category of altruistic suicide, suicide for the sake of others, which also includes cases like old people killing themselves to avoid being a burden. Durkheim's general thesis is that just as egoistic suicide is explained by excessive individuation, altruistic suicide is explained by insufficient individuation, characteristic of 'primitive' societies: "When man has become detached from society, he encounters less resistance to suicide in himself, and he does so likewise when social integration is too strong" (1897/2005, 175). In this vein, Spehr and Dixon (2013) argue that protest suicides are explained by "collective over-regulation", while Steve Taylor emphasizes "complete *attachment* to something outside the self" (1982, 191).

Naturally, for social pressure or identification with a group to account for protest suicide, it must be something encouraged or demanded by the group's ideals. As Simanti Lahiri observes in her study of protest suicides in Southeast Asia, "cases of individual suicide protest are much more rare than those that are embedded within a social or political organization" (2015, 272). For example, Thich Quảng Đức's famous self-immolation in 1963 was preceded by a debate among the Buddhist activists, who ended up carefully orchestrating the spectacle of his death (Biggs 2005, 179-180). Different attitudes towards self-sacrifice in

religious traditions seem to play an important background role here – even if those who kill themselves are not religious, protest suicides are much more common in Hindu and Buddhist cultures than others (Biggs 2005, 186).

While some of these psychological explanations arguably pathologize protest suicides – it’s one thing to say that one is attached to one’s group and another to say that one is *over-*regulated by the collective – there are also studies that capture their motivations more directly. For example, Park (1994) examined materials left behind by 17 Korean protest suicides. As Hyojoung Kim summarizes these findings, the self-immolators

had strong and uncompromising personal beliefs in right and wrong, had a great sense of sympathy for the oppressed, possessed a sense of moral urgency for immediate action, and viewed themselves as the moral conscience of the country, the rightful representative of oppressed people, and agents of history. (Kim 2008, 546)

At least from the first-person perspective, then, these suicide protesters were driven mainly by urgent moral considerations related to resistance to oppression, and not merely any sort of attachment to others.

## **2. The Ethics of Protest Suicide**

Let us now turn from the nature and types of protest suicide to its ethics. As with suicide in general, the basic question is whether and when it is *morally permissible*. However, since protest suicides are often performed for the sake of others and at a significant cost to oneself, it is also relevant to ask whether they can be *morally good* or *admirable*. It is surely beyond the call of duty, after all, to set yourself on fire to get others to do what they should do anyway. In the next section, I will turn to the related question of whether they can contribute to the meaningfulness of the suicide’s life.

As other chapters of this handbook reveal, the spectrum of philosophical answers to the question about the permissibility of suicide run the gamut from extremely permissive libertarian views, on which at least competent adults are permitted to end their lives for any reason, to sanctity-of-life views, on which suicide is never permissible. On either of these extreme views, there is nothing interesting to say about protest suicide in particular, since it will automatically be either permissible or prohibited, regardless of its motivations and circumstances.

I will thus take as my starting point a moderate view, on which suicide is sometimes but not always morally permissible. The kind of view that I find appealing in general holds that one must have *sufficient morally relevant reason* to kill oneself to override the *default moral reason* against doing so. To be sure, in the abstract, this view is not very informative, since its implications depend on further views about what we have reason to do, and what makes such reasons morally relevant and sufficient to override the default moral reason against suicide. So let us make some independently plausible assumptions about these matters. To begin with, some of our morally relevant reasons derive from self-interest.<sup>7</sup> We have some reason to do things that are in themselves good for us (that is, constituents of our well-being) or promote what is in itself good for us, where promotion is to be understood very broadly, including being part of a necessary condition for the good. The strength of these reasons depends on how good the activity or its product are for us, and the extent to which the activity realizes or promotes it. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same goes for ill-being and prudential reasons against something. It follows that we have more prudential reason to live than to die (only) as long as our future holds more of what is good for us than what is bad for us. I assume, as most people do, that our prudential reasons are morally relevant, so that even

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<sup>7</sup> I will assume that these reasons do *not* depend on our actual beliefs and desires, briefly because falsely believing that an act would promote an end gives no reason to perform the act (though it might subjectively rationalize it), and the same goes for desiring something that isn't desirable (see e.g. Parfit 2011).

though some option might be morally best, it can be morally permissible for us not to do it if it is harmful enough to us (for example, we do not have to donate half of our income to charity even though it would be morally best, because it would be too demanding to do so).

One kind of reason people typically have against killing themselves is thus that it would deprive them of future goods. But I am willing to assume that there is also a different kind of reason against killing oneself that derives from one's special kind of *value as a person* rather than from self-interest. David Velleman (1999) defends this Kantian view on the basis that what is good or bad for a person is worth caring about only insofar as the person himself merits concern, so that "A person's good has only hypothetical or conditional value, which depends on the value of the person himself" (1999, 611). Following Kant, Velleman then argues that all persons do have unconditional value or dignity in virtue of their rational capacities, which allow them to achieve a kind of freedom from the natural order that commands respect.

In virtue of their dignity, then, everyone, themselves included, must treat persons only in ways that are compatible with their exercising their rational autonomy – as ends in themselves and never as mere means, as Kant famously put it. On Velleman's view, killing oneself on the grounds that one's life is not worth living amounts to "trading one's person in exchange for benefits, or relief from harms", which is morally impermissible, because it "denigrates the value of personhood" (1999, 614). It is not that Velleman thinks the Kantian view always prohibits suicide. If the agent suffers so much that her personality disintegrates, or that her capacity for rational deliberation is undermined by relentless and exclusive focus on ending unbearable pain, she loses the capacities forming the basis of dignity.<sup>8</sup> On

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<sup>8</sup> For criticism of Velleman's arguments, see especially Cholbi (2010), who presents an alternative Kantian account of when suicide is permissible – roughly, the idea is that it suffices for loss of dignity if the agent is no longer capable of forming a rational plan of life, or a conception of the good, which can happen e.g. in cases of nihilist depression.

Velleman's take, then, suicide becomes acceptable only when a person can no longer live with dignity, in the "twilight of his autonomy" (1999, 618–619).

I think this kind of non-consequentialist argument must be taken seriously. But we can accept the appealing idea that there is value that *inheres* in us that is not merely value *for* us, and which we ourselves as well as others must respect, without accepting the radical Kantian thesis that our self-interest cannot in any way be weighed against the value of *our continued existence*. As Frances Kamm put it, it "may be that a person's not being in pain does not have greater value than the *person* has [...], but it has greater value than the *continuing existence of the person*." (2013, 87, my emphasis) As she emphasizes, our interests can outweigh the value of our continued existence without thereby outweighing *our* value. Respecting our own inherent value, then, may call for ending our life when continuing to live would degrade our autonomy or otherwise be bad enough. We can thus say that there is a default moral reason against suicide, which derives not from self-interest but from dignity, but which can nevertheless be outweighed by prudential reasons (as well as potentially other moral reasons, as we will see).<sup>9</sup>

On the basis of what I've said so far, ('egoistic') suicide is morally permissible when the prudential pro-reasons deriving from future ill-being are strong enough to outweigh the moral con-reasons deriving from our dignity. As I have noted, this presupposes that our moral obligations are sensitive to costs to ourselves, and that it makes sense to weigh prudential reasons against moral ones. Suicide could be in one's self-interest even if the prudential pro-reasons do not outweigh the moral con-reasons, but when they do so, it will also be what one has all-things-considered most reason to do. Assuming that rationality requires, roughly,

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<sup>9</sup> For completeness, I should also mention that people typically also have a moral reason not to kill themselves because they have special obligations to others, such as children, partners, or their whole community, that they could not then fulfil (see e.g. Kant 1999, 547) – the same kind of reasons people have not to empty their bank account and begin a new life in Thailand.

doing what we have most reason to do in the light of our evidence, suicide can also be also all-things-considered *rational* in these circumstances, when one has the relevant evidence about them.

### *Arguments For and Against Protest Suicide*

When we turn to protest suicide, the picture is in some ways importantly different. Protest suicides are often *not* in the agent's self-interest, after all. What sorts of considerations, then, might outweigh the default moral reason against suicide, as well as the (likely) self-interested reasons to stay alive? Let us focus on the central case of *instrumental protest suicide*. (I will briefly come back to expressive suicide below.) Consider Palach's case again. What reason did he have to kill himself, and to do so in the way he did? Roughly, the reason he at least thought he had was that his self-immolation would promote the end of bringing back 'socialism with a human face' in Czechoslovakia. After all, we plausibly have a reason to do what would promote a valuable end. The strength of such reasons for action depends both on the value of the end and the extent to which the action would promote it. Roughly speaking, an action promotes an outcome to the extent that the outcome is more likely given the action than without it (Lin 2018). Evidently, however high the value of the end is, if killing oneself makes it only a little bit more likely than it would have been anyway, the value gives only a weak reason for killing oneself, a reason easily outweighed by one's reasons to live. And even if killing oneself does considerably promote a good end, the reason it provides for suicide is outweighed if some less costly means is equally or more efficient.

Since there are both prudential and moral reasons against protest suicide, for it to be morally justified, evidently

- a) the end the act would promote must be very valuable,
- b) the act must promote it to a great extent, and

- c) there cannot be other efficient means with lesser cost to the same end.

There is a *prima facie* case to be made that these conditions can be met, and indeed plausibly are met in *some* actual cases of protest suicide. First, insofar as we are not absolutists about the value of human life, it does seem possible that there are causes worth (deliberately) dying for, such as saving or significantly improving the lives of very many other people. Second, when it comes to efficiency, it does seem in retrospect that some protest suicides have been effective in bringing about desirable social change by way of shaking the world's conscience. And finally, it is rare for people or groups to resort to protest suicide until they have exhausted other feasible options – though ascertaining this is naturally difficult both beforehand and afterwards.

In addition to this *prima facie* case, one consideration in favour of the permissibility of protest suicide in some situations is that some of the standard objections against egoistic suicide do not apply to it. Consider, first, that if we set aside the notion that life is sacred, the strongest objection to suicide seems to be the Kantian one that it is a violation of our own dignity to destroy our own life to avoid a bad future for ourselves. As Kant himself sees it, neither the “highest degree of well-being” nor “the most excruciating pains and even irremediable bodily sufferings” can “give a man the authority to take his own life” (Kant 1997, 369). However, since protest suicide does not involve this sort of trade-off, it is evident that the objection does not apply in this form. (But dignity will still raise an issue, as we will see.)

A related classic objection is that suicide is *cowardly*. It was already put forth by Aristotle:

But to die to escape from poverty or love or anything painful is not the mark of a brave man, but rather of a coward; for it is softness to fly from what is troublesome,



and such a man endures death not because it is noble but to fly from evil. (*NE* 1116a12–15)

I take it to be obvious that this objection does not apply to protest suicides, which typically involve giving up a life worth living and require the agent to suffer the agonies of burning or starvation. If anything, killing oneself in such circumstances takes courage. Another Aristotelian objection is that suicide is unjust “towards the city” (*NE* 1138a), that is, it is wrong because it *harms the community*, at least by way of removing one’s future contributions. While this applies to protest suicides in pursuit of the wrong cause or failed ones, successful ones for a good cause may well produce a net benefit to the community. Finally, it is a well-known challenge to the rationality of suicide that depression and suffering are apt to cloud the agent’s estimates of her future, making her choice *irrational* (Brandt 1980). Again, there may well be situations in which an agent sets about to perform a protest suicide despairing of justice. But cases of instrumental protest suicide seem to be characterized by a level of hope that one will be able to make a difference, and involve a kind of calculation of effective time, place, and manner, in which fellow activists are often involved. The decisions are thus less likely to be irrational in virtue of impaired deliberative capacity. (They might be more likely to be irrational due to wishful thinking concerning the effectiveness of one’s act in inspiring resistance, however!)

However, there are also objections to protest suicide that do not arise in other cases. One objection concerns the *mechanisms* by which the valuable end might be achieved. Often, we think that a person who threatens to kill herself unless someone else does something is trying to manipulate the other person by engaging in a sort of emotional blackmail (“You’ll be sorry when you look at my dead body!”). So someone might say that since instrumental protest suicides often work by making the audience feel shame or guilt, it, too, is

*objectionably manipulative*. I do not think this objection can be dismissed out of hand, since non-rational influence of this kind can be problematic even in the service of a good cause. But we should also bear in mind, first, that insofar as protest suicide serves to *direct attention* to a practice or its wrongness, its emotional resonance is incidental to its effect – just looking deeper into a practice can motivate resistance to it. And second, even when the suicide makes a difference by way of arousing anger or shame, it is by no means uncontentious that these are non-rational or irrational responses. They might, instead, constitute a quasi-perceptual recognition of the moral disvalue of the practice or one’s own contribution (e.g. Döring 2007; Kauppinen 2013). Arousing such emotions might then be a way of opening the eyes of the audience to injustice rather than a way of manipulating them to act.

Finally, let us return to the issue of dignity. The elephant in the room for protest suicide in particular is the question of whether it is really consistent with our inviolable moral status or with self-respect, however great the value it promotes might be. After all, if we take nonconsequentialist constraints seriously, we think that it is seriously wrong to kill *other* (innocent) people as a means to the greater good. But I think this challenge can be answered, at least in principle. Consider first what Velleman says in discussing his Kantian objection to suicide:

The objection is not even to suicide per se, but to suicide committed for a particular kind of reason—that is, in order to obtain benefits or escape harms. [...] When a person cannot sustain both life and dignity, his death may indeed be morally justified.

(1999, 616, 617)

As we saw, what Velleman has in mind when he talks about life without dignity is the kind of life that is centered on unbearable pain, which prevents us from making use of our rational capacities. Once again, in protest suicides, this is rarely the alternative. So what we might call

the *objection from dignity* is at least different, and possibly stronger, in the case of protest suicide.

The tempting response is to say that perfectly healthy people may also be unable to “sustain both life and dignity”, if they live in an oppressive enough circumstances – just imagine what it is like, say, to be imprisoned in Gaza, dirty, hungry, and in constant unpredictable danger. This is no doubt true in the ordinary sense of dignity, which contrasts with humiliation and degradation. But as Michael Cholbi (2010) emphasizes, what is at issue in this argument is the kind of dignity that we have in virtue of being able to make rational and autonomous choices, including choices about whether and how to resist unjust treatment. In the Kantian sense, even an enslaved person has full dignity, and is owed respect by herself and others, whether or not she actually receives any.

This means that the response to the objection should take a slightly different form. We should not say that oppressive circumstances undermine dignity to the point that self-respect is no longer called for. Rather, we should ask whether self-respect really demands self-preservation in such circumstances, when the alternative is effectively promoting a very good cause by sacrificing oneself. Are you treating yourself as a mere means if you shorten your life in order to promote an end to what you yourself see as a grave injustice that you will otherwise have to live with? Kant himself says that “one should think less of preserving one’s life than performing a duty” (1997, 370), which is why he thinks it is permissible or even required for a soldier to risk his life, and that a person must give up his life “if he can preserve it only under the condition of doing something shameful” (ibid.). However, at the same time, he maintains that “it can never be allowable for me deliberately to yield up my life, or to kill myself in fulfilment of a duty to others” (ibid.). Unsurprisingly, then, Kant is an absolutist about the prohibition of suicide even for a good cause, just as he notoriously is about lying for the greater good.

But we might be skeptical of Kant's argument especially when the trade-off is not between death and personal misery but between death and tolerating oppression. After all, we ordinarily think it is permissible to kill *someone else* as a means to a sufficiently great benefit to others if they give rational and informed consent to it. If you can save a hundred people by pushing a large man in front of a train and he asks to be pushed, it appears to be permissible to push, perhaps because in this case he is not being used as a *mere* means to save others. If this is right, it is hard to see why the large man would be using *himself* as a mere means, were he to jump in front of the train himself. Such a choice would not be made in the service of an inclination, like a suicide to free oneself of pain, but a moral conviction that could be rational in the sense that the agent has justification to believe that she has sufficient reason to act accordingly (e.g. Parfit 2011). Again, we must bear in mind Kamm's point that the agent need not make a trade-off between *her* value beyond price and the value of others, but rather between the (significant) value of her *continued existence* and some other morally significant value. If we are non-absolutist non-consequentialists, then, we can say that one doesn't necessarily fail to respect humanity in one's own person by choosing to kill oneself as a protest, since one need not be using oneself as a *mere* means. This does not mean that protest suicides are always or even in general morally justifiable, since it may be quite rare for people to have good reason to believe that their death really is sufficiently instrumental to a sufficiently good cause.<sup>10</sup>

In any case, here we see the distinctiveness of protest suicide with respect to self-interested suicide from a different angle. If self-interested suicide is permissible, it is such because it is too much to ask of people to go on living when it is full of suffering. When protest suicide is permissible, it is such because of the good that it is apt to bring about for others. At the same time, it is hard to imagine a scenario in which it would be morally

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<sup>10</sup> This discussion benefited greatly from comments by the editors of this volume.

required for us to, say, burn ourselves alive for the sake of others – which is to say that protest suicide is *supererogatory*, or beyond the call of duty. This is why a protest suicide can even be morally *admirable*.<sup>11</sup> And indeed, it is not rare for well-known ones like Palach to be regarded as national heroes after their cause is victorious.

If we grant that it can be admirable to sacrifice oneself in protest, we are faced with the question of whether it can then be *virtuous* to do so. There is certainly precedent for thinking so. While Aristotle was against suicide, the Stoic tradition was not – indeed, many leading Stoics, such as Zeno, Cleanthes, and Seneca, died by their own hand (Englert 1990, 2). In the background was the characteristic Stoic view that only virtue is good and only vice bad. Self-preservation is merely a ‘preferred indifferent’, something that the sage (the exemplary person) ordinarily chooses because it is natural, but not if it becomes incompatible with virtue. As Seneca says, “it is not good to live, but to live well”, which is why “the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as he can” (*Selected Letters*, 110). We should die rather than live without virtue: “dying well is to escape the risk of living badly” (*ibid.*). Crucially for our purposes, sometimes sacrificing ourselves is itself required by virtue. Indeed, a sage is willing to do so if it serves morally good ends even when it is not appreciated by others.

When faced with a virtuous man about to die for his country, you may

confront him with many arguments to deter him, say: ‘Your deed will soon be followed by forgetfulness and the ungrateful assessment of your fellow citizens.’ He will answer you, saying: ‘All those things stand outside my achievement, but I am considering the act itself; I know this is honourable, so I am coming wherever it leads and calls me.’ (*Selected Letters*, 127)

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<sup>11</sup> For what it is to admire a person, see Kauppinen 2019.

Must we, then, accept the radical Stoic value theory to regard protest suicide as potentially virtuous? Not necessarily. Any plausible account of virtue will say that a virtuous person will care a lot about the truly valuable things and little about things of little value. While the bar for self-sacrifice will be higher if we acknowledge the worth of non-moral goods, it will still be possible that in some situations the moral goods achievable by sacrifice outweigh those that can be had by living on. A practically wise person or *phronimos* will then face death without fear, and merit our admiration for it.

Here we finally get to questions about *expressive* protest suicide. Recall that here the suicide is not meant to generate any response in other or promote change, but in the ideal-typical case simply forcefully convey one's fundamental opposition to a practice or policy. This sort of act, such as (seemingly) Bouazizi's self-immolation, is not to be judged by its consequences beyond recognition of his rejecting attitude, since they amount to side effects. If it is to have any moral value, it must be because it showed proper regard for what is genuinely valuable – here, perhaps, something like living with dignity in the everyday sense of being treated with respect and fairness – and disregard for what pales in comparison to it, such as the kind of modest goods one might occasionally enjoy while submitting to arbitrary rule and harassment. Here it makes a difference, too, whether the act was motivated by demand for special treatment, or whether the aim was to convey that no one should be forced to endure his fate. In the latter case, surely, we can appreciate the courage of the dramatic gesture – it may be a manifestation of a virtue. This may not suffice to *justify* the act, if we accept that protest suicide must promote something of great value for moral reasons against it to be outweighed. But it may provide a special kind of moral *excuse* for it, so that the suicide is at least not blameworthy.

### **3. Protest Suicide and Meaning in Life**

In the last section, I concluded that killing oneself for the greater good can – in quite specific circumstances – be morally admirable. It’s natural to think that such deaths, which are often publicly commemorated and celebrated, can also make a person’s life *meaningful*. This is another respect in which protest suicide is potentially very different from egoistic suicide. After all, it is plausible that sometimes people kill themselves because they find their lives meaningless (Cholbi 2022), without any hope that their deaths will themselves be meaningful.

### *Meaning in Life: Psychology and Philosophy*

To understand how protest suicide is connected with meaning, we must begin with the question of what it is for an individual’s life to be meaningful. This is now typically labeled as a question about meaning *in* life rather than meaning *of* life in general (Wolf 2010).

Let us first distinguish between what it is to *experience* one’s life as meaningful and what it is (or would be) for life to *be* meaningful. Recently, psychologists have come to distinguish between three varieties of experience of meaning (e.g. George and Park 2016; Martela and Steger 2016; Goetz and Seachris 2020). The first is the experience of *coherence* or intelligibility, which is best understood here as the experience of one’s life as a whole making sense.<sup>12</sup> Second, there’s the *sense of purpose*, the feeling that one has some goal to strive for that gives direction to one’s life. And finally, there is the experience of *mattering*, or significance, linked with thoughts of making a real difference for the better, so that “the entirety of one’s life and actions are consequential” (George and Park 2016, 206). There are also corresponding experiences of meaninglessness. All these experiences are linked with, if not constituted by, affective and conative responses, such as sense of comprehension or

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<sup>12</sup> See e.g. de Bres 2018 and Cholbi 2022. This is not how psychologists in fact tend to understand it, as noted in Kauppinen 2022, 346.

disorientation, enthusiasm or demotivation, and pride or shame (Kauppinen 2022). Whether people have such experiences depends not only on what in fact happens but also on the ‘meaning frameworks’, or sets of value-laden beliefs and expectations that people have and apply to their experience (e.g. Proulx and Inzlicht 2012). Thus, whether a sudden illness makes sense to someone might depend on their religious beliefs, and whether one feels pride for winning a competition on whether one believes it was worth participating in.

One fruitful way of approaching the philosophical debate about what makes a life meaningful is seeing the competing views as answers to the question of whether and when such experiences of meaning are *fitting* (Kauppinen 2022). The traditional focus has been on the issue of whether we or what we do really *matters*. It can be seen as fundamental in one sense – after all, how could we have goals worth striving for, and how could our life make sense, if what we do is ultimately all for nothing? To briefly lay out the main views about mattering, according to *meaning nihilists* everything really is ultimately for nothing. It is often motivated by the thought of a vast, indifferent universe in which all our deeds will soon vanish without a trace. *Meaning subjectivists* retort that even if the universe does not care, we do. We *give* meaning to our activity by wanting to do it or valuing it (e.g. Taylor 1970). According to *meaning objectivists* (Wolf 2010; Metz 2013), nihilists ask for too much and subjectivists ask too little for meaning. Nihilism entails that it makes no difference in terms of meaning whether I spend my day tearing ancient manuscripts to shreds or rescuing a party of scouts from a flooded cave, and that all the feelings of joy, relief, and gratitude that the latter gives rise to are radically misplaced. For subjectivism, the same may be true, depending on my attitudes – if I happen to think it is great to get rid of manuscripts, it is fitting for me to take pride in it. These are tough bullets to bite, especially since objectivists can offer a simple alternative: all we need to have a reason to go on living is that we can do something that is of *objective value*, value that is independent of our fallible opinions. Saving the scouts can be



objectively valuable in virtue of the benefit it gives them, regardless of the fact that one day they will die anyway. There are many reasons why a life might be bad for someone, but the mere fact of finitude isn't one of them. Indeed, as Guy Kahane (2013) cleverly pointed out, if our little world is the only blip of conscious existence in the limitless expanse of space and time, does not that by itself lend us and our little lives a huge cosmic significance?

In my view, then, meaning objectivism is the most promising basic approach to genuine meaningfulness. It can explain why the lives of people like Gandhi or Frida Kahlo stand out as particularly meaningful (roughly, because they exercised their creative capacities in successful pursuit of goals of moral or aesthetic value), and why people are sometimes tragically mistaken about how meaningful an activity is. Objectivism comes in many varieties – while some think value is natural (Metz 2013), others think only a God can be the source of objective value (Seachris forthcoming). I will set these and other significant differences aside in the following.

### *Protest Suicide and the Meaningfulness of a Life*

Assuming that some version of value-based meaning objectivism is correct, could a protest suicide actually contribute to the meaningfulness of one's life? Let's focus first on mattering. The relevant scenario here is obviously one in which the suicide begins a process that leads to a significant change for the better that would not have otherwise happened. On the simplest sort of value-based view of meaning, meaning consequentialism (Bramble 2015), this would already suffice to make the suicide meaningful. But this sort of view is independently implausible. It runs together meaning and a kind of *importance*, where the latter is best understood as the impact one has on overall intrinsic value (for the better or for the worse), as Kahane (2021) argues. A good methodological clue to the difference is provided by the

conceptual link between meaningfulness and pride: actions that contribute to meaningfulness merit pride, gratitude, and admiration (Metz 2013; Kauppinen 2017).

Reflection on meaning and pride yields at least three further factors beyond contributing to objective value. First, for an action to contribute to meaningfulness, the good outcome must be *intended* by the agent. If I accidentally run over young Hitler, I might be important (without anyone ever finding out about it), but there is no reason for pride. So for a protest suicide to contribute to meaning, it must aim at, say, ending oppression and play an important role in it. Second, the causal chain that leads to the outcome cannot be deviant, but must relate to the agent's plan in the right way (O'Brien 2012). If Đứ́c's self-immolation had brought an end to Diem's regime solely as a result of the flames distracting Diem's driver and thus causing a fatal crash (leading everyone to forget about the suicide itself), the success would arguably be too much of an accident to contribute to the meaningfulness of his life. Finally, the act must be a *challenging* one for the agent in a way that requires the use of *creative rational capacities* (see e.g. Metz 2013). One way to see this is to consider what Robert Nozick (1974) called the Results Machine, a device that brings about any outcome by merely pressing a button. With such a machine, one could make the world a whole lot better, but it wouldn't be a source of much pride if one brought a bloody war to an end just by pressing a button. Nor would it do if pressing the button was difficult in a way that required a lot of sheer physical effort. In contrast, bringing a war to an end by way of persuading the parties to accept an ingenious compromise surely would do. This might be a matter of sheer effort, putting the shoulder to the wheel, but assuming that contribution to meaning in our life is enhanced when we are not easily replaced by someone else (Kauppinen 2012), our activities will be particularly meaningful when we exercise our agency in a creative and thus potentially unique fashion.

So we can say that a protest suicide will contribute to meaning-as-mattering if the following conditions are met:

- a) The outcome is objectively good.
- b) The outcome is intended by the agent and is non-deviantly brought about to a significant extent by her action.
- c) The outcome is due to significant exercise of some form of creative agency or other kind of overcoming of challenges.

With these conditions in mind, we can say that it is indeed possible – though relatively unlikely – for instrumental protest suicide to contribute to meaning-as-mattering. This is clear for the first two conditions. As regards the third, it is plausible that for a protest to be successful, the suicide must typically carefully and intelligently select its time, place, and manner, as well as exercise extraordinary willpower to go through with it.

So far, I have discussed the philosophical question of whether killing oneself in protest might contribute to making one's life matter. But there is also a related psychological question: are protest suicides *motivated* by thoughts of personal significance? Here we must be careful and distinguish between desiring the sort of things that do contribute to significance, like liberating one's people, and desiring personal significance for its own sake. One could kill oneself for a cause one believes in without caring about whether one's own life is meaningful or not – and indeed, if we look at the studies of Korean suicides (such as Kim 2008), this does not emerge as a key motivation. But having said that, it is not uncommon in psychological literature to hold that suicide bombers, in particular, are on a 'quest for significance' (Kruglanski et al. 2009). They are said to act out of "the desire to count, to be someone, to be recognized, to matter in the eyes of one's group, according to its (sacred) values" (Webber et al. 2017, 853). I have set suicide bombers aside here, but

presumably similar considerations can play a role in pure protest suicides. It is evidently an empirical question just how common this sort of *de dicto* meaning motivation is.

Speculatively, we might suppose that people's motivations can be mixed – a protest suicide might think both that a cause is important enough to die for and see herself as special in virtue of taking on the responsibility for the required action.

Let's turn next to meaning-as-purpose. Philosophers have focused much less on what gives purpose to our actions than on what makes them matter. I have suggested that one key difference is that a genuinely valuable high-level aim that the agent endorses can give purpose to a person's life and actions even if they are not successful in bringing it about (Kauppinen 2021, 67–68). A failed instrumental protest suicide can thus be genuinely purposeful in virtue of its aim. And if we think that merely registering one's fundamental rejection of an oppressive institution by way of *expressive* protest suicide has value, this kind of death can also contribute to at least purpose in life, even if it has no further intended consequences that would lend significance to the suicide's life. On the psychological side, it is easy to imagine that once one has resolved to kill oneself as a protest, one experiences a sense of purpose in one's final moments.

Finally, when it comes to meaning-as-coherence, it is not implausible that one might see one's death in the service of a good cause as a fitting conclusion to one's story that helps make sense of one's earlier life, and perhaps the suffering one has already experienced. As I have already noted, in many cultures, people who sacrifice themselves for the sake of others one way or another are seen as heroes, after all. In bad enough circumstances, a suicide with a purpose or a suicide that matters can be a better ending to one's story than going on to live in silence and submission. So it certainly seems that protest suicide can contribute to meaning-as-coherence. But unlike mattering or purpose, it is plausible that this consideration has little

normative weight – the intelligibility of a life is not *that* important (though see de Bres 2018 for a contrasting view).

#### **4. Conclusion**

A person who publicly kills herself in protest takes a huge gamble, if her life would otherwise be worth living. It might be that she is wrong in her perception of what is at stake – perhaps the practice or institution is not so unjust after all, or it is already changing for the better, or there's some better way to change it. Much more likely, however, is that she is powerless to change it by her self-sacrifice. News of her act might be suppressed, people might be left cold by it, and even if the desired emotions are aroused in others, they may not have power to change things. Giving up one's only life with little to show for it is arguably also morally wrong, because it fails to respect one's own inherent value sufficiently.

But in rare circumstances, even a virtuous person might kill herself in some spectacular public fashion as the only way to making manifest her fundamental opposition to oppressive institutions or as a way of shocking the conscience of the world and shaming the indifferent into action. Every such suicide is tragic, since it involves a good person giving up a worthwhile life only because other people are doing something wrong or failing to do what is right. But it is not necessarily wrong, and might lend unusual significance to the all-too-short life of the suicide.

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