

Selfishly Suicidal

A Psychoanalytic Critique of Kant on Suicide

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Abstract

Since humankind's earliest philosophical inquiries, society has been plagued by the taboos associated with suicide. It has been rebuked without respite, both on moral and religious grounds. This paper comes to the defense of suicide by combating the opprobrious arguments that have been raised against it. It begins by exploring what exactly constitutes 'suicide', then follows a historical account of the ethics surrounding it from antiquity to modern times. Specific focus is given to Kant's deontological secularization of the previously, strictly theological, *natural law* argument. It claims that Kant is in large part to blame for the stigma around suicide, and by proxy mental health in general in the twenty-first century. Finally, this paper will address said stigma vis-à-vis psychoanalytic ethics and offer a complete restructuring of the concept of suicide in an attempt to change how the western world perceives it.

Keywords: philosophy, suicide, Kant, ethics, psychoanalysis

Throughout history, suicide has been met with criticism, be that on moral grounds, within the context of religious doctrine, or simply as a disservice to one's society. In this paper I will come to the defense of suicide, arguing against several of the disapproving claims laid upon it, and proposing a complete restructuring of how the western world perceives it. First, I will identify what qualifies as "suicide", then giving an account of the ethics that have surrounded it in the past, and finally address the stigma around it in the twenty-first century.

To begin, we must first determine what exactly is being said when using the term "suicide". For the sake of this paper, I will define suicide as *a gradient postulation of self-destruction that results in one's death*. This gradient takes into account things such as the individual's beliefs, intentions, and attitudes toward suicide. This definition becomes paramount when analyzing contemporary notions of suicide since historically there has been endless disagreement over what actually qualifies as such. If one were merely going to classify suicide as a "self-caused death" they would be painting a black and white picture of it. This would be doing a great injustice to its complexities and nuances. Take for example the activity of smoking cigarettes. Many individuals smoke casually, socially even, as a means of interacting and connecting with others and making friends. Others smoke as an outlet or coping mechanism to combat anxieties and stressors in their life. Some, though, may smoke with the intention of causing damage to their lungs and subsequently shortening their life. In all three instances, each smoker is engaging in the same method of self-harm, however only one has suicidal intentions. This is a clear example of gray area within the abstraction of suicide.

Consider another scenario in which an individual drinks a lethal dose of chemicals, mistaking it for water, and causes their own death. This is another example of self-killing without suicidal intentions, and more explicitly, one in which said individual had no knowledge of the fact

that what they were doing would result in physical harm. Therefore, one might say this individual was not morally responsible for their death, but *causally* responsible. Inversely, consider the case of a terminally ill patient who if they were to continue living, would experience extreme pain and suffering. If they were to request that another person inject them with a lethal dose of medication, subsequently ending their life, the patient would not be causally responsible for their death, but *morally* responsible.

This circles back to the question of intention. If someone's intention is to die, then the actions they take to achieve this goal could be classified as suicidal behavior. An example of an intention-based account of suicide would be:

1. A person *S*'s behavior *B* is suicidal if
 - a. *S* believed that *B*, or some causal consequence of *B*, would hasten her death (i.e. her death would occur earlier in time than it would have in *B*'s absence, and
 - b. *S* intended to die by engaging in *B*¹

Condition (a) is quite straightforward. *S* must truly believe that by engaging in *B*, they will bring about their death, either directly or indirectly, as an event in time and space that would not have otherwise occurred without their behavioral influence. Condition (b), on the other hand, is a bit trickier. Consider the example of driving a car. Statistically speaking, it is far more likely to die behind the wheel of a car than sitting in one's bedroom. Ergo, it is reasonable for *S* to believe that driving a car (*B*) is a relatively risky behavior that endangers their life and significantly raises the chances of it coming to an end, yet the conscious decision to drive is still being made. However,

¹ Cholbi, [Suicide \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#), (2021)

very few would consider driving a suicidal tendency. This is because of (b). Death, however likely, is not the driver's *intention* or *aim*. This would be something like getting from one point to another. If death results somewhere in the process, that is strictly coincidental. What if the event wasn't coincidental, though? Take, for instance, a soldier who throws himself onto a live grenade in order to shield his allies from the blast. This soldier knew that this behavior would likely result in his death, yet his intention wasn't to die, it was to shield his allies. In this way, his death could be seen as merely a foreseen side-effect of his actions, not the primary intention. This, then, would position such self-sacrificial acts as passively affectable, rather than actively suicidal.

These are just a few of the complications one faces when attempting to characterize suicide and trap it into a neatly packaged box with a static definition. One of the solutions to this problem is, as previously stated, imaging suicide as a *gradient postulation* or *abstraction*. This gradient is the key factor that allows each individual case of suicide to be viewed through a lens untainted by moral messiness and intentional-accidental dichotomies. It allows for a spectrum of suicidal ideation which may include concepts such as *Active Suicidal Ideation* (when one thinks about dying and plans how to do it) and *Passive Suicidal Ideation* (when one wants to die but doesn't plan to commit suicide). Even within these divisions of ideation, there are subcategories which consider:

- Suicidal thoughts: Thoughts of killing oneself
- Suicidal threat: Thoughts of killing oneself that are verbalized to others
- Suicide attempt: Behavior that is intended to kill oneself but doesn't result in death
- Non-suicidal self-injury: Directly and intentionally hurting oneself without the intention of suicide.²

² Allarakha, [What Is a Suicidal Ideation Scale? Suicide Screening \(medicinenet.com\)](https://www.medicinenet.com/what-is-a-suicidal-ideation-scale?article=what-is-a-suicidal-ideation-scale), (2021)

All of these ideations can provide insight for philosophers when discussing the nature of suicide, but also aid clinicians in assessing an individual's risk of committing suicide by referring to *suicidal ideation scales* such as the Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation (BSSI) or the Suicide Assessment Five-Step Evaluation and Triage (SAFE-T).

Now that terms have been defined and a more thorough understanding of suicide has been established, a trip through time is necessary to unravel just how the modern view of suicide came into being. It is important to note that the views explored from here on are those found historically in western thought, particularly monotheistic thought. It only seems appropriate to start with the grandfather of philosophy himself, Plato. Discussion of suicide has likely been around for as long as humans have been around, living and dying, but it wasn't until Plato's famous work *Phaedo* that we got to see deep philosophical, and specifically ethical analysis of the idea of self-killing. In the story, Socrates articulates his view of suicide and claims that it is always wrong, as the act represents the release of one's soul from their body; this body being a sort of "guard-post" that the gods have placed us at. Therefore, releasing ourselves from this life would be in direct opposition to the will of the gods. (*Phaedo* 61b-62c) This ancient philosophy, based on the validity of ancient mythology, is the first of many times that the idea of self-annihilation as the direct (or indirect) rebellion against a higher power is recognized.

Plato addresses suicide once more in the *Laws*, where he verbalizes that anyone who commits the act of suicide should be buried in unmarked graves. As harsh as this may sound, he does recognize that there are some exceptions to the rule. These exceptions are as follows, "(1) when one's mind is morally corrupted and one's character can therefore not be salvaged (*Laws* IX 854a3-5), (2) when the self-killing is done by judicial order, as in the case of Socrates, (3) when the

self-killing is compelled by extreme and unavoidable personal misfortune, and (4) when the self-killing results from shame at having participated in grossly unjust actions (*Laws IX 873c-d*).³ By modern standards, these exceptions seem remarkably lenient. Principles (2) and (3) are topics of discussion at large in America today, the former being that of the death penalty as a criminal punishment, and the latter that of voluntary euthanasia, or assisted suicide. Principle (4), though, is most striking as it seems to encourage an individual who committed some non-specific heinous act to strongly consider ending his own life out of *guilt*. The notion of guilt will come up again later in this paper, but for now, I leave you with the intrigue that Plato found it acceptable to be one's own jury and executioner when compelled by immense shame.

Plato's famous student Aristotle, on the other hand, had a much looser take on the topic. He came to the conclusion that self-killing is not unjust as long as it is done voluntarily (i.e. one cannot be coerced into doing it) because the harm being done to oneself is consensual. The Stoics, specifically the Roman Stoic Seneca, took it even further, claiming that "mere living is not a good, but living well" and that "a wise person 'lives as long as he ought, not as long as he can.'"⁴ This illustrates just how divided the thinkers of antiquity were on the topic, from Plato's rules and exceptions to Aristotle's indifference, and further to Seneca's suicidal encouragement. This tolerance would not last long, as a new ideology would soon come to fruition, that is, the Christian doctrine.

It was St. Augustine who first addressed the issue theologically. He claimed that, "God's command 'Thou shalt not kill,' is to be taken as forbidding self-destruction, since it does not add 'thy neighbor', as it does when it forbids false witness, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy

³ Cited in Cholbi

⁴ Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, Letter 70

neighbor” (Augustine, book I, chapter 20). St. Thomas Aquinas also defended this belief when he wrote, “(1) Suicide is contrary to natural self-love, whose aim is to preserve us. (2) Suicide injures the community of which an individual is a part. (3) Suicide violates our duty to God because God has given us life as a gift and in taking our lives we violate His right to determine the duration of our earthly existence” (Aquinas 1271, part II, Q64, A5). In shaping today’s stigmatic view of suicide, if Plato’s notion of self-killing as an opposition and defiance of the gods’ will could be thought of as a foundation, then St. Thomas Aquinas’s arguments were the first building blocks.

Before continuing on, it’s worth delving deeper into the Thomistic arguments. The third which states that suicide violates our duty to God is precisely the argument made by Plato. The philosopher David Hume does a superb job at dismantling this point. In Hume’s essay *Of Suicide*, he argues against the premise that suicide is a transgression against God, our neighbor, or ourselves. In response to the Thomistic arguments, Hume starts by pointing out that neither the Old Testament, nor New Testament prohibits or condemns suicide. In response to the argument concerning suicide as a transgression against God, he states that the laws by which the universe is governed, if indeed created by God, carry certain implications. First, God ought not to permit humans to disturb nature in one sense, but not in another. For instance, Hume expresses that, in the same causal manner that God permits him to divert water from its natural course flowing down the riverbed, so too must God permit him to divert blood from their naturally flowing course, out of his veins. Secondly, in a brief response to the first argument, if by the natural laws it is meant that in as far as we are rational beings as God designed us to be, and rationality ought to lead us to pursue happiness, then why should one not commit suicide when our rational faculties determine that our happiness is best served by our death? Lastly, against the idea that God would not consent to any of his creations

killing themselves, Hume argues that God appears to consent to all actions, since if he didn't, being the omnipotent entity that he is, anything God wills not to happen simply would not occur.

Therefore, if suicide is carried out successfully, it can only be surmised that God consented to it happening.

The other issue at hand is that of suicide injuring the society of which you are a part. Hume addresses this point too, quite brilliantly, however, he does so in a general sense of the term "society". His argument is that, first and foremost, an individual who "retires from life, does no harm to society. He only ceases to do good; which, if it be an injury, is of the lowest kind."⁵ If one is obligated to do good for a society, it is because said society will reciprocate that goodness (i.e. allowing the contributor to be a part of it); but if the individual decided to end their life, and are thus no longer a part of that society, they are no longer obligated to promote any such societal interests. Finally, he asks what if one is a burden to society, as an abominable criminal may be. If a judge were to order his execution, would he not be doing himself and his community a service by ending his life himself? (ibid.) All of these responses are respectable in their own right, however none of them address the issue on a personal level. To fully grasp this concept of an intimate suicide, we must turn our attention to the Enlightenment, a movement ushered in by Immanuel Kant.

Kant's philosophy is oftentimes divided into two parts, that being his pre-critical and post-critical periods (before and after the publication of his *Critique of Pure Reason*). His philosophy on suicide is no exception to this rule. Of his pre-critical work, we will look to his *Lectures on Ethics*. This is a collection of notes taken by university students who attended Kant's lectures and forms an

⁵Hume (2005), "Of Suicide"

outline of his early ethics. During the post-critical period, Kant's primary arguments on the impermissibility of suicide can be found in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *The Metaphysics of Morals*. This is where his ideas matured and developed into his own.

Before we begin, it is important to understand the context around Kant's *Lectures on Ethics*. As stated above, this is a collection of notes taken by Kant's students during his time lecturing at the University of Königsberg. The notes taken are credited to George Collins during the winter semester of 1784/85; however, he was copying from another set of notes previously taken sometime between 1774/75-1776/77.⁶ In addition, Kant's lectures were guided by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Initia philosophiae practicae primae* (1760) and *Ethica philosophica* (1740, 1751, 1763). Between using these textbooks as a guideline for his class, and students' note-taking, it is sometimes difficult to decipher which ideas are originally Kant's. Nevertheless, we will now turn to the lectures as a jumping-off point for Kant's argument against the moral permissibility of suicide.

Kant makes several different arguments against the moral permissibility of suicide. They all, however, stand upon one foundational truth that he takes for granted, that intention is paramount. He states, "For all our offenses are either *culpa* or *dolus*" (LE, Collins 27:371). *Culpa* means "due to fault" and *dolus* means "done with intent." Kant continues, "It is the intention to destroy oneself that constitutes suicide. I must not, therefore, turn the intemperance that causes shortening of life into suicide, for if I raise intemperance to the level of suicide, the latter is thereby degraded in turn and reduced to intemperance" (LE, Collins 27:372). This goes back to the example given above of an individual drinking a chemical, mistaking it for water, and subsequently dying. We've determined

⁶ For more on the chronology of Kant's lectures, see <https://users.manchester.edu/facstaff/ssnaragon/kant/Notes/notesMoral.htm>

that this individual was causally responsible for their own death, *qua culpa*; yet lacked in *dolus*, as they had no intention of ending their life. These passages make it very clear that Kant would not have deemed this individual's death a suicide, but rather declared them a victim of fate.⁷

Kant's position and subsequent arguments fall short, as immediately in the next paragraph, he remarks that "suicide evokes revulsion with horror because everything in nature seeks to preserve itself" (ibid.)⁸. Since human beings commit suicide, this seems to imply that we are not a part of nature, but rather that we occupy a space outside of it. Of this moral hierarchy that Kant constructs, he claims that in committing suicide, an individual "thereby puts himself below the beasts." (ibid.) This paints a drastically warped view of reality, as contemporary understandings of biology and the human position in nature give us no reason to believe we are any more or less a part of this universe than any other organic lifeform, but also fails to do justice to all "beasts" as well. Recent studies by veterinarians show that certain animals, namely dogs, show the same suicidal-depressive tendencies as humans when their owners or fellow house pets pass away. It sends them into mournful states, resulting in their refusing to eat, ergo failing to adequately preserve their health, wellbeing, and life.⁹ Therefore, humans do not exist above nor stoop below

⁷ Furthermore, Kant makes the exception in cases of ignorance, such as the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac; since Isaac was a child and ignorant of the situation and it's moral implications, he would not be deemed complicit in any sort of quasi-suicidal act.

⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, who was largely inspired by Hume, comes to the defense of suicide against the dogmatic judeo-christian view which also appeals to a sense of "horror" and "revulsion" and says that the philosophical grounds on which these arguments are made are so shaky, that those who hold this opinion "seek to compensate for the lack of strength of their arguments by the strength of expression of their horror, hence through verbal abuse" (Schopenhauer (2017), *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, pp. 276). He continues by suggesting that a possible sentiment from which these religious opinions originate is that by giving up on life, one is consequently displaying a dissatisfaction for the world as God created it. In his book *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide* (2021) Paolo Stellino explains, "In other words, the real reason lying at the bottom of the clergy's condemnation of suicide would be a pragmatic one: since by taking their own life those who commit suicide call indirectly into question the goodness of the world created by God, thus shedding a negative light on the optimistic account of the *Genesis*, their act must be condemned. The strategy adopted by the monotheistic religions, Schopenhauer adds, is old and well known: they attack their enemy in order not to be attacked by it." (Stellino, pp. 81)

⁹ See <https://vcahospitals.com/know-your-pet/do-dogs-mourn>

the beasts on any arbitrary hierarchy as Kant imagines it, but rather we are all on the same level, at least biologically-chemically speaking.

This would likely be the point in which Kant would interject and make the distinction that humans are indeed differentiated from all other (known) natural lifeforms insofar as we are *rational beings with free will*. He states that “all animals have the capacity to use their powers according to choice. Yet this choice is not free, but necessitated by incentives and *stimuli*. Their actions contain *bruta necessitas*” (LE, Collins 27: 344). Humans on the other hand, are not necessitated to act on sensible impulses, but rather can freely choose to oppose it. For Kant, when a person commits suicide, they are freely following their inclinations (*Neigungen*); this is to say, they allow their actions to be governed by inclination rather than determining them by freedom,¹⁰ but more on that later.

Another argument presented by Kant in the Collins lectures is the *crime argument*. Kant claims that if anyone were to be the master over their own life, the door would be open to commit any such crime that they wished since before they could be apprehended and justly punished, they would simply end their own lives and avoid the consequences of state law. (LE, Collins 27: 372). Hume makes the counterpoint that if suicide is criminal, then only cowardice would compel us to commit the act (for instance, in an attempt to evade legal prosecution). If it is not criminal, then only wisdom and bravery could drive us to end our existence when the zest for life has diminished to nothing. The only way such an act could be useful to society, is by establishing a precedent that allows for all individuals to be happy in their lives, by freeing them from any risk of anguish and despair. This is a philosophy that has been echoed in some capacity by those in favor of medically

¹⁰ Stellino, (*id.*: 38)

assisted suicide. Barring suicide as a cowardly means of escaping penalty from the law— having the opportunity to end your life when in such unbearable pain, be it physical or otherwise, that living becomes a burden, be it moral or otherwise, without a doubt requires courage. This suicidal act then allows others to rest assured knowing that if they too fall into a similar sickly situation, the option to resign from life will be available to them with no legal repercussions.

Kant's position on the rational dimension of human nature is best summarized by Michael Cholbi, who writes:

Kant's arguments, though they reflect earlier natural law arguments, draw upon his view of moral worth as emanating from the autonomous rational wills of individuals. For Kant, our rational wills are the source of our moral duty, and it is therefore a kind of practical contradiction to suppose that the same will can permissibly destroy the very body that carries out its volitions and choices. Given the distinctive worth of an autonomous rational will, suicide is an attack on the very source of moral authority. (Cholbi)

These natural law arguments are the Thomistic ones mentioned previously. Kant's view of suicide, then, is two-fold. Firstly, that our moral duty stems from our autonomous rational will, and that it would be impractical for said will to destroy the body which conducts its decisions; and secondly, if the rational will is the source of our morality, then suicide, as an act of disabling one's rational will, is insubordination against moral authority.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant says of moral duty:

[...]To preserve one's life is one's duty, and besides everyone has an immediate inclination to do so. But on account of this the often anxious care with which the

greatest part of humanity attends to it has yet no inner worth, and their maxim no moral content. They preserve their lives *in conformity with duty*, but not *from duty*. By contrast, if adversities and hopeless grief have entirely taken away the taste for life; if the unfortunate man, strong of soul, more indignant about his fate than despondent or dejected, wishes for death, and yet preserves his life, without loving it, not from inclination, or fear, but from duty; then his maxim has a moral content.

(Kant, 13)

Kant's arguments aren't new ones. As seen by the quote above, they very much reflect the natural law arguments presented by St. Thomas Aquinas, whose own principles were modeled after Plato's. It's the same story, different philosopher. Kant's appropriation of the natural law argument is his *secularization* of it. He shifts the focus from a heavenly father to that of an autonomous will. His latter argument of suicide as an attack against moral authority begs the question, "Who is the moral authority?" For deontologists, those in the know would point at their own head. A Christian would point to the heavens, as subjects to their sovereign who rules over them like pieces of property, never to possess any volition of their own. Perhaps most often is the case today, that the suicidal few point around to friends and family as they point back and declare "How selfish of you! Do you not think about how you're hurting the people who you'll be leaving behind?" This secularized abstraction of suicide puts the individual on the spot and says "You are responsible. This is your choice, your own volition! Proceed at your neighbors' risk, for you won't be around to face the consequences anyway..."

Of the impracticality of one's will to destroy the body which carries out its volitions, I once again look to Hume. On the subject of suicide with respect to our duty to ourselves, Hume says that

suicide may oftentimes be in tune with our desires as well as our duty to ourselves. Of this nobody can argue, who concedes that old age, illness, or tragedy may result in life so unbearable that the alternative seems preferable. Hume believes that no individual has ever disposed of their own life if they themselves deemed it worth keeping, as it is our natural inclination to continue living as a means of avoiding the terror that death brings. (Hume, 2005) Only a substantial motive could compel us to face such a fear. Even if one's situation doesn't seem that dire from an outsider's perspective, understand that whatever hill they are struggling on is surely the steepest they have endeavored to climb, and they bear the subjective weight of the heaviest afflictions.

Before continuing forward, we must take a step back to revisit the notion of inclination and desire. Kant makes a very clear distinction between *subjective* and *necessary* ends. As Paolo Stellino puts it, "Ends based on desires and feelings have only *relative* or *conditional* value[...]In other words, one cannot choose 'to place higher priority on contingent desires than on morality'"(Stellino, 52).¹¹ This is the bottom line for Kant. Stellino continues, "The key to Kant's argument, thus, lies not so much in whether the suicide's end is self-given but rather in the contingent, desire-based nature of the same end." (ibid.) As previously stated, Kant posits a secularized version of every previous theological power structure. God is supreme and imparts a moral law unto his subjects. Likewise, the deontologist's autonomous rational will takes the place of God and serves as the bestower of moral law. Since God exists in a sense outside of and next to or above the natural world, it is no surprise that this Kantian god complex arises, allowing the conceited human to ascend above the beasts. We become the supreme overlords of our own bodies as conducted by the mind, and nobody in servitude ought to act in such a way that it may oust its own sovereign out of their power

¹¹ This quote is taken from Stellino's *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide* (2020) where he himself is quoting Richard Dean's *The Formula of Humanity as an End in Itself* (2009: 89,94).

position. By situating morality hierarchically above contingent desires, we are met with an internal system of judgment that opens the door to self-imposed sentencing of *guilt*.

In the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan sheds new light on the concepts of subconscious *desire* and *guilt*. He addresses Kant directly at several stages throughout this text, the first being in chapter six (VI) specifically approaching this concept of moral law. He contemplates the relationship between the Law (Thou shalt...) and *das Ding* (the Thing).¹² Lacan states:

Is the Law the Thing? Certainly not. Yet I can only know of the Thing by means of the Law. In effect, I would not have had the idea to covet it if the Law hadn't said: 'Thou shalt not covet it.' But the Thing finds a way by producing in me all kinds of covetousness thanks to the commandment for without the Law the Thing is dead. But even without the Law, I was once alive. But when the commandment appeared, the Thing flared up, returned once again, I met my death. And for me, the commandment that was supposed to lead to life turned out to lead to death, for the Thing found a way and thanks to the commandment seduced me; through it I came to desire death. (Lacan, 1959: 83)

If the Law is to be understood as the moral law imposed upon us by a sovereign authority, then the Thing can be understood only to exist as an object of desire *relative* to that commandment. Just as we saw in Kant, a stark contrast is being made between *subjective* (intrinsic) desire and *necessary* (extrinsic) morality. It may be easier to read if one replaces "Law" with 'Morality' and "Thing" with 'Desire'. Before there is a moral law, there is desire. However, it is somewhat of a passive desire, lying dormant in the depths of our subconscious. Once moral law comes into being and begins

¹² The Thing, within the context of *jouissance*, or a "surplus enjoyment" to a purpose or rationale, is understood to be the object of desire. Not necessarily in the sense of Freudian incestuous desire of the pleasure principle, but rather as generating an intrinsic opposition to extrinsic laws.

commanding, its imposer begins ordering its subjects to act, and our desires “flare up” as Lacan puts it. He continues, “The dialectical relationship between desire and the Law causes our desire to flare up only in relation to the Law, through which it becomes the desire for death. It is only because of the Law that sin[...]takes on an excessive, hyperbolic character.” (ibid.) This is precisely what Kant was getting at when speaking of *necessary* versus *contingent* ends. The only difference, though, is Kant believes the Law to come before *das Ding*. Lacan on the other hand sees *das Ding* as existing prior to the imposition of moral law.¹³

Kant and Lacan are on polar opposite sides of the same spectrum. Kant puts primary value into the moral law, to the point of making it God-like, and argues that using our free will to follow our desires/inclinations to thusly oppose the law would in turn violate our duty to treat humanity as a necessary end in itself, and would concurrently sacrifice rationality. On Lacan’s side of the spectrum, he flips Kant’s unconditional categorical imperative — being one that is not concerned with what may or may not be done — with an equally indifferent mode of desire. He believes that desire comes first, as a product of our subconscious, and that moral laws are societally constructed thereafter. Put simply, there is no such thing as objective right and wrong, no pure sense of good or evil. Take, for instance, someone who has never before been exposed to moral law being thrust into contemporary civilized society. They may walk into a grocery store, take the freshest and sweetest smelling fruit they could find, and walk out without paying. As the store clerk chases after our Lacanian friend, spewing on about how they are a thief and stealing is wrong, this individual, prior to this criminal experience, had no such concept of thievery, at least not in a morally apprehensible

¹³ It is important to note here that the priority of Kant’s moral law is not necessarily a temporal prioritization in sequentiality, but rather a priority of value judgments. The Law takes precedence over desire when it comes to ethical decision-making. For Lacan, on the other hand, this priority is a bio-social one. *Das Ding* exists a priori Law within our subconscious. However, it isn’t until the imposition of the Law that our desires become a force ushered to the forefront of our minds and begin consciously impacting our decision-making.

sense. It isn't until societal representatives, be it the store clerk, other citizens, lawmakers, law enforcement, etc. construct a sense of what is legally permissible based on an arbitrary, but typically religious criterion that desire-induced actions become condemnable. Before there is the moral law, as dictated by society, Lacan says there is desire – first and foremost – in part the same desire which Kant discredits as merely animalistic instincts.

In the final chapter of *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan proposes that psychoanalysis leads us to a reconsideration of ethics as “the relationship between action and the desire that inhabits it.” (*id.*: 313) This would be a monumental shift in perspective, since here in America, the constitution was founded on Judeo-Christian values, and our country found its independence in the midst of the Enlightenment. In fact, the signing of the Declaration of Independence and Kant's publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* were only just five years apart. Kant's philosophies have since made tidal waves across the western world and influenced countless political theorists, philosophers, and lawmakers in the centuries we've been united. The consequences of this were monumental, as still today, despite a (perhaps not so clear) separation between church and state, the state remains enveloped in a deontological schema to ensure nothing changes. In order for a radical change to occur on any ethical level, much less something as polarizing as suicide, there needs to be a complete overhaul of moral law relative to desire. Lacan expresses his thoughts on how this might occur. He says:

The ethics of psychoanalysis has nothing to do with speculation about prescriptions for, or the regulation of, what I have called the service of goods. Properly speaking, that ethics implies the dimension that is expressed in what we call the tragic sense of

life. Actions are inscribed in the space of tragedy, and it is with relation to this space, too, that we are led to take our bearings in the sphere of values. (ibid.)

What this means is that the purpose of ethics is not to tell you what is 'good' or 'bad' but rather it is the basis for developing and imparting values via the actions we take or are inclined to take, despite what any authority may wish us to believe. He claims that we now know better how to recognize the nature of desire than those who came before us. A reconsideration of ethics is indeed possible. In fact, it is likely that a shift in ethical judgment may be just around the corner. Lacan refers to this "Last Judgment" and poses the question, "Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?" (*id.*: 314) It has always been all about you, the individual subject, occupying the space of desire.

Lacan uses this spatial imagery to paint a picture of how we might come to perceive *guilt*. He writes that "from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire." (*id.*: 319) To further paint the image, one could imagine walking down a garden path when suddenly you come to a fork in the road. You decide to go left, following your desire, on your empty stomach, to go and steal some food. It isn't until you are reminded by someone (or something) from the other road that stealing is wrong and bad and evil and should never be done. In that instant, you are transported onto the 'right' path, that of the moral imperative which says "Don't steal and you'll be doing good!" Yet you can't help the desire to satiate your hunger, and thus arises from within yourself a sense of guilt. Guilty, not for having done anything truly immoral, but for ceding ground — in this example, literal space between the two paths — relative to your desire.

The point Lacan is trying to get across is that to be good necessitates that one pay for the satisfaction of one's desire with guilty currency, so to speak. Lacan also makes it clear that simply

following one's own desire does not always result in a happy ending. He who goes to the end of his desires "has his eyes opened – and this is essential – to the value of prudence which stands in opposition to that, to the wholly relative value of beneficial reasons, attachments or pathological interests, as Mr. Kant says, that might keep him on that risky path." (*id.*: 323) It is important to note that all who follow their desires may at some point down the line need to reconsider their own personal values, and ask themselves 'for the good of whom am I acting?' For those of us who find ourselves occupying the role of the tragic hero in our own story — and ultimately determine that it ought to conclude in self-annihilation — whose good may be considered greater than that of the protagonist? Lacan paints a paradoxical picture of desire in opposition to the "service of goods", or put differently, a dialectical reconciliation of needs and desires as aesthetically *Eros* (creative, life-producing drives) and virtually *Thanatos* (death drives). He says:

That's the choice with which a human existence such as Oedipus's has to end. It ends so perfectly that he doesn't die like everybody else, that is to say accidentally; he dies from a true death in which he erases his own being. The malediction is freely accepted on the basis of the true subsistence of a human being, the subsistence of the subtraction of himself from the order of the world. It's a beautiful attitude, and as the madrigal says, it's twice as beautiful on account of its beauty. (*id.*: 306)

Lacan eulogizes suicide as a "true death" in contrast to dying of natural causes. This significance is derived precisely from the death drive, which, paradoxically, he synthesizes with *Eros* by the aesthetic descriptor of beauty. He adds that, in his suicide, Oedipus delineates the end of the "limit zone" in relation to desire. He states that said zone "is always relegated to a point beyond death"

since all living humans desire to desire more. Lacan uses the phrase *Primum vivere*, or live first, to draw a contrast between Oedipus and the ordinary human being; for most would postpone the questions related to being, perhaps indefinitely, until their inevitable accidental deaths. I would also point out that a decision is being made either way. By choosing to die an accidental death, one is actively forfeiting to it. To those who have lived full and fruitful lives, this may seem rather reasonable. They've played a good game, ran a close race— but what about those who feel defeated long before the finish line?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), data showed that in 2019 suicide was the second leading cause of death in America in 15-24-year-olds, just after accidents.¹⁴ For how frequently it occurs, it is disproportionately given a measly amount of attention, and I strongly believe this to be the result of living in a post-Kantian world. It comes as no surprise that we have yet to see any drastic change considering the current state of our legislative branch of government. According to the Library of Congress, in 2021 the average age of a member of the House of Representatives was 57.6 years; of Senators, 62.9,¹⁵ with the current oldest being 87 years old.¹⁶ To put this into perspective, Lacan's *Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, was originally published in French in 1986 and translated into English in 1992, just 30 years ago. Meaning that this information wasn't available at the time of most of congress's current members' births. It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that many of them are still stuck in their deontological ways. Currently only fourteen (14) states have laws mandating annual suicide prevention training protocol for their

¹⁴ See <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide>

¹⁵ See

<https://guides.loc.gov/116th-congress-book-list#:~:text=The%20average%20age%20of%20Members,a%20majority%20in%20the%20Senate.>

¹⁶ See <https://fiscalnote.com/blog/how-old-is-the-117th-congress>

school teachers.¹⁷ Nineteen (19) more have mandated non-annual requirements, and thirteen (13) more are optional, including New York and California. It is clear that more can be done to offer help to those in need, and I believe that starts with the destigmatization of suicide via a moral shift away from deontology, and towards psychoanalytical thinking, certainly in Congress, but also in society in general.

So, open the door to more opportunities for conversation about suicide¹⁸ and mental health in general, but do so gently, as the last thing someone at risk needs is to be made to feel guilty for something that is beyond their control. I encourage all to think deeply about their own desires, as well as the desires of others. It will quickly become apparent how we are the selfish ones, worried about how a loved one's suicide might impact our own emotions, rather than giving attention to those who need it while we still can. The signs for mental health decline and suicidal ideation aren't always apparent, in fact they rarely are. As things currently stand, socio-ethically speaking, it's likely that those in need already feel the pressure of this Lacanian guilt before they even attempt to seek help. Therefore, it is up to the rest of us to take that first step and let it be known that there will be no price to pay, no posthumous defamation charge of any kind for those who choose to follow their desires to the bittersweet end.

¹⁷ See <https://www.datocms-assets.com/12810/1602535612-k-12-schools-issue-brief-10-12-20.pdf>

¹⁸ Many have anxieties about this and are convinced that by asking about suicide, it will put the idea into the head of youths who previously weren't considering it, or make them consider it more seriously. Not only do the numbers show they think about it anyway, but this preconceived notion that it will increase has no scientific or statistical basis as shown by a study done in 2017 by researchers at Columbia University. See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/sltb.12368>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

800-273-8255 or 988¹⁹

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Additional resources by country and region

<https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/11181469>

¹⁹ New three digit lifeline officially across the United States as of July 16, 2022. For more, see <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/current-events/the-lifeline-and-988/>

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