

Of Suicide

David Hume¹

One considerable advantage which arises from Philosophy, consists in the sovereign antidote which it affords to superstition and false religion. All other remedies against that pestilent distemper are vain, or, at least, uncertain. Plain good sense and the practice of the world, which alone serve most purposes of life, are found ineffectual. History, as well as daily experience, furnish instances of men endowed with the strongest capacity for slavery to the grossest superstition. Even gaiety and sweetness of temper, which infuse a balm into every other wound, afford no remedy to so virulent a poison; as we may particularly observe of the fair Sex, who, though commonly possessed of the rich presents of nature, feel many of their joys blasted by this importunate intruder.

But when sound Philosophy has once gained possession of the mind, superstition is effectually excluded; and one may fairly affirm, that her triumph over this enemy is more complete than over most of the vices and imperfections indigent to human nature. Love or anger, ambition or avarice, have their root in the temper and affections, which the soundest reason is scarce ever able fully to correct; but superstition being founded on false opinion, must immediately vanish when true Philosophy has inspired juster sentiments of superior powers. The contest is here more equal between the distemper and the medicine, and nothing can hinder the latter from proving effectual, but is being false and sophisticated.

It will here be superfluous to magnify the merits of Philosophy, by displaying the pernicious tendency of that vice of which it cures the human mind. The superstitious man, says Tully (*De divin. lib. ii*, 72, 150) is miserable in every scene, in every incident of life; even sleep itself, which banishes all other cares of unhappy mortals, affords to him matter of new terror, while he examines his dreams and finds in those visions of the night prognostications of future calamities. I may add, that though death alone can put full period to his misery, he dares not fly to this refuge, but still prolongs a miserable existence from a vain fear lest he offend his maker, by using the power, with which that beneficent being has endowed him. The presents of God and nature are ravished from us by this cruel enemy; and notwithstanding that one step would

¹ This text is taken from the original 1777 edition, published after his death at Hume's request and financed by Hume's estate, as edited by Robert G. Buckenmeyer, Ph.D., correcting such things as apparent type-setting misspellings and making some assorted grammatical changes, including punctuation, paragraphing changes as well as the substitution for the relative pronoun "which" or some other appropriate one for "that" when the "that" does not introduce a noun clause; however, this editor left Hume's capitalization in tact and some idioms and spellings contemporary to Hume, such as "juster" for *more just*, "*burthen*" for *burden and others*. This essay was found in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary, Vol. II*, a small section for 'Unpublished Essays,' pp. 406-414, as edited by T.H. Green and T.H. Grose, 1777, out of print and now available only in a copy which is part of the Gompertz Collection, currently located in the Hoose Graduate Library Archives, University of Southern California, as of February, 1960.

remove us from the regions of pain and sorrow, her menaces still chain us down to a hated being, which she herself chiefly contributes to render miserable.

It is observed by such as have been reduced by the calamities of life to the necessity of employing this fatal remedy, that if the unseasonable care of their friends deprive them of that species of Death, which they proposed to themselves, they seldom venture upon any other, or can summon up so much resolution a second time, as to execute their purpose. So great is our horror of death, that when it presents itself, under any form, besides that to which a man has endeavored to reconcile his imagination, it acquires new terrors and overcomes his feeble courage. But when the menaces of superstition are joined to this natural timidity, no wonder it quite deprives men of all power over their lives, since even many pleasures and enjoyments, to which we are carried by a strong propensity, are torn from us by this inhuman tyrant. Let us here endeavor to restore men to their native liberty by examining all the common arguments against Suicide, and showing that that action may be free from every imputation of guilt or blame, according to the sentiments of all the ancient philosophers.²

If Suicide be criminal, it must be a transgression of our duty either to God, our neighbor, or ourselves. To prove that suicide is no transgression of our duty to God, the following considerations may perhaps suffice. In order to govern the material world, the almighty Creator has established general and immutable laws by which all bodies, from the greatest planet to the smallest particle of matter, are maintained in their proper sphere and function. To govern the animal world, he has endowed all living creatures with bodily and mental powers; with senses, passions, appetites, memory and judgment, by which they are impelled or regulated in that course of life to which they are destined.

These two distinct principles of the material and animal world, continually encroach upon each other, and mutually retard or forward each other's operations.

The powers of men and all other animals are restrained and directed by the nature and qualities of the surrounding bodies and the modifications and actions of these bodies are incessantly altered by the operation of all animals. Man is stopped by rivers in his passage over the surface of the earth; the rivers, when properly directed, lend their force to the motion of machines, which serve to the use of man. But though the provinces of the material and animal powers are not kept entirely separate, there results from thence no discord or disorder in the creation; on the contrary, from the mixture, union and contrast of all the various powers of inanimate bodies and living creatures arise that surprising harmony and proportion which affords the surest argument of supreme wisdom. The providence of the Deity appears not immediately in any operation, but governs everything by those general and immutable laws, which have been established from the beginning of time. All events, in one sense, may be pronounced the action

²2. Some of Hume's statements do not stand the test of historical fact as in the case of his claim that "... that action (of suicide) may be free from every imputation of guilt or blame, according to the sentiments of all the ancient philosophers." Plato, Aristotle and Seneca, to mention only three, maintain that suicide is wrong because it is an offense against God in that it is a rejection of the gift of life. In addition, Hume's statement that no law existed against suicide is not true. Technically a positive law prohibition did not exist, however, Sprott observes, "...English laws against suicide had...the basis of custom." (p.24)

of the Almighty; they all proceed from those powers with which he has endowed his creatures. A house which falls by its own weight is not brought to ruin by his providence more than one destroyed by the hands of men; nor are the human faculties less his workmanship, than the laws of motion and gravitation. When the passions play, when the judgment dictates, when the limbs obey; this is all the operation of God, and upon these animate principles, as well as upon the inanimate, has he established the government of that infinite being, who takes in at one glance the most distant regions of space and remotest periods of time. There is not an event, however important to us, which he has exempted from the general laws which govern the universe, or which he has peculiarly reserved for his own immediate action and operation.

The revolution of states and empires depends upon the smallest caprice or passion of single men; and the lives of men are shortened or extended by the smallest accident of air or diet, sunshine or tempest. Nature still continues her progress and operation; and if general laws be ever broken by particular volitions of the Deity, it is after a manner which entirely escapes human observation. As, on the one hand, the elements and other inanimate parts of the creation carry on their action without regard to the particular interest and situation of men; so men are entrusted to their own judgment and discretion, in the various shocks of matter, and may employ every faculty with which they are endowed, in order to provide for their ease, happiness, or preservation. What is the meaning then of that principle, that a man who, tired of life, and hunted by pain and misery, bravely overcomes all the natural terrors of death and makes his escape from this cruel scene; that such a man, I say, has incurred the indignation of his Creator by encroaching on the office of divine providence and disturbing the order of the universe? Shall we assert that the Almighty has reserved to himself in any peculiar manner the disposal of the lives of men and has not submitted that event, in common with others, to the general laws by which the universe is governed? This is plainly false; the lives of men depend upon the same laws as the lives of all other animals; and these are subjected to the general laws of matter and motion. The fall of a tower, or the infusion of a poison, will destroy a man equally with the meanest creature; an inundation sweeps away everything without distinction which comes within the reach of its fury. Since therefore, the lives of men are forever dependant on the general laws of matter and motion, is a man's disposing of his life criminal because in every case it is criminal to encroach upon these laws, or disturb their operation? But, this seems absurd.

All animals are entrusted to their own prudence and skill for their conduct in the world and have full authority, as far as their power extends, to alter all the operations of nature. Without the exercise of this authority, they could not subsist a moment. Every action, every motion of a man, innovates on the order of some parts of matter and diverts from their ordinary course the general laws of motion. Putting together, therefore, these conclusions, we find that human life depends upon the general laws of matter and motion and that it is no encroachment on the office of providence to disturb or alter these general laws. Has not every one, of consequence, the free disposal of his own life? And may he not lawfully employ that power with which nature has endowed him? In order to destroy the evidence of this conclusion, we must show a reason, why this particular case is excepted. Is it because human life is of so great importance, that it is a presumption for human prudence to dispose of it? But, the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster.³ And were it of ever so great

³3. Hume's comparison has no basis in fact except his view that any being is either useful or useless. So, as reflective of his industrial revolution "culture" everything

importance, the order of nature has actually submitted it to human prudence and reduced us to a necessity in every incident of determining concerning it. Were the disposal of human life so much reserved as the peculiar providence of the Almighty that it were an encroachment on his right, for men to dispose of their own lives, it would be equally criminal to act for the preservation of life as for its destruction.⁴ If I turn aside a stone which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature, and I invade the peculiar providence of the Almighty by lengthening out my life beyond the period which by the general laws of matter and motion he has assigned it.

A hair, a fly, an insect is able to destroy this mighty being whose life is of such importance. Is it an absurdity to suppose that human providence may lawfully dispose of what depends on such insignificant causes? It would be no crime in me to divert the Nile or Danube from its course, were I able to effect such purposes? Where then is the crime of turning a few ounces of blood from their natural channel? Do you imagine that I repine at providence or curse my creation because I go out of life and put a period to a being, where, were it to continue, would render me miserable? Far be such sentiments from me; I am only convinced of a matter of fact, which you yourself acknowledge possible, that human life may be unhappy and that my existence, if further prolonged, would become ineligible. But I thank providence both for the good which I have already enjoyed and for the power with which I am endowed of escaping the ill which threatens me. [*Agamus Deo gratias, quod nemo in vita teneri potest, Seneca, Epist. 12*] -- "Let us give thanks to God that no one is able to be held in life", that is, live without having the choice to commit suicide. (Editor's translation and interpretation as to Hume's meaning.)) To you it belongs to repine⁵ at providence, who foolishly imagines that you have no such power and who must still prolong a hated life, though loaded with pain and sickness, with shame and poverty. Do you not teach that when any ill befalls me, though by the malice of my enemies, I

within the human reality, including human beings themselves are tools. Thus, if and when a knife becomes dull, a dish broken, a pair of shoes worn out, then they are to be thrown away because they are useless.

The contemporary American economic system or so-called capitalism reflects and implements this presumption of Hume. A human being's value and worth consists in his or her being a consumer whose buying power (as a product) generates more capitalism. Thus, credit card companies "give away" credit cards on college, now, even on high school campi driven by the assumption that the sooner the credit card company can get their credit card into the hands of a neophyte consumer, the more likely that consumer will continue to use that company's credit card. Whether or not these young student credit card holders (eighteen years and over one may enter into contracts legally, but high school juniors and seniors, unless eighteen must have an adult, parent co-signer) swim into, even drown in debt, these companies look to parents to "throw" them a pay-off life line! The point is that the contemporary American economy looks upon its citizens and citizens of the world as mere consumers whose usefulness consists in their buying power. Absent this buying power, these citizens are useless. So, the American economy and businesses are a practical application of Hume's fundamental view of human beings within his *Essay on Suicide*!

⁴ This statement is contradictory and the following example he adduces proves such. The parallel is: if killing oneself is a violation of God's providence, so too is conserving one's life is a violation of God's providence. Yet, in the former case, one is taking life and in the later case one is conserving life, so if God's providence gives the gift of life, the conserving of life cooperates with God's providence yet the taking of that gift does not. Hume's argument violates logic itself!

⁵ "to repine" means: to feel, or express dejection; to complain, grumble. Hume's use and understanding of this Seneca quote is ambivalent. The Latin can mean: "Let us give thanks to God that no one can be forced to life", implying that God gives humans free choice to choose the gift of life or to reject the gift of life". Obviously, Hume has chosen the meaning which suits his conclusion!

ought to be resigned to the Almighty as much as the actions of inanimate beings? When I fall upon my own sword, therefore, I receive my death equally from the hands of the Deity as if it had proceeded from a lion, a precipice, or a fever. The submission which you require to providence, in every calamity which befalls me, excludes not human skill and industry, if possibly by their means I can avoid or escape the calamity. And why may I not employ one remedy as well as another?

If my life be not my own, it were criminal for me to put it in danger, as well as to dispose of it; nor could one man deserve the appellation *hero* whom glory or friendship transports into the greatest danger and another merit the reproach of *wretch* or *miscreant* who puts a period to his life from the same or like motives. There is no being, which possesses any power or faculty which it receives not from its Creator, nor is there anyone, which by ever so irregular an action can encroach upon the plan of his providence, or disorder the universe. Its operations are his works equally with that chain of events, which it invades and which every principle prevails, we may for that very reason conclude it to be most favored by him. Be it animate, or inanimate, rational, or irrational; it is all a case. Its power is still derived from the supreme creator, and is alike comprehended in the order of his providence. When the horror of pain prevails over the love of life; when a voluntary action anticipates the effects of blind causes; it is only in consequence of those powers and principles, which he has implanted in his creatures. Divine providence is still inviolate and placed far beyond the reach of human injuries. (*Tacit. Ann. lib. i.79*)

It is impious, says the old Roman superstition, to divert rivers from their course, or invade the prerogatives of nature. It is impious, says the French superstition, to inoculate for the small-pox, or usurp the business of providence, by voluntarily producing distemper and maladies. It is impious, says the modern European superstition, to put a period to our own life and thereby rebel against our creator. And why not impious, say I, to build houses, cultivate the ground, or sail upon the ocean? In all these actions, we employ our powers of mind and body, to produce some innovation in the course of nature and in none of them do we any more. They are all of them, therefore, equally innocent, or equally criminal. But, you are placed by providence, like a centennial in a particular station, and when you desert it without being recalled, you are equally guilty of rebellion against your almighty sovereign and have incurred his displeasure. I ask, why do you conclude that providence has placed me in this station? For my part I find that I owe my birth to a long chain of causes, of which many depended upon voluntary actions of men. But, Providence guided all these Causes and nothing happens in the universe without its consent and Co-operation.⁶ If so, then neither does my death, however voluntary, happen without its consent; and whenever pain or sorrow so far overcome my patience as to make me tired of life, I may conclude that I am recalled from my station in the clearest and most express terms. It is Providence surely that has placed me at this present moment in this chamber. But may I not leave it when I think proper, without being liable to the imputation of having deserted my post or station? When I shall be dead, the principles of which I am composed will still perform their part in the universe and will be equally useful in the grand fabric, as when they composed this individual creature. The difference to the whole will be no greater than betwixt my being in a

⁶. Underlining is retained from the original manuscript text.

chamber and in the open air. The one change is of more importance to me than the other; but not more so to the universe.

It is a kind of blasphemy to imagine that any created being can disturb the order of the world or invade the business of providence! It supposes that that Being possesses powers and faculties which it received not from its creator and which are not subordinate to his government and authority. A man may disturb society no doubt, and thereby incur the displeasure of the Almighty. But the government of the world is placed far beyond his reach and violence. And how does it appear that the Almighty is displeased with those actions which disturb society? By the principles which he has implanted in human nature, and which inspire us with a sentiment of remorse if we ourselves have been guilty of such actions, and with that of blame and disapprobation, if we ever observe them in others. Let us now examine, according to the method proposed, whether Suicide be of this kind of action and be a breach of our duty to our neighbor and to society.

A man, who retires from life, does no harm to society. He only ceases to do good which, if it is an injury, is of the lowest kind. All our obligations to do good to society seem to imply something reciprocal. I receive the benefits of society and therefore, ought to promote its interests, but when I withdraw myself altogether from society, can I be bound any longer?**** But, allowing that our obligations to do good were perpetual, they have certainly some bounds. I am not obliged to do a small good to society at the expense of a great harm to myself. Why then should I prolong a miserable existence because of some frivolous advantage which the public may perhaps receive from me? If upon account of age and infirmities, I may lawfully resign any office and employ my time altogether in fencing against these calamities and alleviating as much as possible the miseries of my future life, why may I not cut short these miseries at once by an action which is no more prejudicial to society? But, suppose that it is no longer in my power to promote the interest of society; suppose that I am a burthen to it; suppose that my life hinders some person from being much more useful to society? In such cases, my resignation of life must not only be innocent but laudable. And most people who lie under any temptation to abandon existence, are in some such situation. Those, who have health, or power, or authority, have commonly better reason to be in humor with the world.

A man is engaged in a conspiracy for the public interest; is seized upon suspicion; is threatened with the rack and knows from his own weakness that the secret will be extorted from him. Could such a one consult with public interest better than by putting a quick period to a miserable life? This was the case of the famous and brave Strozi of Florence. Again, suppose a malefactor is justly condemned to a shameful death. Can any reason be imagined why he may not anticipate his punishment and save himself all the anguish of thinking on its dreadful approaches? He invades the business of providence no more than the magistrate did who ordered his execution and this voluntary death is equally advantageous to society by ridding it of a pernicious member.

That suicide may often be consistent with interest and with our duty to ourselves, no one can question who allows that age, sickness, or misfortune may render life a burthen and make it worse even than annihilation. I believe that no man ever threw away life, while it was worth

keeping.⁷ For such is our natural horror of death that small motives will never be able to reconcile us to it and though perhaps the situation of a man's health or fortune did not seem to require this remedy, we may at least be assured that anyone who, without apparent reasons, has had recourse to it, was curst with such an incurable depravity or gloominess of temper as must poison all enjoyment and render him equally miserable as if he had been loaded with the most grievous misfortunes. If suicide be supposed a crime, it is only cowardice which can impel us to it. If it be no crime, both prudence and courage should engage us to rid ourselves at once of existence where it becomes a burthen. It is the only way we can then be useful to society,⁸ by setting an example, which, if imitated, would preserve to everyone his chance for happiness in life and would effectually free him from all danger or misery.

It would be easy to prove that Suicide is as lawful under the Christian dispensation as it was to the Heathens. There is not a single text of Scripture which prohibits it. That great and infallible rule of faith and practice which must control all philosophy and human reasoning has left us in this particular to our natural liberty.⁹ Resignation to Providence is indeed recommended by Scripture, but that implies only submission to ills which are unavoidable, not to such as may be remedied by prudence or courage. Thou shalt not kill is evidently meant to exclude only the killing of others over whose life we have no authority. That this precept, like most of the Scriptural precepts, must be modified by reason and common sense, is plain from the practice of magistrates who punish criminals capitally, notwithstanding the letter of the law. But were this commandment ever so express against suicide, it would now have no authority, for all the law of Moses is abolished, except so far as it is established by the law of Nature.¹⁰ And we have

⁷ Obviously Hume did not read or, if he read, did not understand the *Book of Job*. In addition, Victor Frankl argues within *Man's Search for Meaning* that humans who advocate or seek suicide need a change in attitude, namely, from an attitude about "what can I get out of life" to an attitude of "what can I give to life", a difference between "using" and "gifting" (pp. 111-114, 1992, Beacon Press edition).

⁸ Hume's view of receiving "the benefits of society" and the obligation "to promote its interests" limit "to do good" to what Aristotle calls the "useful good," or love of utility, the lowest of three kinds of good and love, namely the erotic. (*Nichomechean Ethics*, Book 8, Chapter 6, and a few other different places..) This view of "useful good" is an extension of the British view of "use" which spanned the industrial revolution and which was prevalent during and after Hume's time. This meaning of "use" was an off-shoot of the "pragmatic" view of the machine "labor" many British and French "philosophers" extended to human beings, as is reflected within the devote Jansenist and medical doctor De La Mettrie's, *L'Homme Le Machine*. (1748).

⁹ Again, obviously Hume did not read or, if he read, did not understand the *Book of Job*. As the notes for this course document, the fourth century A.D. Aurelius Augustine, Catholic Christian Bishop of Hippo was the first to use the Roman positive law against suicide as the criterion for his position opposing suicide. The Roman law, however, opposed suicide for practical and economic reasons, as specified within the notes. Apparently Hume was ignorant about the Roman positive law position opposing suicide.

¹⁰ This is a view prevalent within Protestant Christianity, especially Calvinist views, in which Calvinist denominational Protestant Religion Hume was raised. However, this view not recognized by the Catholic Christian, given the belief that the *New Testament* is a continuation and fulfillment of the *Old Testament*. S.E. Sprott, author of *The English Debate on Suicide*, *Open Court Classics*, 1887), comments: "Despair of holiness and incorrigibility of inspiration are the heart of the Puritan problem of suicide" which problem he characterizes as "the Puritan epidemic of suicide." (pp. 52-3) Indeed, this "Puritan epidemic of suicide" began in 1130 in South Western France by the Catholic Christian citizens within the town of Albi during the thirteenth century A.D. and was declared a heresy both by the Catholic Christian pope in Rome and French Catholic Christian Bishops. St. Dominic, the founder of the Dominican Religious Order was sent to Albi to persuade the Cathars or Albigenes (Cathar derived from the Greek work for 'Epure', Albigene from the town of Albi) population to discontinue their suicide advocacy, however, they refused. Ultimately, these Catholic Christian people renounced their Catholic faith and, as Cathars

already endeavored to prove, that suicide is not prohibited by that law.¹¹ In all cases, Christians and Heathens are precisely upon the same footing. Cato and Brutus, Arria and Portia acted heroically. Those who now imitate their example ought to receive the same praises from posterity. The power of committing suicide is regarded by Pliny as an advantage which men possess even above the Deity himself: Deus non sibi potest mortem consciscere si velit, quod homini dedit optimus in tantis vitae poenis.” (*Lib. ii, cap. 5*) “*God is not able to kill himself (sibi mortem consciscere), even if he wanted to do so because the Best gives (death) to human being(s) amid the punishments of life.*””

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fled north, ultimately to England. The rest is history! Theologically, therefore, suicide is Protestant Christian in origin and the poverty within the industrial societies was a critical element in the decision, as Bunyan's Pilgrim describes in his 1678 *Pilgrim's Progress*. Spenser's Red Cross Knight within the *Faerie Queene* reflects the same problem and succumbs to the same despair.

¹¹ Not true in many occidental societies today.