

Situating Suicide as an Epistemological Problem

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Abstract. Knowing how, knowing that, and knowing to do, pose difficult questions in moral epistemology. The paper argues that moral knowledge is neither knowing how nor knowing that, but knowing to do. Knowing to do is to be rationally disposed to the right thing. When we talk about moral judgment we often refers to our conscience, hence our moral life is made up of the moral decisions we take. Can we ever know that it is wrong to commit suicide? Can we ever have some justifications for believing whether suicide is morally right or wrong, just or unjust? Suicidal trends have always existed with greater or lesser intensity from one period to another. The circumstances that cause suicide are infinite in number, for example we have people who commit suicide in comfortable circumstance while others commit suicide in an uncomfortable circumstance. The paper calls for a reawaken of our epistemic sensibility, since our conscience is our moral judgment, the paper recommends that we follow the rule of love and unselfishness that is golden rule in order to put an end to the problem of suicide. The most certain way to achieve this is to develop in man the power to coordinate his ideas and feelings so that he is in a position to pursue a definite aim in life, in other words to give epistemic strength to our beliefs and other cognitive acts.

Keywords: Epistemology, suicide, knowing how, knowing that, knowing to do.

1. Introduction

Why do people argue, disagree and even quarrel over the rightness or wrongness of certain actions? Why do we have moral disputes and disagreements? What causes moral disputes? When men make moral judgments what exactly are they doing? When our conscience tells us that an action is good or right, what is implied in the statement that we make? Or

better still when the ordinary man makes such judgments, what is it that he intends to say, rightly or wrongly? The truth of the matter is that we have epistemic duty to prevent the harm we cause ourselves and others, and that duty equally applies to suicide. There are various ways we can do this: for example a frustrated man who has decided to commit suicide could reduce the pain he will cause himself and others by discussing his intention with his family or those who care about him.

On the other hand we have people who believe that the quality of life is more important than the quantity of life, if our quality of life has diminished to the point where we thought that to continue is valueless and life no longer worth living, then is it reasonable to end it. Though this type of judgment can be reasonable, but if we apply Kant's categorical imperative which says that: "if from self-love we adopt it as a principle to shorten our life when its longer duration is likely to bring more evil than satisfaction" (Frankena, 2010:117), then we should ask ourselves: should this become a universal law of nature or golden rule? We all know that the answer is no. The task of this paper is to discuss the nature of epistemic judgments with particular reference to the judgment of conscience, rule of love and unselfishness that is golden rule, and the problem of suicide. The paper also attempts to proffer solution, that is preventive measure we can adopt to reduce the alarming rate of suicide in our society.

2. Epistemic Issues in Suicide

The term suicide describes the act of taking one's own life (Minois, 1998:10). Within this article we are referring to suicide in the conventional sense, in which someone plans out or acts upon self destructive thoughts and feelings, often while they are experiencing overwhelming stress. Epistemic

issues emerge in a variety of ways, from moment of deliberate private reflection on tough theoretical questions, to causal social questions of what other people know and think. There is need to draw systematic lines between knowledge and mere belief, to distinguish justified and unjustified beliefs, and to recognize some beliefs as delusional or irrational. By reviewing our state of knowing and thinking that something is the case, we start to make sense of the human capacity to register these states. Knowledge and belief are states which link an agent to a proposition on suicide: know and belief. One major issue here is the contrast between knowledge and belief, what is believed can be true or false, one may believe without knowing: notable in cases where one's belief is false.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge and justified belief. Moral epistemology on the other hand is the study of what would be involved in knowing that it is wrong to commit suicide, or being justified in believing moral propositions. To possess moral knowledge is to desire the right thing; it is essentially to do the right thing. Knowing how, knowing that, and knowing to do, are related to action in a different way. Ryle argues that:

There are certain parallelism between knowing how and knowing that, as well as of learning that something is the case. We can wonder how as well as wonder whether what is involved in our descriptions of people as knowing how to make and appreciate jokes, to talk grammatically, to play chess, to fish, or to argue? Part of what is meant is that, when they perform these operations, they tend to perform them well or successfully (2009:17).

Ryle is of the opinion that knowing how is concerned with people's competences and operations rather than with their cognitive repertoires or the truth that they learn (Ryle, 2009:28). Unlike knowing that, knowing how requires practice; a beginner may need some knowing that as a guide, but may observe the rules without thinking of them. Moral knowledge is not the ability to perform a task but that which motivates a person commit suicide or not. It motivates us to act the right way. Knowing to do is the right kind of desire related intellect or thought related desire, it is the capacity to see what is the right thing to do and a rational disposition to act in the right way. Knowing how and knowing to do are similar because while moral knowledge is as a result of habituation, knowing how requires practice. Virtue character is a result of habituation, the development of practical wisdom is also a matter of habituation, to possess practical wisdom is not just to learn that it is right to do something, but to be habituated into doing the

right thing by knowing that suicide is wrong. Habituation means to make the person not only choose to do the right thing but also desire to do the right thing, not to desire suicide, it means develop both desire system and intellect (Aristotle, 1925:11).

While it is possible that a man may act against his rational choice, it is not easy to understand that he acts against his knowledge. It is equally important to note that a man who seems to possess moral knowledge does act as moral knowledge prescribes. The tension here is about the conflict between the end and an action which is also the end. Knowing how is concerned with the means not the end. Many people believe that suicide is morally wrong because of their religious tradition, while others see it as morally permissible. We may say that suicide is always immoral in any circumstances, we can also say that suicide is never immoral regardless of the circumstances or better still that suicide is morally acceptable in some circumstances but not in others.

However we can equally say that people who commit suicide are those that are disappointed, or in sorrow but we cannot say exactly the level or the degree of disappointment or sorrow that can prompt an individual to commit suicide. Beck defines suicide as an individual centered, life taking act whose motive is ceasing the struggle for values and resigning the search for meaning (Beck, 2015:51). From this definition we can see that not all taking of one's life that we can consider to be suicide. There are various ways by which someone can commit suicide, for instance a man or woman can commit suicide by using rope, or with a gun, with a sharp object like knife, by taking poison or probably by jumping into the river. We shall take a look at some of the reasons why people commit suicide and see if they are justified in doing this: First of all we should ask ourselves whether suicide could be classified among the actions that are allowed in morality or should we see it as a criminal act, these questions have been debated through the ages. It is important to examine how people especially philosophers have considered the problem of suicide and see if this is in line with our modern day society. Since people commit suicide for different motive, and one of this motives is the worth of life, this has to do with our decisions on values. Is life itself valuable? the quality or the value of life is the most important thing for us to put into consideration, hence reason may sometimes advice us to commit suicide, on the other hand suicide is a disvalue or an evil, life to them is a God given gift its cessation is evil (Beck, 2015:52). On moral ground Augustine and Aquinas argued that since all being are derived from God, life itself should be valued.

David Hume on the other hand sees suicide to be useful to self or for the good of the society. Plato considers suicide to be wrong if it is done without god's permission, and morally right if the gods permitted us to commit suicide. When we look at the natural law theory of nature that enjoins us to follow rather than go against nature we might disagree with those philosophers that argue in support of suicide. Every human being has a natural drive toward self preservation and since suicide go against this natural drive, hence it is morally wrong. Every living organism has a function and that function is living, to commit suicide is wrong because this behaviour is inconsistent with her natural function of living. This is saying that it is wrong to interfere with the normal cause of nature (Barcalow, 2010:296). Let us consider the case of Mr. Joseph, who is 84 years old, his Doctor told him that he has less than a year to live. Joseph knows that cancer of the lungs causes intense pain, because of this disease Joseph's weight will fall rapidly, and grow weaker and becomes helpless. Before this illness Joseph was strong and active just like just like every other person he had hoped to die a dignified and painless death at old age. But with his illness he knows that he can neither die a dignified nor painless death, after several days of reflection he concluded to commit suicide. Would it be morally acceptable for him to commit suicide? If we look at this from the natural law theorists and see suicide this is a behaviour contrary to nature. The truth of the matter is that, it is wrong to interfere with the normal cause of nature. People sometimes believe that their diminished quality of life is permanent when it is only temporary, people can suffer from temporary depression and think it is permanent. We have people who does not believe in the natural law theory and argued "that even if we have natural drive towards self preservation it does not follow that to behave contrary is immoral (Barcalow, 2010:297). In the ancient world we have a whole lot of famous suicide for instance, stoicism commit suicide that was considered to be appropriate under certain circumstances. The Stoic advises us to do what is natural and follow reason. For instance if there is an important information that will harm a country, it is better for whosoever is involved to commit suicide rather than revealing the information. Julius Caesar committed suicide when it became clear that their cause was hopeless and they faced dishonor at the hands of Julius Caesar's successor, Augustus. Similarly Cleopatra committed suicide rather than falls into Augustus hands and face the humiliation of being returned to Rome as a slave rather than a queen. Her lover mark Anthony also committed suicide (Barcalow, 2010:298).

In our modern society it is important to state that suicide can only be considered illegal if it is not authorized by the state. "In Athens if before killing yourself you asked the senate to permit it, giving the reasons why life had become intolerable for you and if this request was authorized, then this type of suicide will be considered as a legitimate act (Durkheim, 366). The penal code of New York treats suicide as a crime, but this crime always goes unpunished because the punishment cannot be effectively applied to the guilty party. But an attempted suicide can result in a prison sentence of two years or a fine (Durkheim, 2009:365).

Indeed we have seen that there are different kinds of suicide, the characteristics which are not at all the same. When we turn to the utilitarianism we can see that while act utilitarianism maintains that we can commit suicide if it will produce happiness for us, for instance if it is the case that by committing suicide an HIV positive patient would avoid pains and relieve his family of the suffering of watching his decline and save money, and knowing quite well that he will die some day anyway. Then there will be an increase in total happiness from his committing suicide, to the act utilitarianism this is the right thing to do. Rule utilitarianism on the other hand argues that we should follow a rule and determine if there will be total happiness in people following this rule. E.g. commit suicide in circumstances "A" than if we follow the rule don't commit suicide in circumstances "B." These two rules should be carefully examined to discover the effect on total happiness.

However if people decide to commit suicide today than they used to, it is not because we need to make more painful efforts to survive or that our legitimate needs are less satisfied. It is clear that the problems of suicide are very complicated and are difficult to decide. We have various ways by which we can minimize if not totally eradicate the alarming rate of suicide in our society, for instance we can prevent an individual from committing suicide temporarily if such a person is suffering from psychological disorder, if someone is not yet mature to take a decision on his own or not yet an adult we can also prevent such a person from committing suicide. With this temporary prevention we are able assist our loved ones with the necessary aid and relieving their psychological disorder and this could probably save their lives. Our present indulgent attitude towards suicide is excessive; hence it ought to be rejected with greater energy and precision. For this reason our next concern is to follow the Kantian maxim as our guiding principle to prevent suicide.

3. Preventive Measure of Suicide

From our various analysis it is evident that the evil outweigh the good, hence it is important to discuss some of the ways we can minimize this social phenomenon. The method we adopt here is the Kantian approach to suicide. In his book: *fundamental principles of the metaphysics of morals*, Kant tries to make explicit the moral concepts which are implicit in the ethical principle of our everyday life, he formulates two kinds of imperative namely: categorical and hypothetical imperative. Kant the categorical imperative is an unconditional imperative; it does not command us to do something which is a means to an end rather it commands something that is good. The only thing that is good without qualification or restriction is a good will, a good will is good in all circumstances, an absolute or unconditioned good, the only thing that is good in itself, there are plenty of things which are good and they may all be thoroughly bad when they are used by a bad will. The second imperative is the hypothetical, this imperative is a conditional imperative which commands someone to do something which is a means to an end (Kant, 2010:20). Kantian approach enjoins us to first identify the maxim which we are to follow. A maxim is the subjective principle of action, that is the principle according to which the subject is acting not the objective principle according to which he ought to act, it follows that the doers maxim may conform to the moral law just as it is possible that his maxim should be incompatible with it (Korner, 2018:133). For instance if you are suffering from cancer of the lung and you are contemplating of committing suicide, the maxim might be: you will commit suicide when you are seriously ill and have few months to live, you will probably have much intense pain, and you will grow weak and more helpless. According to Kant acting on this maxim would be morally acceptable if only the individual will consistently will that it becomes a universal law. Everyone will commit suicide in this type of circumstance. But the truth of the matter is that no rational being could consistently will such a universal law, therefore to Kant suicide is immoral.

The formulations of the categorical imperative include the following: Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law, you are ever to act otherwise than so that your maxim should become a universal law, act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature, so act to use humanity both in your own person and in the person of every other, always as an

end, and not as a means. “We should not use humanity as a means to an end or as a means to achieve our selfish aim, a man who commits suicide in order to get out of poverty or frustration also uses humanity as a means to an end. Act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim, so act as if you were always through your maxims a lawmaking member in a universal kingdom of ends” (Omoregbe, 1993:224).

Kant’s formulation of the categorical imperative requires that we treat people with respect including ourselves (Barcalow, 2010:302). This means for someone to commit suicide because of an illness. Indeed, it is possible for a medical doctor to make mistake about the nature of his patient illness, if on the other hand there is a new development such that, new therapies suddenly becomes readily available, when people have already lost hope and think that their life is valueless and it no longer worth living.

4. African Conception of the Judgment of Conscience

In the African conception, we usually use the word conscience when we talk about moral judgments for instance when I say: that would be against my conscience or my conscience wouldn’t permit me to do that. On the other hand when we talk about wrong action we also make reference about following our conscience e.g. when I do a good action, I say: I must examine my conscience, in the same vein if I am worried about past actions, I say: I have something on my conscience, if I know I have acted badly, or my conscience is clear, if I have no cause to blame myself.

Conscience is a kind of extra sense or part of the mind which deals with moral matters, just like a little man whispering instructions inside one’s head; hence we sit back and listen to the voice of conscience in order to know the next line of action. The crucial question now is: what kind of a thing is this conscience? My conscience is simply myself making a moral judgment or a decision as to whether an act is right or wrong. There is nothing particularly mysterious about conscience. I make my judgments and decisions on moral matters in the same way as I make them on others matters: by thinking and reasoning, by considering all the factors involved, by asking the advice of others, by drawing on the wisdom of the past, and then at last making up my mind.

Our moral life is made up of the moral decisions we take. Most of us are neither completely good nor

completely bad but somewhere in between it is difficult to say that a good person is a person who decides to do the good action when faced with choice. A bad person is someone who chooses the bad action. The truth of the matter is that our good actions are often mixed with selfishness and vanity and other motives. Our bad actions usually have excuses, or explanations which others cannot see, there's so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, that it hardly becomes any of us to talk about the rest of us. Here we must say that we do not go through a long process of consulting our conscience whenever we take a decision, at times we act from habit, from good habit, or from bad habit. For instance a man walking along a busy street and a woman in front of him mistakenly drops her money without noticing it, then the man picks up the money, here he has a choice of action: he can keep it and say nothing or he can give it back to the woman. He has the opportunity to weigh up the factors in favour of either action and make moral decision. It is possible that the man will not immediately go after the woman and give her back her money. Our upbringing, education, religious principles, respect for the law, have made us the kind of person who does not even have to think of what has to be done in this type of situation. On the other hand the man can also decide to put the money in his pocket and walks in the opposite direction. This shows how important it is for us to form the habit of making right moral judgments and acting upon them.

Conscience can also be regarded as a faculty of the mind, the mind as a whole is responsible for moral judgment and also involve in what we call conscience. Conscience considers characters, actions, intentions, motive in its judgment with the aim of discovering their goodness and badness. It judges that pain is appropriate to wrongdoing and happiness to right doing. Another important function of conscience is that it initiates and checks our actions; this is one of the mental process by which our actions are checked. This happens when someone has a feeling of remorse, it can be in the form of pain and this is usually unpleasant. This is why the African man will say the pain of conscience is one of the reasons to avoid wrong actions. Africans believe that their god will never allow our their conscience to lead them astray; hence we see conscience as the voice of god speaking in our soul.

5. The Golden Rule

Most of our actions do not require a special moral judgment, but sometimes we find ourselves in a situation whereby we have to meditate carefully the

right course of action to follow, when decision we make is likely to have a serious effects in our lives and others, especially in a situation that we have never experience before and we have no rule to guide us. It is important to state that the best rule to follow is the golden rule that is the rule of love and unselfishness. For us to apply this type of rule there is need for us to consider carefully all the circumstances involved, because it is possible to have different circumstances and these circumstances are likely to be more important than the other. "A man six honest serving honest men, taught them all they need to know, their names are what?, why?, when?, how?, where?, and who?, these six words are a list of the circumstances that can make an act good, bad or worse" (Bremen and Forristal, 35). It is likely to be more than this or shorter than this, but they are useful in guiding us to make a moral judgment. If we take a look at the first word: "what"? "What am I about to do? asks yourself about the essential nature of the act, e.g. if it is to help someone in need of our assistance, that is good, but if it is a situation whereby you are asked to terminate the life of an enemy, or take what does not rightly belongs to you, that is bad. The what? Question is very crucial.

In the same vein the other questions can also make a good act bad, or a bad act good: if for instance I take another man's property, this is bad, but consider a situation where my neighbour is starving and I take someone else's food in order to save his life, this is an exceptional situation, we cannot consider this as a bad act but a good one. Here the bottom line of "why" is the motive behind my act and this is what makes it good or bad. On the other hand the "why" can also make a good act bad. If I give money to a jobless graduate to assassinate my enemy, this is not a good act. When we turn to the question of "when," "where," and "who," we should ask ourselves "when I do it," "how I do it," "where I do it," "who I am" let's consider the case of a medical doctor who discloses his patient secret that is HIV positive to his friend, or a solicitor who steal the money of his client, these two sets of people are more guilty than an ordinary person who tells a secret or steals money.

Nothing is intrinsically good except love, or intrinsically bad except the lack of love. Love is the only law, because the moral law is the law of love and unselfishness, the truth of the matter is that there are certain things that are wrong in all situations and no motive can make them right.

6. Conclusion

Moral knowledge is special; it essentially knowing to do the right thing. Much of what we learn from the society comes from what others tell us. Hand in hand with this fact, however, comes a hard truth, for a variety of reasons, what others tell us is not always going to be true. As a result of this there is need for epistemic vigilance, our epistemic vigilance has to be both descriptive and normative, the descriptive side concerns what cognitive mechanisms we use for epistemic vigilance. The normative side concerns how these mechanisms are evaluated by epistemic standards, like knowledge, and moral standards, we have to be vigilance towards the informant, and vigilance towards the information.

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