

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION OF SUICIDE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS TO CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

There is an underlying element in the myriads of activities that humans perform on daily basis; namely, the quest to sustain life. Human life is one precious gift from God around which all other gifts revolve. To justify that life is central to all human pursuits, people often say: 'where there is life, there is hope.' Classically, the natural tendency in man to seek happiness and to avoid pain, to refrain from danger and to seek peace, to seek comfort and to avoid discomfort, and above all, to fear death and to embrace life, suggests that life, by all standards of consideration, is enrobed in a garment of expediency. Unfortunately, some humans tend to wilfully take away their lives on their own authority in a manner that tends to suggest that that is the best solution to the vicissitudes of life. This is known as suicide. Proponents and opponents of this action hold on to their varied views about life and how an individual can handle life independent of any external influence. Meanwhile, suicide, as such, has many implications to childhood education, the seriousness of which this paper tries to expose. The study adopted a qualitative design. The methods used were historical, descriptive and critical. In these methods, related literatures on suicide were sourced, the meaning of suicide exposed, and the concept of suicide evaluated respectively. This study tried to establish that suicide in itself is ethically wrong and perhaps has many implications to childhood education. The work therefore recommends that in their homes, among their peer groups, and in the schools, children should undergo an orientation about the importance of life beyond any other value in life. This will unnerve the practice of suicide as seen in the present day society.

Keywords: *childhood, education, ethics, implication, suicide.*

Introduction

Human life is the basis of all goods and the necessary source and condition of every human activity. Whatever man does is ultimately (if not immediately) directed towards the preservation of life. Human life is of such a value that people often say that life is sacred. Human life therefore is something to be treated with utmost care and precaution. A question however arises: If human life is this sacrosanct, why then do people commit suicide? What is it that motivates suicidal behaviour? Can there be a good reason to commit suicide? Is suicidal behaviour rational? Is suicide bad? What makes human behaviour suicidal? How about helping another commit suicide? Can it ever be morally permissible to take one's own life? These and more are the philosophical questions involved in suicide. They constitute the philosophical problem of suicide. The objective of this paper is an attempt to generate a re-orientation platform on the ideological framework on how humans conceive suicide, as a panacea to undue destruction of life and the unethical echoes of this destruction on children.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative design. The methods used were historical, descriptive, and critical. The historical method was used to trace the submissions of varied literatures on the concept of suicide. The descriptive method was used to dissect the various anchors of the subject matter in order to understand in details the texture of its content and its implications to childhood education. Finally, the critical method was used to weigh the various theories on the subject matter in an ethical scale, in order to assess its effects on the education of children and the well-being of the entire society.

Results and Discussions

Conceptual Analysis of Suicide

The first thing is to reassure ourselves of the meaning of suicide. Opinions vary with respect to the definition of suicide. The word "suicide" is a coinage from two Latin words, "sui" and "occidere" meaning "oneself" and "to kill" respectively. Judging from its etymology, suicide literally means the killing of oneself. This literal definition does not capture the entirety of what the concept denotes since it lacks the element of intention which is the thing that actually implicates the agent. The point is that, in its nature, suicide is intentional, not consequential. Suicide, according to Stedman's Medical Dictionary is intentionally causing one's own death. It is to be noted that it is not all self-killings that are suicides. Some are actually accidental. In suicide, three things are involved: **a.** direct killing- the act is directly intended whether as an end or as a means to an end. It is not suicide if one dies while trying to save another from dying (Graber, 1981). **b.** Of oneself- it must be a killing of oneself. If it is a killing of another, it is murder and not suicide. **c.** On one's own authority- it must be a willed act, not an act imposed by some external force or authority. Suicide therefore can be defined as the direct and intentional killing of oneself on one's own authority. This shall be our working definition here.

Types of Suicide

Fundamentally, suicide is divided into two: direct and indirect suicide. Suicide is said to be direct when one intentionally desires death in itself- the victim's action is intended or foreseen

(Durkheim, 1897). In direct suicide, one's death is the immediate object of the act of the will. Here, one aims directly at death and goes out of one's way to perform some death-dealing acts against oneself. These include acts which are objectively known to cause death such as deliberate self-harm and self-mutilation. For instance, one who consciously and willingly takes a cup of poison and dies as a result, commits suicide directly.

Indirect suicide, on the other hand, can happen in two ways: a) when one causes one's own death by performing an action which, contrary to one's intention, results in one's death. b) When one omits the ordinary means of preserving one's life. An example is when one refuses to take a prescribed medicine or visit the hospital when one is sick. In indirect suicide, death is neither intended as an end nor as a means to an end but happens to be the inevitable consequence of one's action. For instance, a woman who throws herself out of the window and dies in the bid to avoid being raped by armed robbers commits indirect suicide.

Based on intention, suicide can be classified into three as follows: Egoistic, Anomic and altruistic. **Egoistic suicide** is when a member of a community commits suicide because he lacks meaningful social interaction which subjects him to a personal isolation. **Anomic Suicide** arises out of a lack of participation in the social structure through deprivation of position, wealth and spouse, etc. **Altruistic Suicide** occurs when an individual decides to die on behalf a community to avoid an impending danger that could befall the community. Another example is when a man donates his life to avert a reprisal attack from another community that seeks a revenge for a life lost.

Supporting arguments for Suicide

Various arguments have been advanced in support of suicide. Among them is the one from the stoics who not only justified suicide but also adopted it as a way of life. The stoics maintain that suicide is always an option and frequently more honourable than a life of protracted misery. It is predicated that there are times when suicide is desirable. The belief is that no human being should be made to suffer unnecessarily and that if life becomes too burdensome, suicide is both justifiable and permissible as an escape. The stoics held that suicide was a permissible wise course to follow in circumstances that might prevent one from living a virtuous life. Suicide could be justified if one fell victim to severe pain or disease. Precisely, Seneca the younger, Epictetus and Aurelius, according to Sacharoff (1972) maintain that death by one's own hand is always an option and frequently more honourable than a life of protracted misery.

Like the stoics, the Libertarians argue that an individual should be allowed the freedom to choose between life and death. Why should we have right over other people's lives as in self-defence and at war and not have right over our own? Suicide is seen as part of human freedom which entitles man to make choices. It is argued that an individual's life belongs only to him and no other person can decide for him how to live his life. This is the view of Philosopher and psychiatrist, Thomas Szasz (2002) who taught that the right to end one's life is inextricably linked to the right of ownership over one's own life and body. Szasz argued that if others can force a person to live, then the person does not own himself but is rather owned by others.

It is also argued that life as a gift may be returned to the donor whenever it is found to be intolerable considering that one has no obligation over what one did not ask for. God, according to this line of thought, just gave each person life without consulting him and anyone

who does not need it at any point in time is therefore free to do away with it. To suppose that suicide deprives God of his Supreme right is to have a very narrow idea of God. God is perfect and omnipotent. No creature can deprive him of anything.

Counter arguments against Suicide

The arguments in defence of suicide may appear plausible but they have very shaky foundations. It can be seen that all of them derive from people's perception of life as a gift which could be terminated at will. The idea is that although life is good generally speaking, people who face intolerable situations have the right as human beings to end it all. This is manifestly preposterous. Everything naturally seeks its own being and it sounds absurd that one should seek one's death. To suppose that one should choose death as the lesser of two evils is illogical because death is not a moral evil. The lesser of two physical evils may be chosen where there is no moral evil. But moral evil must be chosen to avoid physical evil. Further, though life is a gift from God, it is a gift with a difference.

Suicide as an escape from suffering and from being a burden to others embodies a lack of interest in life and the erroneous assumption that the purpose of life is temporal felicity, which is not true. Life is not all about enjoying oneself but about being responsible and using one's life as God through his divine law directs. The suicide invades God's will by usurping God's right. There is need to be patient and reasonably courageous and allow the creator to do what he likes with the life he created. This of course is without prejudice to the heroic giving up of one's life for a noble cause which is morally allowable.

It follows that one is not free to take life at will. According to St. Augustine in Ünver (2003) suicide is strictly opposed and believed to be the worst of all sins. For him, life is the gift of God and our sufferings are the will of Providence. Therefore, rejecting life and shortening the decided time of suffering is a violation against God; it is not accepting the divine will. Augustine equally believed that God definitely forbids suicide with the commandment "thou shall not kill". Committing suicide violates this commandment. This commandment not only prohibits killing others but also oneself. If it is not lawful to take the law into our own hands and slay even a guilty person, whose death no public sentence has warranted, then certainly he who kills himself is a homicide, and so much the guiltier of his own death, as he was more innocent of that offense for which he doomed himself to die.

Aquinas in Ünver (2003) equally opposes suicide. According to him, a suicide by his act deprives himself of opportunity of penitence and acts ignorable in trying to escape the ills of life. Aquinas particularly uses three arguments to kick against suicide: argument from natural inclination to live, argument based on social community and argument that life ought not to be rejected because it is a gift from God. Consequently, for him, every sin is a sin against self, God or neighbour; and suicide is a sin against three of them at the same time.

John Locke (1690) rejects the right of individuals to take their own lives saying that it is against the natural law. For Albert Camus (1942), suicide is a rejection of freedom. He thinks that fleeing from the absurdity of reality is not the way out. Instead of fleeing the absurd meaninglessness of life, we should embrace life passionately.

There is no doubt that man is allowed to kill in self defence and in war, but in both cases, the right to life is still intact. The killing in self defence is done through God's authority implicit in the defender's right to life. The state is also justified in war when it is defending itself against

some unjust attackers. The case of suicide is different for the suicide is both the attacker and the attacked and there is no defence. No man has power/right over his life for it is God's gift. Those who support the right to suicide argue that suicide is an acceptable option when life becomes burdensome. They presuppose the assumption that man has the freedom to manage his life intelligibly and to choose his death when reason shows that life has no more good to offer. Kant (1785) takes on them with an ethical argument. According to him, one who chooses to commit suicide wrongly thinks of oneself as a means to an end. A human being, he argues, cannot be seen merely as means but must always be treated as an end. Kant therefore concludes that it cannot be right ethically to commit suicide to satisfy oneself. This position is in tandem with that of Chesterton (2010) who submits that suicide is an example of the ultimate and absolute evil; the refusal to take an interest in existence; the refusal to take the oath of loyalty to life. Therefore, the man who kills a man kills a man but the man who kills himself kills all men; as far as he is concerned, he wipes out the world.

Evaluation of the arguments for and against suicide

What should one make of the arguments pro and contra? Which position should one adopt? Is suicide ever justifiable? When considering which position to adopt, one has first of all to know whether man is a steward or a master. If man is a steward, then he is the agent of his principal God and therefore has no right over what has been entrusted to him. But if he is a master, then he is in a position to decide under what conditions life is no longer tolerable. Obviously man is not a master of his life. Life belongs to God who offers it to his creatures (out of love) as a gift to be cherished and preserved. Even if the state chooses to legitimize suicide, it remains intrinsically wrong for it involves the taking of what belongs to another. It is quite funny that people see murder to be wrong and still believe that suicide is right. How can they not see that if the right to suicide is upheld, other forms of homicide would equally gain legitimacy? Over and above all, the implications of suicide to childhood education are of paramount importance for the reason that children often learn faster and grow with the knowledge got from their societies. And if the concept of suicide is not well handled, children may grow to handle suicide as a heroic practice.

Implications of Suicide to Childhood Education

Ethical consideration of suicide has implications for childhood education. These implications go beyond the discovery of suicidal tendencies in children to the possible preventive measures to be applied to avert the idea from their malleable psychological dispositions.

In the first place, many people tend to believe that children do not have the developmental maturity to act on suicidal thoughts as they have an incomplete concept of death. However, research shows that regardless of whether they understand the consequences of their actions or not, children may consider death as an option to end their emotional pain without fully understanding the finality of their actions (Tishler, Reiss & Rhodes 2007). This, therefore, implies that issues of suicide should not be restricted to adults alone.

In a related development, children are as likely as adults to commit suicide when exposed to risk factors. The following risk factors, according to Tishler et al are linked to suicide in young children: previous suicide attempts, presence of psychiatric disorders and psychopathology, preoccupation with death. Others include family history of psychopathology and suicidal behaviour. Environmental and demographic factors also play a role in childhood suicide. These risk factors seem to result from a pathological combination of children and family

factors. The implication is that these risk factors should all prompt a more thorough suicide screening. In other words, the presence of one risk factor in a child should prompt a thorough assessment of all other potential risk factors. In addition, education about these risk factors should be part of the initial and ongoing training of all care givers and teachers of children.

Similarly, it is believed that offspring of suicide parents are at greater risk for suicide than offspring of living parents. Offspring of suicide parents have an especially high risk of hospitalization for suicide attempt, depression, psychotic and personality disorder (Wilcox, Kuramoto, Lichtenstein, Langstrom, Brent & Runeso, 2010). Therefore, care should be the watch word in dealing with the children of suicide parents.

Nevertheless, there are precautionary measures that could be applied to avert suicide tendencies in children. In the first place, positive relationships in children's lives play a significant role in promoting their mental health and building resilience. They foster self-esteem, competence, and an ability to respond to life's challenges (CSP, 2008). By implication, therefore, all those involved in training and education of children should work to build resilience in them. Precisely, parents and other family members, as well as teachers, coaches, and indeed all those involved in children's education should take actions to build resilience in them. This could be done by actively listening, understanding, and validating what they say, teaching them that mistakes and problems are opportunities to learn new skills; identifying and affirming their strengths and encouraging them to ask for help when it is needed.

Furthermore, the need for suicide prevention programmes in schools is not in doubt. This is helpful especially when such programmes include mental health promotion that emphasizes strength-based activities, help-seeking, meaningful engagements that give them a sense of belonging and purpose, training teachers and staff to identify thoughts of suicide in children through gatekeeper training, easy and apparent access to mental health support at school and coordinated care following suicide attempts (CSP, 2008). Therefore, suicide prevention programmes should be encouraged and even ensured in children's school environments.

Finally, educators, parents, and mental health professionals should identify pupils who perform poorly academically for signs of depression and suicide tendencies. This would enable them offer the appropriate support when necessary.

Summary and Recommendations

The zeal to sustain life is at the centre of every human struggle. Among all the values one can point at in life, none is as invaluable as life. Hence, the preservation and maintenance of life is an imperative for all humans. When humans attempt to value anything in nature more than life, the effect is the loss of life in search of a living. Suicide is therefore spanked by a misconception of the place of life among other values in nature. Therefore, with life as a gift from God, suicidal mission remains ethically wrong as God is not involved in the act. A profound orientation about life is therefore inevitable for humans, especially children in order to avoid the unfortunate suicidal acts as are evident in our society today.

It is highly recommended therefore, that all hands should be on deck in the upbringing of children in our society. From the home, parents should spend time in exposing the importance

of life to their children in such a conviction that nothing should be valued beyond life. Among their peer-groups and in their religious gatherings, children should be exposed to the importance of life as against suicidal projects. Over and above all, schools should adopt in their curriculum, a time to discuss life as such with children. This may open a window on how they understand life and consequently offer the teacher enough grounds to improve their understanding and appreciation of life.

Conclusion

Despite all the arguments for and against suicide, the act should be seen as an error. The reason is simple: suicide is like murder in that it equally involves the taking of life. And if humans detest murder, they should as well detest suicide. Being a refusal to face life courageously, suicide is an act of cowardice and a clear manifestation of lack of patience. For instance, we know for a fact that many of the things that cause people to commit suicide such as depression, emotional pain, or economic hardship are but transitory things that can be taken care of by adjustments and therapy. Yet, even if it is pathological, one should not give up hope in the face of trained psychological and spiritual experts who are ready to assist possible patients. The trite saying is familiar: "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

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