8-2024

What's Wrong with Suicide?: Our Passional Natures and the Question of Rationality

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by

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Under the Direction of Jessica N. Berry, Ph.D.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2024

ABSTRACT

According to many philosophers, the decision to commit suicide is irrational as a response to grief and hardship because the suicidal individual fails to properly appreciate the value of the future. The suicide, in her fixation on her interest in ending her current suffering, fails to consider the interest she has in the future. In this paper, I consider two views of suicide, one by Michael Cholbi and another by Richard Brandt, that argue that suicide is rational only insofar as the suicidal agent is able to appraise the value of her future. However, I argue that the epistemic standards set by both thinkers are too high. Then drawing on William James and Søren Kierkegaard, I argue that in relation to suicide, our subjective passional natures determine what our interests are, not external objective reasons to live. Suicide is thus no less rational than choosing to live.

INDEX WORDS: Philosophy, Suicide, Death, Dying, Rationality, Pragmatism, Existentialism

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August 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Drs. Jessica Berry, Tim O'Keefe, and Sebastian Rand for feedback on drafts of this paper. Further thanks to Dr. Berry for the consistent guidance throughout the project.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Philosophically, suicide presents two primary questions: First, is suicide ever morally permissible? Second, is it ever reasonable for one to commit suicide? In this paper I am concerned only with the latter question. I take the question of whether suicide is rational to be asking a more fundamental question than the ethical question: What makes a life valuable? If suicide communicates, as Albert Camus (1955) says, that life is "not worth the trouble" (p. 5), what would it mean for any individual life to not be worth living? Ethics takes as its root questions of value. Without discussing values, ethical imperatives cannot be derived; what is valuable determines what we *ought* to do. The value of life is certainly the most critical. All values that I have must come secondarily to the presupposition that life is valuable or can have valuable contents. To value, one must be alive. If a life can be such that death comes to seem more valuable than life there can be no further oughts. The dead have no oughts, morally or prudentially.[1]

In this paper, I want to argue against a common anti-suicide argument that claims that it is irrational to commit suicide in most (if not all) situations because the future may hold better things that an agent *would* want if they were to continue living. As Voltaire writes in his *Philosophical Dictionary* entry on "Cato", "The man who, in a fit of melancholy, kills himself to-day, would have wished to live had he waited a week" ("Cato: On Suicide, and the Abbe St. Cyran's Book Legitimating Suicide," quoted at Hecht 1995, p. 176).[2] In a similar vein, Michael

[1] I take my reasoning here to be similar to that in the opening paragraphs of Camus' (1955) *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which he motivates his famous opening claim that "There is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (p. 3). Camus recognizes and seems to take as his point of departure that claims about the value of life can have a unique ultimacy in the actions they prescribe.

[2] For a particularly vivid and poignant exploration of this theme, see philosopher and writer Clancy Martin's 2023 memoir and philosophical meditation on suicide, *How Not to Kill Yourself: A Portrait of a Suicidal Mind*. The book explores the tension between "two incompatible ideas…*I wish I was dead* and *I'm glad my suicides failed*" (p. xiv). Martin takes the former to be irrational and addictive belief, and one that does not to reflect a justifiable evaluation

Cholbi (2011) argues that suicide is irrational in most cases because the suicide often fails to "appreciate" the "negative significance" (p. 95) of her suicide. The suicide, on his account, fixates on the perceived benefits of her death (e.g., ending her suffering) and thus undervalues her future and its possibilities. These arguments seem to presuppose that those things that *can* make a life worth living *do* in fact, or *must*, make life worth living. I instead argue that choosing to commit suicide is no less rational than choosing to continue living. The contents or conditions of an agent's life, whether possible or actual, can only function as reasons for living or dying if they have internal motivating significance to her. In other words, those elements of her life must be taken as sufficiently valuable according to her evaluations as a particular subject. Thus, the decision to die can very well be reasonable despite appearing, in a given case, to not be in the agent's interest. But that appearance arises when our understanding of what it means for something to be in one's interest is mistaken, such as it is in Cholbi's argument. I will argue that given our epistemic limitations and the implications those have for our decision-making processes, interests are best understood in terms of the internal evaluations of the agent and not some publicly accessible external reasons.

To some it might seem odd to argue about life's value without considering the ethical question. Much of the ethical discussion around suicide focuses on whether other persons have sufficient grounds to make a moral claim against the suicide. Such persons may include loved ones, God, or society at large.[3] I do not wish to make too strong a claim and deny that suicide can have moral significance. There are certainly cases where ethical considerations matter, such

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of his life. He also expresses gratitude over the fact that he has failed because so many things that have made his life better have come after his failed attempts.

[3] It is worth noting that some philosophers, namely Immanuel Kant, have tried to argue that there are duties to the self and that suicide is a violation of those duties. However, the idea of reflexive duties remains deeply controversial and some scholars question the coherence of such duties (Stellino 2020, p. 21).

as is the case with "dyadic" suicides— i.e., suicides that intend "to injure, manipulate, insult, or impress the important other person in his or her [the suicide's] life" (Battin 2000, p. 32) —or in cases where an agent's suicide would leave behind dependents, such as children. In the above cases, I would argue that it is not suicide qua suicide, i.e., the act of self-killing in itself, that is morally problematic. Rather, what is problematic are other aspects of a particular act of suicide that are neither unique to, nor necessary for, suicide, e.g., inflicting trauma or abandoning someone. Further, it seems conceivable that suicide would still raise a question of the value of life even if there were no one else harmed other than the suicide. If we had a person alone such that no one could be affected— someone with no friends or family, no one who could find her body, in a Godless world (or at very least one where God is not affected by suicide)[4] — it would still seem that she could rightly ask: Why shouldn't *I* commit suicide? Is *my* life worth living? The value of life appears here to be distinct from the ethical question.

Suicide also has an intimate quality that is worth noting. Camus in the first few pages of *The Myth of Sisyphus* hints at this intimacy. Suicide, to Camus, amounts to "confessing that life is too much" for the agent and that she finds that life "is not worth the trouble" (Camus 1955, p. 5). Yet despite these hints, Camus seems to be primarily concerned with a universal claim about whether life itself is worth living and has been criticized for not taking proper consideration of the individual's relationship to it (French 2020, p. 73-4). I concur that the agent is communicating something when she commits suicide, yet I do not think it is necessarily the case that suicide communicates some grander statement that all life or life in itself is not worth living. I find it difficult to imagine what value life in itself, divorced from the contents of a life, would have; it is not coherent to speak of life without contents. Thus, when someone commits suicide,

[4] For an argument that it is not an affront to God to commit suicide, see David Hume's essay "Of Suicide" (1998).

the most we can safely assume she is communicating is that there are things particular to her circumstances that make *her* life not worth living. I therefore am limiting my investigation to the individual and suicide. The question here will be "are there conditions in which it is reasonable to terminate one's own life?" or "what are the circumstances that undermine the value of an individual's life such that it is not worth continuing?"

A final note before we begin: When I speak of suicide I will not be speaking of euthanasia or doctor-assisted suicide. This is for two reasons: First, my primary targets for analysis both take it that people suffering from painful terminal illnesses may reasonably choose to end their lives (Cholbi 2011, p. 91; Brandt 1975, p. 70). Second, the arguments that I am engaging with are focused on evaluating the future, its worth, and by extension what long-term losses result from committing suicide. In the case of euthanasia, however, the imminence of death beyond the control of the agent render talk of such a future moot. There is not much left of the future in these cases.[5] I will instead be focusing on self-killings that are motivated perhaps by despair but certainly by a sense, as mentioned above, that one's life is not worth living.

[5] Thanks to Tim O'Keefe for pushing me on this point.

2 MENTAL HEALTH AND THE COGNITION CRITERION

Since my aim is to defend suicidal reasoning against charges of irrationality, I will need to address the problem of mental illness. When discussing the rationality of suicide, it is important to be sure that we are not talking about people who are incapacitated cognitively. Michael Cholbi in his book *Suicide: The Philosophical Dimensions* (2011), posits that for an act of suicide to be rational it must reach a standard of "*rational* autonomy" (p. 89), consisting of two criteria: First, there is the cognition criterion that "the suicidal person must exhibit appropriate cognitive functioning" (Ibid., p. 90). Second, there is an interest condition, which has two further sub-conditions: that the act of suicide is "less harmful to the person than continuing to live" (Ibid., p. 91) and that the act of suicide is in accordance with the "fundamental interests or commitments" of the suicidal agent (Ibid., p. 91).[6]

When considering the cognition criterion, we ought to be careful not to take suicidal ideation as a sufficient condition for mental illness. This has been the consensus view for the medical and psychiatric community (Fairbairn 1995, p. 28) and it continues to be, as evidenced by the fact that psychology and psychiatry seek to treat individuals, aiming for a "cure, or the lifelong management of a problem [suicidal ideation]" (French 2020, p. 70). However, such a mode of thinking begs the question. It presumes that life is worth living (Ibid., p. 70), and therefore anyone who wishes to commit suicide must be mentally unwell and irrational (Fairbairn 1995, p. 28-9). The point of controversy in the debate on suicide's rationality is the criteria by which a life is or is not worth living; we cannot presume at the outset that it *is* worth living. Further, there are cases where it seems *prima facie* that suicide is not the product of mental illness, such as the tactical suicides of the Cesarian military leader, Vulteius, who killed

[6] The selected quotations are from Cholbi's *Suicide: The Philosophical Dimensions*. Although he does not quote her, he credits Margaret Pabst Battin for these interest conditions.

himself to avoid imminent capture by Pompey (Rosen 1975, p. 6), or of spies wishing to avoid being tortured at risk of revealing important secrets.[7] Such cases demonstrate that there are circumstances in which an evaluation is made by the agent that it is better to cut her life short. When we recognize that suicidal ideation is not irrational by definition, the question mentioned above remains open: *what* are the conditions by which it becomes rational to choose death?

Let us grant for the sake of argument that suicide is primarily the product of mental illnesses. Cholbi expresses concerns multiple times throughout *Suicide: The Philosophical Dimensions* (2011) that depression prevents most agents from being able to properly understand their interests or "appreciate" the negative aspects of their death.[8] According to Cholbi, "one of the defining symptoms of depression is… an irrationally pessimistic… view of the future. Thus, depressed individuals may often lack a clear enough sense of their desires… to be in a position to rationally determine whether suicide advances their interests or well-being" (Ibid., p. 82). He expresses a similar concern later, concluding that "serious questions, then, can be raised about whether suicide is cognitively rational if being cognitively rational demands an appreciation of death" (Ibid., p. 96). We might thus be tempted to say that depression qua mental illness leaves us cognitively impaired. However, I believe that there are important considerations that should lead us to withhold judgment on whether depression renders an agent cognitively dysfunctional.

First, we must recognize that people with depression are not delusional; they cannot be said to be detached from reality like someone suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. Cholbi recognizes this and concedes that, because depression affects mood and not cognition, the depressed are not cognitively impaired in this basic sense (2011, p. 92-3). Second, for reasons that will be explored presently, it is not helpful to conceive of the inability to properly appreciate

[7] The cases of spies are explicitly argued by Cholbi to be cases of suicide (2011, p. 24).
[8] I will explain in the next section what Cholbi means by his use of the word "appreciate."

one's death and the value of the future lost in suicide as constituting irrationality: Cholbi's formulation creates too high of an epistemic burden such that all individuals would fail to meet his standard, not just the depressed. Further, as I will argue, he has a mistaken understanding of what constitutes a person's interests. Finally, given advances in psychiatry we must recognize that depression is characterized by certain neurochemical tendencies. It may thus be tempting to claim that depression is purely a medical condition and that the pessimistic viewpoint of the depressed is purely the result of a faulty brain. However, this is a hasty and reductive view. The concern put simply is that it does not necessarily follow from people sharing neurochemical similarities that their tendency towards negative evaluations is irrational. All individuals have a particular neurochemistry, it is thus logical to presume that certain neurochemical tendencies will contribute to, or determine, particular dispositions. If a neurochemical disposition to make a certain evaluation is sufficient to be irrational, the optimist too would be irrational if their good disposition correlated to characteristics of their physical brain. One must then draw a principled distinction as to why the former is irrational but not the latter. Yet, if one believes that the depressed are uniquely irrational because they are prone to suicidal ideation, then one has begged the question and made the normative assumption that life is in fact worth living.

One can have a relationship with suicidal thoughts that I am willing to grant as irrational: cases in which an agent does not experience suicidal thoughts as rationally endorsable, but as something alien to her. In other words, she experiences suicidal thoughts as intrusive, thoughts that are "alien, unacceptable, and at odds with who [she is]" (Seif & Winston, 2018). Such an agent would certainly fail to meet the second condition of the interest criteria that Cholbi (2011) uses— the act must accord to an agent's "fundamental interests and commitments" (p. 91). There still may be controversy around this condition. For one, there are difficulties in determining what

one's self truly is for a thought to be "alien" to it and not one's "own".[9] It may also be the case that succumbing to such thoughts requires a choice which would implicitly reveal a rational endorsement. For our purposes though, it is best to go ahead and exclude such individuals. Such individuals present a hard case, but there are strong reasons to think that acting on such thoughts would not be rational. I do not intend to dispute Cholbi's and Battin's second interest criterion.

[9] Susan Wolf (1987) lays out such a concern as it relates to moral responsibility in *Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility* (p.51-2).

3 EPISTEMIC WALLS

As mentioned above, Cholbi presents two primary criteria for rationally autonomous suicide: First, the suicidal agent must be cognitively functioning. Second, two interest conditions must be met: "the person's suicide [must be] less harmful to the person than continuing to live" and the "suicidal act must accord with [the] person's fundamental interests and commitments" (Cholbi 2011, p. 91). Cholbi gives scant attention to the second condition in his argument on rational autonomy, other than to say that the reason the cognitive conditions are so important is that failure to meet them prevents the suicidal agent from being able to properly appreciate their interests (Ibid., p. 96). I now want to turn to what Cholbi considers to be a second concern regarding the cognition condition and say something more about his notion of an agent's "interests."

According to Cholbi, suicide in most instances is irrational because the suicide does not "appreciate" the negative significance of her death, i.e., the cons of her committing suicide. The suicidal, he says, have a "tendency to fixate on the positive significance of death instead of on its negative significance— to appreciate the former but not the latter" (Ibid., p. 95). "Appreciation" in Cholbi's sense is used in contrast to mere knowing. "Suicide ends one's life," he writes, "do those contemplating suicide comprehend this fact adequately? Doubtless, nearly every suicidal person *knows* that her action is likely to result in her death, but it is useful here to distinguish simply knowing something to be true from *appreciating* its truth" (Ibid., p. 94). In this context, to *know* is simply to "acknowledge or recognize" (Ibid., p. 94) that a proposition is true. To *appreciate* that proposition is to recognize its significance as a truth. To illustrate the distinction between knowing and appreciating, Cholbi gives the following example: His friend, a wine connoisseur, tells him that he recently had a bottle of wine with a "nose [that] reminded him of

Beluga caviar" (Ibid., p. 94). Cholbi, however, is not a wine connoisseur, so he does not know what a wine's nose is, nor has he experience with Beluga caviar. Although he can now be said to *know,* i.e., he acknowledges and recognizes, that his friend's wine had a nose reminiscent of Beluga caviar, he cannot *appreciate* the significance of that fact (Ibid., p. 94-95). Similarly, in the case of suicide, many suicidal individuals become fixated on the positive aspects of their respective deaths; they only appreciate that death will terminate whatever suffering they are facing. But, according to Cholbi, they "discount the value of the future; that is, they assign less importance to possible future happiness, however remote to present or immediate suffering" (Ibid., p. 95). It is important to note too that this failure of reasoning is not exclusive to those suffering with depression but occurs in people broadly (Ibid. p. 95).

Another view of suicide's rationality worth considering is that of Richard Brandt. Cholbi endorses Brandt's view in an argument against the idea that suicide is permissible because only the suicidal agent is knowledgeable of her own interests and wants (Ibid., p. 82). Brandt similarly makes the locus of rationality the agent's ability to evaluate the future in relation to her interests. According to Brandt:

> The basic question a person must answer, in order to determine which world-course [i.e., the future one commits oneself to in making a choice] is best or rational for him to choose, is which he *would* choose under conditions of optimal use of information, when *all* of his desires are taken into account. It is not just a question of what we prefer *now*… the preferences of tomorrow… are just as legitimately taken into account in deciding what to do now as the preferences of today. (Brandt 1975, p. 69)

In short, for suicide to be rational, the agent must be able to account for both the interests of her current self *and* the interests of her future self. Here, the agent is not just losing things that *are* valuable in life when she commits suicide, but she is losing things that she *would* want if she

continued to live. Brandt further warns that passions and desires change over time; an event that triggers an episode of suicidal ideation may later come to have less significance to the agent than it does in the present moment (Ibid., p. 69-70). Cholbi concurs, asking: "Do suicidal people fully and accurately take into account their future wants and desires when considering whether to end their lives?" (Cholbi 2011, p. 82). Cholbi seems skeptical that the suicidal can properly evaluate their futures, especially when they are depressed. What he says about this inability when discussing Brandt mirrors what he says when he discusses rationally autonomous suicide, which in the latter passage he generalized to people overall (Ibid., p. 95). Taking both Cholbi's and Brandt's arguments together, the relationship between the cognitive condition and the interest conditions becomes clear: Suicide is not rational, because the suicidal fail to evaluate their ends with a proper appreciation of their interests, they thus wrongly conclude that it is in their interest to commit suicide.

My main concern about the picture Cholbi and Brandt paint is something that they both recognize but perhaps do not *appreciate* fully: The future is something that we know little, if anything, about. This uncertainty is even more pronounced when it comes to knowledge of complex things such as our life's course and our future selves, and as such Cholbi's and Brandt's standards for rational suicide are too epistemically demanding. The overarching problem is that what we typically treat as knowledge when it comes to future states is at best a crude approximation or projection of the past and present condition onto the future. In the case of Brandt's argument there is not as a matter of fact an existent future self. The future self is by definition a self that has yet to come into being. Thus, when attempting to evaluate our future selves, "we always have to live by probabilities and make our estimates as best we can" (Brandt 1975, p. 70). At best then, the "future self" we are considering is a projection or approximation

cobbled together from the past and present self. There are a few problems with this, however. Firstly, the proposition that things have been observably and predictably a certain way does not entail that things will continue to be that way, as Hume famously argued in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (2007, p. 24-5). Although we might worry that endorsing skepticism towards inductive inferences is perversely skeptical, recognizing that the problem of induction presents a legitimately difficult puzzle that ought to serve as a reminder that we cannot take for granted our ability to *know* future outcomes. After all, if nothing logically precludes the possibility that our most certain empirical knowledge could be revealed to be merely true opinion, then *a fortiori* our speculation about the future is on shakier ground than we would like it to be.

We may be reasonably comfortable asserting that our belief that water freezes at zero degrees Celsius constitutes knowledge. Yet, although we may grant this for similarly simple examples, when it comes to such complex projections as who we will be in the future, or whether the future will be worth living for, things become substantially less certain than in the realm of empirical generalization. Brandt's argument, which Cholbi endorses, would need the suicidal agent to be reasonably sure that her future self will remain roughly the same in some relevant way as it does currently or has in the past. This also seems dubious. We do not need a Freudian conception of the subconscious or a Nietzschean view of drives to understand that people are oftentimes wrong about themselves. Columnist David Brooks recounted an illustrative anecdote: A woman had heard of a man who had a stroke that left him unable to speak and commented to her son that should something like that happen to her that she would "not prolong her life" (Brooks 2023, p. 95). Later, she too suffered a stroke that took her voice, yet she found that she was able to live a rich life until her natural death (Brooks 2023, p. 95). Although both Brooks

and Cholbi take instances like this to be indicative of the irrationality of suicide, I think that such a claim is too hasty. Let us assume for the sake of argument that the woman did not claim that she would rather be dead flippantly and that she could rationally endorse her position upon reflection. The fact that her past projection failed to reflect her future reality indicates at least one of two things: Either she did not know herself well enough to accurately predict what her interests and attitudes would be, or herself or her circumstances changed in a way she could not foresee. The circumstances of our lives also can change quite unpredictably and in ways that upend how we have understood ourselves. As such, one can never have a strong enough grasp of one's future to have a sufficient appraisal of its value. But for Cholbi and Brandt, we need to be able to have a grasp of the future to render the decision rational or irrational, thus we cannot say whether an act of suicide was or was not rational. If we make a stronger claim that lacking the appraisal makes the act irrational, then affirming life and continuing to live also becomes irrational. The account is too demanding and cannot justify a decision either way.

It should be apparent that the epistemic issues I have outlined above do not render the decision to commit suicide rational. If I find it inappropriate to make positive claims about the value of life, that will preclude me from claiming that it is not worth living. Yet if what I said above stands, I can also not claim that it is and render suicide irrational. I contend, rather, that suicide is no less rational than choosing to live. Further, I worry that it is a tautology to say, as Cholbi (2011) does, that those who seriously consider suicide "discount the value of the future" (p. 95). If we take actions to reveal the values that a person has, and therefore concede to Camus (1955) that "one kills oneself because life is not worth living" (p. 8), then it seems plainly obvious that those who kill themselves find the future to "not be worth the trouble" (Ibid., p. 5), i.e., that they find the future worth discounting. Thinking about suicide in this way, in terms of

one's subjective valuations rather than one's objective appraisals will allow us to have an epistemically less demanding account of how we make decisions. It is to the subjective valuations that I now turn in order to address a weaker interpretation of Cholbi's (2011) argument that the suicidal person needs only to appreciate the "possib[ility of] future happiness" (p. 95).

4 SIGNIFICANCE AND THE PASSIONATE TURN

There are two philosophers that I now want to bring into the discussion, as I believe they will have useful insights for the present discussion: William James and Søren Kierkegaard. Although the works of both authors I will be drawing from are primarily arguments justifying belief in God, they take as their point of departure the epistemic limitations and uncertainty that I have explored above. Importantly for my purposes, they then explore the implications that those limitations have for human action. The argument against suicide from what I will call the "hope for our future selves" argument[10] relies on the rational evaluation of the value of the future, which is on epistemically shaky grounds. Yet, both James and Kierkegaard recognize that part of what it means to be beings that do anything is that we must make choices despite these epistemic limitations.

William James states the thesis of his seminal work "The Will to Believe" this way: "*Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds*" (p. 42, italics in original). In James's terms, a genuine option is living, forced, and momentous. A living option occurs when the person deciding takes both the propositions she is choosing from to be real possibilities. A forced option occurs when one faces a true dichotomy; one cannot affirm one proposition without forgoing the other (Ibid., p. 34). James illuminates the momentous option by describing its opposite— the trivial option —which occurs when the "opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise" (Ibid., p. 35). Thus, the momentous decision either presents a unique

[10] In the absence of a widely agreed upon name for this class of anti-suicide arguments, I am opting to refer to them using the title from Jennifer Michael Hecht's book *Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies Against It* (2013) in which she recounts similar arguments.

opportunity, has significant stakes, or is irreversible. These choices (genuine options), which must be determined by one's "passional nature," are those that bear great weight in the life of the person who is choosing a path forward, a "world-course" as Brandt put it above. Such significant choices, to James, cannot feasibly be adjudicated on purely "intellectual grounds" (Ibid., p. 42) because "no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp" (Ibid., p. 61). Because nothing can be known with absolute certainty, for James, it becomes absurd to demand in the case of momentous decisions, such as the choice to have religious faith, that one "always wait with impunity till the coercive evidence shall have arrived" (Ibid., p. 53). Such evidence will never arrive, thus placing momentous decisions outside of the realm of practical reason.

Kierkegaard is fixated more narrowly on applying his philosophy to justify Christian faith and, as far as I am aware, Kierkegaard does not delineate a class of decisions that warrant the use of passion separate from religious questions. Like James, Kierkegaard recognizes a gap between what we want to know when making decisions and what we can actually know with any certainty. Early in his seminal work the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard writes: "For my deliberation, it is more important that it be understood and borne in mind that even with the most stupendous learning and perseverance… one would never arrive at anything more than an approximation of the truth" (p. 24). Because what can be known can only ever be an approximation of the truth, if one were to insist on continuing to withhold judgment until the full truth had been found, then that judgment would need to be withheld indefinitely. Consequently, any action relying on that judgment will be indefinitely postponed (Ibid., p. 27). Worse, "a little dialectical doubt suddenly touching the presuppositions here can disturb the entire project for a long time" (Ibid., p. 25). Alluding to Pontius Pilate, Kierkegaard writes, "The approximation-process of truth is symbolically expressed by washing

one's hands, because objectively there is no decision" (Ibid., p. 230). In other words, it is not possible to find compelling reasons to decide in objective circumstances alone. The "objective" way of looking at things is wholly inappropriate to the "personal impassioned interestedness" of one's subjective projects (Ibid., p. 25). From the descriptions Kierkegaard has of the objective attempts to find Christianity's true doctrine, it becomes clear that "objective" and "subjective" are not used in the common, colloquial manner whereby the former is the "real" and "factual" and the latter is mere opinion. The "objective" is still the antithesis of the "subjective," but the subjective is here best understood as that which involves human interestedness, i.e., the placing of oneself in the world as an existing subject. Subjectivity is "essentially passion" (Ibid., p. 33). For James and Kierkegaard, the gap between our epistemic limitations and committed actions is bridged by passion.

How, then, shall we take these insights beyond the religious context and into the present conversation about the rationality of suicide? Both authors have discussed the epistemic barriers to the truth and posited that decisions and their entailing actions, particularly those involving important matters to the subject, require that such gaps be circumvented. James perhaps makes it the clearest how passionate volitional faith has implications and applications outside of the realm of religious belief. In section IX of "The Will to Believe," James lists several choices that cannot wait until we have "sensible proof" to act on, including moral choices (James, p. 53) and choices pertaining to the formation and maintenance of personal relationships (Ibid., p. 53-4). James says of friendships, "The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence… ten to one your liking never comes" (Ibid., p. 54-5). Similarly, of marriage, James says, "If a man should hesitate indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was

not perfectly sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home… Would he not cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he went and married some one else?" (Ibid., p. 56). I do not wish to couch human passion in terms of pragmatic utility, as James does here, but the point stands that the choices in each relationship are momentous and that to participate as a subject in our own existence we must commit to beliefs through passion. To do otherwise is to have "forgotten what it means to exist" (Kierkegaard, p. 242). When we commit to beliefs we can commit to actions by extension and our actions reveal our commitments and beliefs. The passional process is just what we must do as subjectively interested beings.

One final insight from James that I think will be helpful: passion undergirds every belief that we have. Both our moral beliefs (James, p. 53-54) and our epistemic ones result ultimately from our "willing nature" (Ibid., p. 39-40). Of our moral beliefs James says:

> Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only odd biological phenomena, making things good or bad for us, but in themselves indifferent? How can your pure intellect decide? If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one. (Ibid., p. 54)

Compare this with what he says about our epistemic commitments:

> Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other, — what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire… we want to believe that our experiments and studies and discussions must put us in a continually better and better position towards it… But if a pyrrhonistic sceptic asks us how we know all this, can our logic find a reply? No! certainly it cannot… we willing to go in for life upon a trust or assumption which he… does not care to make. (Ibid., p. 40-1)

James appears to be arguing that what makes a hypothesis living, in his terms, for an agent is our passion. For example, our reliance on inductive inferences is not logical, but pragmatic.

According to James, we need and desire that our inductive inferences are knowledge, even though logically they are problematic— as Hume demonstrated in his *Enquiry* (2007, p. 25-28). On this account our beliefs at root appeal to our passions. What appears significant to our passion determines what beliefs are even worth entertaining.

Let us now turn back to our discussion of suicide. Suicide is undoubtedly a forced and momentous option, in Jamesian terms. It is forced because "one does or does not kill oneself" (Camus 1955, p. 7), one cannot choose one without inherently foregoing the other. And it is momentous; should one choose to commit suicide and succeed the consequences would be irreversible. Just like any other momentous decision one makes in life, such as marriage, moving to a new town to restart, or investing oneself in the religious life, the decision to commit suicide is one that will be guided by passion. Objective considerations alone are unable to motivate a decision. There must be some evaluative presumption on the part of the agent. Further, our discussion of James' living hypotheses also adds another complication to Cholbi's and Brandt's arguments: What an agent takes to be the salient facts about herself and her circumstances when she projects her future will also be determined by what is significant to her passions at present. There is no agreed upon way to determine which aspects of a person's life ought to have more weight in determining whether life is or is not worth continuing. Nor is it clear how one could derive such a system without appeal to subjective and passionate evaluations.

One could perhaps advocate that the suicidal agent needs to, whether ethically or prudentially, try to wait a little longer to see if new information comes to light, including the facts of what she will have become or what values she will have or prioritize once the inciting incident has come to pass. Or perhaps the agent ought to try to change her circumstances in case she had missed a way of being that could give her life renewed value. There are two possible

responses given what I have explored above. Again, our knowledge is necessarily incomplete, meaning that one can always be in a process of gathering information and thus never actually make a decision. In the face of this, it may seem that the suicidal agent should take the skeptical approach and withhold judgment indefinitely. Yet if she did decide to take the skeptical approach, it would still be because doing so appealed to her passions, as James indicated above (p.41). But, regardless of whether we frame the skeptical approach as a positive decision or as a postponement of a decision, we may worry that by encouraging her to be withhold judgment and thus action, we would be to asking her to forgo her agency as subjective project. She would not be affirming life, but merely riding it as a passenger rather than a participant—something which James and Kierkegaard take to be undesirable, for pragmatic purposes and existential reasons, respectively. Regardless of what she chooses, to affirm her life and commit to it fully, to disaffirm it and commit suicide, or even just to hold out to see if things change, the agent is decisively acting on necessarily incomplete evidence, and so it must be her passionate dispositions that push her in her particular direction.

Finally, we are interested in our life's course as a subjective project, and every action (for people who meet the cognitive functioning criteria) is an expression of those interests. We ought not to make the mistake of thinking that a person's interests as it pertains to suicide lies in whether the "person's suicide is less harmful to the person than continuing to live" (Cholbi 2011, p. 91). People are willing to undergo a good deal of suffering or harm if it aligns with their passionate interests. Imagine someone suffering severely from a terminal illness who, despite (what appears to be) all reason, chooses to see to her natural end rather than be euthanized. What would motivate her decision? It certainly does not seem like it would be in her interest to do so. It would seem *prima facie* that she suffers a greater amount of harm from this choice. Yet the

subject may choose it because of her committed belief in seeing to God's plan, or the longing to hold on to see the sunrise out the hospital window each morning, or to see her loved ones visit. Any of those could be enough to motivate her to continue to live despite her "interests." Ultimately, her real interests are those that are chosen through, or appeal to, her passionate commitments.

Other thinkers have commented on how absurd the notion of continuing to exist is. Camus (1955) described the suicidal thought as one which "recognize[s], even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living" (p. 5-6). What then could motivate an agent to continue to live? Only her passional interests. On the contrary, if the sufferings of life become too much for the agent to bear, and it appeals to her passionate commitments to commit suicide, i.e., if none of those things that so many have argued make life worth continuing have enough motivating significance to the suicidal subject, then there is no reasoning that could possibly convince her to stay. Her family, community, or other goals she had, even the vague possibility of a better future, will not have any motivating force if she does not value them enough. If those things are not sufficiently significant to her passions, they cannot motivate her to choose life over suicide. As such it may be perfectly rational given her passionate motivations to simply put an end to it.

5 CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, we cannot know enough about the future to make a substantive evaluation of our future or our future selves. Even if we do not endorse the skeptical conclusions from the limits of our empirical knowledge, we still cannot have sufficient knowledge to evaluate the future. Any projections that an agent could make would at best be a rough approximation, inherently influenced by her subjective passions rather than by objective matters of fact alone. Thus, the soundness of her evaluation of the future cannot be the appropriate measure of the rationality of suicide, otherwise it would render both the choice to live and the choice to die as irrational. So, as in the case of every major life decision, an agent's choice necessarily must reflect her internal passional interests. As Nietzsche wrote in a *Nachlass* passage, "The surrender to the world process [*Weltprozeß*] is as stupid as the individual negation of the will" (quoted at Stellino 2020, p. 125). There is nothing that makes life worth living or worth ending that is not wholly dependent on the individual subject. No arguments could ever convince an agent that life is worth continuing if they do not appeal to her other deeply held passionate commitments. To commit suicide now seems no less rational than committing to life. As such, I think that it is ill-advised to treat those who make those pessimistic evaluations as irrational, as not truly being able to appreciate the positive value of their future. To do so is to presuppose certain normative valuations and paternalistically impose their maxims on others. Perhaps we ought to encourage she who is contemplating suicide to take the decision slowly and to very carefully evaluate what she cares about. But if to our chagrin she should still believe that to commit suicide is the best course of action, we are in no position to argue with her. The reasoning that undergirds the decision, to be or not to be, is only that which is significant to her.

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