SOCIAL-ETHICAL PROPERTIES OF EGOISTIC SUICIDE

D. MORGAN PIERCE

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I. INDIVIDUAL LIFE AS A PROPERTY OF SOCIETY

A. RECOUSE TO SOCIAL-ETHICAL GROUNDS AGAINST SUICIDE

¶1. It is a treacherous quality of philosophical argumentation that often the strongest moral argument against a type of act suddenly becomes the strongest moral defense of that act if one of its main premises falls out. The Augustinian argument that makes suicide a sin, and attempted suicide punishable in canonical and secular law, propounds that egoistic suicide is categorically wrong because a human life is in the ownership of God. If then the essential ground for the wrongness of suicide is the ownership of the life by God, it follows that there is nothing morally objectionable in any absolute sense about committing suicide if God does not exist. Anyone who does not believe in the existence of God is therefore perplexed about suicide; when he regards its rational basis, the prohibition of egoistic suicide appears to be a vestigial superstition, but regarding it intuitively he cannot accept the idea that there is nothing morally wrong about capriciously committing suicide. When an argument poses itself as the essential rational ground for some precept, rather oddly it strongly encourages one to act against the precept in so far as it connotes that it would be unreasonable to accept the precept in the absence the reasons given in the argument.

¶2. A strategy to preserve belief in what one intuitively feels to be true, but for which the argument fails, is to revert to an earlier argument which cannot prove the conclusion as forcefully as the discredited argument does, but which on the other hand is stronger than the outmoded argument in the sense that its more modest premises are more resistant to being controverted. The thesis that a human life is in the ownership of God is the most forceful argument; it is the foundation of the theses both that egoistic
suicide is wrong for individual-ethical reasons, and that its wrongness is absolute, admitting of no circumstances that would excuse it. If the presupposition of God is put in suspense, the intuitive sense can revert to the Aristotelian rationale that suicide is wrong because individual life is primarily the property of society rather than of the person living the life. The position is of course controversial, especially in respect of ownership, but the argument is at least more resistant to contradiction in the respect that no one is likely to doubt whether society exists. The new position makes suicide wrong for social-ethical reasons, and is accordingly far less absolute than the previous argument regarding how much of egoistic suicide it can forbid. Social ownership of individual life may imply that it is always wrong for the individual to commit suicide, i.e. that he has absolutely no right to autonomous disposal over his existence, or it could imply that the individual has a right to commit suicide within the limitation that the suicide does not collide with duties implied by the social ownership of individual life.

B. THE SCOPE OF SOCIAL-ETHICAL CROUNDS AGAINST SUICIDE

§1. The force of the Aristotelian ground against suicide, to what degree it can save the Augustinian thesis with weaker premises, depends on whether social ownership of life signifies that any act of suicide, purely as such, is a betrayal of society, or whether the wrongness of suicide is entailed only by the duties an individual exercises in his status as a property of society. The former is nearly as forceful as the Augustinian condemnation of suicide, because an individual cannot contingently belong to society; if membership in society is an a priori existential property of being human, arbitrary suicide would always be wrong. The latter alternative on the other hand
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attenuates the wrongness of suicide in that it implies that it is not morally wrong for a person who has become socially useless to commit suicide.

¶2. Let us assume that the act of suicide is never morally wrong purely from theological or individual-ethical grounds: succinctly put, it is impossible for an individual to treat himself unjustly. In complete abstraction from society, that is, an individual is never wrong to commit a certain act x. But under the new supposition it is nevertheless always wrong for an individual in society to commit x. Alternatively, it may be the case that the individual cannot help but commit y in the course of doing x. If it is always wrong to commit y and it is never wrong per se to commit x, it is nevertheless always wrong to commit x if doing x entails doing y. Even if it were never in itself wrong for an individual in society to commit suicide, it may nevertheless follow that it is always wrong to commit suicide, if y is some harm to society which always ensues from suicide. Consequently suicide, x, would be demonstrated to be only contingently wrong if it were established that the y which always accompanies x in fact does not necessarily accompany x as an ineluctable precondition for accomplishing x. Finally, suicide may be only contingently wrong if y does necessarily accompany x as x's negative precondition, but, following only from the unique properties of egoistic suicide, it is not morally wrong to harm society.

¶3. The final alternative concerns whether egoistic suicide touches on an existential element of human life which transcends moral critique, since, if a suicide rejects society as part of what he rejects when he rejects life, he also means to repudiate the moral concepts which constitute society. Possibly social morality is so integrated in the meaning of human existence that the suicide cannot repudiate social-moral duties even by rejecting life, or possibly moral duties are posterior modifications on human existence which are valid only in so far as the agent affirms life. The will to observe
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moral duties is only contingently related to suicide; an agent's decision to commit suicide may not be in the least motivated by a desire to abandon moral obligations. It may even be the pleasure the agent has in performing moral duties that have sustained his will to live thus far; he may be pained and remorseful that suicide will disable him from continuing in them. It must therefore be questioned whether suicide is socially immoral only when the intention of suicide is to abandon duties, or whether suicide is immoral as an abandonment of social duty when egoistic suicide only fortuitously involves abandonment of duty. If adventitious conflicts with duty override an egoistic prerogative to commit suicide, it should be clarified whether any substantial duty stringently overrides a right to suicide, or whether only certain duties override this liberty. If only certain duties override a personal prerogative over suicide, a criterion must be discovered which determines when the individual has a second-order liberty to abandon his duties, and when social duties have precedence over any of his personal motives.

II. SOCIAL OWNERSHIP OF INDIVIDUAL LIFE

A. PRECISION OF ABSOLUTE AND CONTINGENT OWNERSHIP OF INDIVIDUAL LIFE

1. The notion that suicide is wrong because an individual has duties to society is completely different in logical nature from the treatment of altruistic suicide in previous essays. If individual life is a property of society, it is harm to the society which makes suicide categorically wrong. When an individual's life is conceived to be in the ownership of society, suicide is per se wrong because the individual is making a wrongful use of property that is not his. The premise of social ownership does not, as with
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an individual-ethical conception, condemn suicide because of its harm to the individual himself, but for its harm to society.

¶2. The concept of social ownership of individual life is not monolithic. When the teleology of society is naturalistic, as in Aristotelian reasoning, suicide is not merely in large part contingently wrong depending on whether the intention which motivates the suicide is good or bad, nor is the wrongness of suicide contingent on whether the particular consequences of a suicide are bad. The naturalistic teleology of social ownership of life implies a categorical condemnation of egoistic suicide, not primarily because of the specific harmful effect suicide may have on society, but because flouting the principle that life is the property of the society, not the individual, undermines the authority on which the stability of the whole social structure is based.¹

¶3. When the naturalistic conception of teleology decays, the vitiated principle of the social ownership of private life gradually makes the categorical condemnation of suicide on the ground of its harm to society inconsistent. When individual life is thought to have a dignity independent of its functioning in society, the thesis that suicide is wrong because of social ownership can pin the wrongness of suicide only on a very attenuated, utilitarian conception of teleology. Since society as a whole is not conceived to have a final goal, an act cannot be wrong because it frustrates the final purpose of society; if it is a harm to society, the harm must consist in the harm of its particular consequences. Therefore it becomes impossible to categorically condemn egoistic suicide on the ground society's ownership of individual life, because this ground is capable of making suicide morally wrong only when the particular suicide entails harmful consequences. If an egoistic suicide were morally wrong only when it damaged society, it would be extremely rare for an egoistic suicide to be

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morally wrong. Beccaria exemplifies a typical Enlightenment backlash against the classical thesis of social ownership in his utilitarian comment that a suicide does not do any particular injustice to society, since he takes less away from society than an emigrant, who takes his property away from society:

Chiunque si uccide fa un minor male alla società che colui che ne esce per sempre dai confini, perché quegli vi lascia tutta la sua sostanza, ma questi trasporta se stesso e darsi ad una vicina nazione fa un doppio danno di quello che lo faccia chi semplicemente colla morte si toglie alla società. La questione dunque si riduce a sapere se sia utile o dannoso alla nazione il lasciare una perpetua libertà di assentarsi a ciascun membro di essa.²

The theological ground against suicide turns out to do more than support the individual-ethical argument for the categorical wrongness of suicide; it is also essential for the social-ethical condemnation of suicide so long as the argument is meant to be categorical. Without reference to God it is difficult to support the premise that society as a whole has a teleological goal, and hence difficult to sustain the thesis that society is in absolute ownership of individual life.

¶4. If to the contrary the individual has an intrinsic value quite apart from his value to society, the premise of society’s total ownership of individual life cannot be used to support the categorical condemnation of suicide. Suicide can only be contingently wrong, because the meaning of harm to society is exhausted in the utilitarian consideration of whether the suicide’s consequences are harmful. It is not an a priori element of suicide that it
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does harm to others, although harm to others is the only condition which can make suicide wrong. An agent may recognize under certain circumstances that he no longer has utility for society, and that suicide, even though egoistic, would adventitiously benefit society more by vacating his social role for a more capable successor.

§5. Loss of utility cannot be an extenuating ground for suicide under a naturalistic theory, but it would be a valid ground under the utilitarian theory of society's property in the individual. The ostensible social prohibition of suicide because of its harmful effect may implicitly call for suicide under such a condition. Even if society is conceived to have partial ownership of individual life in the restricted consequentialistic sense, and even if the individual harms society in this way by his suicide, egoistic suicide is not always morally wrong because the caveat against harm to society cannot always offset the separate value of individual dignity. Under the premise that suicide is wrong only if it deprives the community of benefit, harm to society is what is absolutely wrong, but suicide is wrong contingently on whether it would deprive society of benefit. If the benefit of which it deprives society is not harmful in contrast with the degree of individual dignity at stake in a particular circumstance, either the absence or the negligibility of social harm will remove any moral obstacle to egoistic suicide. Even disregarding whether or not a suicide were egoistically motivated, in the case that a suicide would benefit society, the ground for condemning suicide would fail.

B. THE PRIMACY OF SOCIAL PROPERTY IN PERSONAL AUTONOMY

§1. The exact meaning of the naturalistic thesis that egoistic suicide is wrong because it is unjust treatment of the state is not a matter of the
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balance of cost and benefit for the individual and society but rather of competing conceptions of the social status of individual autonomy. The naturalistic conception does not regard egoistic suicide as wrong because it cancels the individual’s benefit to society; emphasis for its immorality centers on the sinister example it makes for other individuals. The wrongness of egoistic suicide carries a conception that suicide is wrong because society is an organic whole which cannot persist if its parts are allowed to disgregate:

\[ \text{Kai χις ςε εγγυτατα \varepsilonνός \alphaνθρώπου \varepsilonχει; \text{Ο}ιον \text{ο}ταν \text{πο}υ \text{ημών} \\text{δάκτυλος} \text{του} \text{πληγή, πάσα} \text{ή} \text{κοινωνία} \text{ή} \text{κατά} \text{το} \text{σώμα} \text{πρός} \text{τήν} \text{ψυχήν} \text{τεταμένη} \text{εις} \text{μίαν} \text{σύνταξιν} \text{τήν} \text{του} \text{ἄρχοντος} \text{ἐν} \text{αὐτή} \\text{ήσυχοτό} \text{τε} \text{καὶ} \text{πάσα} \text{άμα} \text{ξυνήλυγησε} \text{μερους} \text{πονήσαντος} \text{ὅλη, καὶ} \text{οὕτω} \text{δὲ} \text{λεγόμενον} \text{ὅτι} \text{ὁ} \text{ἄνθρωπος} \text{τὸν} \text{δάκτυλον} \text{ἀλγεῖ. καὶ} \text{περὶ} \text{ἄλλου} \text{ότονοῦ} \text{τῶν} \text{τῶ} \text{ἄνθρωπον} \text{ὁ} \text{αὐτῶς} \text{λόγος, περὶ} \text{τε} \text{λύπης} \text{πονοῦντος} \text{μέρους} \text{καὶ} \text{περὶ} \text{ἡδονῆς} \text{ραίζοντος;} \]
\[ \text{Ὁ} \text{αὐτῶς} \text{γάρ, ἐφη, καὶ} \text{τούτο} \text{δέρωτες,} \text{τοῦ} \text{τοιούτου} \text{εγγυτατα} \text{ἡ} \text{ἄριστα} \text{πολιευκομένη} \text{πόλις} \text{οίκει.} \]

Under the assumption that society can exist only if all of its members act as organic parts, an egoistic suicide is a forceful subversion of the will of the members of a society to act as if they formed a collective whole:

\[ \text{ἐχομεν} \text{οὖν} \text{τι} \text{μείζων} \text{κακών} \text{πόλει} \text{ἡ} \text{ἐκεῖνο} \text{δὲ} \text{ἄν} \text{αὐτήν} \text{διαπέρ καὶ} \]
\[ \text{ποιή} \text{πολλὰς} \text{αντὶ} \text{μιᾶς} \text{ἡ} \text{μείζων} \text{ἀγαθῶν} \text{τοῦ} \text{δὲ} \text{ἄν} \text{ξυνδή} \text{τε} \text{καὶ} \]
\[ \text{ποιή} \text{μίας.} \]

Body, soul, and society have similar structures and corresponding virtues:
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the goodness of the parts in each case is a function of its organization with the other parts, and the values of the constituents in each depend on its contribution to the stability of the whole. The goodness of anything depends on the order of the parts in respect to the whole. In so far as egoistic suicide is a form of repudiating one's duties to society it threatens the organic priority of society over the individual and thereby destroys the condition by which it is possible for individuals to survive. Suicide threatens the collectivist concept not, as Beccaria supposes, because suicide withdraws benefit from the state, but because suicide signifies a transference of priority from the state to the individual.

12. The organic status of individual life precludes the position that the individual has natural rights on the ground of being a human; the organic relation of individual and society does imply that the individual has natural rights, but because society is natural; the individual has natural rights because he is part of a society. Therefore the individual does not have a right to withdraw from society, for instance by suicide, because any rights he has come to him by virtue of being a part of society. All types of roughly analogous voluntary deaths which the collectivist concept of the individual does allow, infanticide, abandonment of captured soldiers, and euthanasia, are justifiable because the sacrifice of life is beneficial to the society. Thus Plato requires infanticide for a newborn child that was born without approval of the state. He recommends giving presents to the enemy and letting them keep the soldiers who let themselves be captured alive in battle. He recommends withholding medical treatment from the chronically ill because they lead miserable lives and contribute nothing to the good of the society. Because of the conception that society is an organic whole, the fact that this conception of society allows for the waste of individual life does not liken it to the contemporary conception of a
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totalitarian state. Since the part of an organic whole cannot survive or exist separately from the whole of which it is a part, the primary interest of the part is to keep the whole alive, not, for instance in this case, because the society has supreme value and the individual is worthless, but because the individual needs the society as the essential condition of his existence.

§3. Plato vehemently condemns suicide, but at the same time praises the waste of individual life in the service of society. His apparent nonchalance about individual human life and human pain seems to be oddly contradictory with his categorical condemnation of suicide, but it is not. Suicide is categorically wrong not because of its harm to the agent, but because of its egoism; if there were a justification for suicide, it would have to derive from its benefit to society, but since by definition an egoistic suicide is not for the benefit of others, it cannot be morally condoned. The “categorical” condemnation of suicide condones socially beneficial voluntary death, but categorically condemns individual autonomy in the decision to commit suicide:

Τὸν δὲ δὴ πάντων οἰκείότατον καὶ λεγόμενον φιλτατον ὃς ἄν ἀποκτείνῃ, τί χρὴ πάσχεις λεγω δὲ ὅς ἄν ἑαυτόν κτείνῃ, τήν τῆς εἴμαρμένης βία ἀποστερῶν μοίραν, μήτε πόλεως ταξάσης δίκη, μήτε περιωνυν αφύκτω προσπεσούσῃ τύχη ἀναγκασθείς, μηδὲ αἰσχύνης τινὸς ἀπόρου καὶ ἀθλίου μεταλαχών, ἄργια δὲ καὶ ἀναιδρίας δειλία εὔπτη δίκην ᾧ δικὸν ἐπιθῇ. Τούτω δὴ τὰ μὲν ἄλλα θεός οἶδεν ἄ χρή νόμιμα γίνεσθαι περὶ καθαρμοῦς τε καὶ ταφᾶς, ὃν εξηγητάς τε ἅμα καὶ τοὺς περὶ ταῦτα νόμους ἐπανερμένους χρῆ τοὺς εγγίζοντα γένει ποιεῖν ἀυτοῦσιν κατὰ τὰ προστατόμενα. τάφους δὲ εἶναι τοὺς οὕτω φθαρεῖσι πρῶτων μὲν κατὰ μόνας καὶ μὴ ἐμθὲν συντάφου, εἶτα ἐν τοῖς τῶν

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The Platonic-Aristotelian position manages to condemn suicide categorically, not contingently, by making social submission found the semantic distinction between suicide and self-sacrifice. If it is subordination to the social good which constitutes moral value, killing oneself may be good or bad according to whether it signifies subordination or insubordination to society. Plato and Aristotle cheerfully praise voluntary death, such as in battle, but express the strongest contempt for the individual who commits suicide out of laziness or cowardice, as above, because laziness or cowardice express a priority of individual autonomy over communal duty. If it is priority of the social good which makes egoistic suicide wrong, it is the implied insubordination of the individual to his society, rather than the contingent harm that suicide causes society, which makes suicide wrong. He recommends a program of eugenics involving a phoney lottery, so that the spontaneous desires of individuals will be frustrated through deception. In order that loyalty to the society may not be divided by other loyalties, he calls for the destruction of paired marriages and the nuclear family, and recommends the utter abolition of private property. Plato regards nothing as immoral which is in the interest of the community. Since social ownership of individual life implies that the individual’s obligation to society is prior to his private interests, the individual’s reasoned judgement about the value of his life to himself is irrelevant to any valid reasoning about the value of suicide:

Πότερον δ’ ἐνδέχεται ἑαυτὸν ἀδικεῖν ἢ οὐ, θανερὸν ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων, τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐστὶ τῶν δικαίων τὰ κατὰ πᾶσαν ἀρετήν

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υπὸ τοῦ νόμου τεταγμένα, οἶον οὐ κελεύει ἀποκτίννυναι ἑαυτὸν ὁ νόμος, ἀ δὲ μὴ κελεύει, ἀπαγορεύει. έτι ὅταν παρὰ τὸν νόμον βλάπτῃ μὴ ἀντιβλάπτων ἑκών, ἄδικε, ἑκών δὲ ὁ ἐидῶς καὶ ὅν καὶ φι. ὁ δὲ δι όργην εάντων σφάττων ἑκών τοῦτο δρᾶ παρὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον, διόκ. ἐφ ὁ νόμος ἄδικε ἄρα. ἀλλὰ τίνα; ἢ τῆν πόλιν, αὐτὸν διόκ ἑκών γὰρ πάσχει, ἄδικείται δ' ὀδέης ἑκών. διό καὶ ἡ πόλις ξημοί, καὶ τις ἀτιμία πρόσεστι τῷ ἑαυτῶν διαφθείραντι ὡς τὴν πόλιν ἄδικον. 17

§4. The thesis that egoistic suicide is wrong because society is in ownership of individual life is deeply in conflict with the individual-ethical condemnation of suicide. The social ground against suicide, that suicide harms the society to which the individual has duties of beneficence, is not a precursor of the idea that an individual’s right to life is a right he can have against himself to prohibit suicide:

and he who through anger voluntarily stabs himself does this contrary to right reason, and this the law does not allow; therefore he is acting unjustly. But towards whom? Surely towards the State, not towards himself.

The phrasing here that stabbing oneself is against right reason may suggest that the individual has a right to life which he can have against himself; the phrase “and this the law does not allow” could suggest that the law’s relation to suicide is paternalistic, to protect the agent from himself. However, the phrase “surely towards the State, not towards himself” signifies that stabbing oneself is “against right reason” not because it hurts the agent, but because it hurts the state. To eliminate the consideration
that suicide could be "against right reason" because of harm to oneself, Aristotle refers to the position that nothing which is voluntarily received can be unjust:

πρὸς δὲ τούτοις, ἀνευ τῶν κατὰ μέρος ἀδικημάτων οὐδεὶς ἰθικεῖ,
μουχεῖι δ' οὐδεὶς τὴν εαυτοῦ οὐδὲ τοιχωρκεῖ τὸν εαυτοῦ τοίχον
οὐδὲ κλέπτει τὰ αὐτοῦ

The wrongness of suicide cannot consist in a wrong to the agent because he denies that whatever rights an individual has can ever be rights that he can hold against himself. The analogy with theft and adultery suggests that it is impossible for an individual to murder himself, on the ground that he is similarly minding his own business so long as he kills himself instead of someone else; it is impossible for an agent to do wrong to himself. The argument is not to imply that egoistic suicide is therefore in no way immoral; its intent is to eliminate the individual-ethical ground against suicide so as to aver the more absolutely that egoistic suicide is immoral solely because of its offense against society. The exclusion of individual-ethical grounds is to imply that how an agent affects himself is entirely irrelevant to the morality of his act, but whatever an individual omits to do in accordance with the social good is injustice, thus:

"the law does not command a man to kill himself, and what it does not command it forbids"

§5. The full significance of the argument comes out with a reflection on what the liberal conclusions would be from roughly the same viewpoint. As previously mentioned, it is a treacherous quality of a moral argument that
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it can suddenly become the most powerful argument for the exact opposite of its conclusion when just one of its constituent premises falls out. The present argument that suicide is first and foremost a social injustice reverses its implication if the key premise about the social ownership of individual life is abandoned. If it is impossible for an agent to murder himself, in the same way that he cannot commit adultery or theft against himself, then there is no ground for legal condemnation of suicide if the individual's life is not the property of society. The argument that it is impossible for an agent to do wrong to himself if he harms himself supports the liberal idea that the individual has a liberty-right against the state to do anything whatever so long as it does not infringe on the rights of others. If suicide by this argument is not an immoral act to the agent himself, and if it does not infringe on the rights of others, social morality would entail a duty to protect the individual's liberty-right to suicide, since a liberal conception of morality does not require the individual to extinguish fundamental rights for a social good. A "right against suicide" could not be generated because an individual's rights are only limited so as never to infringe on the rights of other individuals. Suicide would have to be construed to invade rights of an individual; harm to society as an abstract entity, no matter how great, would be an invalid ground against suicide. If suicide does not infringe the rights of the individual who is the agent, and it does not affect any other individual, the agent would be morally entitled to legal protection of his liberty-right to suicide.

6 The notion that suicide is a social injustice thus bifurcates into conceptions of rights-invasion and the social ownership of individual life. Human rights invasion holds that something can be a harm to society only if the harm ultimately concresces as harm against particular individuals, but under the principle of social ownership identifiable harm to an
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individual other is irrelevant to whether a person's act is an injustice to the state. Plato's direction to punish a suicide with a dishonorable burial exemplifies the view that what is ultimately a harm to individual others is not essential for an act to be conceived as a harm to society. If the value of the individual as such were the ultimate criterion of social harm as in a human rights theory, the social injustice in this example would not be the act of suicide, but the punishment of the suicide by a dishonorable burial. The conception of social injustice as rights invasion would convict the State of injustice for violating individual dignity. Once individual-ethical grounds against suicide are put in suspense, the State has no moral justification to repress egoistic suicides which do not involve harm to individual others:

C'est foiblesse de ceder aus maux, mais c'est folie de les nourrir. Les Stoiciens disent que c'est vivre convenablement à nature, pour le sage, de se departir de la vie, encore qu'il soit en plein heur, s'il le fait opportunément; et au fol de maintenir sa vie, encore qu'il soit miserable, pour veu qu'il soit en la plus grande part des choses qu'ils disent estre selon nature.¹⁹

If society is not in ownership of individual life, attacks on the suicidal agent's burial, inheritance or other posthumous concerns, or internment in a mental asylum, amount to an invasion of the individual's rights against the State, since the State then lacks moral justification for applying repressions against the sole power that the individual has for escaping intolerable suffering:

Les lois sont furieuses en Europe contre ceux qui se tuent eux-

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mêmes; on les fait mourir, pour ainsi dire. une seconde fois; ils sont trainés indignement par les rues; on les note d'infamie; on confisque leurs biens. Il me paroit. Ibben, que ces lois sont bien injustes. Quand je suis accablé de douleur, de misère, de mépris, pourquoi veut-on m'empêcher de mettre fin à mes peines, et me priver cruellement d'un remède qui est en mes mains?²⁰

C. SOCIAL PREROGATIVES
OVER INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

§1. It is also fully conceivable within a eudaimonistic theory that an agent would be happier if he foreshortened his life by suicide, because the eudaimonistic theory of "happiness" considers the success of a human life as a whole. If the remaining time of a human life would detract from the quality of life as a whole, the agent would do well to preserve the over-all happiness of his life by foreshortening it:

For there are many consequences of life that make men fling away life, such as disease, excessive pains, storms, so that it is clear that, if one were given the power of choice, not to be born at all would, as far at least as these reasons go, have been desirable. Further, the Life we lead as children is not desirable, for no one in his senses would consent to return again to this. Further, many incidents involving neither pleasure nor pain or involving pleasure but not of a noble kind are such that, as far as they are concerned, non-existence is preferable to life. And generally, if one were to bring together

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all that all men do and experience but not willingly because not for its own sake, and were to add to this an existence of infinite duration, one would none the more on account of these experiences choose existence rather than non-existence. But further, neither for the pleasure of eating or that of sex, if all the other pleasures were removed that knowing or seeing or any other sense provides men with, would any man value existence, unless he were utterly servile.31

Classical thinking itself seems to partially agree with Montesquieu's idea that suffering should give the individual a right to commit egoistic suicide. Social ownership of life however implies that society has a prior claim in the sense that it can abrogate any of the individual's individual-ethical claims to his own good when they are inconducive to the social good. If a right to life does not sustain an individual's right against himself not to commit suicide, instead postulating in accordance with Aristotle that it is impossible for an individual to inflict an injustice on himself [II. B. §4], the individual should apparently have a liberty-right to commit suicide. Even under these premises, the social ownership of individual life would nullify such a liberty-right to suicide. A crucial problem is whether the scope of individual liberty should be weakened in order to sustain the moral condemnation of egoistic suicide, or whether the value of individual liberty is so great that egoistic suicide ought not to be morally stigmatized. §2. So much being said, it is not obvious that egoistic suicide should be morally condoned so as to uphold the concept of individual liberty in its fullest force. Although harm to an individual other is not a necessary condition for suicide to be a social injustice, it is a false inference to suppose that social ownership has no alternative but to derive its condemnation of
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egoistic suicide either from a conception that society is a superorganism whose value overrides values attaching to individuals, or that individual lives have only instrumental values. Collective social ownership and human rights theories are the same in basing all justification on benefit to the individual; priority of social over individual good does not exclude individual benefit as a necessary component of social-ethical justification. Therefore even given a social ownership principle, ultimately benevolence to the individual is the final justifying moment for subordination of the individual to society. The collectivist element of social ownership inflicts much greater stress than liberal principles on individual lives, as evidenced by the callousness of condemning egoistic suicide or in its willingness to spend individual lives for a social benefit. The more intense pressures are supposed to constitute an indispensable condition for individuals to develop the types of character by which they can achieve self-realization.

§3. Accordingly individuals would benefit less from a society without strong pressures because they would tend to develop characters which draw less on their potentialities. The individual owes subordination to society not for its benefit to society, but because a society thus supported is the ideal condition by which the individual can achieve self-realization. When Plato faces the objection that his collectivist society ignores individual human happiness, he does reply that legislation should intend the well-being of the community as a whole, rather than that of any person or social class, but moral justification nevertheless depends on its ultimate benefit to the individual rather than society. Plato argues by analogy that the separate interests of the parts of the body are subordinate to the health of the whole, and that desires in an individual must be disciplined, coordinated, or altogether repressed in the interest of the happiness of the individual life as a whole. Supposing self-realization depends on an objective end, social pressures
constraining individual freedom are justified to the end that the individual’s chaotic use of his freedom would frustrate the self-realization that freedom is good for. If social activity forms the individual path into self-realization and the integrity of that social medium persists only if social good has priority over individual good, it is ultimately by the individual good that individual subordination to the social whole is justified.

¶4. The repression of egoistic suicide thus appears to be quite cruel in individual cases, but seems to have its value as a discipline to guide most individuals to have happier lives. Despite their common justification of social policies in terms of benevolence to the individual, the teleological scheme condemns certain individual liberties for utterly different reasons than liberal theories. A human rights theory denies an individual a particular liberty by reason that the liberty would somehow violate the liberty of another, whereas the teleological scheme refuses an individual a liberty not necessarily because it would harm another individual, but because it would vitiate the social integrity that all individuals depend on. The individual liberty to commit egoistic suicide is teleologically prohibited on the ground that such a liberty would threaten the vital precedence of social good over individual good. It is necessary to explain how individual good could possibly be the ultimate justification for giving social good precedence over individual good.

¶5. The precedence of social good depends on the premise that a good society should pressure the individual to develop his potentialities. The argument for benevolent social pressure presupposes that a human being’s final state of development is an ontologically fixed criterion that society can use for deciding what social pressures would benefit his development. If there is no such teleological knowledge the state could not have a moral justification for pressuring the individual in the direction of any particular
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development. It depends on the premise that what is finally good for the individual may not be anything that he himself chooses, or anything that he may even be conscious of at an earlier stage of his development. If, to the contrary, the final good is something which the individual must consciously choose, society would lose its moral ground to pressure individual development. If the state exercised such pressure, it would implicitly use as its criterion what character development would be good for the state, not the individual, and thus be morally liable to the objection [II.B.§8] that it expunges individual dignity.

D. INCOMPATIBILITY OF TELEOLOGY AND MORAL AUTONOMY

§1. The social ownership of life gravitates on whether the individual has a right of personal autonomy even when his use of autonomy would not be beneficial to himself, or whether society should obliterate any individual autonomy which is not objectively good for the individual. The condemnation of egoistic suicide by virtue of social ownership amounts to a condemnation of any personal autonomy which does not achieve what is objectively good for that individual. If the “right to life” is not derived from premises of social ownership, it does not morally bind the individual against his will to continue living. A right to life rooted in individual-ethical grounds would give the individual a discretionary right to egoistic suicide exactly because he has a right to life. The individual would retain a right to commit an egoistic suicide in cases in which it would not be objectively what is best for him. An individual-ethical conception of suicide thus protects the individual’s integrity, in that the claims of society are not allowed to inundate his liberty to waive his own right to life.

§2. The qualification that social ownership of individual life is justified by
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what is good for the individual, not ultimately by its good for society, categorically prohibits egoistic suicide, but does not thereby endorse a right to life. Personal autonomy is a necessary component of a right; a right to life which is not discretionary is after all not a right, but a duty. If the individual is morally wrong to commit suicide when it is not egoistically beneficial, but he is morally right to commit suicide -i.e. self-sacrifice- when it is socially beneficial, the individual has no absolute rights over his own life at all. A suicide cannot be morally permissible and egoistic at the same time. If the moral value of the suicide is not oriented on its subjective value in the individual's personal circumstances, which particular individual it is makes no difference to the moral value of the suicide, so long as the suicide would have the same effect on the social situation. Under the premise that what is objectively good for the individual is uniformly the same for every individual, the individuality of the agent drops completely out of the criteria for the morality of egoistic suicide. Under a social ownership conception the individual is morally bound against his will to continue living; his only autonomy is in determining whether his death would be good or bad for society.

¶3 The thesis that it is immoral to abandon society by suicide, not primarily because it is bad for society, but because it is bad for the individual himself, implies that the individual should be denied the liberty to commit suicide according to the subjective value of his life. The moral justification for society to pressure the individual is that there is an objective good for the individual, which, although it is his only true good, is often different from what he thinks it is. The individual is therefore likely to miss his own good if his character development forms in the wrong direction. Even if society does in this case force the individual to obtain what is objectively good for him, despite his subjective judgement, the objective good is obtained at the
cost of eliminating individual autonomy.

4 Even assuming that a society successfully steers an individual to what is good for himself by prohibiting him from doing what is bad for himself, social coercion would not be well justified because of the violence to the individual’s subjectivity. The psychology of applied social pressures jeopardizes the individual with a high degree of fallibility in his perception of what actions he morally owes to others. Individuals can be socially pressured to make choices for or against suicide which do not reflect their individuality. An agent may ostensibly act on his decisions, but under circumstances in which the beliefs on the basis of which he thinks no longer embody his authentic subjectivity. The social pressure necessary to assure that the individual makes the presumably right decisions that lead to his own good may foster such weakness of will in the agent that he no longer has the capacity to be morally responsible for his acts or his thoughts.

5 The concept of egoistic suicide entails that the act proceeds from the individual’s decision; a person who kills himself, but whose act is not an intentional product of a decision, cannot be said to commit suicide. Conversely, a person who does not commit suicide cannot be morally credited, so to say, for not having committed suicide, if the agent refrains from suicide because he is too intimidated by social pressures rather than from autonomous reflection. The use of social pressure to prevent egoistic suicide may have a moral value, but in so far as it prevents suicide by obliterating the individual’s capability for autonomous thought, it would be as absurd to morally censure a person for committing suicide as to blame him for catching pneumonia.

6 If there is an objective good that is good for every individual, social pressure to guarantee that individuals achieve that good for themselves would destroy moral autonomy; the thesis of social ownership of individual
life can be justified only if the value of the objective good outweighs the
value of moral autonomy. Secondly, if the objectively fixed good is not
uniform for all individuals, or if the objective good is presumed uniform but
its nature were in dispute, it would be wrong to disable individual autonomy so as to pressure individual development towards a uniform end.
The conclusion seems to be that limitation of individual autonomy may be
morally justifiable for the sake of a common social good, but the sake of the
individual's ownmost objective good is not a valid ground to limit personal
autonomy. Furthermore, the final good cannot justify application of social
pressure in so far as the social benefit is not reducible to its utility for
individual character development [II.C.¶4].
¶7 In summary, if a final good were perfectly definite, it would be plausible
to attribute primacy to the final good and relegate autonomy as an
instrumental good. But to the degree that self-realization is not
convincingly predefined, autonomy assumes greater moral value than the
pretention of any final good. The only condition which can override
individual autonomy is the individual's own consent to have his autonomy
curtailed. The unlimited expanse of subjective goals, in contrast to a
singular final good, signifies that the value of the individual's self-
realization increases in direct proportion to the increase in liberty to
achieve more subjective goals. If simultaneously self-realization is the
ultimate moral ground and there is no objective good to define self-
realization, the individual ought to relinquish only as many liberties as is
necessary to maximize his liberty. Supposing that there is no "true good"
which the individual is likely to miss if he is not coerced in the right
direction, the individual's own good cannot be a justification to rescind
personal autonomy over suicide because the prohibition of suicide is not a
condition necessary for maximizing personal liberty.

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III. ΦΙΛΙΑ: CONTINGENT HARM OF SUICIDE TO OTHERS

A. IMPARTIALITY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL OWNERSHIP

It is a principle of Stoic reasoning that the moral agent must consider the benefit of an act with complete impartiality as to whether the benefit will be his own or that of another.28 Usually the purport of this principle is to deter the moral agent from placing a higher value on the benefit of an act just because the benefit will be to himself; however, against the purport of the principle, impartiality may avert the agent from placing greater value on the benefit of an act just because the benefit will be to some person other than himself. Unless the individual is entitled to compare impartially his egocentric benefits equally with benefits to others, the presumption favoring benefit to the other would make the altruistic excuse for suicide inconsistent with the social ground against egoistic suicide:

But suppose that it is no longer in my power to promote the interest of society; suppose that I am a burden to it; suppose that my life hinders some person from being much more useful to society. In such cases my resignation of life must not only be innocent but laudable. And most people who live under any temptation to abandon existence are in some such situation; those who have health, or power, or authority, have commonly better reason to be in humour with the world.29

The moral condemnation of a person who commits suicide to benefit himself because he thereby fails to benefit others conversely implies that a person is morally obligated to commit suicide when it would benefit people more than
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if he continued living. Consistency should require that if sacrificial suicide is morally good because of social benefit, an egoistic suicide should not be less morally valuable if benefitting oneself is no less intrinsically valuable than benefitting any other individual. If the social ownership theory distinguishes between "social benefit" and benefit to an individual other, the argument remains consistent, but in that case it eradicates the value of the individual qua individual; if on the other hand the meaning of social benefit ultimately reduces to benefit to an individual other, the value of the individual qua individual is reinstated, but it inconsistently implies that the life of the other is intrinsically more valuable than one's own life.

§ 2 If the values of self and other are to be regarded impartially, the agent would be entitled to suicide whenever the value of suicide for the self would be greater than its disvalue to others. The distinction between suicide and other types of self-killing is linguistic and artificial if there are conditions under which a sacrificial suicide would not be morally wrong, and there are exactly analogous conditions under which the suicide would achieve the same benefit, but for the self rather than another person, and the harm to others would not transcend the benefit to oneself.\textsuperscript{27} An act x cannot be morally correct just because A does it, such that x would be morally wrong just because B does it. If a condition justifies A's performance of x it must justify B's performance of x, assuming that there are no descriptions of the positions of A and B which make A and B relevantly different. Correlatively the benefit of doing x cannot make it right for A to do x just because it is to B's benefit, but wrong to do x just because it would be to A's own benefit. The social property in the individual can coherently commend a sacrificial suicide only under the entailment that the individual is entitled to value his own life no less than that of another, other descriptions of the situation being equal; if it is right for A to sacrifice his life, it would be right for B to
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sacrifice his life in the same conditions. Assuming the abstract equality of individual lives, it follows that A should be morally entitled to commit suicide to benefit himself if it is analogous to the benefit to another which would justify a sacrificial suicide, and if his suicide does not entail substantial harm to others. The contrary would imply that a moral agent must assume that his own life is intrinsically less valuable than the life of any other individual he might benefit.

3 The thesis that social property in the individual preempts individual autonomy over suicide therefore does not successfully condemn egoistic suicide and condone sacrificial suicide. Since the degree of value that an individual's life has to himself is in normal situations immeasurably greater than the degree of benefit or loss that his life might constitute for society, even under the assumption that individual life is a social property it would nevertheless follow that the individual is right to give far greater weight to the value his life has for himself than the value that his life has for society:

Pour être utile à sa patrie ou sa famille, il faut que l'homme chérisse sa propre existence, ait intérêt de la conserver, aime les liens qui l'unissent aux autres, soit capable de s'occuper de leur félicité.28

If a person who does not want to live cannot be of any substantial use to his society, it would follow that suicide cannot be an injustice to society; rather, it would be spiteful on the part of society to force such a person to live, even when he has so little value to society and the continuance of life is so painful to himself. The argument from the value of the individual's life to society is inherently weak if "community" connotes such things as career performance and civil participation; although collectively individual life is

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essential, society is almost never significantly dependent on any particular individual taken distributively. The thesis of impartiality, that one should not value any other person’s life less than one’s own, would imply, paradoxically, that one always has a right to egoistic suicide, because the value that one holds in almost any position of society is less than the value of the life to oneself.

B. HUMAN INTERDEPENDENCE IN PHILÍA

§1 The concept of absolute social ownership successfully establishes a categorical condemnation of suicide, but in so doing it must depreciate the values of individual dignity and moral autonomy. Capitulation of the teleological and holistic presuppositions of social ownership undercuts the right of society to pressure individual development and therefore nullifies the argument that egoistic suicide is wrong essentially because of its symbolic significance as insubordination against society. Consequently if egoistic suicide is morally wrong on grounds of social ownership, it must be argued that its wrongness is consists in the real harm it does to society. However, the immediately preceding argument vitiates this position as well. Accordingly society has no further moral justification to coerce the individual to continue living against his will by stigmatizing him and his family with disgrace, confiscating his property or that of his relatives, or other countermeasures. Inviolability of individual dignity should protect an individual from such types of coercion, but individual dignity does not herewith imply that society has no ownership in individual life. Suspending the thesis that society as a whole has a telos, a revision of the moral claim of society may bind the individual against egoistic suicide when it would substantially harm others. The concept of individual dignity makes
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autonomy over suicide contingent on partial social ownership of individual life. Thus Diderot argues that an individual is not morally free to end his life if his suicide would harm the happiness or honor of the people who depend on his existence.29

¶2 Instead of the premise that individual life ought to be dedicated to the social telos which makes his own life possible [II.C.¶5], the reduced notion of social property conveys that other people taken individually are partial owners of the agent’s life. One may argue validly that suicide is immoral when the suicide would deeply hurt the interests of others, such as through loss of material support, through the provocation of guilt feelings, or through social stigmatization.30 In so far as no individual human being can exist as he does without the other people to whom he is related, no individual should have total autonomy over his life because his existence is a vital part of the lives of others. Although the moral view of the Stoic philosophers regarded the State with indifference, attributing no moral purpose or telos to its existence, similarly to Diderot they argued that an egoistic suicide is limited by duties he has to the family:

Saepe impetum cepi abruppendae vitae; patris me indulgentissimi senectus retinuit. Cogitavi enim non quam fortiter ego mori possem, sed quam ille fortiter desiderare non posset. Itaque imperavi mihi ut vivere; aliquando enim et vivere fortiter facere est.31

The moral underpinning of partial social ownership is that although an individual’s duties to his society are not overriding, an individual has intimate relations and commitments to others which override egoistic reasons. These commitments may be characterized as philia; such relations
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are not limited to immediate relatives and friends, but include any particular persons to whom one has commitments, regardless of whether the relations contain personal affection. The concept that there is social ownership in individual life because of personal interdependence characterizes egoistic suicide as objectively, but contingently wrong. The interdependence of individuals makes egoistic suicide contingently immoral because the viability of other individual lives depends on the agent’s existence. The agent’s ostensible liberty to commit egoistic suicide is overridden to the degree that his suicide can ruin other lives. In effect the agent has a prima facie right to suicide which is almost always defeated by the moral claims that others have on the agent.32

¶3 The sense of the claim that the wrongness of egoistic suicide is at the same time objective and contingent is that, even though the agent should have autonomy over suicide, it does not follow that any decision he makes is morally right just because the judgement is within his autonomy. Egoistic suicide is objectively wrong when a preponderant duty to the community overrides the subjective reasons he has to prefer suicide. “Contingent” on the other hand conveys that although there are reasons against egoistic suicide which obligate the individual to continue living against his will, those reasons do not always revoke the autonomy concerned in egoistic suicide:

Quant a infortuné qui ne peut perdre de vue ses ennuis et ses peines, qui a toujours ses maux presens a l’esprit, il est forcé de prendre conseil d’eux seuls. D’ailleurs, quels avantages ou quels secours la société pourrait-elle se promettre d’un malheureux reduit au désespoir, d’un misanthrope accablé par la tristesse, tourmenté de remords, qui n’a plus de motifs pour se rendre utile aux autres, et qui, lui-même s’abandonné, et ne
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drive plus d'intérêt a conserver ses jours? Cette société n'en serait-elle pas plus heureuse, si l'on pouvait parvenir a persuader aux mechants d'ôter de devant nos yeux des objets incommodes et que les lois, a leur défaut, sont forcées de detruire? 

The previous notion of social ownership interpreted harm to society collectively, so that an egoistic suicide is harmful even if it causes no harm to any individual in particular. Under the interpretation of philia however social ownership is distributive rather than collective, so that something can be a harm to society only if it is a harm to specific individuals. Since the wrongness of suicide is contingent on whether it seriously harms other people taken individually, duty to society does not always override the prerogative to suicide. Since in many cases of suicide the agent is so disabled by despair and isolation that he is not useful to anyone else, it could not be wrong to commit suicide on the ground that it harms others. Voluntary euthanasia exemplifies a suicide which is not likely to inflict serious harm on others. A person may be too disabled in a state of terminal illness to sustain the type of personal relations that would obligate him to persist living in pain.

¶4 Eschewing the premise that an individual life participates in a purpose greater than his own purpose, the purely deontological intuition that it is wrong to cause avoidable pain is the underlying ground by which philia establishes a moral constraint on egoistic suicide. Personal autonomy has social constraints only in the interpretation that "social" connotes how an individual project affects the individuals standing in closest relation to the agent. An egoistic suicide is contingently wrong when the act would desolate the life projects of others. The suicide which cannot be wrong for
upsetting the whole project of a society can still be socially wrong for ruining the dependencies of other individuals. Supposing that any suicide is liable to cause devastating harm to relatives and friends, an egoistic suicide is immoral on the condition that others depend on the agent's continued existence to sustain their life projects.

§5 The deontological account that egoistic suicide is wrong because it harms others is however susceptible to the same refutation as the teleological account of social ownership. The crucial premise of each account is that egoistic suicide is wrong because it is harmful, but it is plausible that suicide can be harmful but not wrong. Egoistic suicide is such an extreme culmination of personal tragedy that the harm it causes others is usually not commensurable with the significance suicide has for the agent [III.A.§3]. When egoistic suicide is the only means by which the agent can refrain from repudiating values, a situation in which continuing to live would destroy all values would destroy the reasons for the agent's attachment to other people.36 Assuming that friendships are based upon values that people appreciate in each other, a person cannot be a friend if he demands the abandonment of one's central values as payment for the friendship. Since by the very nature of egoistic suicide the harm to others is inessential and peripheral to the meaning of the suicide, the harm of an egoistic suicide to others is nominal in comparison with the agent's final effort to save the total meaning of his life through suicide. The presumption in an egoistic suicide is that because an authentic friend supports whatever values which constitute the friendship, a friend would also support the reasons for the suicide stemming from those values rather than evaluate the suicide for its peripheral harm to his own affairs. Even assuming that the connection between harm and wrong is embedded in the meanings of these concepts, it only follows that doing harm requires a justification; it
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does not imply that any act which causes harm is necessarily wrong. What is required to resolve the connection between egoistic suicide and harm to others is what degree of harm it is that makes an act indefeasibly wrong.

The contingent relationship between harm and wrong signifies that the individual is not categorically bound against his will to continue living; his discretionary right to egoistic suicide is intact so long as the harm he causes others does not cross a certain threshold. The individual is nevertheless almost always morally bound against his will not to commit suicide because the territorial limitations of harm to others takes away most of his disposition over personal autonomy in the case of suicide. Relations between human beings might be designated as "external" when the individual can realize his life without the particular individuals to whom he is related; if in its converse sense the relations of individuals are internal, it is thinkable that a suicide could ruin the life projects and identities of people related to the agent. The agent's ownership in his own life is limited in that he cannot destroy or use what is his own if he thereby harms what belongs to others. If individual human beings are internally related to each other so as to be unable to enact their several projects without the existence of the others, all individuals are in partial ownership of each other. The individual is not totally autonomous in his own life in so far as he is morally obligated to let the projects of other individuals transfer through the decisions that he makes about his own projects. Thus an egoistic suicide is morally wrong if it has a destructive internal relation to the life projects of others, but it has moral integrity if its relation to the life projects of others is external. But even the distinction between internal and external relations does not perfectly distinguish suicides which are too harmful to others to be permissible from those which are not. When an agent martyrizes himself, committing suicide because he is not allowed to persist in the values he
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lives for the sake of, his suicide may be beneficial, not destructive, particularly to the people to whose projects his suicide is internally related because the suicide bears witness for the values which they live for.

IV. MARTYRDOM AND ARETAIC SUICIDE

A. MARTYRDOM FOR SOCIAL IDEALS

¶1 The difference in the teleological and liberal conceptions of social ownership of individual life engenders a dilemma which highlights the conceptual difference between ethics and morality. The deontological stricture that suicide is wrong because it harms others is a moral characterization; it starts out from the principle that the relation to others circumscribes the domain of moral value. Since the ethical conception of moral value is oriented on the good life, it includes relation to others as a factor of moral value, but things can have moral value which do not involve relation to others. The Aristotelian connotation of virtue does not allow harm to others to be the final reason why suicide is bad. Both Plato and Aristotle regard sacrificial suicide, such as on a battlefield, to be virtuous not only because the agent benefits the community, but because it is rather awkwardly supposed that such an act benefits the agent’s self-development. Since risking one’s life is an exercise of bravery, and bravery is one of the virtues necessary for self-realization, a person benefits himself by the kind of sacrificial suicide exemplified by death on a battlefield. However, sacrificial suicide like death on a battlefield conveniently combines bravery, which Aristotle commends as a virtue, with service to society, which is another essential virtue in the Aristotelian scheme. An embarrassment emerges when a suicide is obviously brave, and therefore commendable, but

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is at the same time recusant, and therefore ignominious; a martyrdom is a type of egoistic suicide which apparently combines contradictory ethical values.

2 In the passage in which Plato provides a punishment for suicide by a dishonorable burial, he argues a distinction; a suicide is honorable if the individual is otherwise caught in an inescapable, painful destiny or if the individual is caught in an intolerable disgrace. He stipulates that suicide should be punished when it is done out of cowardice or laziness. Conspicuously, Socrates’ execution is virtually a martyrred suicide, since he provoked the court to give him the death penalty and he rejected the opportunity that had been prepared for him to escape. It is not, in this context, inescapable pain which justifies the suicide, but resistance to disgrace, since that is the common element which explains why both death on the battlefield and Socrates’ submission to execution are exemplary. However, both instances also have in common obedience to the State; it is carefully emphasized that Socrates refuses to escape death because he refuses to defy State authority, even though the State is morally wrong and the punishment is unjust. The passages appear to resolve the dilemma by suggesting that a suicide in the guise of self-sacrifice or martyrdom is commendable when the individual dies for the sake of the State, but not when the element of submission to society is lacking. Consequently, if an individual reluctantly gives up his life for a higher principle, but sacrificial witness for a higher principle involves defiance against society, such as in a Christian martyrdom, egoistic suicide is immoral. The formulation of “bravery” apparently divides martyrdom between benefit to others and to oneself. An agent is brave if he surrenders his life for a principle in a way that benefits society or if a desire to benefit society restrains the agent who would otherwise prefer to die. A suicide for the sake of a principle is not
"brave", even though the suicide is reluctant, but egoistic and wrong if the motive in the principle is socially divisive. Socrates' claim that he ought to submit to the death penalty, even though the punishment is unjust, implies that martyrdom against an unjust society is immoral.

§3 The remark that Christian martyrdom is not praiseworthy in the context of Platonic-Aristotelian principles provokes the question of how an individual, who rejects his hedonistic appetites and overcomes his own desire to live in order to die for the sake of a principle, could possibly be considered egoistic or immoral. The premises of Socrates' execution imply that Christian martyrdom is immoral because it destabilizes society. Perfectly in parallel with Christian martyrdom, however, the dialogue makes it clear that the society itself is unjust. That is, it is not merely immoral to destabilize a good society; it is also immoral to destabilize a bad society. Similarly it should be noted that in the Politics Aristotle characterizes a good government and points out that all existing governments are therefore not good, but nevertheless the bulk of the Politics is devoted to constructive advice on how to maintain the stability and survival of those same governments, defective though they are. Plato implicitly condones a martyrdom as correctly non-egoistic, similarly to self-sacrifice, when the agent dies in order to bear witness to a principle, but the motive in his principle is to affirm the State; Socrates' acquiescence to execution signifies that an individual is not morally released from loyalty to his State when it becomes bad. A martyrdom is egoistic if the agent lets himself die to bear witness for a principle, but his martyrdom is not intended to affirm social integrity. Christian and Stoic suicides do not fit the model of martyrdom that Plato commends.

§4 A Stoic suicide is not egoistic in the sense that it is a cowardly attempt to escape pain, punishment, or hardship; it fits the model of "bravery" in that
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it involves forsaking a pleasurable and desirable life for the sake of an ideal. The Stoic recommendation of suicide poses a serious deviation from the Platonic concepts of self-sacrifice or martyrdom, however, in that the Platonic model assumes that if an individual gives up his life to witness a "higher principle;" ipso facto, the individual is sacrificing his personal pleasures for the sake of a social good. The Stoic viewpoint deeply alters the moral value of martyrdom. If moral values are universal, the State is a morally indifferent entity; there is no moral ground for giving good treatment to a member of one's own community but not to a stranger. If there is good reason to martyrize oneself, the reason cannot be to affirm the State, because the existence of the State makes no difference in the moral duties one owes to every other human being. However, if a martyrdom cannot be to affirm the State, instead of implying that martyrdom must be for the sake of some other cause, it may follow simply that martyrdom is a conceptual impossibility under Stoic premises.

B. MARTYRDOM FOR PERSONAL IDEALS

¶1 It initially appears that dying for an ideal is necessarily sacrificing one's life for the sake of society, because an ideal is necessarily constituted by social communication. Committing suicide to escape pain, for instance, is anti-socially egoistic in the sense that the rationality of such a suicide does not depend on whether others would commit suicide in the same circumstances. Whether another person would not commit suicide in the same circumstances does not defeat the meaning of one's suicide; one fulfills one's own purpose by having escaped pain. Giving up one's life to witness an idea is necessarily socially mediated because the agent cannot acquire abstract values, ideals, without supposing that not only he, but everybody
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in the same circumstances, ought to behave in the same way. The conceptual content of an ideal is a desire that every other individual would do the same thing which the agent does; if the agent does not convey such a desire, he is not acting for the sake of an ideal. An agent who commits suicide to escape pain does not have to desire that other individuals would do the same thing in order for his act to be rational, but if the agent does not desire other people to feel instructed to do something by the example of his death, then the agent is not sacrificing himself for the sake of an ideal, and his death would not fit the definition of martyrdom.

¶2 On the pragmatic level, if an agent in a cowardly suicide escapes pain or suffering, his purpose is successfully accomplished regardless of how society judges his suicide. If, however, a person kills himself as witness to some ideal, his suicide is necessarily a failure if nobody recognizes that the suicide itself is the communication of a meaning or if nobody correctly interprets what the suicide is supposed to mean. If it is impossible to commit a martyrdom in secret, it appears that it is impossible to commit suicide for the sake of a principle unless the act involves subordinating personal good to social good.

¶3 The Stoic suicide however does indicate a type of suicide which is for the sake of an ideal, but which is also egoistic in the sense that the value of the suicide does not depend on whether it is correctly interpreted by others. The argument depends on destroying the presupposition that if a person commits an egoistic suicide, the act is necessarily motivated from hedonistic grounds. An agent may reluctantly forsake a life which is pleasant, thus defying hedonistic criteria of rationality, for the sake of an ideal, and yet not for the sake of some benefit to society. A suicide is idealistically motivated, yet egoistic in the sense that it disregards the social benefit of suicide, when it is intended to assert the individual's dignity in the face of degradation:

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Itaque sapiens vivet quantum debet, non quantum potest. Videbit ubi victurus sit, cum quibus, quomodo, quid acturus. Cogitat semper qualis vita, non quanta sit. Si multa occurrunt molesta et tranquillitatem turbantia, emittet se; nec hoc tantum in necessitate ultima facit, sed cum primum illi coepit suspecta esse fortuna, diligenter circumspicit numquid illic desinendum sit. Nihil existimat sua referre, faciat finem an accipiat, tardius fiat an citius: non tamquam de magno detrimento timet; nemo multum ex stilicidio potest perdere. Citius mori aut tardius ad rem non pertinet, bene mori aut male ad rem pertinet; bene autem mori est effugere male vivendi periculum.40

Although moral considerations concerning its effect on others may prompt or deter the suicide, the essential motivation to the suicide is dignity. Self-respect is socially mediated, because it involves measuring oneself against some value which one acquired from that society, but a suicide for the sake of self-respect is egoistic in the sense that the success of the suicide does not depend on the meaning that the suicide may have for others. Presumably in such a situation others pressure the agent to continue living; the agent asserts his dignity in defiance of others and in defiance of his own hedonistic will to stay alive:

Existimetur de facto hominis acerrimi ut cuique visum erit, dum hoc constet, praeferendam esse spurcissimam mortem servituti mundissimae.41
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There are circumstances under which the mere fact of continuing to live becomes in itself testimony that one has abandoned values for the sake of hedonistic dependencies; consequently there are situations in which an agent cannot assert fidelity to a value except by committing suicide. The suicide may nevertheless be characterized as egoistic because of its presumed right to reject society by suicide when the agent's repudiation of the prevalent social values would destabilize that society.

The Stoic conception of martyrdom exposes an interesting inconsistency between Platonic principles and what Plato himself says of egoistic suicide. Since in the Platonic-Aristotelian conception self-realization is the ultimate principle which makes suicide wrong and which justifies individual subordination to society, an egoistic suicide which is idealistic rather than escapist or vindictive should be justified which does not subordinate the individual to society but does enhance self-realization. A suicide which flouts subordination to society is justified when the agent's dignity is better preserved by suicide than by continuing to live. Since the justification of social ownership of individual life consists in its indispensability for individual self-realization, suicide would not be wrong if the harm that suicide causes to society were not detrimental to self-realization. The Stoic version of egoistic suicide discovers an instance in which social loyalty is not an aid to self-realization. Since justice is only a component of self-realization, it is possible for a situation without any reference to interpersonal relations to have a moral value. It is therefore possible for fidelity to a notion of dignity informed by some personal ideal to preponderate over concern for the good of others.
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C. CONCERN FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS

1. The argument that egoistic suicide is wrong because it harms individual others presupposes that the agent is concerned about the good of others. Self-realization constitutes the moral value of one's actions, while justice, the concern for the good of others, is part of moral value because it is a component of self-realization. The quandary then is in what way the concept of justice is derivative. Concern for the good of others may be valuable because the good of others is a condition for one's own good, or the good of others may be valuable to the agent simply for their good, not because he needs their happiness as an instrumental condition to obtain his own happiness. The first alternative appears to be internally consistent, but to defeat the argument against egoistic suicide; the second alternative sustains that harm against others makes suicide wrong, but does not explain the presupposition that the agent cares about the good of others.

2. The Platonic argument against injustice, epitomized in the myth of Gyges' ring, holds that it is wrong to be unjust not primarily because of harm to others, but because injustice to others destroys one's own psychic harmony. The argument is designed to refute the position of ethical egoism, that a person cares about the good of others only because of fear of retaliation, such that a person with no fear of reprisals could not be motivated to be just. The argument hereby gives the misleading impression that Plato supposed the first alternative given above, that a person is able to care about the good of another person only because the good of the other is reducible to one's own good; one desires the happiness of others only in so far as it is an instrumental condition for one's own happiness. It should be noticed, however, that in order to refute the ethical egoist he must put himself in the position of the egoist; the argument proves that even within
the premises established by the egoist there would be sufficient motivation to be fair to others even when there is no fear of retaliation. The egoistic cast given in the argument about the harmony of the soul is necessitated by the framework of the thesis it seeks to refute; Plato’s official position is not captured in the argument of Gyges’s Ring because its assumption of the opponent’s premises is only hypothetical. The argument does not posit the impossibility of the second alternative, that man has a capability of valuing the well-being of others even when their well-being does not affect one’s own good.

§3 Setting aside the ambiguity above, the argument from the Ring of Gyges does presuppose that a person cares about the good of others because he cares about his own good. Even accepting the egoistic argument that the good of others is important because the good of others is good for oneself, an account must be made for how it is possible for the good of others to be an instrumental condition for one’s own good. If the good of the individual is conceived to be purely hedonistic, it is possible to establish a link between the good of others and the good of oneself. The social-contract reasoning that a person should be concerned about the good of others because of the fear of retaliation ultimately supposes that the good which others can give or take is hedonistic. When the well-being of others cannot influence hedonistic good, concern for others is not reducible to concern with one’s own good, and on this egoistic model there would be no rational ground to care about the good of others in such an instance. Since the fear of retaliation presupposes that the good which another person can harm is hedonistic, the relation of “justice” between individuals becomes highly contingent on whether one’s good really does depend on others. If the individual good is purely hedonistic, concern for others poses no moral constraint on egoistic suicide, because the agent can value his effect on
others only for as long as they are instrumental to one’s hedonistic good. Since the account leaves it conceptually impossible to suppose that an individual could care about the good of others for their own sakes, there cannot be a moral constraint on suicide. But this is unintuitive, because it appears that humans do care about the welfare of others even when it has no effect on their own good.

§4 The Platonic argument in the passage about Gyges’ ring does not seek to repudiate the egoistic motivation behind justice; instead it affirms egoism, but denies that hedonism is its only content. It is therefore not a matter of demonstrating that an agent is capable of selfless concern for the good of others for their own sakes, but rather that an egoistic person has good reason to care about the good of others even when he does not stand to profit from their well-being. The concept of harmony in the soul conveys that one’s own happiness ultimately depends on a non-hedonistic good and that a person should therefore be motivated to care impartially about the good of others so as to maintain his own mental tranquility. The Platonic-Aristotelian tenet that happiness is something objective, achieved only by development of all the virtues, preempts the egoistic reduction of concern for others to a narrowly self-centered hedonism. This position saves the appearance that humans often are motivated not to commit suicide because of the harm it would do others, even though the harm to others could not affect their own hedonistic good. The Platonic account shows that an egoistic suicide which harms others is immoral because the suicidal agent’s view of his own good is too narrow. He can disregard the harm he does to others only because he conceives the total value of his life in hedonistic terms.

§5 The concept of a Stoic suicide shows however that there are agents who commit suicide for egoistic reasons who do not have a narrowly hedonistic
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misconception of the value of life. An agent can commit suicide, knowing of its peripheral harm to others, without cynically discounting the harm to others because it will not affect oneself. It is a suicide which is egoistic, but which is not an instantiation of the Platonic-Aristotelian reasons for which a suicide in disregard of others is wrong. On the contrary the Stoic suicide should be virtuous according to Platonic-Aristotelian premises, thus confuting the Platonic argument above, because the motive to preserve dignity through suicide attempts to maintain harmony in the soul instead of chasing after hedonistic goods. What is brought to light here is a conflict between two non-hedonistic goods, impartial concern for others and psychic integrity; when these values conflict the former Platonic distinction between one's hedonistic and non-hedonistic goods falls short. The ambiguity is renewed, that regard for others may be a moral constraint because the good of others is conducive to one's own psychic good, or the good for others may be a moral constraint even when their good is a detriment to one's own good. Here, one of the alternatives is not ruled out because it comprises a narrowly hedonistic misconception of the value of life, because both motivations are non-hedonistic. A person may for instance continue to live reluctantly in a state of indignity because of the harm his suicide would cause others, or he may commit suicide, not because his life would become more painful, but because he refuses to abandon values as the price for continuing to live. Concern for the good of others can make a Stoic suicide wrong only if the good of others is an independent moral constraint which is binding even when benefiting others is not good for oneself. Platonic-Aristotelian principles however cannot accommodate such a deontological position because they never depart from egoistic premises.

The previous question about the extent to which regard for the good of others governs one's right to commit a suicide otherwise beneficial to oneself
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Thus develops into two deeper questions. First, it is not the extent of concern for others which is to be investigated, but whether concern for others should be any reason at all against egoistic suicide when suicide would otherwise optimize one's life. Second, if an agent is morally bound to care about the good of others for their own sakes, even when the good of others is not ultimately to one's own good, it must be questioned what it is, since it is not self-love, which makes the good of others an independent moral constraint on one's actions.

V. SOCIAL CONTRACT LIMITS ON SUICIDAL AUTONOMY

A. HARM TO OTHERS AS THE LIMIT OF AUTONOMY

1. Both moral conceptions, aretaic and deontological, fail for different reasons to achieve a categorical condemnation of egoistic suicide. Initially the aretaic condemnation seems to be less contingent because the relation of harm between two people is not the primary ground of moral wrong. Since in a teleological ethics the happiness of one's life as a whole is the fundamental ground for moral value, things which have little or no connection to the interests of others can have important moral value. The transcendent conception of morality such as it is expounded by Plato's analogy between justice in the soul and justice in the state establishes that psychic harmony and social justice have moral value because of their exigency for the happiness of one's life taken as a whole. Since the final point of morality is the achievement of one's own good, an act which does not affect others is nevertheless morally wrong if it is detrimental to the person by virtue of his own telos.

2. Despite the tenet that suicide is wrong even when it does not affect
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others, the aretaic conception falls short of categorically condemning suicide because it is not always true that a suicide would detract from the happiness of a life as a whole. The discontinuity stems from the premise that the individual must subordinate personal goods to the social good in order to complete the virtues which constitute his happiness. The aretaic conception presupposes that the reason justice is a moral good is because psychic harmony is a component in the process of self-realization. However, the example of Stoic suicide reveals that there are cases in which giving priority to the social good is not conducive to self-realization; justice as harmony of the soul is not always equivalent with justice as the impartial treatment of others. The individual may save his own dignity only by refusing to continue to live under the new conditions descending upon him, while at the same time suicide may constitute a harm to society or to individual others.

¶3 The deontological condemnation of egoistic suicide seems in this respect to achieve a more categorical condemnation of egoistic suicide because it makes concern for others an entirely independent moral constraint. It is not just because of its importance to self-development that one should be concerned not to harm others. The wrongness of egoistic suicide is unproblematic because in deontological reasoning the ultimate basis of an agent’s moral duties is not that they are necessary conditions for his happiness; the agent is morally bound even when the performance of the duty would cause him unqualified harm or unhappiness. Thus, if egoistic suicide is morally wrong because it harms others, the agent is morally bound to continue living regardless of the fact that his life would have been better as a whole if he had committed suicide.

¶4 However, unless the deontological condemnation gives absolutely no reason for why suicide is wrong, this account is equally incapable of
categorically condemning suicide. Not all egoistic suicides satisfy the
deohtological account of how an act can be morally wrong. The position that
there are independent moral constraints, not reducible to a telos such as
happiness or self-realization, is obtained at the cost that an act, to have a
moral value, must have a relation to another person. If moral value is
conceived purely in terms of interpersonal relations, an action which has no
relation to others has no moral value. In order for an egoistic suicide to be
morally wrong, it must be harmful to others. Egoistic suicide cannot be
categorically wrong because an egoistic suicide can be harmless to others.
The aretaic notion that suicide is morally related to self-development
suggests that egoistic suicide can be categorically wrong because harm to
oneself seems to be an inseparable circumstance in any suicide. In
discarding the relevance of self-realization for the wrongness of suicide, a
deontological interpretation must conceive the wrongness of suicide, if there
is any, in terms of justice, the moral quality of its relation to others, and
therefore has no ground to criticize suicide when it is socially insulated.
Establishing that suicide is categorically wrong depends on whether the
relation of suicide to others is unexceptionably harmful, that there cannot
be any such thing as an insulated suicide, and that any degree of harm to
others is always sufficient to override the individual’s right of autonomy.

B. CONTINUANCE OF LIFE AS A SOCIAL CONTRACT OBLIGATION

§1 The categorical wrongness of suicide therefore depends on whether the
individual’s right to personal autonomy can ever override his duty not to
harm people. The problematic premise that an agent’s acts obtain moral
value solely in consequence of obligation that the agent has to another
person rests upon how it is possible for an agent to have an obligation to
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another person. Whether obligation to another person can override a right of autonomy in suicide, or whether the agent is morally free to rescind his obligation to the other, depends on how the obligation is obtained. If the deontological sense of obligation derives purely from social contract concepts of promise and agreement, it may follow that the individual has an unconditional right to suicide because of his right to autonomy, in spite of the fact that in other cases rights of autonomy are conditioned by an obligation not to harm others.

Ein Recht zu etwas oder auf etwas haben heißt nichts weiter, als es tun oder aber es nehmen oder benutzen können, ohne dadurch irgendeinen andern zu verletzen: "Simplex sigillum veri." [Das Einfache ist ein Kennzeichen des Wahren.] - Hieraus erheilt auch die Sinnlosigkeit mancher Fragen, z.B. ob wir das Recht haben, uns das Leben zu nehmen. Was aber dabei die Ansprüche, die etwan andere auf uns persönlich haben können, betrifft, so stehn sie unter der Bedingung, daß wir leben, fallen also mit dieser weg. Daß der, welcher für sich selbst nicht mehr leben mag, nun noch als bloße Maschine zum Nutzen anderer fortleben sollte, ist eine überspannte Forderung.⁴³

Two questions should of course not be confused; one question is whether a suicidal agent has a rational ground to care any longer about his moral commitments, and second whether a suicide can break moral commitments by suicide, or whether the suicide nullifies the moral commitments which he had up to that point. The position immediately above answers to the second question, not the first. It holds that suicide cannot have a moral value

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because the nonexistence of the person cancels the condition under which others can have a moral claim on him. Inferring from the premise that moral entitlements and values originate in human society, there can be no such thing as injustice or immorality where there are no interpersonal relations. This may imply that suicide is uniquely incapable of having a moral value because it abrogates the interpersonal relations which moral value presupposes.

¶2 Except for posthumous conditions such as inheritance and prestige, the suicide in itself cancels all of the egoistic interests that constitute the valuable objects of a social contract. In answer to the first question, it appears that a person on the verge of suicide has no rational ground to care about the morality of his act. Essential to the meaning of a right, normally conceived as a protection which the subject has vis à vis others, is relation to others. Since suicide does not involve a right because it does not involve duties of others towards oneself, suicide cannot be prohibited by the way “right to life” could plausibly be interpreted along the that lines of social contact. A social contract type of right prohibits others from interfering in the agent’s activities in so far as his activities do not infringe on others; suicide, as the ultimate withdrawal from other people, is in a sense what a person should be most at liberty to do, since it is the final repudiation of the condition under which others would have a right to interfere:

A man who retires from life does no harm to society; He only ceases to do good; which, if it is an injury, is of the lowest kind. All our obligations to do good to society seem to imply something reciprocal. I receive the benefits of society and therefore ought to promote its interests, but when I withdraw myself altogether from society, can I be bound any longer?"
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§3 The agent consents to social obligations de facto in that he benefits from the conformity of others to that agreement. The agent assents to the contract, limiting his own freedom, for the guarantee that others will not invade the remaining part of his autonomy. The pragmatic attribution of moral value therefore presupposes the existent subject because the only rational ground for the moral wrongness of harming the other is a promise against reciprocal harm:

But because Covenants of mutuell trust, where there is a feare of not performance on either part, (as hath been said in the former Chapter,) are invalid; though the Originall of Justice be the making of Covenants; yet Injustice actually there can be none, till the cause of such feare be taken away; which while men are in the naturall condition of Warre, cannot be done. Therefore before the names of Just, and Unjust can have place, there must be some coercive Power, to compell men equally to the performance of their Covenants, by the terrour of some punishment, greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their Covenant; 45

From the viewpoint of these motivations the agent would regard a certain act x as rationally “wrong” because it would release the other person from his obligation not to invade the subject’s autonomy. If moral grounds for limiting one’s autonomy are purely pragmatic the agent has no ground to regard suicide as immoral; if the result of his act is that he no longer exists, he has no remaining autonomy that he could be motivated to protect from invasion.
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¶4 A person has a moral obligation because of the reciprocal promise that he will not be harmed by others. Somewhat similar to Hobbes' remark that a state cannot coherently have a right to order a subject to give up his life, exactly because avoiding death is the individual's only motivation for submission to the State, a social contract stricture against suicide is nonsensical because fear of harm from the other is the ultimate rationale for accepting moral limitations on his action. Since suicide nullifies the possibility under which the subject can be harmed by others, suicide cannot have a moral value because it abolishes the condition under which the person consented to social obligation. The harm of the suicide in itself eclipses any harm the person could possibly have sought to avoid by accepting moral obligation to the other. In contrast to an aretaic conception, a social contract conception would make the wrongness of egoistic suicide not contingent, but highly contingent. The coherence of a social contract condemnation of suicide depends on whether, aside from pragmatic grounds, there is an underlying deontological ground for the wrongness of suicide.

¶5 The prudential argument indicates that especially in the case of suicide the agent cannot have any motivation to break his promise in the social contract, if there is one, not to commit suicide, but it remains undetermined whether the social contract additionally implies a moral reason why an individual should not commit suicide, or whether the moral and prudential are ultimately the same, so that there cannot be a moral reason against suicide where there is not a prudential reason. Since the promise is a kind of agreement, the agent has to suppose that the conditions under which he agreed to make that promise are valid. The promise not to harm the other which contravenes a right to suicide consists in a promise not to infringe on the autonomy of the other, so that hypothetically there would be an
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unimpeded right to egoistic suicide if the suicide would not infringe on the autonomy of the other. By subsuming the wrongness of suicide under the concept of distributive justice, the agent's suicide infringes on the other person's personal autonomy when the suicide upsets the balance of benefit for which the individuals agreed.

C. QUALITIES OF AN IMPLICIT PROMISE

1. Usually it is morally acceptable to break an agreement either if the other party has not kept to the agreement, if somehow otherwise the original conditions of the agreement collapse, or if the presumed conditions under which the agreement was made never existed. There are accordingly three aspects. First, if the other person violates the agreement, that person abolishes the reason which the agent has for limiting his own autonomy out of respect for the autonomy of that other person. But this is not pertinent to the justification of egoistic suicide. The second aspect is that the agent somehow destroys the conditions for which it was originally sensible for him to enter a promise. This ground would be pertinent, but it does not appear to be a moral justification for suicide in a social contract context. If the conditions presupposed by a promise fail by an act of God, as it were, an agent may have a justification for breaking his promise. In the case of egoistic suicide, the conditions under which the agent made the agreement have not failed independently of the person's agency; rather, the agent himself has made the original conditions for the sake of which he initially agreed irrelevant to himself. When there is a promise it is usually immoral for the agent to break the promise solely because a different arrangement from the one he promised into would be more advantageous to himself. The peculiar question of suicide is whether the agent is morally bound to a
promise when the other party does not break the conditions of the agreement, but when the agent's breaking his promise is the very act which makes the agent no longer able to value the presumptive conditions for the sake of which he made the promise. Normally a person is bound by a promise even when the object for the sake of which the made the promise fails. Egoistic suicide would be morally justifiable only if there is some unique moral quality in the circumstance that suicide simultaneously destroys the conditions of the promise when it breaks the promise.

2 Given in the context of social contract that moral right and wrong originate in interpersonal relations, it is possible for an egoistic suicide to be wrong only if it is construed as breaking an implicit promise to continue living. The presupposition in the "implicit" promise is the explicit promise not to harm others. The first ambiguity in this approach is whether the wrongness of suicide is in the breaking of the promise not to harm others or in the harm itself. The second ambiguity is whether the suicidal agent is bound by a promise which he has not explicitly made because his behavior thus far has led people to rely on his not committing suicide. The special quality of how a suicide destroys the conditions of a promise when it breaks a promise distinguishes suicide from every other case of implicit promise. In the normal case of implicit promise a repetitive action induces others to rely on continuance of the repetitive pattern; the agent breaks an implicit promise if he abruptly refrains. Not committing suicide is, however, not a repetitive action which other people have come to rely on from repeated observation of the same act. Secondly, the act of suicide has more finality than other types of act. Accountability and wrongness of breaking an implicit promise may presuppose that the agent somehow continues to participate in the network of which his implicit promise was a part.

3 The ambiguities focus attention on what an agreement is capable of
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being in the premises of a social contract. If obligations engender moral values in consequence of a promise to limit one's own freedom so as not to harm the other, moral wrong is essentially equivalent to breaking the promise rather than to the harm itself. Even though harm is the motivating reason for making a promise not to harm, harming a person is wrong because it breaks the promise rather than that it frustrates the object for which the promise purported. Thus if an agent harms another person, but in so doing did not break his promise not to harm another person, his act cannot be said to be morally wrong, regardless of whether the harm entails indemnities. The contravening obligations which make an egoistic suicide wrong accordingly devolve upon the promise not to harm the other rather than on the harm to the other, so that hypothetically there would be a right to an egoistic suicide either if a suicide does not violate the promise not to harm, even if it does cause harm to the other, or if there is something in the conditions of making that promise which makes some cases of egoistic suicide immune to the obligation generated by that promise.

¶4 Aside from the fact that there is something ludicrous about thinking that an agent takes an unfair share of the pleasure in life by committing suicide, the basic concept of a fair balance of benefit does not reflect the social obligations of suicide in the same way as other benefits. The concept of implicit promise is markedly weaker in the case of suicide than of other morally valued acts because of its dependence on the premise that the individual assents to a contract in freedom. The value of suicide in contract must be assessed on two derivative considerations. First, a contract is not valid if the individual consents to a contract, but does not consent in freedom. If it is supposed that the agent "implicitly" consents not to commit suicide by virtue of living as a member in society, the agent is consenting in ignorance, and therefore not in freedom, because the conditions of the
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consent are too vague to be predicted in advance of the situation.

The second consideration is that if the individual freely consents to a contract, but unforeseen pressures force the failure of the benefits for the sake of which he entered the contract, the obligations of the contract may be void. Obviously the second consideration is normally false; this discrepancy highlights why the wrongness of breaking a promise not to harm is the breaking of the promise, not the harm itself. However, the second consideration may have application because suicide has unique properties which separate it from every other type of contractual agreement. In a social contract an individual has obligations but his society has a counter-obligation. If egoistic suicide is wrong because of duties to others, it is plausible that the society has a counter-obligation to sustain conditions under which the individual would not feel motivated to commit suicide. If it can be inferred that a person who commits suicide is not happy, the agent has a right commit suicide because the other party has not fulfilled the counter-conditions for the sake of which the agent made the promise. Neither society at large nor family have rights against a suicide since a society which is unable to provide the means to happiness has failed in the contractual conditions which gave it claims on the individual:

La patrie ou la famille n'a point droit de se plaindre d'un membre qu'elle ne peut rendre heureux, et dont elle n'a plus rien a éesperer pour elle-même.47

D. PROMISE CONDITIONS OF EGOISTIC SUICIDE

Thus, the right of an individual to commit an egoistic suicide does not consist in a right to break any of the specific promises he made in the
contract, but in a prior right to renege on all of the promises by repudiating the contract as a whole. If he broke a promise while acting within the contract, he would be in the wrong; but if he repudiates the whole contract which obligates him to those specific promises, it is dubious whether he is blameworthy for breaking those promises or whether he is immune to blame. It may be construed that if he is now outside the contract which had obligated him to certain promises, he cannot be wrong for failing to fulfill his promises in the way that he would be if he were still inside the contract. The preeminent reproach would not be that he broke those promises in the contract, but his wrongness for reneging on the contract. Reproach for breaking the promises in the contract can follow only after it has been established that the agent was wrong to renege on the contract. It can be interpreted that he is nevertheless wrong for breaking promises in the contract, because even if a repudiation of the contract does release him from the commitments in the contract from that point onward, according to conditions it may not retroactively release him from promises in the contract from the time that he formerly acknowledged it. Since a promise not to commit suicide would be a negative duty, it is the type of duty which cannot be discharged, so that a agent who hypothetically repudiates the social contract could not thereby release himself from a promise not to commit suicide if that had been an implicit commitment in the contract.

2 If reneging on a contract is not the same as breaking specific promises made in the contract, and moral wrong does not derive from harm itself, but from breaking the promise not to cause harm, it is ambiguous whether an egoistic suicide which harms others is morally wrong. One condition for a valid contract is that the agent is intelligent of the conditions of the contract; conversely, a person may rightly renege on a contract if he did not understand its conditions when he agreed. In such a case he would not be
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wrong to break the promises he is held to in the contract because he is already "outside" the contract when he repudiates it. If on the other hand the agent does understand the contract when he agrees to it, and afterwards repudiates the contract, he is morally wrong for breaking the promises to which the contract obligates him because, notwithstanding his repudiation of the contract, he is still inside the contract.

§3 Since an individual never perspicaciously assents to the social contract he happens to be born into, the question devolves upon whether an individual who reneges on a contract which he has agreed to only de facto is inside or outside of the contract upon repudiating it. Under a collectivist conception of society an individual is wrong to commit suicide because the power of the State does not depend on garnering its legitimate authority from the prior consent of the individuals who constitute it; an individual could not, that is, repudiate his duties to society on the ground that he hadn't consented to them. Under a radically individualistic conception of State power, however, Society or the State has authority over the individual only because the individual is construed to have somehow consented to giving Society that power over himself. The individualistic conception of power therefore implies that an individual cannot be obligated to remain a member of society, since the individual at birth had no choice in becoming a member of society:

Pourquoi veut-on que je travaille pour une société dont je consens de n'être plus? Que je tienne, malgré moi, une convention qui s'est faite sans moi? La société est fondée sur un avantage mutuel. Mais lorsqu'elle me devient onéreuse, qui m'empêche d'y renoncer? La vie m'a été donnée comme une faveur; je puis donc la rendre lorsqu'elle ne l'est plus: la
Whether the individual would have a right to renege on the contract depends on whether he would have explicitly accepted the contract under the conditions of those benefits. The usual interpretation of implicit promise holds that in subsequence to extracting all of his benefits from the conditions of a contract for a long time, the agent cannot belatedly repudiate the contract on the ground that he never understood his obligations in the contract.

§4 The inherent vagueness of an implicit promise makes it an extremely weak ground on which to suppose that the agent of an accomplished suicide can have the moral relations that are delineated in the context of a promise. It entails regarding life itself as an “obligation” that he has to society. Since by hypothesis the teleological or collectivist notions of obligation are ruled out, the “obligation” would have to be argued from the structure of a promise. But suicide is also in this respect a unique, perhaps therefore exceptional situation because of the extreme generality of the question. In this case of implicit promise it is not merely vague whether or not the person has made a promise; it is unclear whether the person could possibly have understood the meaning of what he was promising if he did make the promise. There is absolutely nothing ridiculous in the supposition that it may take an individual fifty years before it dawns on him that life is not worth living. Generally an agent is not bound by a promise he has made if he did not clearly understand its conditions at the time he committed himself. An agent cannot from the start have an idea of what “life” is, or what conditions he may be required to tolerate if continuing to live is an obligation to society. An implicit promise is a viable moral claim only in contexts of such narrow scope that the agent cannot help but be cognizant of
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what his probable obligations are. Where the obligations become ambiguous, to that degree an implicit promise cannot bind the agent. In contrast with the usual context of an implicit promise, the fact that others rely on the agent continuing to live is not a binding moral obligation on the agent not to commit suicide.

§5 The dominant question of this section has been not the extent to which relations to others is a moral restraint on egoistic suicide, but whether one's obligations to others should at all be a moral constraint on suicide. The moral ramifications of a contract fail to apply to suicide in the way that they apply to other acts. Other types of violation of obligations do nothing more than break the obligations; they do not annul the obligations. The tenet that harm to others is a boundary on the right to personal autonomy does not imply that egoistic suicide is even contingently wrong if suicide, unlike other types of act, simultaneously annuls the obligations which it violates. Suicide may simultaneously harm others and annul the promise not to harm others. The previous argument suggested that a person who has participated in the benefits of social welfare is subsequently obligated to the conditions of that welfare. Since in the class of egoistic acts a suicide uniquely makes received social benefits irrelevant, it is thinkable, only in the case of suicide, that when the agent abandons the agreement he simultaneously nullifies the agreement. If under the unique conditions of suicide reneging on a promise nullifies the obligations which proceeded from the promise, none of the items inside the social contract can characterize the moral quality of the suicide.

§6 The social contract ground of moral value is mutual obligation. Even though a social contract is made for the sake of forestalling mutual harm, the primary wrongness of harming others consists in breaking a promise rather than in the harm itself [V.C.§3]. An agent who harms others is
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wrong primarily because he breaks a promise, because the obligations of a promise survive the act of violating the obligations. A violation of obligations normally occurs within a context of continuing obligations; there is an enduring subject to adjust the persisting obligations subsequently to the violation. The first-order act of breaking a promise does not in this case nullify the second-order status that it is wrong to break a promise. A suicide which harms others is, uniquely, not for that reason immoral, for although it violates the rules inside the contract, it is the only act in which breaking a promise nullifies the wrongness of breaking the promise. An egoistic suicide is wrong because of the promise inside the contract not to harm others, but since the suicide abrogates the contract itself, it is not wrong to harm others by committing suicide. In other words, it is impossible for a person to promise not to commit suicide.

7 The ground which makes it wrong to renege on the contract cannot ultimately derive from a promise within the contract. A suicide requires a unique interpretation because, unlike other contract relations, when it breaks any promise inside the contract, which should make the person's act wrong, it simultaneously abolishes the whole of the contract itself. An act which abrogates reciprocity cannot be a violation of reciprocity, although it may be wrong for an independent ground which makes it wrong to abrogate reciprocity. If an agent reneges on a contract, the agent is wrong only if the fundamental conditions which make it possible to observe the contract persist; an agent is wrong if he reneges on his obligations while benefiting from the contract but not if fundamental conditions make the agent incapable of observing the contract. In the normal case of contract abrogation the fundamental conditions which make it possible to observe the contract persist; in the case of suicide, abrogation does not connote a simple rejection of reciprocity, but an abolition of the conditions which make
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reciprocity possible. It is like a wrongful contract abrogation because it proceeds from the will of the agent, not from an "act of God", but it is like an excusable contract-abrogation because the conditions which make the contract possible do not persist. Reciprocity is abolished because there is not a persisting subject capable of readjusting the balance of obligations.

E. VINDICTIVE SUICIDE

§1 Considering the great harm that a suicide can cause, the implication that a person has a right to commit suicide regardless of its harm to others may in effect prove that there is something wrong about the derivation of moral obligation from social contract. If it is harm to others which makes suicide wrong, the moral theory must have some other root than the social contract. Assume that a disgruntled worker comes into his workplace with an automatic gun and kills two dozen people whom he had been working with for the last ten years. We would not say that it is inappropriate to be morally critical of the person because he killed himself in the end. The example may appear slightly inaccurate because it introduces the wrongness of murder into the context of suicide, but what is to be investigated is whether an egoistic suicide is morally permissible even when it is not innocuous. The example is not inaccurate. What has been discussed so far is the morality of an egoistic suicide, in which harm to others is peripheral and unintentional. One might possibly argue in the present case that it is not the suicide itself which is morally wrong, but the murder. First, however, in the case of a vindictive suicide, harm to others is the supreme purpose of the suicide, so that the murder is not a contingently connected wrong which does not qualify the morality of the suicide in itself. Second, if the abolition of reciprocity is enough to annul the wrong of
suicide, then for the same reason one would be compelled to say that it is absurd to morally blame a person for murdering ten people because his suicide has removed him from the conditions of reciprocity. A social-ethical theory of suicide would minimally have to imply that a harmful escapist suicide or a vindictive suicide is wrong regardless of the fact that the agent renounces the benefits for the sake of which he made a promise:

Der Selbstmord hat einen Abscheu mit Grausen, denn jede Natur sucht sich selbst zu erhalten. Ein verletzter Baum, ein lebendiger Körper, ein Thier; und nun soll beym Menschen die Freyheit, die der höchste Grad des Lebens ist, und den Werth desselben ausmacht, ein principium sein, sich selbst zu zerstören? Dieses ist das erschrecklichste, was sich denken läßt. Denn wer es schon so weit gebracht hat, daß er jedesmal ein Meister über sein Leben ist, der ist auch Meister über jedes andern sein Leben, dem stehet die Thure zu allen Lastern offen, und ehe man ihn habhaft werden kann, ist er bereit, sich aus der Welt wegzustehlen."

12 Setting aside for the moment whether a right to autonomy could demonstrate a right to suicide, any argument from personal autonomy which cannot succeed at a strong moral distinction between an innocuous egoistic suicide and a vindictive suicide would instead prove that there is no right to suicide from personal autonomy. An unconditional right to suicide would otherwise destroy the foundation of morality. If an agent can escape reproach for immoral acts by committing suicide the totality of morality is vitiated because the agent would have a license to commit any other vicious act so long as he cancels reproach, as it were, by suicide. It is not simply the
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prudential consideration that no threat of punishment could deter the agent, but the normative aspect that a refusal to reproach a person for committing suicide indirectly encourages him to commit suicide and any other antisocial act which he might include in the process. It is not a ridiculous point; people are motivated to antisocial acts by the thought of a suicidal escape from disgrace or retaliation. Although punishing a person for committing suicide is absurd, the prevenient reproach of suicide has a deterrent effect in so far as individuals are educated too feel shame at the thought of suicide. Unless it is possible to show a strong theoretical distinction between egoistic and vindictive suicide, the liberty to commit egoistic suicide would induce individuals to take up vindictive suicide. Any theoretical approval of vindictive suicide would clash with the simple intuitive sense of moral decency much too violently to be acceptable. Since the social contract reasoning that condones egoistic suicide also suffices to excuse vindictive suicide, the reason why egoistic suicide is permissible cannot be argued along social contract lines. If the framework of social contract premises is retained, egoistic suicide must be morally condemned in order save the grounds that condemn vindictive suicide, or teleological reasoning should, after all, be adopted in order to keep the intuitive difference between egoistic and vindictive suicide.

1 cf. Aristotle. Politics II 1253’31. Aristotle’s claim that the polis is prior by nature to the individual does not entail that the polis is an organism or substance. The priority claim rests on the principle of community, that individuals can realize their potential only if they are subject to the authority of the polis. The polis is a whole in the sense of a community; its natural end is a common good in which the individual members directly participate. cf. Fred D. Miller Jr.. Nature, Justice and Rights in Aristotle’s Politics. Clarendon
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4 of course it could be argued that rule-utilitarianism might be adequate to this challenge; if in general egoistic suicide harmed society, a specific act of committing suicide which did benefit society would nevertheless be morally wrong because it would discourage observance of the general rule that people should not commit egoistic suicide because it usually harms society.
11 Plato: The Collected Dialogues. eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns
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14 cf. Platon. Nomoi. Buch IX. 873c-d; Sämtliche Werke. Insel Taschenbuch. 1991. S. 741: Wass soll nun aber Der erleiden welcher den nächsten aller Verwandten und den welcher für den liebsten und teuersten gilt umgebracht hat? Ich meine Den welcher sich selbst entleibte und sein ihm vom Schicksal bestimmtes Lebenslos gewalttaetig sich selber hinwegnahm, wenn er doch weder dadurch dass der Staat ihm dies als Strafe auferlegte, noch durch einen schmerzvollen und rettungslosen Zustand in den er geraten war, oder durch eine unvertilgbare Schande die ihm das Leben verleidetet, hiezugenoeigt (oder getrieben) war, sondern lediglich aus eines unmaennlichen Sinnes Schlaffheit und Feigheit sich selbst mit Unrecht eine solche Strafe auferlegte? Der Gott allein weiss welche Braeuche zum Zwecke der Reinigung und Bestattung eines solchen Selbstmoerders anzuwenden sind, und es muessen daher die nachsten Anverwandten desselben hierueber die (von ihm vorzuschreibenden) Gesetze und deren Ausleger befragen und dann nach dem ihnen Anbefohlenen verfahren. (Wir setzen hier nur so fiel fest.) Die Graeber Derer welche auf diese Weise ums Leben gekommen sind sollen an einsamen Orten liegen, wo sonst Niemand beerdigt wird, und zwar an den Grenzen der zwoelf Landesteile, an namenlosen und unbebauten Plaetzen, und keine Saeule oder Inschrift soll ihre Grabstaetten bezeichnen: so sollen sie ruhm- und ehrlos bestattet sein. cf. Plato. Laws. Book IX. 873c-d; Plato: The Collected Dialogues. eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton University Press, 1969. p. 1432: But what of him who takes the life that is, as they say, nearest and dearest to himself? What should be his punishment? I mean the man whose violence frustrates the decree of destiny by self-slaughter though no sentence of the state has required this of him, no stress of cruel and inevitable calamity driven him to the act, and he has been involved in no desperate and intolerable disgrace, the man who thus gives unrighteous sentence against himself from mere poltroonery and unmanly cowardice... But the graves of such as perish thus must, in the first place, be solitary; they must have no companions whatsoever in the tomb. Further, they must be buried ignominiously in waste

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and nameless spots on the boundaries between the twelve districts, and the tomb shall be marked by neither headstone nor name.


17 rif. Aristotele. Etica. Biblioteca Universale Quinto. I 5. I 138a3 - I 138a14. Etica Nicomachea, a cura di Marcello Zanatta Rizzoli. 1994. Volume Primo. Libro Quinto p. 380-383: Se sia possibile commettere ingiustizia verso se stesso oppure no. - chiaro da ciò che si - detto. Infatti esiste una categoria di azioni giuste costituita da quelle prescritte dalla legge secondo ciascuna virtù: ad esempio la legge non commanda di suicidarsi, e le azioni che non commanda, proibisce. Inoltre. quando fuori della legge si provoca danno volontariamente senza restituirlo in cambio. si commette ingiustizia, e lo provoca volontariamente chi conosce la persona ed il mezzo. E chi, spinto da collera, si sgozza volontariamente. compie quest' azione contro la retta regola: cosa che la legge non permette; dunque commette ingiustizia. Ma contro chi? Non - forse contro la città e non contro se stesso? Infatti subisce volontariamente. e nessuno riceve ingiustizia volontariamente. Per questo la città commina pene, ed una forma di disonore s'addossa a chi si uccide, come se commettesse ingiustizia contro la città. cf. Aristotele. Nichomachaean Ethics. Book V. Ch. II; I138a4-1138a13. in The Complete Works of Aristotle. ed. Jonathan Barnes. Volume Two. Princeton University Press. Bollingen Series. p. 1796: Whether a man can treat himself unjustly or not, is evident from what has been said. For one class of just acts are those acts in accordance with any excellence which are prescribed by the law; e.g. the law does not command a man to kill himself, and what it does not command it forbids... and he who through anger voluntarily stabs himself does this contrary to right reason, and this the law does not allow; therefore he is acting unjustly. But towards whom? Surely towards the State. not towards himself. For he suffers voluntarily, but no one is voluntarily treated unjustly. This is also the reason why the state punishes; a certain loss of civil rights attaches to the man who destroys himself, on the ground that he is treating the state unjustly.

18 rif. Aristotele. Etica Nicomachea. a cura di Marcello Zanatta. Biblioteca
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20 cf. Montesquieu, Lettres Persanes, Lettre LXXVI, Oeuvres Completés, première tome. p. 246
24 Battin points out that a person can easily be made to feel that he has a moral obligation to die quickly when he discovers that he is a dependent on others. Since all people grow sick or old, all people are potentially vulnerable to ideological manipulation which might induce them into suicide. Conversely a person might be socially pressured into not committing suicide in personal circumstances in which he would rationally decide to do so if it hadn't been for the countervailing social pressure. cf. M. Pabst Battin, Manipulated Suicide, in Suicide: The Philosophical Issues. eds. Battin and Mayo, Peter Owen, 1981. p. 179.
26 cf. David Hume. On Suicide, in Ethical Issues in Death and Dying, eds. Tom L. Beauchamp & Seymour Perlin, Prentice-Hall. p. 110

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27 cf. D. Morgan Pierce. Individual-Ethical Properties of Egoistic Suicide. The cases are however not perfectly parallel. If a person sacrifices himself to benefit another person, the person has that benefit by continuing to live. If an agent commits an egoistic suicide to benefit himself, of course he has the benefit by being dead.


36 As a vivid image of this consider the final meeting between Winston and his girlfriend in Orwell’s 1984.


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