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Course: CCHU9009 Moral Controversies in Contemporary Societies

A Right to Autonomy Means We Should Always Respect a Person's Choice to End Her Own Life

In this essay, I will argue that a right to autonomy means we should always respect a person's choice to end her own life. I will begin by clarifying what "respect" means in this context. I will then consider utilitarian arguments that suicide harms loved ones or society, and argue that autonomy as a right is non-overridable. Next, I will examine and challenge Kant's view that suicide treats the self merely as a means, and argue that this interpretation fails. I will then turn to the sanctity of life view, together with Kant's claim that rational nature may not be destroyed, and argue that both positions fail for they deny autonomy as self-sovereignty. Finally, I will address a possible objection that my argument collapses into these views.

The first step is to clarify what "respect" means in the context. Following Darwall (1977, pp. 38-39), there are two kinds of respect: *appraisal respect* and *recognition respect*. Appraisal respect is evaluative, it involves esteeming someone for her achievements or characters. By contrast, recognition respect is moral in nature. It is "to give appropriate weight to the fact that he or she is a person by being willing to constrain one's behavior in ways required by that fact"

(Darwall, 1977, pp. 45). When the claim asserts that we should “respect” a person’s choice to end her own life, it is the latter sense that is relevant. This is because we do not necessarily admire or endorse the decision; instead we refrain from interference or judgement on the basis that the choice is an exercise of her right to autonomy, or, in Feinberg’s (1986, pp. 47) terms, an expression of *self-sovereignty*.

Having clarified the sense of respect, I now turn to utilitarian arguments against suicide. Utilitarians would argue, at least in some cases, ending one’s own life is not respected for either she harms some specific others or the community as a whole (Cholbi, Winter 2024, §3.5). I admit that such harm exists, but it does not justify their claim. In this essay I adopt Feinberg’s (1986, pp. 47) definition of the right to autonomy as self-sovereignty. This conception is ultimate and non-revocable, which means if a person is qualified for full sovereignty, her right to autonomy cannot be overridden by other-regarding decisions, including calculation of overall well-being. Another convincing objection to utilitarian views comes from Kant. According to him, utilitarians treat the person as a means to maximize well-being, instead of herself as an end.

Interestingly, Kant himself opposed suicide, but for different reasons. He argued that in ending one’s own life, the person is also treating herself as a mere means to “some discretionary end” (Kant, 1797/1996, 6:423), such as escaping suffering. Yet I think this interpretation is questionable. It seems more natural to say that the action, which is suicide, serves as a means, while the ultimate end

remains the person who chooses to die. She is not using herself to serve the purpose of ending misery; instead she chooses death for herself. The decision is indeed grounded in her own autonomous will. Therefore, we should always respect her choice, for it embodies autonomy and dignity, rather than, as Kant argued, undermining them. In this respect, my interpretation is closer to some existentialist views, which regard suicide as a declaration of authentic human will.¹

Having reinterpreted Kant's first argument, I now proceed to another kind of objection, including Kant's second argument against suicide. Kant further argued that ending one's own life should not be respected because it is an act to "annihilate the subject of morality" (Kant, 1797/1996, 6:423). The *autonomous rational will*, as the condition of all moral laws, is of distinctive worth, and thus it is impermissible to destroy the very body that realizes it (Cholbi, Winter 2024, §2.3). Before addressing this argument, I would like to introduce a related line of reasoning, which is the sanctity of life view. Religiously speaking or not, this position holds that suicide is always wrong because human life is sacred, even if the person is living a miserable life (Cholbi, Winter 2024, §3.2).

I would like to discuss these two arguments together because they both assume, or attempt to show, the existence of some impersonal essence within individuals. For Kant, it is the *autonomous rational will* or *nature*; for thinkers

¹ For example, Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/2021, pp. 626) suggested that "suicide, in fact, is a choice and affirmation - of being." In his view, choosing death could be seen as a way for individuals to assert their will and define their own essence in a world without God (Cholbi, Winter 2024, §3.5).

like Aquinas, it is the internal value or holiness of life. We must not respect a choice of suicide, for it annihilates the very essence. Yet I reject these views, because like utilitarians², they also disregard the right to autonomy as self-sovereignty. On their account, a person's autonomy is only derivative, grounded not in self-sovereignty but in their proposed inherent essence. Feinberg (1986, pp. 94) cited the term "alien dignity" from Paul Ramsey to describe such essence, for although it is said to reside within the individual, it in fact has nothing to do with her individuality. From this perspective, these views neglect self-sovereignty even more than utilitarians, since at least the calculation of well-being takes into account the results of the person's own choices.

Someone might object that I too treat the right to autonomy as a kind of "alien dignity". I beg to differ, mainly for two reasons. First, autonomy is not an impersonal essence imposed on individuals, but "a set of rights expressive of one's sovereignty over oneself" (Feinberg, as cited in Christman, Fall 2025, §1.2). It connects closely to individuality, as one exercises this right through her making choices for her own sake. Second, I would recall the earlier clarification of the term "respect". When we respect a person's right to autonomy, the "respect" involved is recognition respect. By contrast, when we are asked to respect the sanctity of life or Kantian rational nature, the notion comes closer to appraisal respect. This distinction is crucial: it means we could respect one's choice of

² Yet they differ substantively: utilitarian arguments are consequentialist, whereas both sanctity of life and Kantian views are non-consequentialist.

suicide without approving of it, but we could not respect the sanctity of life without endorsing its dominion over the individual.

In conclusion, I have shown that a right to autonomy means we should always respect a person's choice to end her own life. It does not require approval or admiration, but only the acknowledgment that the decision ultimately belongs to the person herself. To deny this is to transfer authority away from her to some external standard or impersonal essence, be it utilitarian calculations, Kant's rational will, or the sanctity of life doctrine. This directly conflicts with the notion of the right to autonomy. Therefore, what is at stake is not merely the choice to end one's life, but the very possibility of living, as well as dying, under her own sovereignty.

(Word Count: 1069)

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