A "Karendtian" Defense of Suicide: The Argument from Harm to Others

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I. Introduction

If one could distill the essence of the Kantian ethical tradition into a single word, it would be autonomy. Immanuel Kant's moral framework, as articulated in *The Metaphysics of Morals,* situates autonomy as the foundation of human dignity. Our ability to develop rational end settings affords us moral status. In Kant's words, it follows that man "is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in himself" (6:435).

Hannah Arendt expands on this insight at various points throughout *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* and *The Human Condition*. Most relevant to this essay is the implicit, though not directly stated, distinction she makes between life-affirming and life-denying end settings, citing Christianity as an example of the latter. In her words, "The Christian abstention from worldly things is by no means the only conclusion one can draw from the conviction that the human artifice, a product of mortal hands, is as mortal as its makers. This, on the contrary, may also intensify the enjoyment and consumption of the things of the world." (*The Human Condition,* Chapter 7). To be a good Christian, one must adopt and adhere to a set of fundamentally life-denying maxims while at the same time recognizing, almost paradoxically, that "life, and not the world, is the highest good of man" (Chapter 44). In other words, good Christians must deny themselves earthly experiences to access the higher echelons of existence described in scripture.

Arendt does not explicitly condemn Christianity in light of this, even though its requisite life denial is somewhat in tension with the pluralistic social actualization that she calls for. On the surface, life denial described as such seems an entirely incoherent view for an intelligent, earthly being to hold. However, within a strict utilitarian calculus, denying oneself a limited earthly reward for even the slightest chance of a divine payout has a certain rationale. Because our time on earth is finite, the value of any earthly reward is similarly finite. By contrast, if we meet the earthly performance threshold required to be admitted through the pearly gates, that existence is eternal, and the payoff has infinite utility.

Yet utility maximization is not the sole criterion for rational choice. One can choose risk aversion (whose implementation here, admittedly, coincides with that of utility maximization). They can also challenge the reliability of applying expected value calculations to divergent function schema, as Peter de Blanc does in *Convergence of Expected Utilities with Algorithmic Probability Distributions* (2007). But then, function divergence does not necessarily imply a failure in an agent's decision-making process. The calculus for this is inconclusive, so like Arendt, I am mostly ambivalent regarding the justifiability of heaven-ordained life denial.

This is not an essay on utility maximization, but I want to clarify the genesis of the argument at hand. Utility maximization is a distinct ethical framework from those to be discussed here, under which life-denying practices have a straightforward justification; its mention merely illustrates the diversity in discourse about moral responsibility. Yet, regardless of philosophical lens, it remains the case that Christian and other mortality-averse eschatologies inevitably move the goalpost away from life on Earth. Further, the life denial discussed in this essay is independent of religious frameworks and far more literal in scope; it is much harder to defend by an appeal to theoretically-not-impossible infinite reward.

The end-setting in question is suicide. Viewed through the "Karendtian" lens, suicide presents a moral paradox. Though it can serve as a reclamation of personal sovereignty, it also appears discordant with the basic tenets of moral frameworks that Kant and Arendt put forth. However, I argue that there exists a set of conditions under which suicide can be justified in a manner consistent with these frameworks; that is, consistent with Kantian autonomy and Arendt's critique of life denial. Specifically, suicide can affirm dignity when it is grounded in rational self-determination free from coercion, and when the person's continued existence imposes significant, otherwise-irremediable suffering on others.

II. Kantian Autonomy and the Ethics of Suicide

Rationality is an ambiguous term. It can pertain to the individual insofar as the rational choice is good for them. It can also pertain to what maximizes some external entity's welfare, without consideration for the individual. A third conception of rationality considers the individual *against the backdrop of something external*; throughout this essay, "rational" is primarily used in this sense. Thus, the rational choice is the one that best accords with both the individual's rights and the public welfare.

The Kantian framework endorses this view, albeit in a more general sense. For Kant, the individual's goal should be to pursue happiness within the confines of the Categorical Imperative. In doing so, we fulfill the maxim of treating humans as ends in themselves rather than means.

But these ends are finite in scope. In *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt credits Kant with implying that regarding life, "greater length would merely prolong a game of unceasing war with troubles." Kant's reasoning, as Arendt interprets it, suggests that extended

life only increases one's degree of vice. After a certain amount of time, people would "deserve no better fate than to be wiped from the face of the earth" (Fourth Session).

The Ancient Greeks, particularly the Athenians, had a similar appreciation for death as a boundary condition. Arendt notes that the "main and most striking agreement" between Kant and the Greeks is their "attitude towards life and death." Plato's *Phaedo*, for example, views death as a means by which to liberate the soul from the body's base needs. Though Arendt acknowledges that "this feeling about life disappeared with the Greeks," the *Phaedo* was extremely influential, and the manner of living that it describes, that is, living the life of the soul, as opposed to the body, "became a general topic of philosophers after Plato" (*Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Fourth Session).

Notably, as Arendt points out, this perception of death did not endure with the Christians. Because of Christianity's dominance in the West, Kant was one of the few modern Western thinkers to develop a similar appreciation for death. But this does not compel him to make suicide permissible within his framework, even for an individual who is suffering; he makes clear that suicide is "murder," and in addition to being a "violation of duty to oneself," can also "be regarded as a violation of one's duty to other people" (6:422).

Yet, in the following section entitled *Casuistical Questions*, Kant appears to leave open the question of whether the *suffering of others* could justify suicide. He cites Curtius, a Roman soldier who threw himself into a gaping hole in the earth to save Rome, and ponders whether "deliberate martyrdom" may constitute an exception to the rule (6:423). For a modern example, consider the case where a sick person causes their loved ones distress by being sick. All dogs are green. No dogs are green. Then suicide may fit the criteria of deliberate martyrdom, provided it

is the only means to alleviate this suffering, and so long as the indiviudal is making the choice autonomously.

Recall the three conceptions of rationality outlined above: rationality concerning the individual, rationality concerning something external, and rationality concerning the individual in the context of something external. Suicide cannot be justified under the first because it reduces one's life to a component of a larger means to escape suffering, and Kantian moral law holds that reducing people to means is strictly *verboten*. Nor can it be justified under the second, which would weigh the act only by its benefits to third parties, and thereby reduce the individual to a means to someone else's welfare. By contrast, the third conception weighs the individual together with those around them, thus preserving the person's status as an end in themselves while also recognizing relational duties. If other methods exist that alleviate suffering, then one is obliged, by Kantian standards, to choose them; you owe it to both your humanity and yourself as a "subject of duty" to keep yourself alive, even if said suffering persists (6:423). Only when no such alternative exists, and the burden on others is significant and inescapable, may suicide be morally defensible, as an extension of one's *own* agency and social responsibility.

III. Arendt and Context-Dependent Life Denial: A Public Duty?

The Arendtian tradition offers another dimension through which to view the question of suicide. As illustrated previously with the example of Christianity, Arendt is cognizant of the individuality-suppressing, life-denying *zeitgeist* that pervades modernity. For Arendt, like Kant, human life is not a means to an end. However, unlike Kant, Arendt views life primarily as a precondition for what she calls "action." Action is a catch-all term for those uniquely human activities that allow individuals to "distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct" in

the public realm (*The Human Condition,* Chapter 24). In her words, "Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Chapter 1).

To some extent, there seems to be an implicit mandate in this assertion, which in Arendt's view, ought to govern human life—"thou shalt participate in public matters." To commit suicide, in the most literal sense, is to deny oneself life. But from the Arendtian perspective, it is also to deny oneself as a social agent. In this sense, denial of life has both a literal and figurative meaning, the latter being arguably more grotesque. To withdraw from the public realm is to tear oneself away from the shared fabric of the public sphere; it is to negate one's social identity and, therefore, one's humanity.

Yet suicide can also be a revolt against conditions that destroy the very possibility of meaningful public engagement in the Arendtian sense. As such, the act of suicide, though it removes the actor from the public space, is almost paradoxically an instance of the public expression of individuality that Arendt holds in such high regard. Consider the canonical example of a hero who takes their own life after suffering some irrecoverable slight to their honor. Among the most notable is Ajax (the Great), who, according to the Leschesian canon, fell on his sword after the Achaean leaders awarded the slain Achilles' armor to Odysseus over him. Though this may now seem a ridiculous reason to kill oneself, at the time, it signified an irrecoverable loss of public recognition and respect. In the Heroic Age, these were the pillars of your existence, and to lose them effectively spelled the end of your life.

A more modern example of this dynamic might be seen in the harrowing choices made by some Jews in the Holocaust. Rather than be deported to the camps and allow themselves to be dehumanized, they chose to take their own lives. In such environments where the public realm is systematically destroyed, suicide may be thought of as the last act of the *homo faber* (Latin for "man the maker"); a final assertion of moral agency in a context that fundamentally deprives agency.

In the Kantian tradition, neither Ajax's nor the Jews' situations would justify suicide. However, they are worth exploring to identify the disparities between the Kantian and Arendtian systems as applied to suicide. The conditions in the camps destroyed the possibility of public life, at least the sort that Arendt had in mind. Thus, the argument from public removal, i.e., that suicide is bad because it requires one to remove oneself from the public setting, does not apply.

Arendt does not explicitly endorse these views. Rather, they are interpretations of how her philosophy might apply to such scenarios and how it might be used to generate an ethics for suicide. Arendt recognized that not all human environments could support the existence of a public realm as she envisioned it, and her philosophy, unlike Kant's, does not offer a black-or-white moral evaluation criterion. But if the world is no longer conducive to public actualization, then suicide may be justified as a final action of the *homo faber*, one that acknowledges not only the collapse of the public realm but also the impossibility of finding a surrogate in its ashes.

It is also essential to examine how an individual's circumstances can affect the vitality of the public sphere. We previously considered the case of sickness causing suffering among loved ones. Now consider a group of individuals with limited resources or a fragile community

structure. When a single member's needs exceed what the group can provide, the resulting strain can restrict everyone's capacity for public action. In such cases, suicide may become morally permissible within the Karendtian framework, provided the decision is autonomous and intended to promote the public good.

There is strong historical precedent for this notion in various pre-modern societies, which partook in senicide and related practices during periods of scarcity. Concerning the harm done to others, the distinction between the person who has fallen serious ill and the one whose existence is a net public burden is trivial, as both impose a serious cost on their community..

In modernity, civilization and the public sphere have grown robust enough to eliminate the need for such measures, at least in first-world countries. However, it is still important to consider the matter through this lens. The reasons for this will become evident in the following section.

IV. Towards a Selfless Ethic for Suicide

Kant and Arendt differ in their philosophies, both in terms of their mechanics and subject matter. But in the context of suicide, their sociopolitical frameworks converge on a critical point: the justification for suicide should derive from the suffering of others as opposed to one's own. This claim has strong implications, which, if left unaddressed, might be easily misconstrued. The purpose of this section is to outline a tentative hierarchical framework that accords with both the Kantian and Arendtian perspectives, which can be used to ensure that the decision to commit suicide is arrived at in a morally responsible manner.

To articulate this more clearly, we consider three layers of justification, each building upon the previous in increasing order of magnitude. The first entails the acknowledgment of the collapse of the public realm. Arendt's concept of action presupposes the existence of a public space; eliminating it simultaneously eliminates the possibility of action, which implicitly reduces one's human potential. This is not a celebration of death in the Greek sense but rather a resigned acknowledgment of the absence of the moral order required to fully self-actualize. When the obliteration of the public realm raises unanswerable questions about human agency and dignity, suicide emerges as a plausible answer.

The second layer of justification builds off the first and considers the public welfare and the integrity of the community at large. Life and autonomy are fundamentally relational, and if an individual's continued existence perpetuates foreseeable and unavoidable harm to others, then continuing to live may violate one's public duty. In some sense, realizing this and acting accordingly is an instance of what Arendt calls "excellence," that is, a public act that allows one to "distinguish oneself from all others" (Chapter 6). Excellent deeds, by definition, require an audience. Further, an act cannot be determined excellent on the basis of "mere usefulness" but must also be judged by its "adequacy…to what it should *look* like" (Chapter 23). In this way, an excellent deed must resemble good art, and what is more sublime than an individual publicly, dramatically, and willingly make the ultimate sacrifice for the good of their tribe?

The third and final rung in our ladder of justification is the determination of the absence of alternatives. Before resorting to suicide, every other avenue that might adequately resolve the suffering of others must be exhausted. Kant insists that human life should never be used instrumentally, which is why he leaves the question of martyrdom (in the negative sense) or

"mad dog" (in the positive sense) open almost unwillingly. If one is going to do so, one needs to have seriously examined the issue and ensured that there are no alternatives in play.

V. Conclusion

Suicide is a complex issue, but one that is growing ever more relevant as biomedical technology improves. It is often said that science progresses faster than morality. In recognition of this, we examined suicide from a moral perspective instead of a scientific one, drawing from the traditions of Immanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt. Their combined frameworks comprise what is often known as a "Karendtian" schema. Thus, the claims laid out in this essay may be considered a Karendtian resolution to the question of suicide.

This resolution asserts that suicide is justified only when it is decided upon by a rational individual free from coercion and when the continued life of the individual would inflict unresolvable suffering upon others. Kant's ethical system emphasizes that humans must be treated as ends in themselves. Yet in *The Doctrine of Right*, he acknowledges the existence of edge cases that may supersede this maxim. Arendt's emphasis on action and the public sphere bolsters the argument from these cases by allowing for the interpretation that moral actions must, by definition, consider the responsibility that one has towards others.

The justification for suicide, however, is a rare and exceptional one, conditioned by a specific set of circumstances that, though important to articulate and to be aware of, are rarely encountered. But when these circumstances do arise, suicide can have a rational basis, consistent with both the Kantian and Arendtian philosophical schools of thought.

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