

## A Reassessment of the Rising Tide of Suicide in Contemporary Nigerian Society: A Kantian Interrogative

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This paper undertakes a reassessment of the rising incidence of suicide contemporary Nigerian society in the light of Immanuel Kant's proposition. Throughout history, suicide has evoked an astonishingly wide range of reactions ranging from bafflement, dismissal, heroic glorification, sympathy, anger, to moral and religious condemnation - but it has never been uncontroversial. Suicide is now an object of multidisciplinary scientific study with sociology, anthropology, psychology and psychiatry each providing important insights into suicide. Nonetheless, many of the most controversial questions surrounding suicide are philosophical. For philosophers, suicide raises a host of conceptual, moral, and psychological questions. Among these questions are: What makes a person's behaviour suicidal? What motivates such behaviour? Is suicide morally permissible, or even morally required in some extraordinary circumstances? Is suicidal behaviour rational? Considering the rising spate of suicide in Nigeria in the last decade, this study seeks to employ the Kantian proposition to investigate the causes and consequences of suicide in Nigeria with a view to proffering solutions. Kant maintains that an agent who takes his own life acts in violation of the moral law; suicide is therefore totally wrong. He maintains that killing oneself when life goes ill is wrong. It is this Kantian position that this paper uses to reassess the rationality of the rising spate of suicide in Nigeria. The study employed the qualitative research approach by relying mainly on secondary sources for data. Thereafter, the expository and critical methods were used for analysis. The paper surmised that despite the arguments for and against the morality of suicide, a deeper reflection reveals that suicide is a crime against humanity and degrades human dignity, and should be dissuaded.

**Keywords:** Kantian, Nigeria, Suicide, morality, rationality

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

It is a truism that life is precious and constitutes the ultimate and highest value of human existence. This explains why the right to life is the most basic of the fundamental human rights. However, in contemporary Nigerian society, as in many parts of the world, the value of human life seems to have waned drastically. In genetic engineering, issues like human cloning, sterilization, invitro fertilization, abortion, euthanasia and suicide have continually reduced the dignity of human life, albeit the arguments that surround them. In this regard, human life is treated as a mere instrument, which can be manipulated at will. One major threat to human life in Nigeria today is suicide. From Lagos to Kano, from Enugu to Cross River notably, suicide is in the increase today. This is why a number of questions have been raised within the philosophy of suicide, including whether or not suicide can be a rational choice, and the moral permissibility of suicide. This means that the critical decision of judging whether life is worth living amounts to answering a fundamental question in philosophy. Various philosophical positions have been taken in the past concerning this controversial reality. Kant waded into the scene by

proposing an acute condemnation of suicide, which has elicited various responses from various quarters. This paper is therefore intended to make a reassessment of the question of suicide as postulated by Kant in consideration of contemporary Nigerian realities.

## **2. CONCEPTUALIZING SUICIDE**

There have always been philosophical difficulties at defining and characterizing suicide precisely. This is possibly because such attempts are tied with intricate issues about how to describe and explain human actions in exact terms. This makes it herculean and challenging to identify a set of conditions for suicide that fit well with the conventional usage of the term. To compound the issue, it is noticed that suicide's strong negative emotional and/or moral connotations makes efforts to distinguish suicidal behaviour from other behaviour often clandestinely difficult. Here, it is easier for people to categorize self-killings intended to avoid unfavourable conditions as suicides than self-killings intended to benefit others. It is under this guise that people would usually classify Hitler's self-killing act as suicide, while leaving out Jesus' (Garrison 94).

For a worthwhile definition and characterization, scholars opine that 'suicide' should not be equated with wrongful self-killing in the way that 'murder' is equated with wrongful killing of another, lest we render ourselves unable to refer even to the possibility of a morally justified self-killing.. This brief attempt at conceptual analysis of suicide illustrates the frustrations of such a project, as the unclear notion of suicide is apparently replaced by equally unclear notions such as intention and coercion. From this, we may provisionally define suicide as "the act of intentionally causing one's own death" (Crosby and Sacks 321). Suicide, the decision to end one's own life, usually stems from despair and an inability to cope with life. This has to be differentiated from attempted suicide or non-fatal suicidal behaviour which is self-injury with the desire to end one's life that does not result in death; and from assisted suicide which is when one individual helps another bring about their own death indirectly via providing either advice or the means to the end.

## **3. POSSIBLE CAUSES OF SUICIDE IN NIGERIA**

Modality is an expression of the speaker's opinion. This can be done either by the use of prepositions or proposals [15]. Propositions assert or deny possibilities which can either be negative (it is not) or positive (it is so). Two kinds of possibilities are degrees of probability and degrees of usuality. These are called modalisation. On the other hand, proposals are about meaning of positive (do it) or negative (do not do it) poles. Two possibilities exist here that is commands and offers. Commands are represented by degrees of obligation while offers are represented by degrees of inclination. Scales of obligation and inclination are referred to as modulation. The study looked at the use of modality on all the selected conferences, banners, slogans and placards in that order. The conferences were organised beginning with the first Strike referred to as Strike 1, followed by the second which was Strike 2 and the last one referred to as Strike 3.

In Nigeria, various factors have been proposed over time as being responsible for the willful taking of one's life.

**a. Mental Problems:** Common causes of suicide, especially as regards Nigeria are basically mental related. They include:

- **Anxiety:** Having generalized anxiety, social phobia, panic attacks, or obsessive-compulsive disorder can drive a person crazy. Sprintzen opines that "some forms of anxiety make it extremely difficult to maintain friendships, finish school, or hold down a steady job; just as the combination of loneliness and fear can lead a person to contemplate suicide (Sprintzen 78). A close consideration of many suicide cases across Nigeria are occasioned by outcomes of accumulated anxiety.

- **Depression:** Major depression is a leading cause of suicide in Nigeria. Individuals with major depression are typically genetically wired in a way that makes it difficult to feel pleasure and happiness in life. According to Schutt, Meschede and Rierdan, "90% of people who commit suicide suffer from untreated depression" (134). The excruciating socio-economic conditions in Nigeria makes life unbearable and thus drives many people into either madness or suicide behaviour.

- **Schizophrenia:** This is a highly severe mental illness with an array of symptoms including severe depression, hallucinations and cognitive impairment. Having this illness makes it difficult to function in life and can be a major challenge due to the fact that most medications to treat this illness carry severe side effects (142). It is notable in Nigeria that people with this illness often attempt or complete suicide.

**b. Traumatic Experiences**

There are various traumatic conditions in Nigeria. Trauma generally could lead a person to feeling helpless, guilty, and/or ashamed. Those who were victims of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or dealt with trauma in war, are much more likely to end up with post-traumatic stress disorder (Crosby, A.E. and Sacks 324). This disorder and the feelings associated with traumatic experiences can lead a person to become suicidal. With flashbacks and numbing or blockage of memories surrounding the traumatic experience, people with this illness often live in a state of intense, and sometimes debilitating anxiety and/or fear that can interfere with leading a normal life. When people feel helpless about their situation and permanently traumatized, they may turn to suicide.

**c. Personality Disorders**

Personality disorders can be closely related to mental illness, but are considered a set of traits that make it difficult to function within society. People with a personality disorder may have trouble maintaining relationships, holding down a steady job, and/or coping with life generally. For example, someone with dependent personality disorder may be too afraid to leave an abusive relationship. This “dependency” may lead the person with this disorder to consider suicide as an escape from their circumstances (Sakuta 102).

On the same token, avoidant personality disorder can lead individuals to avoid social contact because they are afraid they will be rejected or won’t fit in. This can result in feelings of isolation and a person thinking that they will never have any friends. Generally, an individual with a personality disorder may feel as if there is no hope for escaping the problems caused by their personality and may consider suicide.

**d. Drug Addiction/Substance Abuse**

Ogabo reports that it has been observed that people that are addicted to drugs and/or abuse drugs and/or alcohol on a consistent basis are more likely to become depressed (81). With many depressing situations in Nigeria, many people use drugs to escape painful feelings of depression and hopelessness of their current life situation. Being addicted to drugs or alcohol may provide some short-term relief from the pain that they feel, but over the long term, drug use tends to alter brain functioning and neurotransmitters. Eventually, a person will build up such a high tolerance to whatever drug they are addicted to, that they won’t experience anymore lift in mood that they got when they first started using. One may feel helpless to overcome whatever addiction he/she faces and some people see suicide as an only way out of the addiction trap (Schutt, Meschede and Rierdan 134).

**e. Unemployment**

There is some kind of fulfillment derived from gainful employment. Contrarily, being unemployed can lead to feelings of isolation and make your life feel as if it is void of purpose. With a poor economy as the one found in Nigeria, many people remain jobless for long periods of time. Some lose their jobs and look for new work, but since the competition is fierce, landing a new job can be difficult. In many cases being unemployed not only makes people feel as if they have no purpose in life, it can lead to depression over lack of an income as well. Individuals who are unemployed do not earn any money and may get especially stressed out when it comes to time to pay bills. Being unable to earn money and provide for yourself and/or a family can result in significant depression and anxiety.

In addition to unemployment, hating one's current job can also lead to suicidal thoughts and possibly actions if one feels as if there is no alternative option. Employment provides most people with a sense of purpose and belonging to a specific group or company (Schutt, Meschede and Rierdan 147). If you are unemployed you may find yourself socially isolated and lacking purpose and structure in your day. Being employed helps individuals stay busy and can actually take their mind off worries. The contrary can lead to contemplation of suicide.

**f. Social Isolation / Loneliness**

Loneliness is defined as a general feeling of sadness as a result of being alone or feeling disconnected from others. Isolation on the other hand is being separated from others in an environment. Someone can become isolated based on circumstances or as a result of personal decisions. Various reasons that a person could feel lonely or isolated include: living alone, death of a close friend or family member, poor physical health, mental illness, being introverted, fear of rejection, and/or retirement. Living isolated from others can lead to an array of problems including mental health conditions, low energy, substance abuse, negative feelings, and/or sleep problems. If the loneliness and/or social isolation is not addressed, it may lead someone to consider suicide as an escape from their situation (Berman 88). This has been the case with any suicide cases in Nigeria.

**g. Relationship Crises**

It is common today to see people struggling with relationships. There are cases of being in abusive relationships, not feeling appreciated, and/or going through break-ups. There are many different types of relationships that a person could struggle with. Some people may have difficulties making friends and maintaining a close group for socialization. Others may struggle with staying in abusive relationships just so that they can avoid feeling isolated and lonely. The need for human belonging is so strong that some people are willing to join gangs and/or humiliate themselves just to be in a relationship with another person (Rubenstein et al 17). As far as romantic relationships are concerned, the act of a break-up can trigger intense feelings of depression, anxiety, guilt and panic – leading a person to go through a lot of emotional pain. Often times in Nigeria, the news reports instances of people committing suicide as the result of a break-up with a significant other. This is a major cause of suicide in some places today.

**h. Existential Crisis**

When life seems void of meaning, people tend to question why they are even living and/or the entire purpose of their existence. This is often referred to as an “existential crisis” and can be difficult to overcome because people dealing with this issue often think themselves in circles of logic as to why there is no point or meaning to life. In many cases, people facing an existential crisis consider suicide because they feel as if their entire existence is void of purpose. This crisis can result from misfortunes, financial challenges, character assassination, trauma, loneliness, seeking meaning and/or general dissatisfaction with life. Some reports suggest that this crisis may affect individuals with above-average levels of intelligence. Facing an existential crisis can be difficult and can take a while to get over. Usually the individual needs to make some sort of changes in life for their existential outlook to change (Alasdair 59).

**i. Terminal Illness**

Many people with terminal illnesses that have no hope of improving their situation based on current science and medicine may become depressed. This depression is usually a result of feeling powerless to one's condition. People with terminal illnesses aren't able to treat or make any sort of improvement towards getting better. In many cases they are simply living and being controlled by the impairments that their illness causes. Terminal illnesses such as various types of cancer usually leave a person frustrated, shocked and feeling hopeless. Other terminal illnesses end up causing physical or other handicaps and take a serious toll on a person's energy levels, willpower, and ability to partake in daily functions.

Many elderly individuals who are terminally ill have fought for euthanasia rights and/or traveled to other countries where it has been legalized (63).

#### **4. KANT ON SUICIDE**

It is the conception of Donnelly Is that “all Enlightenment thinkers who wrote on the subject – Hume, Voltaire and Rousseau among others – agreed that the religious condemnation of suicide was not only preposterous but also entirely lacking in charity” (88). Kant, on the other hand, denounced suicide in the most unqualified and indeed quite furious terms. According to him “suicide is in no circumstances permissible.” The man who commits suicide “sinks lower than the beasts.” We “shrink from him in horror.” “Nothing more terrible can be imagined.” “We look upon the suicide as carrion.” And if a man attempts suicide and survives, “he has in effect “discarded his humanity” and we are entitled to “treat him as a beast, as a thing, and to use him for our sport as we do a horse or a dog” (Kant 71).

Religiously, Kant maintains that man is God’s property, and hence has no right to dispose of his own life. However, Kant also has a number of purely secular arguments, two of which deserve some discussion. According to the first of them, the suicide is abasing and degrading his humanity by treating himself as no more than a thing: “Man can only dispose of things; beasts are things in this sense; but man is not a thing, not a beast. If he disposes of himself, he treats his value as that of a beast. He who so behaves, who has no respect for human behavior, makes a thing of himself” (85).

Kant’s other argument is based on the undeniable fact that if a person commits suicide he can no longer perform any moral acts. “It cannot be moral,” in Kant’s words, “to root out the existence of morality in the world.” The suicide “robs himself of his person. This is contrary to the highest duty we have towards ourselves, for it annuls the conditions of all other duties” (89).

Kant’s opinion is that a suicide indicates a maxim along the lines of “From self-love I make as my principle to shorten my life when its continued duration threatens more evil than it promises satisfaction”, but this is not something that lends itself to universalisation. After all, Kant reasons, nature places in us a feeling of self-love to stimulate the furtherance of life, and the promotion of life through self-love can therefore be regarded as a law of nature. Meanwhile, to use self-love against life would necessitate the simultaneous promotion of death through self-love as a law of nature, and this would point to a contradiction in that law. Because a law - be it of nature or any other type - cannot contradict itself, we must suppose that the promotion of death through self-love violates the laws of nature and is therefore correctly called “wrong” (91). Kant says that a suicide would be “making use of his person merely as a means to maintain a tolerable condition until the end of his life”. This is incompatible with the moral law, which demands that we treat people as an end in themselves, and never wholly as a means. Personhood, Kant thinks, gives a creature a dignity that is beyond price; no matter what advantage we may gain by treating a person as a means to an end, this will never be sufficient to offset the value of their personhood (97).

#### **5. SUICIDE: THE MORAL QUESTION**

Various arguments have evolved over time on the morality of suicide. The many arguments based on many differing factors are generally grouped under the liberal and conservative arguments. Briefly, whereas the former upholds the permissibility of suicide, the latter conceives suicide as a totally immoral act. The morality of suicide clearly surfaces how broad worldview considerations are important for understanding and evaluating different moral positions. In the final analysis, one’s approach to suicide is determined largely by the worldview one brings to the issue. However, the position of this paper is tilted to the conservative idea of suicide.

Hanna has rightly noted that “common philosophical opinion of suicide since modernization reflected a spread in cultural beliefs of societies that suicide is immoral and unethical” (Hanna 119). One popular argument is that many of the reasons for committing suicide – such as depression, emotional pain, or economic hardship – are transitory and can be ameliorated by therapy and through making changes to some aspects of one’s life. Irina calls suicide “the ultimate and absolute evil, the

refusal to take an interest in existence" (Irina 99). He argues that a person who kills himself, as far as he is concerned, destroys the entire world. This owes to the fact that suicide has a social character.

In his influential essay "On Liberty", John Stuart Mill argued that since the sine qua non of liberty is the power of the individual to make choices, any choice that one might make that would deprive one of the ability to make further choices should be prevented. Thus, for Mill, as reported by Erwin,

Not only persons are not held to engagements which violate the rights of third parties, but it is sometimes considered a sufficient reason for releasing them from an engagement, that it is injurious to themselves. In this and most other civilized countries, for example, an engagement by which a person should sell himself, or allow himself to be sold, as a slave, would be null and void; neither enforced by law nor by opinion. The ground for thus limiting his power of voluntarily disposing of his own lot in life, is apparent, and is very clearly seen in this extreme case. The reason for not interfering, unless for the sake of others, with a person's voluntary acts, is consideration for his liberty. His voluntary choice is evidence that what he so chooses is desirable, or at the least endurable, to him, and his good is on the whole best provided for by allowing him to take his own means of pursuing it (137).

The one who commits suicide therefore, defeats in his own case, the very purpose which is the justification of allowing him to dispose of himself. He is no longer free; but is thenceforth in a position which has no longer the presumption in its favour, that would be afforded by his voluntarily remaining in it. The principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free. It is not freedom, to be allowed to alienate his freedom. Thus, for Mills, suicide alienates man from his freedom, since it stops him from making further choices. Here, it could be argued that suicide prevents further choices in the same way slavery does. However, it can also be argued that there are significant differences in not having any further involvement in decisions about your life and not having any further life to make decisions about. Suicide essentially removes the condition of being alive, not the condition of making choices about your life.

Immanuel Kant argues against suicide in his Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals. In accordance with the second formulation of his categorical imperative, Kant argues that "he who contemplates suicide should ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself" (Callahan 23). Kant's theory looks at the act only, and not at its outcomes and consequences, and claims that one is ethically required to consider whether one would be willing to universalise the act: to claim everyone should behave that way. Kant argues that choosing to commit suicide entails considering oneself as a means to an end, which he rejects: a person, he says, must not be used "merely as means, but must in all actions always be considered as an end in himself" (24). Therefore, it is unethical to commit suicide to satisfy oneself.

## **6. EFFECTS OF SUICIDE ON THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

Suicide carries a social and moral meaning in all societies. At both the individual and population levels, the suicide rate has long been understood to correlate with cultural, social, political, and economic forces. Society and culture play an enormous role in dictating how people respond to and view mental health and suicide. Culture influences the way in which we define and experience mental health and mental illness, our ability to access care and the nature of the care we seek, the quality of the interaction between provider and patient in the health care system, and our response to intervention and treatment.

Suicide, even though committed by an individual, has a social character. One of the objections commonly raised by opponents of suicide is that it amounts to social murder. They accuse the individual for committing murder indirectly, thereby violating the value of the human right to life, which is one of the duties and responsibilities of the society to protect against unwarranted actions either by public authorities or private individuals. The only difference, which they put forward, is that the murder or killing in this case is not between one person and the other, but murder directed by one of society's members against himself/herself.

According to Donnelly, if murder is wrong in one instance, then nothing on earth will make it right even when it is used as a weapon by the individual against the self.

By this he simply means that since the society has condemned murder as something evil or wrong which ought not to be done by anybody in the society, then it should not be used as a means of taking one's life because it is still killing. In other words, why do you still kill when you say one should not kill? Here, suicide has a social character and ought to be avoided under all circumstances (217).

Perhaps the most social impact of suicide is that suicide causes the suffering of the victim's family. Suicide causes painful stigma and prolonged pain and suffering on the victim's family and extends suffering and pain to the loved ones of the suicider. In some cases, many family members who have lost loved ones to suicide are subjected to stigma and are made to go through various cultural processes for purification, especially in the African setting. Also some family members as a result of the shocking news of the suicide of the son or daughter lack concentration in the various places of work which can also lead to their dismissal. Thus, as utilitarians argue, though the death of a depressed person ends their suffering, the person's family and friends may grieve.

Learning that a loved one has died by suicide can absolutely be traumatic. In addition to all the feelings that anyone would feel about the death of a loved one, when the death is a suicide, there are additional feelings like: "Extreme guilt for not preventing the suicide, failure because a person they loved felt unloved and committed suicide, anger or resentment at the person who chose to take his or her own life, confusion, distress over unresolved issues" (Tom, Beauchamp and Childress 316).

When a person dies, other members of the society generally offer empathy and compassion, but when a person dies by suicide, there is stigma around that death and people often treat the loved ones of the person who committed suicide differently. Loved ones can be very afraid to talk about the suicide for fear of judgement and condemnation – being blamed for the suicide of their family member or friend. Because of this, one effect of suicide on family and friends can be extreme isolation.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

As the foregoing discussion indicates, suicide has been and continues to be a rich but controversial issue of philosophical investigation. Recent advances in medical technology are responsible for the extensive philosophical attention paid to suicide, among other reasons. One could thus surmise that not only is suicide worthy of philosophical investigation in its own right, it is a source of insight for various philosophical subdisciplines: moral psychology, ethical theory, social and political philosophy, the metaphysics of personhood, and action theory. Suicide is also an area where philosophical interests intersect with those of the empirical sciences. The collective efforts of philosophers and others continue to illuminate one of the most enigmatic of human behaviours which is increasing rather rapidly in Nigeria. Kant's moralist stance on the subject of suicide has both been lauded and criticized on various fronts. While some scholars feel that Kant has meaningfully contributed to the debate, others are of the opinion that Kant's conclusions are unconvincing and his argument in these matters is undermined on considering other areas of his thought. Albeit the many arguments that have ensued concerning the Kantian position on suicide, this paper takes that no amount of argument makes suicide a moral act. A critical survey of the issues concerned reveals that suicide is life-effacing rather than life-enhancing; it robs humanity of the dignity due to the human species and so should be avoided in all circumstances.

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