

How Would You Regard a Friend?

On Suicide and the Moral Demands of Friendship

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[Note to the reader: This talk may strike some as a callous condemnation of suicide, heaping charges of immorality and an incapacity to be a friend on suicidal people who are already suffering mightily. My aim is not to further wound in this way. It is rather to see if we can read Kant's moral condemnation of suicide as a way of making sense of the feelings of fear, horror, aversion, fury, devastation, and helplessness many feel in the face of another's suicide. These feelings, per Kant as I read him, are not selfish reactions, but track a kind of justified outrage, a moral *cri de cœur*, at the degree to which suicide seems to represent a person's despising her own life. I am generally interested in projects that look at whether older, intellectually out-of-favor, moral language can be re-read and sometimes interestingly rehabilitated.]

Wie würdet ihr einen freund ansehen, von dem ihr nie sicher wäret, ob er nicht mit dem Selbstmorde umginge? (Refl 6801, AA 19:166.16f.)¹

I. Introduction

One way to get a handle on Kant's moral objection to suicide is through the rhetorical question above, which Kant asks in a note to himself. My suggestion in this paper is that the wariness, alarm, mistrust, anger, helplessness and other feelings we are liable to have vis-à-vis the friend Kant describes, the friend about whom we are never sure whether he is toying with suicide, help illuminate what is morally wrong for Kant, and also I think for us, with suicide.

The heart of my argument here will be that, for Kant, a person toying with suicide is a person who fails to be able to be friend. Piggybacking on work by Christine Korsgaard and Rae Langton, I suggest that a person who fails to be able to be a friend is a

¹ "How would you regard a friend of whom you were never sure whether he was toying with [the idea of] suicide?" Translation M. J. Seidler in his excellent paper, *Kant and the Stoics in Suicide*, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44:3 (1983): 429-53, 441.

person who cannot be a possible member of a kingdom, or realm, of ends, that is, of a moral community. But to say this is to say that she, or anyway the suicidal intention that disqualifies her as a member of a moral community, is immoral.

Missing from what I just said: I will specifically argue that a suicide fails to be a friend, or relevantly like a friend, *to herself*. Kant treats suicide as a violation of a duty to self, and I am not aiming to revise him here. But I think a way to understand that violation of duty to self is through Kantian ideas about friendship, and through the idea that we ought to be friends, in a sense I will make clear, with ourselves.

I should say, before proceeding, that I take the material I introduce here to illuminate just one aspect of Kant's complicated view about suicide, other aspects of which I explore elsewhere. I focus here on Kant's *Grundlegung* argument that suicide treats the self as a mere means, or a thing. I show how we can read this as saying that a suicide fails to treat herself like a friend, and then argue that suicide's immorality can be located in this failure. I conclude by suggesting that, thus understood, we may in fact find ourselves agreeing with Kant, at least a propos the paradigmatic and most prevalent case of suicide from despair.

II. Kant's *Grundlegung* Argument that Suicide Treats Humanity as a Thing

Kant has multiple arguments against suicide. The one I focus on here is the *Grundlegung* argument that suicide treats humanity as a mere means, or as a thing. Here is the argument in full:

Erstlich nach dem Begriffe der nothwendigen Pflicht gegen sich selbst derjenige, der mit Selbstmorde umgeht, sich fragen, ob seine Handlung mit der Idee der Menschheit *als Zwecks an sich selbst* zusammen bestehen könne. Wenn er, um einem beschwerlichen Zustande zu entfliehen, sich selbst zerstört, so bedient er sich einer Person bloß als eines Mittels zu Erhaltung eines erträglichen Zustandes bis zu Ende des Lebens. Der Mensch aber ist keine Sache, mithin nicht etwas, das bloß als Mittel gebraucht werden kann, sondern muss bei allen seinen Handlungen jederzeit als Zweck an sich selbst betrachtet werden. Also kann ich über den Menschen in meiner Person nichts disponiren, ihn zu verstümmeln, zu verderben, oder zu tödten. (GMS AA 04:429.15-25)²

² "First, as regards the concept of necessary duty to oneself, someone who has suicide in mind will ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity *as an end in itself*. If he destroys

This argument is familiar: someone considering suicide ought to realize that he errs in thinking of himself, "bloß als *eines Mittels* zu Erhaltung eines erträglichen Zustandes bis zu Ende des Lebens ("*merely as a means* to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life") or as a "Sache" ("thing"), and should accordingly see that to commit suicide is to act in a way that cannot, "mit der Idee der Menschheit *als Zwecks an sich selbst* zusammen bestehen könne" (or, that is not "consistent with the idea of humanity *as an end in itself*") (GMS AA 04:429.19f., 21, 17f.; Gregor translation).

Let us grant the general Kantian idea that we must never treat persons merely as means, but always as ends in themselves. Let us further grant that this rules out maiming or otherwise damaging ourselves for pleasure or material gain, and that it rules out lying promises, letting one's talents rot, and refusing to help others. Let us grant, then, that Kant's ban on treating persons as mere means or as things constitutes a general argument that pulls in favor of personal integrity and self-respect and against manipulation, coercion, and callous withholding from others. It is still reasonable to wonder why suicide is forbidden, especially given how many in the history of the world have argued that personal integrity and self-respect sometimes demand suicide. How, that is, does suicide, or the attitudes it betrays, violate the demand not to treat the self as a mere means or as a thing?

III. How Treating the Self as a Mere Means or a Thing is Like Failing to Be Friends with Oneself, and How This Makes Suicide Immoral

My suggestion: the problem with suicide is a problem about how part of a self regards another part. In particular, a suicide fails to regard significant parts of himself with that combination of openness, generosity, intimacy and respect that characterizes Kantian friendship (MS AA 06:469-73). Kant's claims about suicide's immorality, I will then argue, become more persuasive in this light.

himself in order to escape from a trying condition he makes use of a person *merely as a means* to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life. A human being, however, is not a thing and hence not something that can be used *merely* as a means, but must in all his actions always be regarded as an end in itself. I cannot, therefore, dispose of a human being in my own person by maiming, damaging or killing him." (GMS AA 04:429.15-25; Kant's italics; translation: Kant, Immanuel: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Transl. and ed. Mary Gregor. Cambridge, 1997, 38.)

To begin, notice Kant's language in the argument. The suicide makes use of "einer Person" ("a person") as a means (GMS AA 04:429.19). As a suicide, I err because I may "den Menschen in meiner Person nichts disponiren" (because I may not "dispose of a human being in my own person") (GMS AA 04:429.23f.; Gregor translation). Kant's language takes emphasis *off* the fact that I am killing *myself*, and focuses on the fact that I am killing *a person*, disposing of *a human being*.

Additionally, the fact of a split between the willing or acting self and the self acted upon is also essential for Kant. He takes it up, just before addressing suicide in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* in order to solve the "scheinbaren Antinomie" ("apparent antinomy") contained in the concept of duty to self, viz., that I can obligate myself to myself even as I can always release one obligated to me from obligation (MS AA 06:418.4; Gregor translation). How, then, can an obligation to self ever actually obligate? The answer: one part of me obligates another.³ For Kant, we are split creatures, being always at once subjects and objects, phenomenal and noumenal, rational and natural. Our intelligible selves do the obligating, with reason's backing, and our sensuous selves, no matter how clever or permissive, cannot legitimately release us.

Because we are split in this way, we can ask about the morality of the orientations and attitudes we rationally endorse toward troublesome aspects of ourselves. Such troublesome aspects range. Most generically, part of us wants to pursue sensuous inclinations while another part aspires to reason and freedom. Either part can torment the other, and either can generate orientations and attitudes toward the other that may become so despairing and hostile as to be murderous. In the *Grundlegung*, Kant is most

³ Kant:

Der Mensch betrachtet sich in dem Bewusstsein einer Pflicht gegen sich selbst, als Subject derselben, in zweifacher Qualität: erstlich als *Sinnenwesen*, d. i. als Mensch [...]; dann aber auch also *Vernunftwesen* [...] (MS AA 06:418.5-8)
 [...] so: dass der Mensch (in zweierlei Bedeutung betrachtet), ohne in Widerspruch mit sich zu gerathen (weil der Begriff vom Menschen nicht in einem und demselben Sinn gedacht wird), eine Pflicht gegen sich selbst anerkennen kann. (MS AA 06:418.20-23)

When man is conscious of a duty to himself, he views himself, as the subject of duty, under two attributes: first as a *sensible being*, that is as man [...] and second as an *intelligible being* [...] So man (taken in these two different senses) can acknowledge a duty to himself without falling into contradiction (because the concept of man is not thought in one and the same sense). (Translation: Immanuel Kant: *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Transl. and ed. Mary Gregor. Cambridge, 1991, 215.)

concerned with sensuously motivated suicide, where my phenomenal self, as it were, insists on the kill, but elsewhere he takes on Stoic and heroic suicide, wherein people kill themselves on behalf of (what they see as) their noumenal selves, that is for the sake of freedom and reason.⁴

This way of putting it is not Kant's, but all the ingredients are ingredients Kant provides. The model I propose then sees a person toying with suicide as a person who treats part of herself as something she has a right to judge worthless and dispose of, something she might take advantage of so long as it helps maintain a tolerable condition, but that otherwise may be "hasst" ("hated") (Refl 6801, AA 19:166.7) and junked like an old car.

But this, of course, is no way to treat a person, and the fact that this is no way to treat a person is what makes suicide immoral. The suicide treats part of herself like a mere means or thing, in this case a part best abandoned or killed off. But, like the persons who are our friends, we don't "come apart", and treating parts of ourselves that trouble us like disposable things is tantamount to treating the whole this way (see V-Mo/Collins AA 27:369).

Here is where I think a quick foray into Christine Korsgaard's invaluable and extraordinary paper, "Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Reciprocity and Responsibility in Personal Relations", can help. Korsgaard argues that, "holding one another responsible is the distinctive element in the relation of adult human beings".⁵ She continues:

To hold someone responsible is to regard her as a *person* – that is to say, as a free and equal person, capable of acting both rationally and morally. It is therefore to regard her as someone with whom you can enter the kind of relation that is possible only among free and equal rational people: a relation of reciprocity. When you hold someone responsible, you are prepared to exchange lawless individual activity for reciprocity in some or all of its forms. You are prepared to accept promises, offer confidences, exchange vows, cooperate on a project, enter a social contract, have a conversation, make love, be friends, or get married.⁶

⁴ Of course, on Kant's ultimate analysis, these suicides too will turn out to be sensuously motivated, unbeknownst to their perpetrators.

⁵ Korsgaard, Christine: *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. In her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge. 1996, 188-221, 189.

⁶ Korsgaard, Christine: *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. In her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge. 1996, 188-221, 189.

The point here of treating another as a person, that is, of holding her responsible is not (or at least is not mainly) to pass judgment, but to engage her as moral agent. "We hold each other responsible because", Korsgaard writes, "in this way we together populate a moral world."⁷ Those creatures we do not hold responsible are creatures with whom we do not have such relations and who are not our moral co-conspirators. They may be people who are out of control and need handling or managing; they may be children, insofar as they need the same; they may be animals.⁸ We treat these, at least at times, as things, rather than as persons: we do not hope to share ends or reasons with them, as we do not trust them to be able to be responsive to the same. We do not look for reciprocity or community, but only for control.

Korsgaard suggests that the holding responsible characteristic of treating someone as a person is something we do, paradigmatically, in friendship. And so, in a sentence that beautifully pulls her paper's threads together, she remarks: "To become friends is to create a neighborhood where the Kingdom of Ends is real."⁹ Her paper (in a way I have only gestured at here) thus elaborates an equivalence between 'treating as a person' and 'treating as a friend'. It is this equivalence that I wish to exploit in suggesting that the suicide is a poor friend to herself.

For Kant, friendship relies on striking a delicate balance between love and respect (MS AA 06:470-73). The love that friends feel for each other encourages self-disclosure. True friends are those someone can trust with his "geheimen Urtheile und Empfindungen" ("secret judgments and feelings") (MS AA 06:471.28; Gregor translation) or "wie er über die Menschen, mit denen er umgeht, wie er über die Regierung, Religion u. s. w. denkt" ("what he thinks about his associates, the government, religion and so forth") (MS AA 06:472.2f.; Gregor translation). The risk and danger of self-disclosure is great, but a friend will not betray your secrets, so you feel free with him. One must, however, avoid giving too much information: too much self-

⁷ Korsgaard, Christine: *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. In her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge. 1996, 188-221, 212.

⁸ On people who need handling or managing, see Rae Langton's beautiful elaboration of this theme in *Duty and Desolation in Philosophy* 67 1992, 481-505, especially 487f.

⁹ Korsgaard, Christine: *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. In her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge. 1996, 188-221, 194.

disclosure may lead to contempt, eroding respect. Ditto too much neediness. And too much frank criticism, however well-meaning, raises suspicions of secret contempt. The key is that one cannot sustain friendship, even if there is love, without respect (MS AA 06:470f). Without the right balance, and the right efforts at protecting that balance for the other, oneself, and the relationship, trust erodes, and one begins to treat the other either as a problem to be managed or an adversary to be worked around – one begins to treat the other more like a thing. The delicate balance required for friendship is tested, if not entirely upset.

The relation we have to ourselves is perhaps the most intimate relation we have, and getting the balance of respect and love for ourselves right is tricky. The suicide can fruitfully be read as someone who, for whatever complex set of reasons, is to herself a poor friend. Perhaps she is overly critical of herself, bent on improvement no matter how painful; or perpetually needy, forever undermining the bases of her own self-respect (see MS AA 06:470f.). Perhaps she has become untrustworthy to herself, or no longer feels free in her own company. She is unable to get on new terms, or make peace, or amends, or sustain self-respect in the face of whatever is so troubling, or shameful, or desperate about her situation. She becomes a problem for herself, not a person, but an obstacle to be worked around or removed. It had seemed odd to think that killing oneself could constitute using oneself as a mere means or treating oneself as a thing at all. But the suggestion here is that this is just what a suicide, in failing to be friends with himself, does.

Korsgaard's paper opens with a quotation from Aristotle: "As the virtuous man is to himself, he is to his friend also, for his friend is another self."¹⁰ Her point in opening this way: the attitudes present in friendship are the fundamental attitudes required for morality. It is "the moral relation generally", she writes, "that friendship mirrors".¹¹ If a suicide's attitude toward human being in her own person is not one of friendship, then a suicide's attitude is immoral.

¹⁰ Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9 1170b.6f., as quoted in Korsgaard, Christine: *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. In her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge. 1996, 188-221, 188.

¹¹ Korsgaard, Christine: *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. In her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge. 1996, 188-221, 192.

IV. Conclusion: How Would You Regard a Friend?

Now, I know that actual people who are or have been suicidal are also often actually good friends, at least in very many salient respects. And I know that actual people who are or have been suicidal need their friends, and I do not advocate abandoning them. But suicides do fail, while they are suicidal, to be reliable and trustworthy, and to contribute to the stability of our fragile moral world. I hope, in bringing this out, not to license rejection. But I do hope to license other things.

First and foremost, I hope to license sympathy for Kant's claim that suicide is immoral. If we can, via this analysis, begin to connect Kant's moral disapprobation, which many find harsh and alienating, to the complicated upset suicide and attempted suicide often occasion, we may begin to read Kant's argument less as an excoriation of already suffering souls and more as an analysis of what has gone devastatingly wrong in the suicidal psyche. Kant is no therapist, and I would send no suicidal friend to him. But it is perhaps most productive to read Kant here as someone anxious to make sense of the terrible feelings suicide occasions. I thus hope this analysis licenses a more sympathetic understanding of feelings of fear, horror, aversion, fury, devastation, and helplessness in the face of suicide. These feelings, per Kant as I read him, are not selfish reactions. They represent a kind of justified outrage, a moral *cri de cœur*, at the degree to which a person can despise her own life.

As I have worked on this material, many have asked whether I think Kant was afraid of, or defending against, suicidal tendencies of his own. I will not speculate, but will wonder aloud whether suicide disturbs Kant as much as it does because he thinks we are able, and perhaps even prone, to commit it due to the split within us on which he insists. Our ability to disconnect from and override parts of ourselves is, for Kant, our moral salvation, but it is also very dangerous. Kant frequently cites suicide as an example of the terrors freedom makes possible, terrors that only we, with our mixed natures, visit on the world and ourselves (e.g. V-Mo/Collins AA 27:344). These, together with Kant's generally dim view of the inclinations, may have led to an uncomfortable awareness that on his view, there is a standing temptation to see ourselves as our own worst enemies. Kant's arguments contrast with, but also seems to want to heed, Aquinas:

"suicide runs counter," writes Aquinas, "to that charity by which one ought to cherish oneself".¹²

Be this as it may, I hope to have sketched here an analysis of Kantian suicide as a failure of friendship to self. I hope, too, to have sketched an analysis that will strike others as both philosophically and psychologically plausible, and as grounds for reconsidering Kant's claim that suicide is immoral.

¹² Aquinas, Thomas: *Summa Theologiae*. Ed. and trans. Marcus Lefébure. New York, 1975, II-II, Q. 64, Art. 5.