

PHILOSOPHICAL PERCEPTIONS OF SUICIDE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT: *The sanctity of human life is commonly adjudged as placing great moral burden on man. On this premise, some philosophers opined that man has no right to terminate his life. While others argued that having received life as a gift, man has the right to reject the gift when he perceives that there is no value in remaining alive. This could be due to grave illness or other forms of dissatisfaction. There are various arguments presented both in favour and against suicide by these proponents. Notable among the protagonists are some philosophers. The study therefore, seeks to examine the philosophical perceptions of suicide and implications on the sanctity of human life. The writer applied philosophical, sociological and historical research methodology in his investigation. It is recommended that man should not necessarily see suicide as the right option for escaping the vicissitudes of life, which are often likely to confront man. On the other hand, it is a tremendous moral burden on man if he decides to terminate his life since he would be depriving those he could have supported, both financially and morally. The study also recommended that man should uphold the sanctity of life, as life is a gift from God. Man cannot give life and not justified to also take life, the study argued.*

KEYWORDS: Life, Perceptions, Philosophical, Sanctity, Suicide.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is described as an act of voluntarily and intentionally taking one's own life (McAlpine, Panser, Swanson, O'Fallen and Melton, 1990). The word suicide, etymologically, is from two Latin roots, *Sui* ("of oneself") and *Cidium* (or "slaying"), (Minois and Cochrane, 1999). It was actually around the 19th century, when the French sociologist, Emil Durkheim published his work *Le suicide*, that the right and precise definition was given to the term suicide. Before then, various explanations tied suicide to superstitious, moral, religious and philosophical fallacies. In his work, Emile Durkheim explained suicide to apply to all cases of death which result directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim concerned, which he is aware will produce that result. It was this publication that provided the theoretical basis for the researches on suicide that followed. It is also considered as the starting point for modern study on suicide (Hatton and Valente, 1984).

The century that followed, saw many researchers in various disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, psychology and medicine, explore diverse definitions of suicide. One of them was the American Psychologist, Shneidman (1971), who defined suicide as a type of human act by self-inflicted, self-intended cessation. In this regard, suicide is a death by self-inflicted means, with the evidence that the sole intention was to cause death. On the other hand, the American Psychiatric Association (2004) defined suicide as self death, with clear or unclear evidence that the person intended to die. Another definition was that of the World Health Organization (WHO) (2009). It emphasized that suicide was any deliberate action which has a life-threatening consequence, with the result of the action been entirely predictable. The definition of suicide by the World Health Organization (WHO) is quite comprehensive. It emphasized both the self-destructive outcome and the predictable precondition. The author therefore, defined suicide as “every action intended to culminate in self-motivated death”. In this instance, drug abuse, automobile misuse, risky games and directly self-induced death, all fall under the ambit of suicide.

It is opined by Freedman (1992) that, due to the depth of disgust with which several people viewed the phenomenon (suicide) many found it difficult to put the word in their dictionaries, and vocabulary. In the place of this, he argued, they used phrases like “self-murder”, “self-killing” and “self-slaughter”. On this note, the Oxford English Dictionary placed the word suicide for the first time among its vocabulary, in 1651 (Freedman, 1992). The use of the different phrases to describe suicide was actually to portray how closely related it was to murder. On the strength of this, there was the main concern about the soul of one who has committed suicide. The major challenge elicited by this concern led to different religious views about suicide. This also aroused philosophical contentions that bordered on metaphysics, especially from the stand point of the soul, reincarnation and afterlife. In this instance, it can be argued that suicide has been a deep controversial issue especially discussed in most of the philosophical schools of the Greco-Roman World (Rist, 2013). He further opined that, “from the earliest days of the stoic school, the problem of suicide is... a problem of free will. Each school formed her opinion on the consequences and moral meanings of suicide. Eventually, many Greeks came to consider suicide as a heroic act” (Rist, 2013:2). This led Nock (2013:2) to conclude that “there was a certain fascination about self-chosen death”. These and other levels of contention, in the opinion of the writer have necessitated the depth of philosophical and religious attraction towards the study of suicide.

The relationship between philosophy, religion, culture and suicide is postulated by Li, Hauser and Gao (2001). They argued that suicide is high in societies that are socially isolated, mobile and disorganized. It is lower in countries or subcultures whose philosophical, religious or cultural mores proscribe suicide. The consequence is that philosophy, culture and religion could be averred as composite correlates of suicide. No doubt philosophical perception sets out a deep consideration of the different paradigms in most levels of discourse on suicide.

The objective of this study is to examine some common philosophical perceptions of suicide. The positions of philosophers who are in support of suicide and those against would also be considered. The study would also relate these philosophical paradigms to the sanctity of human life. The ultimate objective would be to examine how the sanctity of human life agree or disagree with the decision to terminate life, the reason adduced, notwithstanding.

In order to establish the right foundation on which to base this study, the writer applied Emile Durkheim's theory on suicide. The application of this theory enabled the writer establish the implication of some of the variables considered in the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The views expressed in Emile Durkheim's theory stems from the sociological and psychological dynamics of suicide. Nonetheless, these have found tremendous relevance in any attempt at comprehending the philosophical challenges posed by suicide and the sanctity of human life.

The Theory of Emile Durkheim on suicide

The challenge of suicide was exposed to empirical consideration due to the study carried out by Emile Durkheim. He documented his findings and position in the book, *La suicide*. The book, *La suicide* was written by Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist in 1897 (Crossman, 2013). It was a groundbreaking book in the field of sociology. In the words of Anderson and Taylor, (2009:1), Durkheim was the first to "argue that the causes of suicide were to be found in social factors and not individual personalities". Durkheim observed that the rate of suicide varied with time and place, thus attempted to look for causes which are linked to these factors apart from emotional stress. It was at this instance he also looked at the "degree to which people feel integrated into the structure of society and their social surroundings as social factors producing suicide" (Anderson and Taylor, 2009:1). Durkheim further argued that suicide rates are often affected by the different social contexts within which they emerged.

As a follow up to his study, Durkheim drew a distinction between four types of suicide. He arrived at this by exploring the different suicide rates among Protestants and Catholics. According to Crossman (2013:1), Durkheim argued that, Stronger social control among Catholics results in lower suicide rates. He also found that suicide rates were higher among men than women, higher for those who are single than those who are married, higher for people without children than people with children, higher among soldiers than civilians, and higher at times of peace than in times of war.

In giving outstanding credence to Durkheim's book, Gianfranco (2000:10), declared that, the book "pioneered modern social research and served to distinguish social science from psychology and political philosophy". This is also supported by Pope (1978), who contended that, the book was Durkheim's third major work, yet it was widely considered to rank as the most influential of all his works. This was due to the manner he conceptualized the impact of social forces. It clearly indicated the first attempt made at offering an elaborate empirical basis on which to account for individual actions. Emile Durkheim's work was published in 1897. Before the publication of his book, suicide was viewed basically as a wholly individual act. This reduced the phenomenon purely to the domain of psychology. In this instance, social activities and phenomena were not appreciated as relevant in the examination of suicide (Taylor, 1982). Although his study established a social theoretical framework to account for suicide rates in European countries (Lukes, 1985), he was able to engage the traditional view on suicide. The traditional view argued that suicide was an individual act, affecting the individual only, hence, depends exclusively on individual factors.

In his work, Durkheim identified four different forms of suicide. He opined that they were caused by direct consequences of social factors which hinge on two main perspectives. These are social integration and moral regulation. The social integration embraces egoistic and altruistic suicide, while moral regulation encompasses anomic and fatalistic suicides. By this, Marcoux (2013: 23), submitted that, Durkheim “hypothesized that suicide rates were determined by the society’s level of social integration (that is, the degree to which the people are bound together in social networks) and the level of social integration (that is, the degree to which people’s desires and emotions are regulated by social norms and customs)”.

The four different forms of suicide suggested by Emile Durkheim are:

- i. Egoistic suicide
- ii. Altruistic suicide
- iii. Anomic suicide
- iv. Fatalistic suicide

The key factors under which Durkheim based the above forms of suicide are social integration, which has to do with attachment to other individuals within the society. The second one was social regulation, which has to do with attachment to society’s norms. In his study, suicide rates may increase when there are extremities in these factors already mentioned. The common forms of suicide are discussed as follows:

- i. **Egoistic Suicide:** Ordinarily, egoism is a state whereby the ties attracting an individual to others in the society are weak. This means that since the individual is weakly attached and integrated into the society, his or her suicide will have little impact on the rest of the society. There are few social ties to keep such individual from taking his or her life. Individuals who live in an egoistic state could be considered as seriously lacking social integration. The implication is that, since the social norms, values and support networks, which are the integrating factors, are lacking, such individuals are likely to contribute to consistent suicide rates. The major implication is that egoistic suicide is a consequence of a feeling of sense of personal failure or the inability to meet one’s personal expectations or societal expectations.

In his empirical example, Durkheim used unmarried people, primarily males. It was discovered that, “unmarried people, in particular, males were more likely to commit suicide because they lacked the social integrating norms which tend to bound married people to the social fabric that surrounded them” (Taylor, 1982:19). In a clear sense, people are integrated into society through work roles, ties to families and community and other social bonds. At the instance of the weakness within these bonds, which may be occasioned by retirement or loss of family or friends, then egoistic suicide may occur (Crossman, 2013). He further argued that elderly people who lose these ties are the most susceptible to this form of suicide.

Finally, Breault and Barkley (1982:3) examined the research done on egoistic suicide and concluded that, Family integration is seen to have an influence on the suicide rate. It has been found that married people are more integrated than single ones, married people are more integrated than widowed and divorced people, widowed and divorced people are more integrated than single people, married and widowed people with children are more integrated than married and widowed people without children.

In the opinion of the researcher, this agreed with Emile Durkheim’s view that there is a relationship between suicide and family interaction.

- ii. **Altruistic Suicide:** This form of suicide results from deep integration into a group or society. The person is deeply involved to the extent that he or she is ready to kill himself or herself if the values of the group demands such (Herbding and Glick, 1996). The individual, due to the fact that he is absorbed into a society or group, feels obliged to commit suicide. In other words, such people kill themselves due to the fact that the ideal they so cherished requires this sacrifice. An example of this is the women in Hindu societies who throw themselves on their husband's funeral pyre for the fear of being dishonoured (Herbding and Glick, 1996). There is obligatory altruistic suicide, where people feel it is their duty to take their own lives. There is also the optional suicide, where people feel there is a social prestige attached to suicide. Another form of altruistic suicide occurs where people kill themselves for the joy of it. They see this as praiseworthy and believe there is a beautiful life beyond the present one. On his part, Crossman (2013:1) declared that "altruistic suicide takes place when there is excessive regulation of individuals by social forces". A clear example is one who commits suicide for the sake of a religious or political cause. Such persons have subordinated themselves to collective expectations even when death is the result. The writer is of the opinion that the suicide bombers are also clear example of altruistic suicides.
- iii. **Anomic Suicide:** This form of suicide falls within the consideration of moral regulation. The word anomie is said to be a state where there is weak social regulation between the individual and the society's norms. This is brought about by drastic economic changes in the economy and or social circumstances. This form of suicide could be necessitated when the social norms and the laws that govern the society do not correspond with the life goals of the individual. As a result of the individual's inability to identify with the norms of the society, he sees suicide as the way out. On this note, Anderson and Taylor (2009:1) submitted that "anomic suicide happens when the disintegrating forces in the society make individuals feel lost or alone". The suicide among teenagers is said to be an example of anomic suicide. Other examples are the suicide among children who have been sexually abused and those whose parents are alcoholics.

Furthermore, it is surmised by Thomas (2013) that drastic changes in the economic and social conditions could act as precursors to anomic suicide. This, probably led Durkheim to classify anomic suicide into four: The first one, he referred to as acute economic anomie. This is a consequence of speedy reduction in social regulations and provision by traditional actors. Examples of these forces are religious forces that were previously involved in carrying out economic support. The second is chronic economic anomie. This is exemplified by the long term reduction of social networks. He cited the example of the industrial revolution. This shows the manner through which the former forms of social regulation have been removed, yet not replaced. The third one is the micro social level suicide. This involves a sudden change and the resulting inability to adapt. Examples of this include widowhood or child bereavement. While the fourth is chronic domestic anomie. This has to do with the manner in which the marriage institution affects suicide rates among women. In this, Durkheim posited that unmarried men were, more likely to commit suicide, while unmarried women were less likely to commit suicide, due to the social limitations marriage placed upon women.

The position of Keel (2000:1) captured the essence of anomic suicide succinctly. He argued: "when people have a set of meaningful goals and have a set of regulated rules and norms, suicide will be in decline. But when goals lose their effectiveness and meaning or cannot be achieved because something has changed, suicide will increase". He further stated that, "when

the individual has no guidance or limitations, society cannot control the behaviour of its members because of a lack of regulatory constraints". This is why, Levin (1999), declared that anomie can happen through different ways. This could be war, physical disaster, dramatic drop in income or the loss of a family member.

- iv. **Fatalistic Suicide:** This fourth form of suicide is only briefly described by Durkheim. Although it is the second type of suicide caused by moral regulation, fatalistic suicide is said to be a rare phenomenon. It is the type of suicide that is undertaken by people with unrewarding lives, for example, slaves. To Durkheim, he did not feel that this form of suicide bore much relevance to modern society, hence he dedicated little time to it. The basic distinctive of fatalistic suicide is that it results from that situation when there appears to be too much regulation and great external norms are also imposed. In this situation, the people's future is also blocked and they are oppressed. Apart from slaves, examples of those who can commit fatalistic suicide are childless married women and young husbands. They all have common challenges, which include over regulated, unrewarding lives and too many rules and controls.

In summarizing Durkheim's work on suicide, he postulated the following findings. First, that suicide rates are higher for those widowed, single and divorced than married. Second, that suicide rates are higher for people without children than with children. Lastly, that suicide rates are higher among Protestants than Catholics and Jews. It is important to state that there has been some level of disagreement among some scholars about some of the findings highlighted by Durkheim in his work. For example, it is argued that the distinction made between Catholics and Protestants concerning suicide may not be absolutely justifiable. This is due to the fact that, the coroner in a Catholic country, who understands that suicide is a mortal sin there, may be less likely to record any death as truly suicide and takes it as ordinary death. This becomes more justified if no suicide note is left behind. It should also be noted that the causes that lead someone to commit suicide in a particular way may be different from those that lead one to kill himself in the first instance. It must be appreciated that the culture of some societies makes death easier than others. This means that even though they are dependent on social causes, the form of suicidal act and the nature of suicide itself are unrelated. It shows therefore that suicide can only be explained as a collective phenomenon. In the light of this, Durkheim only intended that his theory should explain variation among social environments in the incidence of suicide, not the suicides of particular individuals. The position of Pope and Danigelis (1981) argued that the Protestant – Catholic differences in suicide appears to be limited to German speaking Europe, therefore may be the spurious reflection of other factors.

In spite of the seeming limitations of Durkheim's work on suicide, the researcher concurred that it has had great influence on the proponents of the control theory and part of classic sociological study. The work have also pioneered modern social research and played a major role in distinguishing social science from psychology and political philosophy (Gianfranco, 2000). It could be concluded that, it may not be easy to know what exactly causes suicide. This is the position canvassed by Breault and Barkley (1982). However, the writer is of the opinion that the various philosophical perceptions of suicide would orchestrate the position held by some philosophers with regards to the sanctity of life.

It is safe to conclude that Emil Durkheim's work on suicide, forms adequate theoretical framework for this study. The different forms of suicide considered by Durkheim, agreed with some of the likely causes and experiences with regards to suicide generally. It is commonly

acclaimed that as a result of social forces, there is a drastic interference with the level of integration experienced by different individuals. The implication is that suicide is likely to occur. As a result of the outstanding work done by Emile Durkheim with regards to suicide, there is a level of consensus that suicide goes beyond the individual that is directly involved but could be seen as a societal problem, with all the social dynamics attached to it. In this instance, the study of suicide has gone beyond social consideration as other fields play formidable roles in our attempt at articulating the causes and challenges of suicide. The traditional consideration of suicide before Durkheim's empirical study was purely psychological. With the new development, suicide has been brought to the domains of philosophy, religion, culture and others.

Philosophy and suicide

The act of suicide has generated both condemnation and acceptance by some ancient and modern thinkers or philosophers. Their positions are said to be philosophical, ethical, theistic, metaphysical or theological. For some who tend to be philosophical in their perspective, they appear to have approved suicide on various grounds. Some of these include Stoics, Janis, Taoist and Buddhist mystics. It is commonly argued that they have philosophical leanings. The position held concerning suicide, determined largely the level of acceptance or condemnation by the different philosophers. For some, they are empiricists, while others are moralists, theists and philosophical theologians. An example of an empiricist is Hume, who did not prescribe suicide and at the same time did not condemn it. For Locke and Hobbes, who are theists, they condemned suicide in its entirety. For psycho-social proponents like Freud, Rousseau and James, they did not judge suicide but rather were concerned about its motivations. Legal philosophers like Hegel, Montesquieu and Locke, saw suicide as a violation with respect to patriotic ideals or standards, they were not necessarily in support of theology. Lastly, moralists like Aristotle, Kant, Spinoza, St. Augustine, Aquinas, and others expressed opinion of condemnation with respect to suicide.

The attempt in this section would be to examine the different philosophical positions with regards to suicide. This would include ancient philosophers, theistic philosophers, moral philosophers and others. The purpose of this consideration was articulated by the New World Encyclopedia (2013:5). It argued that, "certain questions about suicide seem to fall at least partially outside the domain of science, and indeed, suicide has been a focus of philosophical examination in the West since at least the time of Plato". The role of philosophy in the consideration of suicide is said to have taken the front burner as far back as the time of Seneca. He is acclaimed as one of the most famous philosopher suicide. He argued for the reason, as well as virtue of suicide, as he wrote: "Living is not the good, but living well." This he pushed further by stressing that, "the dirtiest death is preferable to the daintiest slavery" (New World Encyclopedia, 2013:5). This may be why several of the great philosophers maintained different positions as far as suicide was concerned. For Kant, he saw suicide from a moral philosophical perspective on the basis of the challenges posed by it. Plato on his part highlighted instances where suicide was or was not deviant. The position of Spinoza was that he regarded the will to self-preservation as the ultimate and the key to value. On the strength of this, he postulated that suicide was truly irrational and wrong.

The position of most philosophers who argued against suicide is that it is the ultimate irrationality and evil, pure selfishness, a dangerous precedent, madness and pathology. This is why it has consistently aroused great passions in the arena of humanity. It is definitely a threat

from religious, existential, political or emotional perspectives. This calls for the examination of different philosophical positions with regards to suicide. It is argued by Minois and Cochrane (1999) that the beliefs about suicide varied in ancient Greece. Taking the Stoics and Epicureans as examples, they stated that they mainly considered that one's destiny was a personal choice. In this instance, Cato, Pliny and Seneca the younger, thought that the choice of suicide was acceptable. However, others like Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Ovid and Cicero opposed suicide. The list, according to Minois and Cochrane (1999) is in exhaustive. They further submitted that other philosophers like Martin Luther, Puritan Philosophers and religious leaders such as, John Locke, Rousseau and Soren Kierkegaard were adamantly against suicide.

Philosophical arguments against suicide:

The philosophical arguments against suicide posited clearly that suicide is unethical and immoral. This position is premised on the grounds that the challenges that leads to suicide, as often claimed, are transitory. Some of the causes of suicide are economic challenges (for example bankruptcy), depression, terminal illness, emotional pain and others. It is often argued that these causes can be ameliorated through some form of therapy. This is able to bring about drastic occasional change in the life of the individual. This position, though canvassed with regards to checking the challenge posed by some common causes of suicide, has been faulted by some philosophers. They argued that, though emotional pains may appear to be transitory to some individuals, however, making changes to some aspects of an individual's life may sometimes be difficult. This is due to the fact that the effectiveness of this approach, even through counseling therapy, would be determined largely by the level of the affliction and the ability of the one concerned to withstand the pain or challenge. Although those who argued on the contrary claimed that, "suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem". It is difficult to reconcile this position with the experience of individuals passing through terminal illnesses or mental maladjustment (Craig, 2013). These have led to the sharp philosophical divide with regards to accepting or rejecting the act of suicide.

The writer would examine the different philosophers who have argued against and in favour of suicide. The discourse would include ancient philosophers during the Socratic period, ancient stoic philosophers, theistic philosophers, moral philosophers and others.

Philosophers during Socratic era who argued against suicide.

Some of the philosophers during the Socratic era who argued against suicide would be considered. It should be noted that the list is in exhaustive, but those considered would, to a large extent capture the position held against suicide.

Socrates on Suicide

In the dialogue of Plato (428-348), Phaedo claimed that Plato recorded Socrates as saying that a man with the spirit of philosophy is ready to die, but must not take his own life (Plato, in Phaedo, 2013). Socrates, according to Plato had argued that according to the Greek laws of his days, it is unlawful to kill oneself. Socrates argued that death is exceptional, due to the fact that when a man is better dead, he is not allowed to be his own benefactor, and must wait for the hand of another. This, according to him is due to the fact that man is a prisoner who does not have any right to open the door and run away.

The essence of Socrates' position with respect to suicide was captured in the conclusion he made. It was his position that, the gods are man's guardians and custodians, therefore man must not take his life, and he must wait to be summoned by God. This gave an impression that the early Greek philosophers may sound as though they were religious. Could it be concluded that, in spite of his comment, Socrates did not fully condemn suicide? The phrase from Plato tends to give an impression that Socrates covertly accepted altruistic suicide. This he demonstrated by willingly drinking the hemlock as a form of punishment. Plato wrote: "then there may be reason in saying that a man should wait and not take his own life until God summons him...which urged voluntary death for philosophers, though the death must be indirect suicide or better still a martyr's death for philosophy" (Plato, in Hutchins, 2013:222-223).

The story of how Socrates (C. 399 BC), a Greek philosopher (Athenian) finally died, was captured by McCulloch (2012). He submitted that Socrates was enflamed by the enmity of his fellow citizens as he sought the true nature of wisdom. According to him, the death of Socrates resulted from his attempt to question the wisdom of the elite in the city. Put aptly: "inspired by a divine mission to find people wiser than himself, Socrates questioned the conventional wisdom of the city's elite including the politicians, artisans, writers and orators. Upon proving that they possess no such wisdom, a trial and subsequent judgment was brought against him, the final judgment being, forced suicide" (McCulloch, 2012:4). This, according to him, was the major reason Socrates committed suicide. How did his death occur? He further stated that, "surrounded by friends and relatives, Socrates drank poison known as Hemlock. This poison is a slow acting agent that eventually works its way up from the feet until it reaches the heart. The passage of time it took allowed Socrates to deliver his final dialogue on the immortality of the soul" (McCulloch, 2012:4).

The death of Socrates was a clear form of altruistic suicide. The writer concurred with the position of Herbding and Glick (1996) It is the form of suicide whereby the person involved is so caught up to the extent that he or she is ready to kill himself or herself if the ideals they so cherished, or, the values of the group demands that such persons feel so obliged to commit suicide. This is reflected in the experience of Socrates who was so over whelmed by the ideals of philosophy, hence willing to commit suicide by drinking the hemlock.

Aristotle on suicide (384-322).

Aristotle's argument on suicide is said to have occurred in the midst of a discussion on the possibility of treating oneself unjustly. He opined therefore that self-killing does not indicate treating oneself unjustly, as long as it is done voluntarily. This, according to him, is due to the fact that the harm done to oneself is mostly consensual (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013). On the strength of this position, Aristotle concluded that suicide is a wrong to the state or community. He then viewed suicide, the state and law. This was why he argued that as long as man is a part of the society, he is duty bound to obey the laws of the society. Extended further, the law cannot be said to permit suicide, since it is an act against the rule of life. The state has the full weight and right to enforce this right rule.

The position of Aristotle is corroborated by the philosopher, Hegel. He however considered man a property of the state. This position was also canvassed by St. Thomas Aquinas. He surmised that the creator has handed over to the state the custodianship of human life. The views of Aristotle were basically the judicial responsibilities of the state, the need to maintain law and order, and man as citizen of the state. He therefore expressed this ethico-legal view as

follows, “one class of just acts are those acts in accordance with any virtue which are prescribed by the law: e.g. the law does not expressly permit suicide, and what it does not expressly permit, it forbids... and he who through anger voluntarily stabs himself does this contrary to the right rule of life. He acts unjustly towards the state for he suffers voluntarily...” (Aristotle, 2000). Though Aquinas shared similar views with Aristotle, he conceded the ownership of man’s life to God; and believed that only God can demand life.

The position of Aristotle is expressed strongly by the social argument school of thought concerning suicide. It posited that suicide is harm to the state or community. The implication of this is that since the state or community depends on the economic and social contributions of the members, they have an obligation to contribute to the society. But suicide can tremendously violate this obligation (Pabst Battin, 1996; Cholbi, 2011). The researcher takes exception to this claim. It is quite difficult to clearly prove and demonstrate that a society has any moral claim on the talents or labour of its members, therefore compels them to contribute to the well-being of the society at all cost. The short coming of the position canvassed by its proponents is that they only see suicide as wrong, from the standpoint of the benefits the society would have enjoyed if the act of suicide was not perpetrated, the position of the victim, notwithstanding. The argument of suicide violating the member’s duty of reciprocity is therefore faulted. The relationship between the individual and the society, though, contractual, does not impose such a strong obligation on any of the parties involved. The essence of this position was articulated by d’Holbach (1970:136-137). He argued that, “the contract between an individual and her society is a conditional one, presupposing “mutual advantages between the contracting parties”. Hence, if a society fails to fulfill its obligations under the contract, namely to provide individuals with the goods needed for a decent quality life, then the individual is not morally required to live in order to reciprocate an arrangement that society has already reneged on”. The researcher believes that the society can only lay moral claim on the members if she has rightly kept her own part of the “contract”. If the reverse is the situation, then her claim does not have a strong moral base.

The position of Aristotle is clearly reflective of ethico-legal view. This is hinged on man as the citizen of state and the importance of maintaining law and order. It is indicative, in the position maintained by Aristotle, that he was against suicide.

Plato on Suicide

Plato discussed suicide in two major works. The first was in *Phaedo*. Here, the philosopher, Socrates, was said to have declared that suicide was always wrong, due to the fact that it “represents our releasing ourselves (that is our souls) from a ‘guard-post’ (that is our bodies) the gods have placed us in as a form of punishment (*Phaedo* 61b-62c). The second was in the *Laws*, where Plato asserted that suicide is disgraceful; hence the perpetrators should be buried in unmarked graves. The second part, that is, the *Laws*, however, recognized some exceptions as outlined by Plato. The exceptions to the principle are:

- (i) When one’s mind is morally corrupted and one’s character cannot be salvaged (*Laws* ix 854a 3-5).
- (ii) (ii) When the self- killing is done by judicial order, as in the case of Socrates.
- (iii) (iii) When the self-killing is compelled by extreme and unavoidable personal misfortune and
- (iv) (iv) When the self-killing results from shame at having participated in grossly unjust actions (*Laws* ix 873 c-d).

In these instances, according to Plato, suicide can be excused. He declared that, apart from this, suicide should otherwise be seen as an act of cowardice or laziness, which is undertaken by individuals too delicate to manage life's vicissitudes. Plato explicitly was against suicide, save for the exceptions. The writer wonders why these exceptions should be tenable. The condemnation of suicide, as proposed by Plato should be all-encompassing if he accepted that suicide was truly disgraceful as he had earlier on claimed.

The position of some ancient philosophers during the Socratic era showed that they were against suicide. Some philosophers for example Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, declared overtly, their positions concerning suicide. They outrightly condemned it, although some (for example, Plato) appeared to have expressed some arguments that may sometimes excuse the act. The writer is of the opinion that this may not have given a clear expression of such position on suicide. This borders on ambivalence, and may not outrightly justify the true position of the proponents, who could likely be seen as oscillating between two divergent opinions. It can be safely claimed that their justification of suicide (especially for Plato and Aristotle) was largely based on the individual's social roles and obligations. They could be said not to have any obvious concern for the individual's well being or autonomy. This, the writer argued may have exposed their position to the challenge of great moral burden of justifying their stance against suicide.

Some Ancient Stoic Philosophers who supported suicide

The general position of the Stoics is that once the means of living a rich and flourishing life are absent, suicide is justifiable, the character or virtue of the individual concerned, notwithstanding. In this instance, the stoics further argued that, the nature of man requires some "natural advantages," for example physical health. The absence of this will make man unhappy. The consequence is that anyone who discovers that such advantages are lacking in his life, believes that ending such life would neither enhance nor diminishes his or her moral value.

This position is aptly captured by Cicero, when he argued that: When a man's circumstance contain a preponderance of things in accordance with nature, it is appropriate for him to remain alive: when he possesses or sees in prospect a majority of the contrary things, it is appropriate for him to depart from life... Even for the foolish that are also miserable, it is appropriate for them to remain alive if they possess a predominance of those things in accordance with nature (Cicero, III, 60-61).

Arguing against the position of Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics contend that it is not only the concerns related to one's obligations to others that justify suicide, but one's own private good is also important. It is on this premise that the writer would consider some ancient Stoic philosophers who supported suicide.

Lucretius (C98-55BC) on Suicide.

Lucretius was a Stoic philosopher who believed that suicide should be permitted in suffering. Although it cannot be stated categorically that all stoics believed in the philosophy of death as a result of suffering, but Lucretius could be said to have given an open-ended approach to his argument. In his book, "*On the nature of things*", Lucretius is said not to have innately subscribed to suicide as the right end. He, however argued that if life calls for suicide, he would have no option or choice, but to embrace it. The implication, in the opinion of the writer is that

Lucretius would probably not participate in suicide if there is no just cause (Lucretius, Google Search, 2013). He was recorded as later expressing maniac outbursts and insanity, as he subsequently killed himself in 55BC. It cannot be categorically stated whether his suicide was a ploy to escape the state of insanity, or the suicide was due to the state of insanity itself. He actually saw suicide as self-murder, but would rather prescribe it, however, reluctantly, as an inevitable evil that could serve as an antidote for escaping suffering. This is premised on the fact that he saw suffering as a greater evil, at least more overwhelming than death.

Epictetus on Suicide

Epictetus was another stoic philosopher who accepted suicide. He expressed his position that death is not wrong, neither is it evil. To him, if man discovers that the desire to maintain life diminishes drastically, any attempt to die voluntarily is no evil. He further argued that we are actually God's Kinsmen and since we came from God, we should be allowed to freely return to Him. The position expressed above by Epictetus appeared to run contrary to the common views of the stoics. According to Urmson and Ree (1990), the stoics do not actually believe in the immortality of the soul and life after death. This may have been expressed by Epictetus, where he opined that life should return to God, from whom life came.

There is a glaring implication from Epictetus' position on suicide. This is encapsulated in man's belief that he has the right to do "wrong", if this would satisfy his desires and rights (Waldron, 1981). In this instance, Epictetus sees "good" as anything that is able to set man free from pain. It can therefore be argued, according to Epictetus, that if man is set free from pain by suicide, then that instrument should be considered a "good" one. There may be other contrary views, but the essence of Epictetus' position is that man's ultimate desire is to satisfy what would set him free from pain. The writer takes exception to this position. This is premised on the fact that Epictetus subscribes to the argument that the end often justifies the means. It follows that it does not really matter how man accomplishes the process of death, provided he is satisfied by the act, even if it means through suicide.

Another shortcoming in the position of Epictetus as seen by the writer is captured in the argument; "must man's assumption of the 'good', be seen always as the 'good'?" This is premised on the fact that, it may not always be a right attitude believing absolutely that whatever man claims to be the 'good' is always the 'good', the position of others notwithstanding. The writer believes that no man necessarily lives in isolation. This means that, since man lives within a social context, it is absolute selfishness to consider his "good" or "desire" alone. These must be juxtaposed with the "good" or desire of the wider community where man belongs. On the strength of this, the writer sees Epictetus' philosophy of suicide as built on a selfish premise, since it focused only on the individual's desires or perceived "good".

Marcus Aurelius (AD121-180) on Suicide

Marcus Aurelius was another stoic philosopher who supported suicide. He is said to have thrived confidently on the stead of Epictetus. Aurelius argued that man has the power to leave this life once he discovered that living no longer holds anything worthwhile for him. He is said to have argued consistently that man exercises absolute freedom, therefore no one can hinder him from exercising that freedom. This right belongs to every social and rational animal, he further averred. In this wise, Aurelius justified self-killing.

The writer may not contest the fact that man has some measure of freedom. At the same time it is not arguable that death is inevitable. In spite of this, it must be stated unequivocally that the main contention is with the method and manner of death. No doubt, death appears to be inevitable, but this does not in any way guaranty or confer on man the right to take life or even his/her own life. It should be noted that Heifer and Mange (1975), had supported the right to die. They were Neuro-surgeons, but their philosophy was out rightly rejected by medical ethics, whose position is to save life, in spite of the purported self-will and freedom as claimed by Heifer and Mange (1975). If this philosophy is allowed to hold sway, the writer wonders, where the right of others stands. At least, it should be appreciated that the one who committed suicide does not exist for himself alone as he or she belongs to a social community.

Seneca the younger, on Suicide (65AD)

Seneca, the younger, was a Roman stoic. He joined other stoics like, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius to argue that “death by one’s own hand is always an option and frequently more honourable than a life of protracted misery” (Sacharoff, 2013:115). Seneca was himself compelled to commit suicide. He was bold in his claim as he unapologetically argued that, “mere living is not a good, but living well, a wise person lives as long as he ought, not as long as he can”. For Seneca, it is the quality not the quantity of one’s life that matters” (Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy, 2013:7).

Seneca the younger, who was a Roman stoic philosopher, was also tutor and adviser to the emperor Nero (McCulloch, 2013). His death is said to have been a forced suicide ordered by Nero, who implicated him in the Pisonian conspiracy. According to McCulloch (2012:9), “Seneca severed his own veins and allowed the blood to run free. Due to his age and poor diet, the blood ran slow and only extended his pain. Submerging himself into a warm bath, we are told that he suffocated to end this pain”. As McCulloch referred to the Tacitus Annals, 64, “Seneca the younger was then carried into a bath, with the steam he was suffocated, and he was burnt without any of the social funeral rites. So he had directed in a codicil of his will, even when in the height of his wealth and power he was thinking of life’s close” (Tacitus Annals 64, in McCulloch, 2012:9).

The position of the stoic philosophers was hinged on dying well and this to them means an escape from the danger that not living well portends (Gorovitz, 1976). In this instance, the emphasis should be on quality and not necessary the quantity of life. The consensus between the stoic philosophers can be rightly captured as: if life events turn out to be frustrating, the person concerned is free to consider if such a life is worth living, or if it is not better for him to go out of it. The writer is of the opinion that the position of the stoic philosophers that support suicide when life is full of frustrating circumstances or worthlessness, does not take cognizance of the fact that some frustrating situations could actually become reversed if favourable conditions replace them. Though there may be some grave frustrating situations, but suicide may not be the antidote. This is premised on the fact that it is not ideal to recommended suicide as the panacea for worthless or frustrating life situation. This would soon lend itself to abuses, as every man who feels a sense of frustrating worthlessness could justifiably resort to suicide. This means legalizing suicide as a solution for escaping the vicissitudes of life. At the same time, the writer does not believe that applying suicide as an antidote for frustration in life, would out rightly wipe away the condition of worthlessness associated with life. This means that the process of freedom through self-inflicted death (suicide) may not be the desired

panacea. It was argued, however, by Urmson and Ree (1990) that the immediate successors of Seneca began to moderate their views on suicide, though they were stoics.

The Sanctity of Life

It is the position of the writer that life should be seen as a gift from God. The argument, 'thou shall not kill' is quite relevant in the consideration of the sanctity of human life. It is not arguable that man cannot create life or give life. This is actually the divine prerogative of God. It could be rightly argued that man has a purpose to accomplish in life. It becomes inexcusable if he chooses to terminate his life himself without any genuine attempt at accomplishing that purpose(s). The writer believes that the vicissitudes of life are not enough justification for man to go contrary to the will and purpose of God for giving him life.

The act of suicide could be likened to murder. In this instance, self murder. This definitely carries an outstanding reprimand; coupled with the moral burden this has on both the actual person who committed suicide and the members of his family. There are several social constraints faced by the family members of the one that has committed suicide. In some cultures in Nigeria they may not be allowed to participate in some social activities such as marriage or burial. Apart from this, they are also likely deprived by such death (suicide) from reaping the supposed financial and moral support if such a person had been alive. Some of those who have committed suicide could be the main "bread winners" in their various families. On the strength of the foregoing, the writer holds the view that suicide should be discouraged, the claimed justifiable circumstances notwithstanding. Every life should be seen as a gift from God and worth living. The metaphysical view of life- after- death should constrain man into believing that he also owes the giver of life an explanation for handling the gift (life) with impunity and carelessness. The sanctity of human life should be of utmost consideration in all respect.

CONCLUSION

There are different philosophers who have demonstrated various positions on the act of suicide. This has produced strong dichotomy on philosophical grounds. Suicide has generated two clear philosophical divides. Some philosophers accepted suicide, while others condemned the act. Some philosophers during the era of Socrates argued vehemently against suicide. The underlining argument was that man should not terminate his life. This indicated that they were against suicide. Some of them include Socrates, who argued that man must not take his life; he must wait to be summoned by God. Another philosopher during this era was Aristotle, who contended that suicide was a wrong done to the state or community. The other philosopher who was against suicide at the period in question was Plato. He argued in one of his laws that suicide was disgraceful and perpetrators should be buried in unmarked graves.

The position of the Stoics was a sharp deviation from that of the philosophers during the period of Socrates. They include some of the following philosophers: Lucretius, Epictetus, Aurelius and Seneca the younger. Their general position was captured in the argument that once there is a deviation from rich and flourishing life, suicide could then be justifiable as an option. The Stoics further argued that the absence of physical health, for example, would lead to unhappiness, consequently encourages suicide. These positions notwithstanding, it is recommended by the writer that suicide should be discouraged on the basis of the sanctity of human life.

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