SUICIDE: A PERSONAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION

Jack Hernandez

First Word

Meadows Field

You are a hole in me. You
Are an absence I cannot grasp.
Yet your history nudges hard
From unexpected places.

Yesterday a father and son
Had breakfast where I write:
Father basso about manners and jam,
Son wriggling, his voice lilting, light.

Years ago at Meadows Field
We watched the big jets practice,
Their upward thrusts waking the morning air.
Then, our ears roaring with awe,

We took our hunger to the coffee shop
Where we worked out justice together:
I divided the doughnut, you chose
Your half: contented, we filled each other.

This essay began in the personal. In the late summer and early fall of 1991, my adult son, Paul, took his life by jumping from a bridge near Niagara Falls. His backpack and deerstalker hat were found on the bridge where he left them, his body was not found until October. Shock and despair, that’s what I felt, and loss, and puzzlement. What could have led him to do this? Why didn’t we know how he was feeling, seeing life? He was married and living in Toronto. As far as we knew, all was well. As far as we knew, but as it turns out we, not living
near, didn’t know. In the months following his death, more became clear, but much remained opaque. He was a young man, possessed a master's degree in political science from UC Berkeley, was teaching, was a very good writer. Yet, his life had become enveloped in darkness; he could not see a future. He jumped, jumped from us, from life.

I was scheduled to take a sabbatical leave in the spring of 1992. I had two sabbatical leave projects related to suicide: creative writing—poetry and a one-act play; and, a reflective study of suicide. As I taught philosophy the latter project was in my discipline; but more, I hoped it might help me understand suicide, clarify its many forms and nuances, and understand, in particular, Paul's suicide. In the creative work, I engaged my grief directly; in the study of suicide I engaged it indirectly. Both, I hoped, would be healing.

After recently talking with a colleague and friend, I decided to re read the essay I wrote on that sabbatical leave over twenty years ago, and revise and update it as I felt necessary. For the most part, though, what I discovered through my research and my reflection then remains my thoughts today. This is especially the case with the philosophical issues related to suicide, for while the technological, medical, and legal situation has changed somewhat, the philosophical issues have not, are in a sense perennial.

Philosophical Reflection

The philosophical debate and discussion about suicide are very illuminating because they underscore the deep divisions in our culture over this issue. Specifically, while on sabbatical I studied and thought deeply about the meaning of life and death as related to suicide, the definition of suicide, the morality of suicide, rationality and suicide, and the right to suicide. These subjects led me to the topic of assisted suicide, which had become a serious moral and
public issue in our country, and will continue to do so as the baby boomers age and face death, often painful, even as they have attempted to delay it with healthy habits and wrinkle removers. Technology and medicine continue to keep us alive longer, and while only a few states have legalized assisted suicide, we often read about elderly spouses facing the decision to help the other die. Many families face the decision to terminate treatment of a loved one, and while that appears to be only a very short distance to assisted suicide, the legal gap remains large. But this issue can only be understood in the context of our general philosophical understanding of and attitudes toward suicide.

Our understanding of life and death are closely related to our attitude toward suicide. Roughly speaking, there are two views: the view that life is sacred and intrinsically good, thus death is seen as something evil in all circumstances; and the view that life is only instrumentally good, thus death is a good or evil depending upon the circumstances of a person’s life. As I’ve discovered through much of the debate on suicide, these two views of life and death are, for the most part, the religious view, especially theistic, and the secular view. They are often opposing and lead to very different philosophical positions and attitudes.

The view that life is sacred and death evil leads to the view that most suicides are wrong because they repudiate a “gift” from God. Moreover, some religious philosophers argue that life is itself a good, which should never be given up. Some feel that suffering and pain is often ennobling and, in any case, that we have an obligation to God and others to persist no matter how bad off our life is. Those who hold this view, however, would allow for some suicides committed to saving the lives of others (although they may be reluctant to call them “suicide”). There is no question, however, that all other suicides would be strongly disapproved of, if not condemned.
On the other hand, the view that life is only as good as its circumstances would approve or at least tolerate a wider spectrum of suicides. In this view, life is not sacred or intrinsically good; it is good because it leads to things we value like happiness, pleasure, wisdom, love, and friendship. If these are not present, and, in fact, are replaced by pain and unhappiness, suicide is regarded as a rational option. Not only would this view approve of suicides to save others, it would also approve of suicides in cases of severely painful and debilitating illnesses, especially if terminal. It sees no value in hanging on regardless of how bad the situation. Self-inflicted death can be, thus, a good rather than an evil. Some would describe this as a quality of life approach, that is it is not life itself, but its quality that is good. Of course, those who take the opposite view reject this approach, arguing that if we do not regard life itself as intrinsically good, we open the floodgates to suicide (and who knows what else).

One wouldn’t think that the definition of suicide would pose much of a problem, but it does. Part of the reason is practical: a suicide may lose insurance benefits and bring suffering and shame upon a family. But there is a religious problem as well. For example, if we define suicide as any action intended by a person to bring about his or her death, we have to include as suicides those who give their lives for others, principle, or God. Such an inclusive definition does not sit well with some who would rather not describe those cases of self-killing as suicide.

Behind this problem lurk the negative connotations of the term “suicide.” It is clear, that for many, including philosophers, it is not a neutral descriptive term, but applies only to cases of self-caused deaths that do not involve altruistic motives. My own thinking has led me to the following position. I believe that there are three types of suicide or self-caused death: altruistic, self-interested, and mean. It confuses the issue to regard these as the same or entirely distinct,
because in each case the person chooses a course of action, perhaps with the help of others, which leads to his or her death. So in each case we have suicide, but for different motives.

What distinguishes these types is whether or not, in addition to choosing death, a person wants to die, that is sees death in his or her self interest. For example, if I am piloting a crippled airplane and decide not to parachute to safety, but rather to stay with the plane to guide it away from a residential area, I am choosing a course of action that will lead to my death, but I certainly don't want to die. This is altruistic suicide. I choose death for the good of others, a principle, or God; but I don't want to die. I don't see it as something that is good for me (the exception might be religious martyrdom where I believe that my soul will benefit). On the other hand, if I am suffering from a terribly painful case of terminal cancer and ask for medication to end my life, I both choose to die and want to die. This is self-interested suicide. As one philosopher put it, in the former case if the dead pilot, having saved the residential area, were miraculously brought back to life he or she would be overjoyed (of course this would not be so for the martyr who would be yanked back from the bliss of heaven, but this is because her or his suicide is mixed, i.e. altruistic and self-interested). If the terminal cancer patient were brought back to life, however, he or she would complain bitterly about what went wrong and ask for another dose to try again. I've found that this distinction between choosing an action that leads to death and, in addition, wanting to die clears up a lot of muddled thinking I encountered with respect to defining suicide. Practically speaking, for insurance purposes, it might be wise to reserve the term “suicide” for self-interested suicides only. While I don't believe we should legally punish self-interested suicides, I especially don't want penalize altruistic suicides. Self-interested suicide is usually applied only to the terminally ill, when, often, the typical self-interested suicide is a person who takes his or her life in the belief that death is better than life,
but who is in sound health. For some, this form of self-interested suicide is the only act they consider suicide because they don’t consider this form of suicide to be in a person’s self-interest. Yet if a suicide regards it as such, it is, then, self-interested suicide.

Mean suicide is distinguished from altruistic suicide by the fact that the mean suicide chooses to die to harm, not help, someone else. For instance, suicides by hanging are sometimes mean suicides because the suicide knows what a terrible shock it will be to find his or her body. Mean suicides may leave accusatory notes, blaming someone for their act. Although mean suicides may at times want to die because that satisfies their need to lash out and get back at another, they are distinguished from self-interested suicides by the fact that usually they do not want to die, only to cause pain to another.

Of course, it is possible for a suicide to combine types. A person who is painfully and terminally ill may want to kill him or herself to end the pain and to save his or her family from suffering and financial difficulty, or to get back at family members. The case of Samson may combine all three types. From the Hebrew viewpoint he took his own life to save them from their enemies, the Philistines. From the Philistine viewpoint, however, he was only getting back at them, and, there is some indication that because he was blind, was captive, and had been such a fool, he no longer wanted to live. Today, a suicide bomber wishes both to harm others and receive the glory and reward of doing God’s will.

Assisted suicide is a special case of self-interested suicide. I say special because it has been the subject of much popular attention. The popularity of books like Final Exit indicates that more people have accepted this type of suicide. Not that this acceptance is unequivocal, only that many perceive this type of suicide as different from other forms of self-interested suicide. Assisted suicide refers to suicides of those who suffer from painful terminal illnesses or
the onset of dementias like Alzheimer’s disease and who need some help in taking their lives. Advances in medical technology have increased our ability to keep people alive longer, sometimes past the time when they wish to live. Further, the aging population is increasing with a concomitant rise in debilitating, and often, painful, humiliating illness. These factors have increased public acceptance of assisted suicide, yet not to the level of a major national issue, as evidenced by its legalization in only five states, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Vermont, and New Mexico. It seems to have been drowned out by other issues like abortion and gay marriage. Yet it remains a major ethical and legal issue, one related to the exercise of individual freedom, and there seems to be a quiet acceptance of this form of suicide while other forms of self-interested suicide, such as suicide out of despair, are not accepted by most people.

A final point about altruistic suicide. An altruistic suicide may be done to save the life of another, but may also be done to avoid violating a moral principle or to promote what is considered to be a socially valuable cause. Socrates’ death by his own hand should be considered an altruistic suicide because he did it to uphold the laws of Athens, which he considered to be for the public good. Similarly a hunger strike to death or self immolation to protest oppression would also be altruistic suicides. It does no good to pretend these aren’t suicide; the real point is that they are of a very different kind than self-interested or mean suicides.

The morality of suicide is no less debated than its definition, and as with much of the discussion of suicide it seems to break down into a religious versus a secular approach. According to the Christian tradition formulated by Thomas Aquinas, suicide is morally wrong because it is against community, nature, and God. God gives life and only God can decide when it is to end; furthermore, humans by nature are to love themselves, which is inconsistent with killing themselves. Finally, a suicide robs the community of his or her life. Thus all mean
suicides are morally wrong—in addition to the above reasons, their intent is to harm others. But also wrong are all self-interested suicides, including the cases of those suffering from terminal illnesses. In this instance one is supposed to accept one’s illness and pain as the will of God; to kill oneself is to reject God's will. Altruistic suicides, however, pose a problem for this moral approach, and there are ingenious attempts to deal with them. As I’ve mentioned, not calling them suicides is one such attempt, but it fails because they are self-killing, which is suicide regardless of what it is called. Other attempts range from justifying suicide if God commands or wills it (as in Samson’s case) to arguing that the death of an altruistic suicide is an unwanted consequence of an attempt to do something good (the doctrine of double effect). But, as I’ve said, an altruistic suicide does not want to die, but does choose to as the only way to bring about some good. Finally, the problem of following God’s will for a life is complicated by all of the technological and medical interventions in that life to prolong it; if God wishes someone to die then why delay it?

In contrast, the secular (this label is a bit misleading because some religious ethicists like Joseph Fletcher take this approach) utilitarian approach evaluates the morality of suicide on the good versus the harm it brings about to all involved. Thus the altruistic suicide usually does more good; the case of the pilot staying with the plane illustrates this. But this may not always be the case. A few years ago a Los Angeles man killed himself, in part, as a protest against the then new motorcycle helmet law. It’s clear that nothing good was gained by this act; he lost his life (he was only forty-eight), his wife lost him under horrible circumstances (she heard the shot and found him), and his death did not change the law, which most people find sensible and in the public good (soon after its passage data indicated that it was saving lives). From the secular viewpoint this suicide was not morally right because it brought about more harm than good.
As for self-interested suicide the utilitarian approach would not judge it morally wrong if only the victim was affected, and in cases of painful terminal illness would weigh the suffering of the one committing suicide more than that of surviving friends and relatives. The problem, of course, becomes attempting to objectively evaluate the good and harm of a self-interested suicide that affects others. The deaths of very few people, after all, affect no one else. But some evaluation must be made, and having done this the utilitarian would not regard all harmful, self-interested suicides as equally morally wrong. Some harm, obviously, is greater than other harm and merits a stronger moral response. Unlike the religious approach, the utilitarian does not regard all suicides as worthy of the same moral condemnation. Even mean suicides differ in the harm they cause. This approach is the same as distinguishing between the harm caused by different kinds of lies, from “white” lies to serious fraud.

Unexpectedly, I have found the issue of the rationality of suicide to be more complicated than I thought. For many reasons, often unstated, people do not want to regard suicide, especially self-interested suicide, as rational. I believe the major factor behind this resistance is that like the concept of suicide the concept of rationality is not a purely descriptive term, but contains connotations and implications that make it difficult for people to apply it to suicides they disapprove of. When, for instance, we label an action or a person “rational” we imply that the action or person is good. “Rational” is a term of approval. For example, not many would want to call what Hitler thought and did rational nor would the term be applied to terrorism like the destruction of the World Trade Center. Interestingly, the new atheists embrace non-religious rationality as good and consider religion to be irrational and bad. The reply of many of the religious is to regard this view as irrational and thus bad. Yet a moment’s reflection tells us that the issue isn’t really rationality, but morality. The assumption is that rational people are
good people. That’s why the term can be fought over, and why suicide, which is bad, can’t be rational, which is good. But rational people don’t have to be good, nor rational acts good. If by “rational” we mean understanding the facts of a situation and acting from that understanding along with clear and consistent values and principles, it is clear that many saints and saintly actions are “rational,” as are many criminals and criminal actions. Facts may be objective, but values and ideologies are not. A religious martyr is acting rationally given his or her religious beliefs, even though those beliefs may not seem reasonable to a person who disagrees with the martyr’s religion.

Furthermore, when we see the acceptance of different kinds of suicides in different cultures as well as different periods of history as rational, we can only conclude that rationality is relative to diverse situations. Modern Japanese have considered suicide for honor to be rational; the ancient Greek and Roman stoics considered suicide when life is no longer meaningful to be rational; the biblical king Saul thought suicide rational in defeat. One might even view Jesus death as a rational suicide. Are they wrong? Of course not. By the definition of “rational” above these are rational suicides. Assuming one understands the facts of a situation (i.e. is not hallucinating or suffering from a serious mental disease like depression or schizophrenia or for various reasons refuses to see the situation objectively), the key to whether one suicide is to be judged rational or not depends on whether the values or principles used to justify the suicide are culturally acceptable. But when we note that even people in the same culture, like ours, can have very different values and principles it appears that many self-interested suicides are rational. The point is to remember that when we describe a suicide as rational we are not saying that we consider the reasons for the action as good ones or that we consider the action to be morally right. It is interesting to note that in our culture, while many
do not consider self-interested suicide to be rational, they consider altruistic suicide to be rational, probably because they consider it to be morally good.

In our society the concept of rationality in self-interested suicide is closely tied to the concept of a future. That is, if a person is seen not to have a future then suicide is accepted as rational. Thus assisted suicide is increasingly accepted because it involves mostly the terminally ill, who literally do not have a future. As we move from the physical certainty of no future, people feel less and less that suicide is rational. Thus paraplegia and Alzheimer's disease are problematic, and suicide because life is meaningless philosophically or psychologically is, for the most part, rejected as irrational. Yet, as noted above, value judgments are not objective as facts are. One person's idea of meaninglessness may not be another's. One person's despair may not be another's. One person's lack of a future may not be another's. In short, rationality depends. It depends on the principles and values brought to bear on a situation; and while terminal illness is from a physical viewpoint no future, from a philosophical or psychological viewpoint despair is equally no future. That is not to say that a despairing person should not be counseled with. Some people may act from haste and temporary depression, but if a person has thought it through and decides that suicide is the only answer, that action cannot be labeled irrational just because it is suicide and would not be considered rational by someone else in a different situation. When Ernest Hemmingway committed suicide, apparently because he could no longer write and live the active life that he had, was that irrational? That another wouldn't do it doesn't make it irrational. If a person wishes to commit suicide and is acting rationally, it is questionable whether others have the right to judge it morally or even prevent it. Perhaps even John Stuart Mill who argued that we don't have the right to use our freedom to take away our
freedom, i.e. sell ourselves into slavery—that doing so is contradictory, might have to concede that in some lives freedom is no longer relevant to a good life.

The concept of having no future is key to understanding self-interested suicide. When a person wants to die, often in our society it is because he or she does not feel the future to be worthwhile, that there is in any meaningful sense a future at all, or if there is one it is filled with unbearable pain and suffering. The problem with this, as many have noted, is that the despair resulting in the perception that there is no future may be transitory. To outsiders it is clear that when a person is not terminally ill, there is a literal future. Suicides in reaction to emotional, social, medical, or economic problems may be too hasty—as we all know, things do change, the sky does clear. Therefore, while such suicides may be rational in the sense of acting for a reason, they may also be misguided, that is rational without good reasons or an understanding of the facts. In such cases, all efforts should be made to comfort and counsel with the potential suicide so that he or she may be enabled to see that there is a future, a worthwhile future. If necessary, medical and professional psychological help should be sought. Yet, as I've said above, if after careful deliberation a person still believes suicide to be best, the action cannot be called irrational simply because others would not do the same thing. Concepts of good lives vary as do concepts of good futures.

One other problem with the concept of rationality is that it implies that the person who commits suicide is responsible for the action. For some people it is painful to acknowledge this so they argue that all self-interested suicides result from mental illness, mainly depression. In this way they can relieve the suicide of the blame for the action and excuse the action. The problem with this approach, apart from its obvious lack of truth, is that it robs self-interested suicide of any dignity associated with a purposeful, rational act. Furthermore, it justifies not
only counseling with a potential suicide, but, perhaps, also physically intervening to prevent the suicide, which raises the issue of whether there is a right to suicide.

The issue of a right to suicide is a complex philosophical issue involving the notion of what constitutes a right, as well as the question of how individuals get rights and the relationship of rights to obligations. With respect to suicide, both rights and obligations to others have to be considered, but the latter is not always easy to see. The practical import of this issue is whether or not anyone, including the government, can prevent a person from committing self-interested suicide if she or he has a right to do so. This matter is especially urgent with regard to assisted suicide. Many are coming to believe that people with terminal illnesses or illnesses that might terminate life as they know it, e.g. Alzheimer's disease, do have the right to suicide, and when this occurs in a private setting with one spouse aiding the ill spouse the government may not prosecute or a jury convict. If such a right exists, it is illogical to maintain laws against assisted suicide, since they prevent a person from exercising her or his right.

Suicide is a difficult issue to parse. Difficult not only because of its philosophical complexity but because of the difference of religious and non-religious beliefs brought to bear upon it. Difficult because so often it is not an abstract social issue, but a painful personal one. Albert Camus said, “There is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.” My hope is not that this philosophical reflection clarifies all of suicide’s complexities, but that it provides a map for further reflection by others.

Personal Reflection

When I began this essay I was attempting to work through my own puzzlement and grief over the suicide of my son. I think that I wanted to believe that what he had done was a
well-thought out act. But after talking to his wife and reading the short note he sent before he
took his life, a note that did not indicate suicide on its face but did so after, I have come to
believe that his self-interested suicide was a result of his immediate despair over his life and a
mental and emotional illness, which runs in the family...his mother, who is clinically depressed,
also attempted suicide. I did not see signs of this condition as he grew up, but from what I now
know it seemed to overtake him as a young adult. Had I, we, known we would have tried to
help him in all the ways we could, although I'm not sure how much help he would have wanted.
On sabbatical leave, I wrote a poem, that I think expresses how he felt:

   Darkness

   I didn't call you, dad,
   Because I didn't want to lie
   When you asked how I was.
   I have no future, you see—
   It's closed off, gone
   Like me, soon.
   I've tried to stay
   For you. The family
   Gave me more days
   Than I might have had,
   But, dad, I just can't lift
   This darkness, anymore.

   Afterword

   In the spirit of Socrates and the Stoics, I believe that philosophy should relate to life, to
how we can live good, flourishing lives. And that has been the spirit in which this essay has been
written.