

## Lecture Notes 7 : Death

### Suicide...

#### ... as illustration of the FLN

In the second section of the Groundwork Kant cites the case of:

someone who feels sick of life because of a series of troubles that has grown to the point of despair. (*Groundwork* 4: 422)

The man is thereby driven to take his own life on the maxim:

from self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life when its longer duration threatens more troubles than it promises agreeableness.

Kant says that this maxim cannot be a universal law of nature, because:

a nature whose law it would be to destroy life itself by means of the same feeling whose destination is to impel toward the furtherance of life would contradict itself and would therefore not subsist as nature...

The standard reading of this claim is along the lines of the contradiction in conception (CC) test for universalizability. The relevant maxim, willed as universal law, is:

- (1) It is a universal of nature that from self-love everyone makes it their principle to shorten their lives when their longer duration threatens more troubles than it promises agreeableness

Note, first, that there's nothing contradictory about this maxim as it stands. But Kant adds the further premise that:

- (2) The feeling of 'self-love' has a 'destination' (*Bestimmung*), which is 'the furtherance of life'.

#### ... as illustration of the FH

Kant's second rationale for opposition to suicide on the basis of the FH:

If [someone] destroys 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.

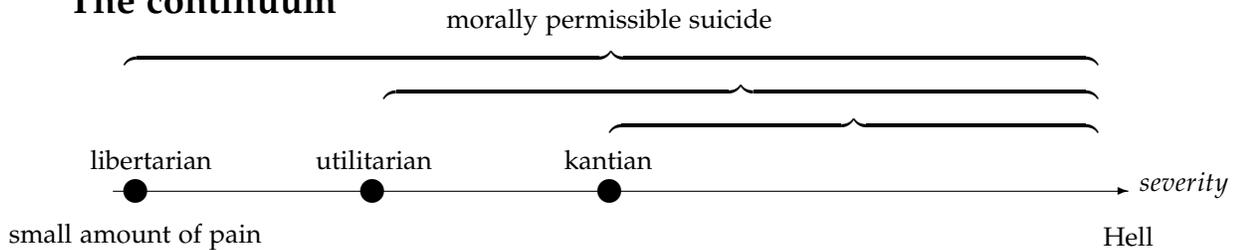
The argument here seems to be that:

- (3) one ought always to treat oneself as an end, and never as a mere means (the FH).
  - (4) To commit suicide on a maxim of maintaining a tolerable condition up to the end of life is to treat oneself as a mere means.
- ∴ (5) Suicide is not permissible *on this maxim*.

### ... as an ethical duty

disposing of oneself as a mere means to some discretionary end is debasing humanity in one's person, to which the human being was nevertheless entrusted for preservation.  
(*Metaphysics of Morals* 6: 423)

### The continuum



Libertarians think that:

- (6) Persons morally own themselves, i.e. their person (incl. body, mind and powers thereof), just like they morally own a car, or a tree.
- (7) Self-ownership implies that one can permissibly destroy one's person, just as one can destroy one's car or tree.
- ∴ (8) Therefore, self-ownership-consistent suicide is everywhere and always morally permissible.
- (9) A self-owner can permissibly get another to destroy his own person.
- ∴ (10) Self-ownership-consistent assisted suicide is everywhere and always morally permissible.

Kantians dispute (6), (7) and (9). But for our purposes, it will suffice to resist (7) and (9).

### A Kantian view

That's what I miss in so many discussions of euthanasia and assisted suicide: a sense of something in each of us that is larger than any of us, something that makes human life more than just an exchange of costs or benefits, more than just a job or a trip to the mall. I miss the sense of a value in us that makes a claim on us — a value we must live up to. (Velleman 1999, 612)

So:

- (11) (Assisted) suicide is morally permissible only if it expresses respect for the dignity of humanity as an end itself, in oneself and others.

Relevance to the value of life debate?

### Suggested Reading

Hill, T.E. (1991), *Autonomy and Self-Respect*, CUP, ch. 7.

Velleman, D. (1999), 'A Right of Self-Termination?', *Ethics* 109, 606-628.