Unit 9: SUICIDE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- know the concept and characteristics of suicide
- know the historical Western thought of suicide
- explain whether suicide is morally and rationally justified
- know the modern developments of philosophical thoughts about suicide

9.2 INTRODUCTION

Suicide is an act of taking one's own life intentionally. It can be caused due to extreme form of mental disorders, stress or any other such causes which force themselves to take such drastic step. In this unit we shall discuss the concept of suicide, its characteristics, various Arguments in support of suicide, and various arguments that rejects suicide. We can

also analyse whether taking one's own life is morally justified. Generally, it is said that suicide is morally wrong as it is a drastic form of one's own destruction and it also affects others emotionally. But inspire of it, there are certain arguments which clearly state that suicide in certain cases can be regarded morally justified

9.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF SUICIDE

Suicide is an act of putting oneself into death purposefully. It happens due to fear, anxiety, trauma, stress, problems, financial crisis, uncontrolled emotional states or any mental disorders which is in extreme form such as personality disorders, substance abuse, bipolar disorders, etc. It is a state of self-injury to the extent of putting oneself into death. The cause of suicide varies from person to person but it has some common characteristics which can be discussed as follows:-

1. Prolonged and intolerable mental states:-

People often commit suicide due to unbearable mental conditions which they face for a long time. In order to completely come out of such mental state, people commit suicide.

2. Unfulfilled needs:-

Most of the people who commit suicide, take such a drastic step due to their unfulfilled psychological needs which are impossible to fulfill.

3. Overcome the painful state:-

People try to end their own lives because they think it to be the last solution to overcome their unbearable painful state.

4. Hopeless and Helpless:-

When there is a lack of Hope in certain difficult situation, people try to end their life. They become so helpless that they cannot find any pleasure and purpose of living their life.

5. Escape from world:-

Most of the people try to escape from life, world and from others. They have some fear, some anxiety which they cannot overcome. So, in order to escape from such problems, people end their life.

9.4 HIGHLIGHTS OF HISTORICAL WESTERN THOUGHT

As you have come across the concept of suicide, now let us discuss the historical philosophical views about suicide in Western countries. Some of the ethical considerations regarding suicide are also found in Western thought. Confucius addresses that suicide may violate ethical duties of others. Philosophers such as Plato has also discussed about suicide by portraying Socrates was arguing that there is no contradiction in submitting freely to death and holding the belief that suicide is forbidden. Socrates believed that it is better to put oneself into death than accepting something which is wrong. The Stoic philosophers have also put forwarded some views on suicide. The reasons of committing suicide that can be found in Chrysippus book "The Stoics' Five Reasons for Suicide". They picturised five ways of reasonable departure from life which can be discussed as follows:-

1. According to them, people take such drastic step when a pressing matter turns up.

2. People, according to them also put themselves into death when tyrants rush in, forcing them to do or say forbidden things.

3. Another reason for such step according to them can be a serious illness that prevents the soul from using the body as an instrument for a long time.

4. Poverty is also one of the reasons according to Stoics' philosophers, for people take their own life as they think it to be the only way in order to escape from poverty.

5. Lastly, dementedness is also one of the reasons, according to Stoics', due to which people decide to end their life.

9.4.1 ANCIENT AND CLASSICAL VIEWS OF SUICIDE

Western philosophical views about suicide can be drawn from the time of Plato. Before Stoics, the concept of suicide was not discussed in a very systematic manner. Plato discussed about suicide in his two works- "Phaedo" and "Laws". In Phaedo, Plato picturized

Socrates expression of guarded enthusiasm for the thesis that is linked with Pythagoras that suicide is always wrong as it leads to releasing our souls from our bodies that God has placed us in as a form of punishment.

In "Law", Plato discussed that suicide is disgraceful and it's prepetrators should be buried in unmarked graves. But he has also put forwarded some exceptions to this principle:

1) When one's mind is morally corrupted and one's character cannot therefore be salvaged.

2) When one put himself into death by judicial orders.

3) When extreme and unavoidable misfortune force oneself to put into death.

4) When self-killing takes place out of shame at participating in unjust actions.

According to Plato, suicide under these conditions can be excused. But otherwise, suicide is regarded by him as an act of cowardice and laziness.

9.4.2 ENLIGHTENMENT AND MODERN DEVELOPMENTS

Some philosophers tried to view suicide from religious perspectives that deals with facts about individuals, their mental states and their social settings. Hume deals with this new approach on suicide. According to Thomistic view, suicide is an act against God's wish and a decision against God's order in determining when we shall die. Hume's arguments rest on the following considerations:-

1) If God is regarded as the creator of the causal laws of 'divine order' then it is wrong to go against it. But it is not wholly acceptable since God at times permits us to alter these laws during the case of disease or any other natural calamities.

2) If 'divine order' is regarded as the will of God which are rational that produce happiness then suicide should also be accepted within such law as it appears to be rational which is believed to be result into happiness by ending one's own life?

3) If 'divine order' is regarded as God's wish then all our actions can be said to be regarded as God's wish. If this is so then there can be no distinctions between God's wish in some of our actions and to those actions which is against God's wish. Then the decision of taking one's own life can also be regarded as the reflection of God's wish.

Hume holds that suicide neither violates duties towards others nor does it violate duties towards oneself. In some cases and at certain point, we become nothing rather than a burden for others and in such cases putting oneself into death can be justified. Again, sickness, oldage, and other misfortunes make our lives miserable than death. Thus, in such cases, putting oneself to death according to Hume is acceptable.

Immanuel Kant was totally against the idea of suicide. According to him, our moral duties reflect our rational will and therefore, it is contradictory to support that the same "rational will" can destroy one's own self.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries philosophers Rousseau, Goethe and Flaubert and sociologist Durkheim and Laplace and some other experts brought certain developments that have shaped philosophical thoughts about suicide.

Rousseau, Goethe and Flaubert have discussed about suicide by stating it to be a response of misunderstood and anguished soul which is covered by love or shunned by society.

Secondly, psychiatry was developed during this period by many experts due to which the problems related to suicide can be diagnosed and can be treated properly.

Lastly, the sociologists such as Durkheim and Laplace regard suicide as a social I'll that creates separation of an individual from society, anomies, and other attitudes which is said to be arise out of modernity.

9.5 MODERNITY AND RATIONALITY OF SUICIDE

As we have come across the concept of suicide, its characteristics, it's effects, now let us discuss whether suicide can be regarded as morally

justified and rationally acceptable. In order to analyse it, we must come across certain points which are as follows:-

9.5.1 MORAL PERMISSIBILITY

There are certain issues that focus on suicide. Let us check what these issues are:-

a) The conditions of regarding suicide to be morally justified.

b) The decision whether other individuals should try to prevent suicide.

c) Whether suicide should be criminalized or should it be prevent.

d) Whether suicide is rational or prudent.

As it is already clear that in certain cases, as has been accepted by many philosophers, suicide us permissible and in those cases neither state nor other individuals should interfere in it. But such suicidal acts must be interfered by others to prevent them from taking their lives if such suicidal acts are done by irrational individuals.

9.5.2 RELIGIOUS ARGUMENTS

There are some arguments that emerged in support of suicide being morally I'm permissible such as Thomistic arguments on suicide. But these arguments have been rejected on various grounds. As we have already discussed earlier about Hume's rejection of suicide violating natural law created by God on various grounds, now let us see some other religious arguments against in permissibility of suicide which talks about the relationship between God and individuals. According to this argument, we are regarded as God's property and therefore suicide us regarded as wrong since it leads to destruction of God's property. But this argument has been criticised on several fronts.

Firstly, although we are God's property but we are not dominated and are free to act which sometimes might be inconsistent with God's wish?

Secondly, it points outs to that by destruction of God's property which us regarded as human life, doesn't lead to destruction of God.

Thirdly, God is regarded as all loving and if it is so then God must permit his property, that is human life to be destroyed through suicide if it is sufficiently bad.

Finally, it is argued that destruction of property is morally justified if that property causes harm to the owner. In other words, killing oneself is justified in order to avoid serious future harm to oneself.

Thus, religious thought favours suicide. It permits one to reunite with their deceased love, to attain liberty of soul from the bondage of the body.

9.5.3 LIBERATARIAN VIEWS AND THE RIGHTS TO SUICIDE

As we have come across the religious views on suicide, now let us discuss Libertarian views whether Libertarians permit the act of suicide. According to Libertarians, suicide is morally justified as it is the right of individuals to commit suicide. But it doesn't show that is rational but it is morally permissible.

Secondly, Libertarians assert that the right to suicide is the right of non-interference that nobody should interfere with the right of killing oneself. It is also claimed to be liberty right which states that others should not interfere of a person's suicidal behaviour and must also assist in that behaviour.

Thirdly, suicide is regarded as morally justified on the ground that we are the owner of our own bodies and thus, we have the full right to destroy our bodies whenever we wish.

Lastly, Libertarians argue that suicide is morally right if it doesn't harm others. It is our right and we are morally justified to put ourselves into death whenever we wish.

9.5.4 SOCIAL AND ROLE BASED ARGUMENTS

From religious and libertarian point of view it is quite clear that suicide is morally permissible. Now let us discuss the social and role

based arguments regarding suicide. According to Aristotle, suicide is a harm to the society. A society depends on the economic and social productivity of its members and the members must be obliged by their duties and thus in such cases suicide cannot be justified. Suicide hampers individuals' moral contribution to society. Thus, putting an end to one's own life is not morally justified. But this argument cannot be acceptable as it is difficult to show that society has a moral right to claim on its members' talents and productivity. It is not justified to say that the members of the society need to benefit their society in terms of their capabilities regardless of the harms to themselves. However, suicide is morally wrong if the benefits to oneself are less than the benefits it produce to others. An another argument claims that there is a conditional relationship between society and it's members which shows that individuals cannot end their life as they have to fulfil the conditions of the society. But this argument also cannot prove that suicide is unjustified because if the relation between an individual and a society is conditional then an individual has the full right to end his life if his conditions are not fulfilled by the society. Thus, it also indicates that suicide is morally permissible.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is suicide?

Q 2: Is suicide morally justified?

Q 3: Name a philosopher who accepted suicide to be morally justified.

Q 4: Mention the name of a Stoic philosopher.



9.6 LET US SUM UP

- Suicide is an act of putting oneself into death purposefully.
- Philosophers such as Plato has discussed about suicide by portraying Socrates as arguing that there is no contradiction in his submitting freely to death and holding the belief that suicide is forbidden.

- Enlightenment philosophers tried to view suicide from religious perspective that deals with facts about individuals, their mental states and their social settings.
- Hume holds that suicide neither violates duties towards others nor does it violate duties towards oneself.
- Immanuel Kant was totally against the idea of suicide.
- According to Kant, our moral duty reflects our rational will and therefore it is contradictory to support that the same "rational will" can destroy one's own self.
- Rousseau, Goethe and Flaubert have discussed about suicide by stating it to be a response of misunderstood and anguished soul which is covered by love or shunned by society.



9.7 FURTHER READINGS

1) Alvarez, A., 1982, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide. New York: Bentham.

2) Donnelly, J. (Ed.), 1998, Suicide: Right or Wrong? Amherst, NY: Promthens.

3) Joiner, T., 2005, Why People Die by Suicide. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

4) Shneidman, E. S., 1998, The Suicidal Mind, Oxford: Oxford University Press.



ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

And to Q No 1: Suicide is an act of putting oneself into death purposefully.

And to Q No 2: Yes.

And to Q No 3: David Hume.

And to Q No 4: Chrysippus.



9.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very Short questions

Q No 1: What is suicide?

Q No 2: Mention the name of a philosophers who rejected the idea of suicide to be morally justified.

Q No 3: Name the book written by Chrysippus.

Q No 4: Mention the name of a Stoic philosopher.

B. Short questions (Answer in about 150 words)

Q No 1: What are the characteristics of suicide? Discuss briefly.

Q No 2: Write a note on the developments that have shaped the philosophical thought about suicide.

Q No 3: "Putting an end to one's own life is morally justified". Discuss briefly.

Q No 4: Give a brief account on the Liberatarian views of suicide.

Q No 5: Give a brief account on the social arguments of suicide.

C. Long questions (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q No 1: Is suicide morally justified? Discuss.

Q No 2: Highlight the historical Western thought of suicide.

Q No 3: What are the characteristics of suicide? Discuss.

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