

# The Limits on Self-Destruction

BY SIDNEY CALLAHAN, PhD

**D**o we have the moral right to choose to commit suicide? Those who want to make physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia legal say yes. They move from an affirmation of an individual's moral right to suicide to a claim that this right can be delegated to a physician or another who will assist in the act. But if an individual has no moral right to suicide, then the argument for euthanasia fails.

The arguments for an individual's moral right to commit suicide are usually based on three claims:

1. An individual has personal sovereignty over his or her life.
2. Unlike murder, one commits suicide with the consent of the killed (i.e., oneself).
3. A private act of suicide does no harm to other persons.

Each of these arguments seems unconvincing.

## PERSONAL SOVEREIGNTY

The argument for a personal sovereignty extending even to death claims that there can never be a little bit of individual sovereignty, just as no woman can be a little bit pregnant. Free persons must be able to end their lives when they choose. The reasons a person chooses to commit suicide may not be morally adequate from another's point of view, but having this choice is a private, personal exercise of autonomy and freedom that must be respected.

After all, goes the argument, no one asked to be born. If I cannot freely kill myself when I choose, then I am not free and am enslaved by the suffering and degradation that chance may bring. If I own myself and through free will am fully in charge of my life, then it follows that I must be able to die at will. Such a freedom is particularly important to maintain dignity in the face of physical or psychological suffering.

I am not convinced by these arguments. I think that personal sovereignty, autonomy, or freedom can be limited, indeed must be limited when it comes to acts of destruction and killing.



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The idea that one can "own" oneself as a piece of property and therefore choose self-destruction seems erroneous. Can a human person be an object that is owned? No, not by a master, by a state, or by oneself. We now understand that no person can be treated by another as a mere means to an end or be destroyed at will. How can the self be an exception to the prohibition on killing?

If it is wrong for others to kill me, or for me to kill them at will, can it be right for me to kill myself? Can any of these prohibitions be lifted without weakening the others, which are so intimately related? Cultures in which suicide has flourished as acceptable, such as ancient Rome and Japan, have been cultures which also assumed that one person can own others and kill them at will. (See Stephen G. Post, "American Culture and Euthanasia," *Health Progress*, December 1991, pp. 32-38.)

In a world of ecological interconnections, we should rethink any ideas of sovereignty, ownership, and property. Individual persons as lonely, isolated rights bearers are no longer ceded a right to choose destruction for the land, the air, the water, certain animal species. Given the communal, interactive conditions of life on earth, sovereignty must be transformed into stewardship, a holding of goods in trust for the larger community.

Although individuals do not give their informed consent to be born a part of the earth's ecosystem, they have a moral responsibility not to destroy it. Mature individuals exist only because of the gene pool and the procreative actions of their parents and their cultural community. The psychological self that can freely choose to act is also the gift of human nurturing. An individual self is created by incorporating and internalizing other persons, a common language, and common social structures. It seems arrogant to assume that one has the right to unilaterally destroy at will the self that has been cocreated by so many others. It also seems contradictory, as philosophers have

noted, to use one's free will to destroy all possible future acts of free will by choosing death.

### **INDIVIDUAL CONSENT**

Those who argue for the moral acceptability of suicide also make a point about consent and killing. Individual consent to being killed by one's own action is supposed to make suicide different from killing others who do not consent. But I question whether one can consent to self-killing. Much has to do with how we think about the self.

We know that the self—"I" as the observer and the different parts of me that I can observe—consists of many dimensions and subsystems. Self-consciousness exists as a succession of many altered and different states, as different subselves come to center stage. Thus someone in a screaming rage may answer a ringing phone and instantly assume his or her polite social persona. In an emergency someone may become "a different person," completely consumed by a rescue attempt. Many selves exist in each person; persons with multiple personality disorders represent a pathologically disordered extreme of our normal multiple selves. Humans also have many physiological and psychological processing subsystems that are never represented in consciousness—the brain's perceptual and memory retrieval system, for instance, or the body's automatic physiological regulation.

When a person commits suicide, one dimension of the self has to use the force of technology or drugs to violently kill all the subsystems which make up that human being. Since the bodily self is not yet dying, it must be destroyed forcibly, along with other parts of the self that may not choose to die. Since the body and other selves have to be actively murdered by the state of consciousness temporarily in control, it seems wrong to see this as an instance of consent to dying. Often in failed suicide attempts, the body along with other selves fights back and resists dying—vomiting the pills, calling for help at the last minute. When people "change their mind" after a failed suicide attempt, it means a life-choosing self gains control and dominates ongoing consciousness.

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Consenting to suicide is different from other forms of personal consent, which may also contain some inward divisiveness or ambivalence. Self-killing is violent, aimed at complete destruction, and a final, irreversible action—all those things which make murder so serious a crime. By contrast, consenting to a withdrawal of medical treatment is an act in which a conscious self accepts and joins with the bodily self's inevitable dying—without violently intervening and exerting control by medical or technological means. Allowing ourselves or other people to die is very different from actively killing ourselves or others.

### **SOCIAL HARM**

A final question is whether suicide is a private act or can harm others. Clearly, suicide is a social harm to the community. We live in interconnected networks of meaning, hope, and care; self-killing as a unilateral act of individualistic control breaks our bonds with others in the community. When we choose the absolute control that only killing can give, we refuse to countenance human suffering, either ours or that of others. In the name of autonomy and freedom we reject dependent care from others and strike a blow against all human interdependence.

Suicide, or "self-inflicted euthanasia," can induce others to resort to suicide to avoid suffering or solve problems. Suicide repeats itself in families; celebrity suicides are often imitated by others. Many observers are alarmed over epidemics of suicide among adolescents and young adults. Social pressure on the old to kill themselves may be increased when suicide is more accepted. We have always counted on a strong instinct for survival to keep people struggling to live despite the difficulties they face. But there may be an equally strong human tendency to give up and seek death, which can be triggered by unfavorable social conditions and overt social approval.

Every instance of socially sanctioned killing tends to make all other lives less valued and more precarious. Americans should be deathly afraid of seeing suicide, physician-assisted suicide, and euthanasia become culturally and legally endorsed. □