Suicide

When is it acceptable (if ever) to end one's own life?

1. Rationality vs. Morality: Kagan begins by distinguishing between two questions:

- When (if ever) is it (pragmatically) *rational* to end one's own life?
- When (if ever) is it *morally permissible* to end one's own life?

Questions of pragmatic rationality and moral permissibility come apart. Consider:

- You come across a drowning child in a pond on your way to a really important interview. If you miss the interview, you won't get the job. It seems *pragmatically rational* to keep walking. Yet, doing so seems *morally wrong*.

- Now imagine that you jump into the pond to save the drowning child. You miss the interview and don't get the job. This was *pragmatically irrational*, and yet it was clearly *morally permissible* (or even *obligatory*).

So, what is rational/irrational and permissible/impermissible are not always the same.

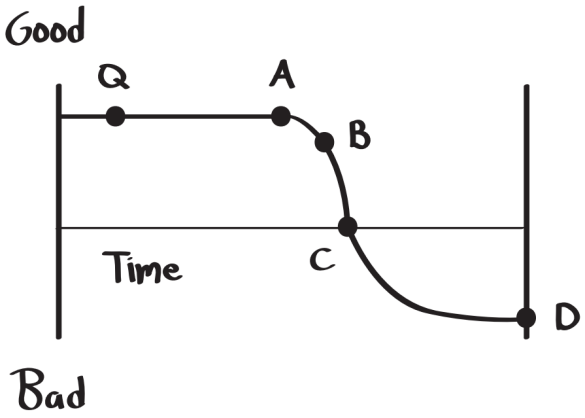
[Note: Imagine staying behind to defuse a bomb in order to save millions of others, but you will die if you do so. Technically, this is an instance of killing yourself; or at least, intentionally doing something that you know will result in your own death. This is surely morally permissible. After all, this seems like a brave and heroic act, rather than an immoral one. Perhaps it is even rational, at least in one sense – e.g., since it seems rational to sacrifice one person to save millions. But, Kagan sets aside these sorts of cases. What we want to know is, are there ever instances where it would be rational, or permissible, to end your own life based ONLY on considerations about yourself?]

2. Is it Ever Rational to End One's Own Life?: Is it ever rational to end one's own life? It seems that the obvious answer is: Yes; namely if one would be *better off dead*.

A note about comparison: "Better than" is a relation between two things. So, at first glance, it may seem that the claim that one would be "better off dead" is impossible, because it requires a COMPARISON between one's actual state and the state of being dead. But this requires us to compare existence with non-existence, and non-existence isn't a state at all! might suggest that a patient would be "better off dead" if they are suffering (at, say, -100), because we're imagining death as a state of well-being at **zero**. But, some say, non-existence doesn't even have a well-being value of ZERO. It is NOTHINGNESS. How can we compare existence with *nothingness*?

Reply: Kagan suggests that we needn't compare existence with *non-existence*. Rather, we need only be able to compare the value of one's actual life with the value that it *would have had*, had they lived! For instance, imagine that someone's life up to now has had a positive value of +100. Unfortunately, she is now terminally ill with a very painful, incurable disease. If she continues living, the pain and suffering will contribute -10 to her life. Well, now we can compare the value that her life WILL have if she continues to live until the disease takes her (+90; i.e., +100 – 10) with the value that her life would have if it ended prematurely right now (+100). On this calculation, it is clear that she would be better off dead—and we arrived at this conclusion without comparing existence with non-existence. (Note that we are implicitly arriving at this very same conclusion whenever we take a suffering, dying pet to the vet to be "put to sleep").

So, When (if ever) is it (pragmatically) rational to end one's own life? There is a simple answer: Namely, whenever one would be better off dead. And we determine this by adding up all of the future goods and bads that one has to look forward to, should he or she continue to live, and see whether that quantity is positive or negative. For instance, suicide would be rational at point C during the following life:



[*Note1: Kagan speaks only of pain and pleasure. But, depending on one's view of well-being, we might also include the satisfaction of desires, or items from an objective list (e.g., appreciation of beauty, acquiring of knowledge, friendship, etc.). Perhaps even life itself even has some instrinsic value. If so, then if the value of life is great enough, the remainder of one's life could NEVER have negative value (because any pain would be outweighed by the positive value of merely living). We will set this view aside. Most find it implausible; e.g., as in the case of putting a suffering dog to sleep, which seems to be a GOOD thing.*

Note2: Imagine that the life pictured above gets worse and worse due to some disease, but one that is CURABLE! In this case, suicide would not be the rational response. Rather, receiving the CURE would be the rational course of action! So it needs to be the case that the ONLY alternative to suicide is a life where one would be better off dead.]

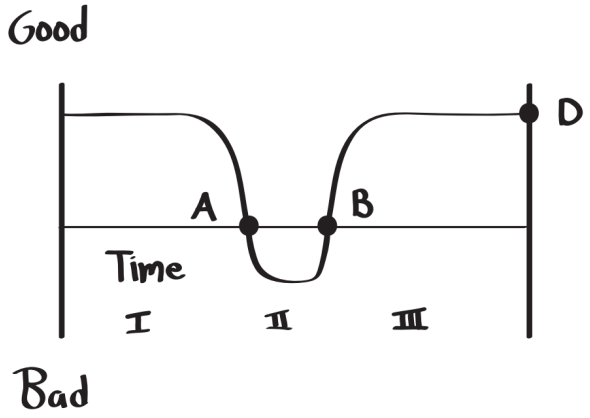
3. Uncertainty and Thinking Clearly: A worry comes up here. We might think that, even if ending one's own life in a circumstance where one's life had negative value (e.g., it was full of pain and suffering) and was guaranteed to continue in this negative state permanently (e.g., this seems true of terminally ill patients) was objectively rational, can one ever even BE rational when in such a state?

Can a suicidal person ever think clearly? Consider: In order for a life to be not worth living, it would need to be filled with significant pain—so much that it would likely be overwhelming and debilitating. But, then, is it possible to even think clearly in such a state? The answer might be 'NO'. But, then, if one is not thinking clearly, then one should not trust one's own judgement that one is indeed IN one of the special circumstances where suicide is rational. If that is the case, then it turns out that it is actually NEVER rational to end one's own life. What we want is rational, informed consent. But, it simply may not be possible for someone to gather or consider the information rationally, or truly consent to death when they are in so much pain.

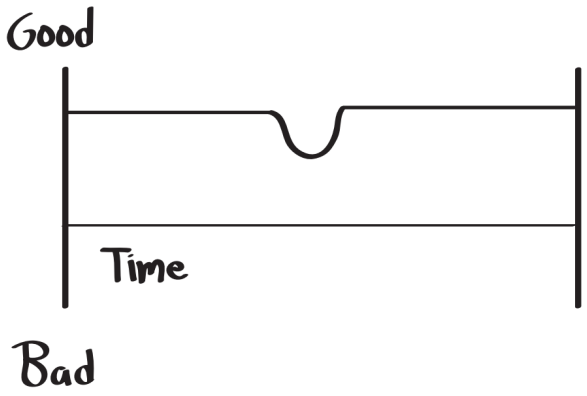
Furthermore: **We cannot know the future with certainty**. We do not have a crystal ball, we're not all-knowing. In real life, it seems that can very rarely (if ever) have confidence that we ARE in fact in a state where suicide would be rational.

Thus, even if suicide might be rational in certain extreme circumstances IF (i) one were thinking clearly AND (ii) one had complete knowledge of ones future, we might worry that neither of these conditions is ever met. That is, we might worry that (not-ii) We can never KNOW when we are in those circumstances, and (not-i) If we WERE in such circumstances, we could never be thinking clearly enough to think rationally (especially regarding such an important decision).

Indeed, nearly all suicides are probably due to a MISTAKEN calculation of what one's future holds. For, even if one is experiencing a very bad period of one's life, most likely, a graph of one's well-being looks like this:



Or, even worse, perhaps like this:



Clearly, suicide would be irrational in either of these two circumstances. Sadly, due to mistaken and incomplete knowledge of one's future, some choose to take their own lives in such situations. In these cases, suicide is a terrible tragedy.

Uncertainty: Yet, even in cases of painful, incurable terminal illness, where doctors tell you that there is no hope of recovery or escape from pain, perhaps there is still a CHANCE that life will turn out to be worth living. For, new cures are discovered all the time. Also, some patients miraculously and inexplicably recover from supposedly "terminal" diseases.

In reply to such uncertainty, imagine that you are a contestant on a twisted game show:

> **Game Show** You are required to pick one of two doors. If you pick Door #1, there is a 99% chance that you will be tortured for a week, and a 1% chance that you will be given a free, wonderful vacation for a week. If you pick Door #2, you will be put into a dreamless sleep for one week.

Which door would you choose? Kagan believes that you will choose Door #2, or at least, that it would be rational for you to do so.

Now, what if the two doors offered "prizes" that would occur for the rest of your LIFE!? (i.e., 99% chance of lifelong torture and 1% chance of lifelong vacation vs. 100% chance of lifelong dreamless sleep). Kagan says that it would still be rational to pick Door #2.

Now, what if there were only a 90% chance of being tortured if you picked Door #1? Probably you would still pick Door #2.

Kagan's point is that we need not be 100% CERTAIN of our future in order for suicide to be rational (Door #2 effectively represents suicide). We need only be *pretty sure*.

Reply to Irrationality: Regarding the ability to make rational decisions when suffering extreme pain, Kagan turns the tables. He says, if such pain made one incapable of making informed decisions, then this would rule out not only decisions about suicide but also those about treatment!

Imagine a suffering, dying patient who is enduring unimaginable pain. The doctors have a cure that is nearly 100% likely to relieve the pain and save the patient's life. Surely it would be rational for the patient to choose to be cured. But, if the objection above is correct, then we should not give the patient the cure, because the patient lacks the ability to give rational, informed consent to it. Clearly, this is absurd. So, the objection above is absurd.

[*Is Kagan right about this? There seems to be an important difference. When the patient is deemed unfit to give informed consent, doctors typically act based on "hypothetical consent"—i.e., whatever a rational, informed patient likely WOULD consent to. For instance, they will resuscitate a patient whose heart has stopped without permission because it is assumed that this is what the patient would want. The default is LIFE, not death. If a patient IS overwhelmed by extreme pain, the default will still be life, not death. We cannot assume that the patient would hypothetically consent to euthanasia.*]

Nevertheless, perhaps Kagan is at least right in saying that it is at least POSSIBLE to rationally conclude that suicide is the best option (the objection was that one could NEVER come to this conclusion rationally). [*Is he right about this? What do you think?*]

4. Is it Ever Morally Permissible to End One's Own Life?: Even if it could be RATIONAL to end one's own life, this does not guarantee that it would be morally PERMISSIBLE to do so. So, let's look at that topic now.

Some ethicists say that, when assessing whether or not an action is morally wrong, we need only look to the *consequences*. If the consequences of the action are good, then the action is morally permissible. If the consequences are bad, then the action is wrong. The most popular version of this view (called **consequentialism**) is **utilitarianism**. Utilitarians go even further, and say that the morally right action is the one that brings about the BEST consequences—and all other actions are morally wrong.

Suicide Can Be Morally Permissible (or Obligatory) on Utilitarianism: If consequences are all that matter, then suicide would clearly be morally permissible when it is the BEST option (taking into account the future harm to yourself, and to others, etc.). That is, if death would be a GOOD thing for the person (because their entire future is not worth living), then suicide brings about a good consequence.

However, some believe that moral rightness or wrongness is about ACTIONS, not consequences. For instance, consider this case:

> **Organ Harvest:** A doctor is caring for three dying patients, all of them in need of organ transplants (they need a kidney, a heart, and a liver, respectively). A healthy patient comes in for a routine check-up. The doctor sedates him, cuts him open, removes his organs, and performs the transplants, saving her three patients. No one ever discovers how she obtained the organs.

On utilitarianism, what the doctor does is morally permissible. Even worse, it is morally OBLIGATORY! That is, if the doctor DOESN'T kill the one healthy patient and harvest the organs, then she does something morally wrong (since killing the patient brings about the BEST consequences). However, this seems mistaken to most people. If we are correct in judging the doctor's action to be morally wrong, then utilitarianism must be false.

Utilitarianism might be summed up by the slogan "The ends justify the means." In Organ Harvest, the ends (saving 3 lives) justifies the means (killing one individual). But, many reject this claim. Perhaps the means must be justified by themselves (i.e., perhaps killing is just plain wrong, even if doing so saves 3 other people).

Suicide Morally Wrong On Deontology?: The view that certain actions are morally wrong in and of themselves (regardless of the consequences that they bring about) is called **Deontology**. On Deontology, if killing someone (even one's self) is always wrong, then suicide would be morally wrong.

Deontologists typically say that it is wrong to lie, steal, kill, harm others, etc. But, surely even a deontologist would agree that it is at least sometimes morally permissible to harm others in the short term under certain conditions—especially if we have their consent, and it leaves them better off overall. For instance, it is normally morally wrong to remove someone's kidney even if it saves someone else's life. But, now imagine that your kidney is cancerous and you have consented to having it removed in order to save your life (this happened to my own grandfather!). Surely the deontologist won't object to this on moral grounds.

So, if cutting someone open is sometimes permissible even on deontology (e.g., if they **consent**, and doing so **makes them better off**), then perhaps killing someone is also sometimes permissible. And, though suicide is an act of killing someone (yourself), it seems to resemble the surgery case in these two important respects.

Let's look at these two features:

Consent: Consent doesn't seem to automatically make it morally permissible for someone to kill you. If someone walks up to you and says, "Kill me, I give you permission," it still doesn't seem permissible to do so—even if the consent is:

(i) given freely
(ii) informed
(iii) given by a competent decision-maker, and
(iv) for good reasons.

On the other hand, surely SOMETIMES consent makes it permissible to kill an innocent person—e.g., yourself, if you throw yourself on a grenade to save 5 others. We often think this is morally commendable.

Makes One Better Off: But, unlike the grenade case, suicide can also have the following feature:

(v) and the action benefits the person consenting to it.

This really does seem to make suicide seem morally similar to amputating one's leg to save their life. But, then, perhaps suicide is morally permissible even on a deontological view, so long as one consents to it (which they clearly do if they are killing themselves) AND doing so makes them better off (which would be true if the rest of their life is not worth living).