

IS SUICIDE MORALLY PERMISSIBLE?
MCC PHILOSOPHY CLUB
April 21, 2026

Introduction: Today we will cover arguments that suicide is and is not morally permissible. We feel obliged to state that (i) this topic was chosen by MCC students at the first meeting this semester; (ii) this is an academic exercise and we are not truly endorsing committing suicide; (iii) if you are having thoughts of suicide, call or text 988.

I. Arguments that Suicide is or can be Morally Permissible:

- A. Terminally Ill Case:** If a patient is terminally ill, at the limit of painkillers, and has a high probability that he/she will die within 3 months, in the opinion of two doctors, and is not clinically depressed, that patient should be able to take medicine that will end their life if they wish. The only thing to be done in such a case is to administer pain meds and wait for them to die. [Possible objection: What if we change the case: What about a terminally ill person killing themselves in order to save money from medical bills for their family?]
- B. To Protect State Secrets:** If someone knew important information that could kill millions if divulged, and they have already been tortured (so the threat of more torture is not an empty one), one might argue that, if that person was inclined to commit suicide, it would be morally permissible.
- C. If one's life is "physically or psychologically unbearable":** This is the legal standard in The Netherlands and Belgium, and people have been legally able to be prescribed and take a lethal drug to die under these conditions: (i) an alcoholic who tried to stop drinking for years, and found life unbearable; (ii) a person who had botched sex change surgery and was depressed.¹
- D. Jean-Paul Sartre's argument:** "We are condemned to be free," meaning that we are totally responsible for all of our choices and actions, so, once we realize what death is and how to cause it, we are responsible for choosing to stay alive. We can choose suicide anytime we wish, as long as we realize that when we do so, we choose it for all people. That is, when we make any choice, we're basically showing the world the way in which we believe that the rest of the world should act, at least in the same circumstances. So if someone is contemplating suicide, it is morally permissible as long as one is not deceiving oneself, for instance, that someone else is making them commit suicide or that they do not have a choice but to commit suicide, and that they wish to commit suicide.²
- E. Thomas Szasz: Suicide is the most basic right:** If freedom is self-ownership—ownership over one's own life and body—then the right to end that life is the most basic of all. If others can force you to live, you do not own yourself and belong to them.³
- F. The Stoic view that suicide is more honorable than a painful continued existence:** The Stoics Seneca the Younger, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius maintain that death by one's own hand is always an option and frequently more honorable than a life of protracted misery. They accepted that suicide was permissible for the wise person in circumstances that might prevent them from living a virtuous life.⁴
- G. Confucious' altruistic suicide:** Suicide can be morally permissible, and even praiseworthy, if it is done for the sake of loyalty, self-sacrifice, and/or honor.⁵
- H. Japan's argument for suicide for honor:** Japan has a form of suicide called *seppuku*, which is considered an honorable way to redeem oneself for transgressions or personal defeats. It was widely accepted in the days of the Samurai and even before that. It was generally seen as a privilege granted only to the samurai class; civilian criminals would thus not have this 'honor' and be executed. In this historical perspective, suicide reflects a cultural view of suicide as noble, acceptable, and even brave, rather than cowardly and wrong.⁶

¹ Dr. Y has these news stories in his PHI 213 Medical and Bio-Ethics class. And [here](#) is another story from 2018 about a depressed woman with Borderline Personality Disorder who was allowed to drink a prescribed poison to kill herself due to unbearable suffering with no prospect of improvement.

² This idea is from "Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Condemned to Be Free,'" pp. 349-354, in *Western Philosophy: An Anthology*, John Cottingham, ed. 3rd ed. John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, 2021.

³ From [here](#).

⁴ From [here](#).

⁵ From [here](#).

⁶ From [here](#).

II. Arguments that Suicide is Morally Impermissible:

- A. Religions almost universally prohibit it:** Religions that hold that God exists usually state that it is up to God to decide when people pass, Christians generally believe that the body is a temple (Paul, in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20), so they oppose it. The Catholic Church is against passive euthanasia, where a patient is in a persistent vegetative state and withdrawn from hydration and nutrition lines to let the disease or “nature” take its course. Philosopher Immanuel Kant (paraphrasing) states that suicide opposes the purposes of the Creator, and thus the person who commits suicide is a rebel against God. It is God’s intention to preserve life. According to John Locke, we are “God’s property” and everyone is bound to preserve himself and not quit his station willingly. [However, Buddhists would claim that if someone is no longer able to meditate and make progress toward enlightenment, suicide may be morally permissible.]
- B. Camus: Suicide surrenders to the absurd:** In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus deems suicide unethical because it surrenders to the absurd rather than confronting it, acting as a “repudiation” that escapes the conflict rather than living through it. He argues that maintaining consciousness of life’s meaninglessness is a form of revolt, while suicide is a cowardly, fatal “settling” of the absurd.⁷
- C. Kant I: Suicide is self-contradictory:** Kant condemns suicide under any circumstances, since it is an intention to destroy oneself. Suicide is self-contradictory because the power of free will is used for its own destruction – it degrades human worth.⁸
- D. Kant II: Motives concerning bodies must be for self-preservation:** If a foot is a hindrance to life, one may have it amputated. But taking one’s life does not preserve one’s life, as in the foot example. The use of free will is crucial/significant, but is only possible if a person exists. [Kant also notes that there is a difference between a person committing suicide and being a victim of fate: A man who shortens his life through intemperance – like eating too much (link to heart disease, etc.) or not exercising is only indirectly guilty of his death; he did not intend to kill himself.]
- E. Kant III: Selfish or lustful reasons do not justify suicide.** A lustful reason would be if someone’s love is unrequited and that person feels like they cannot go on anymore.
- F. Kant IV: Suicide goes “against nature”:** We “shrink in horror” from hearing about suicide because all of nature seeks its own preservation – everything from an injured tree to non-human animals to humans. “Nothing more terrible can be imagined.”⁹
- G. Kant V: If a man does not respect his life in principle, why be virtuous at all?**
- H. Kant VI: The “rule of morality” does not admit of suicide:** Suicide degrades human nature below the level of animal nature and so destroys it. Observing morality is one of the things that is more important than life. To live honorably while life lasts is a necessity. Happiness is not necessary to live and therefore is not sufficient reason to take one’s life. Our duties towards ourselves may demand that we sacrifice our life. [Brandt’s **Army Pilot example**: An army pilot is flying over a heavily populated area, and can either eject and almost certainly kill civilians, or stay in the plane and land it somewhere away from people but kill himself. Suppose he kills himself. By Brandt’s definition, he committed suicide. Kant thinks that this kind of case is not an act of suicide and may in fact be a moral duty. Thomas Aquinas may say suicide is permissible in this case because the basic intention is to save others.¹⁰]

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you have other arguments for or against cases of suicide?
2. Which cases or arguments in favor or against are the most (im)plausible?
3. It is presumably very reasonable to not allow a person who was just diagnosed with clinical depression to commit suicide, because there are treatments that have not yet been tried. However, what if a clinically depressed person over five years has tried every antidepressant at various levels, and regularly visited a psychiatrist to discuss their condition, and none of the drugs were effective and/or

⁷ From [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

⁸ All of the Kantian arguments against suicide come from *Lectures on Ethics*, Louis Infield, trans., Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis, pp. 148-154, 1980.

⁹ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (see other note for more bibliographical information), p. 151.

¹⁰ From Richard B. Brandt, “The Morality and Rationality of Suicide,” pp. 388-395, 1975.

had very undesirable side effects? Do you think it would be morally permissible for that person to commit suicide?

4. What if a child wants to commit suicide If his/her/their life is “physically or psychologically unbearable”? Could a child in that condition give consent to a doctor for that procedure? If so, should a child’s parents be able to override their decision? [Note: This is a law in Belguim, where a minor can request suicide if life is phycsially and psychologically unbearable, and their parents may override their request.]
5. Do you think suicide is morally permissible in any of the following cases?
 - a. Some event has made a person feel ashamed or lose his prestige or status
 - b. Reduction from affluence to poverty
 - c. Loss of limb or of physical beauty
 - d. Loss of sexual capacity
 - e. Some event that seems to or does prevent one from achieving their dream
 - f. Loss of a loved one
 - g. Disappointment in love
 - h. Infirmities of old age¹¹
 - i. Becoming a quadriplegic after a tragic accident

BONUS STUFF:

1. The Thanos Pod:



“[T]he capsule's creator Dr. Philip Nitschke, said he planned to make the [3D-printable] blueprints available so anyone could download the design. This will be made available for free. ‘We want to remove any kind of psychiatric review from the process and allow the individual to control the method themselves.’ He has long campaigned for the right to die, earning him the nickname ‘Dr. Death’.” And: “[T]he pod - which can be placed anywhere - is flooded with nitrogen, reducing the oxygen levels rapidly. The process would make the person inside lose consciousness and die in approximately 10 minutes. [DY: In an early article where Dr. Nitschke explained the process, he stated that the user will not feel like they are suffocating or panic; the feeling will be euphoric.] The suicide pod is activated from the inside and also has an emergency button to exit.”¹²

“In Switzerland, ... a 64-year-old American woman suffering from an immune disease ended her life using the Sarco capsule.... The death occurred in a remote forest cabin near Schaffhausen, marking the first known use of the Sarco pod for suicide.”¹³

¹¹ This list comes from Richard B. Brandt, “The Morality and Rationality of Suicide,” pp. 388-395, 1975.

¹² From [here](#).

¹³ From [here](#).