



On Suicide

Jean Jacques Rousseau

YES, my Lord, I confess it; the weight of life is too heavy for my soul. I have long endured it as a burden; I have lost every thing which could make it dear to me, and nothing remains but irksomeness and vexation. I am told, however, that I am not at liberty to dispose of my life, without the permission of that Being from whom I received it. I am sensible likewise that you have a right over it by more titles than one. Your care has twice preserved it, and your goodness is its constant security. I will never dispose of it, till I am certain that I may do it without a crime, and till I have not the least hope of employing it for your service.

You told me that I should be of use to you; why did you deceive me? Since we have been in London, so far from thinking of employing me in your concerns, you have been kind enough to make me your only concern. How superfluous is your obliging solicitude! My lord, you know I abhor a crime, even worse than I detest life; I adore the supreme Being. I owe every thing to you; I have an affection for you; you are the only person on earth to whom I am attached. Friendship and duty may chain a wretch to this earth: sophistry and vain pretences will never detain him. Enlighten my understanding, speak to my heart; I am ready to hear you, but remember, that despair is not to be imposed upon.

You would have me apply to the test of reason: I will; let us reason. You desire me to deliberate in proportion to the importance of the question in debate; I agree to it. Let us investigate truth with temper and moderation; let us discuss this general proposition with the same indifference we should treat any other. Roebuck wrote an apology for suicide before he put an end to his life. I will not, after his example, write a book on the subject, neither am I well satisfied with that which he has penned, but I hope in this discussion at least to imitate his moderation.

I have for a long time meditated on this awful subject. You must be sensible that I have, for you know my destiny, and yet I am alive. The more I reflect, the more I am convinced that the question may be reduced to this fundamental proposition. Every man has a right by nature to pursue what he thinks good, and avoid what he thinks evil, in all respects which are not injurious to others. When our life therefore becomes a misery to ourselves, and is of advantage to no one, we are at liberty to put an end to our being. If there is any such thing as a clear and self-evident principle, certainly this is one, and if this be subverted, there is scarce an action in life which may not be made criminal.

Let us hear what the philosophers say on this subject. First, they consider life as something which is not our own, because we hold it as a gift; but because it has been given to us, is it for that reason our own? Has not God given these sophists two arms? nevertheless, when they are under apprehensions of a mortification, they do not scruple to amputate one, or both if there be occasion. By a parity of reasoning, we may convince those who believe in the immortality of the soul; for if I sacrifice my arm to the preservation of

something more precious, which is my body, I have the same right to sacrifice my body to the preservation of something more valuable, which is, the happiness of my existence. If all the gifts which heaven has bestowed are naturally designed for our good, they are certainly too apt to change their nature; and Providence has endowed us with reason, that we may discern the difference. If this rule did not authorize us to chuse the one, and reject the other, to what use would it serve among mankind?

But they turn this weak objection into a thousand shapes. They consider a man living upon earth as a soldier placed on duty. God, say they, has fixed you in this world, why do you quit your station without his leave? But you, who argue thus, has he not stationed you in the town where you was born, why therefore do you quit it without his leave? is not misery, of itself, a sufficient permission? Whatever station Providence has assigned me, whether it be in a regiment, or on the earth at large, he intended me to stay there while I found my situation agreeable, and to leave it when it became intolerable. This is the voice of nature, and the voice of God. I agree that we must wait for an order; but when I die a natural death, God does not order me to quit life, he takes it from me; it is by rendering life insupportable, that he orders me to quit it. In the first case, I resist with all my force; in the second, I have the merit of obedience.

Can you conceive that there are some people so absurd as to arraign suicide as a kind of rebellion against Providence, by an attempt to fly from his laws? but we do not put an end to our being in order to withdraw ourselves from his commands, but to execute them. What! does the power of God extend no farther than to my body? is there a spot in the universe, is there any being in the universe, which is not subject to his power, and will that power have less immediate influence over me when my being is refined, and thereby becomes less compound, and of nearer resemblance to the divine essence? no, his justice and goodness are the foundation of my hopes; and if I thought that death would withdraw me from his power, I would give up my resolution to die.

This is one of the quibbles of the *Phaedo*, which, in other respects, abounds with sublime truths. If your slave destroys himself, says Socrates to Cebes, would you not punish him, for having unjustly deprived you of your property; prithee, good Socrates, do we not belong to God after we are dead? The case you put is not applicable; you ought to argue thus: if you incumber your slave with a habit which confines him from discharging his duty properly, will you punish him for quitting it, in order to render you better service? the grand error lies in making life of too great importance; as if our existence depended upon it, and that death was a total annihilation. Our life is of no consequence in the sight of God; it is of no importance in the eyes of reason, neither ought it to be of any in our sight; when we quit our body, we only lay aside an inconvenient habit. Is this circumstance so painful, to be the occasion of so much disturbance? My Lord, these declaimers are not in earnest. Their arguments are absurd and cruel, for they aggravate the supposed crime, as if it put a period to existence, and they punish it, as if that existence was eternal.

With respect to Plato's *Phaedo*, which has furnished them with the only specious argument that has ever been advanced, the question is discussed there in a very light and desultory manner. Socrates being condemned, by an unjust judgment, to lose his life in a few hours, had no occasion to enter into an accurate enquiry whether he was at liberty to dispose of it himself. Supposing him really to have been the author of those discourses which Plato ascribes to him, yet believe me, my lord, he would have meditated with more attention on the subject, had he been in circumstances which required him to reduce his

speculations to practice; and a strong proof that no valid objection can be drawn from that immortal work against the right of disposing of our own lives, is, that Cato read it twice through the very night that he destroyed himself.

The same sophisters make it a question whether life can ever be an evil? but when we consider the multitude of errors, torments, and vices, with which it abounds, one would rather be inclined to doubt whether it can ever be a blessing. Guilt incessantly besieges the most virtuous of mankind. Every moment he lives he is in danger of falling a prey to the wicked, or of being wicked himself. To struggle and to endure, is his lot in this world; that of the dishonest man is to do evil, and to suffer. In every other particular they differ, and only agree in sharing the miseries of life in common. If you required authorities and facts, I could recite you the oracles of old, the answers of the sages, and produce instances where acts of virtue have been recompensed with death. But let us leave these considerations, my lord; it is to you whom I address myself, and I ask you what is the chief attention of a wise man in this life, except, if I may be allowed the expression, to collect himself inwardly, and endeavour, even while he lives, to be dead to every object of sense? The only way by which wisdom directs us to avoid the miseries of human nature, is it not to detach ourselves from all earthly objects, from every thing that is gross in our composition, to retire within ourselves, and to raise our thoughts to sublime contemplations? If therefore our misfortunes are derived from our passions and errors, with what eagerness should we wish for a state which will deliver us both from the one and the other? What is the fate of those sons of sensuality, who indiscreetly multiply their torments by their pleasures? they in fact destroy their existence by extending their connections in this life; they increase the weight of their crimes by their numerous attachments; they relish no enjoyments, but what are succeeded by a thousand bitter wants; the more lively their sensibility, the more acute their sufferings; the stronger they are attached to life, the more wretched they become.

But admitting it, in general, a benefit to mankind to crawl upon the earth with gloomy sadness, I do not mean to intimate that the human race ought with one common consent to destroy themselves, and make the world one immense grave. But there are miserable beings, who are too much exalted to be governed by vulgar opinion; to them despair and grievous torments are the passports of nature. It would be as ridiculous to suppose that life can be a blessing to such men, as it was absurd in the sophister Possidonius to deny that it was an evil, at the same time that he endured all the torments of the gout. While life is agreeable to us, we earnestly wish to prolong it, and nothing but a sense of extreme misery can extinguish the desire of existence; for we naturally conceive a violent dread of death, and this dread conceals the miseries of human nature from our sight. We drag a painful and melancholy life, for a long time before we can resolve to quit it; but when once life becomes so insupportable as to overcome the horror of death, then existence is evidently a great evil, and we cannot disengage ourselves from it too soon. Therefore, though we cannot exactly ascertain the point at which it ceases to be a blessing, yet at least we are certain in that it is an evil long before it appears to be such, and with every sensible man the right of quitting life is, by a great deal, precedent to the temptation.

This is not all. After they have denied that life can be an evil, in order to bar our right of making away with ourselves; they confess immediately afterwards that it is an evil, by reproaching us with want of courage to support it. According to them, it is cowardice to withdraw ourselves from pain and trouble, and there are none but dastards who destroy themselves. O Rome, thou victrix of the world, what a race of cowards did thy empire

produce! Let Arria, Eponina, Lucretia, be of the number; they were women. But Brutus, Cassius, and thou great and divine Cato, who didst share with the gods the adoration of an astonished world, thou whose sacred and august presence animated the Romans with holy zeal, and made tyrants tremble, little did thy proud admirers imagine that paltry rhetoricians, immured in the dusty corner of a college, would ever attempt to prove that thou wert a coward, for having preferred death to a shameful existence.

O the dignity and energy of your modern writers! How sublime, how intrepid are you with your pens? but tell me, thou great and valiant hero, who dost so courageously decline the battle, in order to endure the pain of living somewhat longer; when spark of fire lights upon your hand, why do you withdraw it in such haste? how? are you such a coward that you dare not bear the scorching of fire? nothing, you say, can oblige you to endure the burning spark; and what obliges me to endure life? was the creation of a man of more difficulty to Providence, than that of a straw? and is not both one and the other equally the work of his hands?

Without doubt, it is an evidence of great fortitude to bear with firmness the misery which we cannot shun; none but a fool, however, will voluntarily endure evils which he can avoid without a crime; and it is very often a great crime to suffer pain unnecessarily. He who has not resolution to deliver himself from a miserable being by a speedy death, is like one who would rather suffer a wound to mortify, than trust to a surgeon's knife for his cure. Come, thou worthy—cut off this leg, which endangers my life. I will see it done without shrinking, and will give that hero leave to call me coward, who suffers his leg to mortify, because he dares not undergo the same operation.

I acknowledge that there are duties owing to others, the nature of which will not allow every man to dispose of his life; but, in return, how many are there which give him a right to dispose of it? let a magistrate on whom the welfare of a nation depends, let a father of a family who is bound to procure subsistence for his children, let a debtor who might ruin his creditors, let these at all events discharge their duty; admitting a thousand other civil and domestic relations to oblige an honest and unfortunate man to support the misery of life, to avoid the greater evil of doing injustice; is it, therefore, under circumstances totally different, incumbent on us to preserve a life oppressed with a swarm of miseries, when it can be of no service but to him who has not courage to die? “Kill me, my child,” says the decrepid savage to his son, who carries him on his shoulders, and bends under his weight; the “enemy is at hand; go to battle with thy brethren; go and preserve thy children, and do not suffer thy helpless father to fall alive into the hands of those whose relations he has mangled.” Though hunger, sickness, and poverty, those domestic plagues, more dreadful than savage enemies, may allow a wretched cripple to consume, in a sick bed, the provisions of a family which can scarce subsist itself, yet he who has no connections, whom heaven has reduced to the necessity of living alone, whose wretched existence can produce no good, why should not he, at least, have the right of quitting a station, where his complaints are troublesome, and his sufferings of no benefit?

Weigh these considerations, my lord; collect these arguments, and you will find that they may be reduced to the most simple of nature's rights, of which no man of sense ever yet entertained a doubt. In fact, why should we be allowed to cure ourselves of the gout, and not to get rid of the misery of life? do not both evils proceed from the same hand? to what purpose is it to say, that death is painful? are drugs agreeable to be taken? no, nature revolts against both. Let them prove therefore that it is more justifiable to cure a transient

disorder by the application of remedies, than to free ourselves from an incurable evil by putting an end to our life; and let them shew how it can be less criminal to use the bark for a fever, than to take opium for the stone. If we consider the object in view, it is in both cases to free ourselves from painful sensations; if we regard the means, both one and the other are equally natural; if we consider the repugnance of our nature, it operates equally on both sides; if we attend to the will of providence, can we struggle against any evil of which it is not the author can we deliver ourselves from any torment which the hand of God has not inflicted? what are the bounds which limit his power, and when resistance lawful? are we then to make no alteration in the condition of things, because every thing is in the state he appointed? must we do nothing in this life, for fear of infringing his laws, or is it in our power to break them if we would? no, my lord, the occupation of man is more great and noble. God did not give him life that he should supinely remain in a state of constant inactivity. But he gave him freedom to act, conscience to will, and reason to choose what is good. He has constituted him sole judge of all his actions. He has engraved this precept in his heart, Do whatever you conceive to be for your own good, provided you thereby do no injury to others. If my sensations tell me that death is eligible, I resist his orders by an obstinate resolution to live; for, by making death desirable, he directs me to put an end to my being.

My lord, I appeal to your wisdom and candour; what more infallible maxims can reason deduce from religion, with respect to suicide? If Christians have adopted contrary tenets, they are neither drawn from the principles of religion, nor from the only sure guide, the Scriptures, but borrowed from the Pagan philosophers. Lactantius and Augustine, the first who propagated this new doctrine, of which Jesus Christ and his apostles take no notice, ground their arguments entirely on the reasoning of Phaedo, which I have already controverted; so that the believers, who, in this respect, think they are supported by the authority of the Gospel, are in fact only countenanced by the authority of Plato. In truth, where do we find, throughout the whole bible any law against suicide, or so much as a bare disapprobation of it; and is it not very unaccountable, that among the instances produced of persons who devoted themselves to death, we do not find the least word of improbation against examples of this kind? nay, what is more, the instance of Samson's voluntary death is authorized by a miracle, by which he revenges himself of his enemies. Would this miracle have been displayed to justify a crime; and would this man, who lost his strength by suffering himself to be seduced by the allurements of a woman, have recovered it to commit an authorised crime, as if God himself would practice deceit on men?

Thou shalt do no murder, says the decalogue; what are we to infer from this? if this commandment is to be taken literally, we must not destroy malefactors, nor our enemies: and Moses, who put so many people to death, was a bad interpreter of his own precept. If there are any exceptions, certainly the first must be in favour of suicide, because it is exempt from any degree of violence and injustice, the two only circumstances which can make homicide criminal; and because nature, moreover, has, in this respect, thrown sufficient obstacles in the way.

But still they tell us, we must patiently endure the evils which God inflicts, and make a merit of our sufferings. This application however of the maxims of Christianity, is very ill calculated to satisfy our judgment. Man is subject to a thousand troubles, his life is a complication of evils, and he seems to have been born only to suffer. Reason directs him to shun as many of these evils as he can avoid; and religion, which is never in contradiction to

reason, approves of his endeavours. But how inconsiderable is the account of these evils, in comparison with those he is obliged to endure against his will? It is with {86} respect to these, that a merciful God allows man to claim the merit of resistance; he receives the tribute he has been pleased to impose, as a voluntary homage, and he places our resignation in this life to our profit in the next. True repentance is derived from nature; if man endures whatever he is obliged to suffer, he does, in this respect, all that God requires of him; and if any one is so inflated with pride, as to attempt more, he is a madman, who ought to be confined, or an impostor, who ought to be punished. Let us, therefore, without scruple, fly from all the evils we can avoid; there will still be too many left for us to endure. Let us, without remorse, quit life itself when it becomes a torment to us, since it is in our own power to do it, and that in so doing we neither offend God nor man. If we would offer a sacrifice to the supreme Being, is it nothing to undergo death? let us devote to God that which he demands by the voice of reason, and into his hands let us peaceably surrender our souls.

Such are the liberal precepts which good sense dictates to every man, and which religion authorises.⁹ Let us apply these precepts to ourselves. You have condescended to disclose your mind to me; I am acquainted with your uneasiness; you do not endure less than myself; and your troubles, like mine, are incurable; and they are the more remediless, as the laws of honour are more immutable than those of fortune. You bear them, I must confess, with fortitude. Virtue supports you; advance but one step farther, and she disengages you. You intreat me to suffer; my lord, I dare importune you to put an end to your sufferings; and I leave you to judge which of us is most dear to the other.

Why should we delay doing that which we must do at last? shall we wait till old age and decrepid baseness attach us to life, after they have robbed it of its charms, and till we are doomed to drag an infirm and decrepid body with labour, and ignominy, and pain? We are at an age when the soul has vigour to disengage itself with ease from its shackles, and when a man knows how to die as he ought; when farther advanced in years, he suffers himself to be torn from life, which he quits with reluctance. Let us take advantage of this time, when the tedium of life makes death desirable; and let us tremble for fear it should come in all its horrors, at the moment when we could wish to avoid it. I remember the time, when I prayed to heaven only for a single hour of life, and when I should have died in despair if it had not been granted. Ah! what a pain it is to burst asunder the ties which attach our hearts to this world, and how advisable it is to quit life the moment the connection is broken! I am sensible, my lord, that we are both worthy of a purer mansion; virtue points it out, and destiny invites us to seek it. May the friendship which invites us preserve our union to the latest hour! O what a pleasure for two sincere friends voluntary to end their days in each others arms, to intermingle their latest breath, and at the same instant to give up the soul which they shared in common! What pain, what regret can infect their last moments? What do they quit by taking leave of the world? They go together; they quit nothing.

Jean Jacques Rousseau. *Eloisa*. Letter CXIV: To Lord B—. London: John Harding, 1810.

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