

Spinoza and Kant on Suicide

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Abstract: In this paper I'm going to argue that both, Spinoza and Kant, construct the argument "for the impossibility of self-destruction" and examine how the concept of suicide relates to the concept of humanity in both philosophers. I will argue that Kant's and Spinoza's argument for the impossibility of self-destruction follows from the "external cause" premise and not from "the same subject" premise. I will try to show that Spinoza and Kant argue that suicide is irrational – it is never done rationally or freely.

Introduction

Spinoza's theory of ethics differs from Kant's theory. The notion of good is primary in Spinoza's ethics and Spinoza derives the notion of right from the notion of good. In Kant's ethics the notion of duty, i.e the notion of right, is primary. He derives the notion of good from the notion of right. Kant explicitly rejects Spinoza's metaphysics and Spinoza's epistemology in his work. He argues that Spinoza's metaphysics is a sort of dogmatism. However, both Kant and Spinoza argue that human beings have double nature. According to both philosophers, human nature is partly rational and partly instinctive. Both Kant and Spinoza did not explain the relation between rational and instinctive part of human nature in their work. However, they both argue that rational aspect of human nature is fundamental. Both Kant and Spinoza emphasize that it is not possible to know the essence of the thing in itself.

The purpose of this inquiry is to show that in spite of huge ontological and epistemological differences in their philosophical theories, those two philosophers agree to some point in the questions concerning human nature¹. One of them is the question of suicide. In this paper I will argue that both

¹ In his *Opus Postumum*, Kant makes a lot of references to Spinoza.

thinkers argue that suicide cannot be committed rationally and that they both construct the same premises of this argument.

Spinoza: External Cause Argument

In E3P4 Spinoza argues: “Nothing can be destroyed save by an external cause.” Spinoza emphasizes: “And so while we regard the thing alone, and not external causes, we can find nothing in it which can destroy it.” I will call this argument the “external cause argument”.

This argument can also be found in the E4P20Schol: “No one, therefore, unless he is overcome by external causes, and those contrary to his nature, neglects to see what is useful to him, i.e. to preserve his being. No one, I say, from the necessity of his nature, but driven by external causes, turns away from taking food, or commits suicide which can take place in many manners.” Thus, the external cause which destroys the thing is external to the thing’s proper essence.

For Spinoza the “willed” self-destruction is impossible. According to Spinoza, an agent who commits a suicide is overcome by the external environment, which is operating contrary to the nature of an agent. So, any attempt to causally explain suicide must focus not on an agent who commits a suicide, but on the external cause which has operated contrary to the nature of an agent.

Spinoza: “Not in the same Subject” Argument

In E3P5 Spinoza claims: “Things are contrary by nature, that is, they cannot exist in the same subject, in so far as one can destroy the other.” I will call this proposition “not in the same subject”² argument. According to Garret, Spinoza in this proposition wants to say either 1 or 2:

- 1) “... that the whole natures of the two things are incompatible – or in other words, that the whole nature of the first, and the whole nature

² As Garret identifies it in “Spinoza’s *Conatus* Argument” p.230

of the second could not be co-instantiated by the same thing at the same time.”³

2) “...that two things cannot coexist as parts of the same whole.”⁴

Spinoza argues that “two things cannot coexist as the part of the same whole”, i.e. as the part of the same nature, which is obvious in E4P21, where Spinoza argues: “No one can desire to be blessed, to act well, and to live well, who at the same time does not desire to be, to act, and to live, that is, actually to exist.”

Spinoza’s Argument for the Impossibility of Self-destruction

“External cause” argument (E3P4) and “Not in the same subject” (E3P5) argument are premises of Spinoza’s argument for the impossibility of self-destruction:

E3P4: “Nothing can be destroyed except through an external cause.”

E3P5: “Things that can destroy each other cannot exist in the same subject.”

It follows:

E3P6: “Each thing in so far as it is in itself endeavours to persist in its own being.”

In the proof for the proposition E3P6 Spinoza summarizes arguments for E3P4 and E3P5: “Nor can a thing have anything in itself whereby it can be destroyed, or which negates its essence, but on the contrary, it is opposed to everything that negates its essence.”

It seems that there is a gap between Spinoza’s argument for the impossibility of self-destruction, which follows from E3P4 and E3P5, and the self-preservative character of action, which is asserted by E3P6. It can be

³ Ibid, p.231

⁴ Ibid, p.231

argued that from the premise that “nothing can be destroyed except through an external cause”, it doesn’t necessarily follow that each thing tries as hard as it can to stay in existence. This “gap” can be solved by showing why Spinoza thought that the essence of the thing contains nothing that can destroy it.

In the E4P18Schol. Spinoza says: “Again if virtue is nothing else than to act according to the laws of one’s own nature, and no one endeavours to preserve his being save according to the laws of his own nature...” In the E4P20Schol. he argues “No one therefore, unless he is overcome by external causes and those contrary to his nature, neglects to seek what is useful to himself, i.e. to preserve his being.” Therefore, Spinoza equates the essence of the thing with the nature of the thing. So it is obvious why Spinoza thought that the essence of the thing contains nothing that can destroy it: “Why an a thing not be destroyed, i.e., caused to lose its essence, without outside interference? Well, necessarily x’s essence is part of x’s nature; if x were also capable unaided of destroying itself, its nature must also contain something implying the denial to x of its essence. Thus a thing capable of unaided self-destruction would have a nature which both entailed or included a certain essence and was also inconsistent with it; such a nature would be self-contradictory, and therefore could not be had by anything; so nothing can be capable of destroying itself without outside help.⁵ On the other hand, Spinoza equates the essence of the thing with its *conatus*: “The endeavour (*conatus*) wherewith a thing endeavours to persist in its being is nothing else than the actual essence of the thing.”⁶ That is why for Spinoza from the non-self-destructive character of the action it necessarily follows the self-preservative character of the action. Thus, Spinoza’s conception of human essence is self-affirming.

In the E4P20Schol. Spinoza says: “The more each one endeavours successfully to get what is useful to him, that is to preserve his own being the more he is endowed with virtue, and on the contrary, the more one neglects to preserve what is useful, that is his being, he is thus far lacking in power.” Spinoza gives an examples of turning away from taking food and committing

⁵ Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, p.239

⁶ Spinoza, E3P7

suicide as an examples of neglecting to preserve what is useful. Thus, Spinoza's conception of human essence is self-affirming in the sense of the preservation of one's life.

According to Spinoza, self-preservation (*conatus*) is an objective end ⁷. In the E3P7 Spinoza argues: "The endeavour (*conatus*) wherewith a thing endeavours to persist in its being is nothing else than the actual essence of the thing." In E4P25 Spinoza argues the same: "No one endeavours to preserve his being for the sake of anything else."

In the proof for E4P25, Spinoza claims: "The endeavour wherewith each thing endeavours to persist in its own being is defined by the essence of the thing alone, and from this alone, and not from the essence of any other thing, it necessarily follows that each one endeavours to preserve his own being. For if man were to endeavour to preserve his being for the sake of anything else, then that thing would be the primary basis of his virtue which is absurd.

Spinoza equates the *conatus* with the thing's essence, this means that *conatus* is an objective end – it is never a means to anything else. Spinoza argues that "no virtue can be conceived as prior to this virtue of endeavouring to preserve oneself." (E4P22)

Kant: External Cause Argument

According to Kant, suicide is motivated by misfortune and founded on self-love.

Kant argues that the suicidal agent places the release from "painful circumstances" – his happiness ⁸ – above the rational autonomy, which is the source of all values for Kant. The motive for suicide for Kant is self-love, or pursuit of happiness. Thus, suicide is motivated by unhappiness. Kant defines happiness as "contentment with the state of the world in which I find myself in relation to other things outside me."⁹ Kant also argues that happiness depends on external factors, so it "can be very defective, and very changeable."¹⁰ In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant makes a distinction between the

⁷ It cannot serve as a means for another end.

⁸ Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics*, p.5

⁹ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p.409

¹⁰ Ibid, p.21

“blessedness” and the “happiness”. He argues that happiness is contentment with the state of the world in which an agent finds himself in relation to the other things outside him. Misfortune is, therefore, an external cause on which an agent can’t influence.

Kant: “Not in the Same Subject” Argument

As it is said, the motive for suicide, according to Kant, is self-love. Kant argues that it is contradictory that one can improve life by destroying it. He emphasizes that the function of self-love is to aim at life (not at self-destruction). The person who commits suicide, therefore, contradicts the purpose of life.

Kant argues that the proper end of rational being is self-preservation. To destroy one’s ability to act is in contradiction with objectives of free rational agents as such, and so the suicide is in contradiction with his or her own nature. Kant argues that self-love and self-destruction cannot exist in the same subject.

On the other hand, suicide is contradictory to Kant’s Formula of Humanity, which is universal law: “So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only.”¹¹

Kant’s Argument For the Impossibility of Self-destruction

Kant claims that suicide is founded on self-love. He argues that suicide could be permitted by the rule of prudence, but on the other hand, it is strictly prohibited by the rule of morality.

Kant argues that the maxim: “From self-love I adopt it is a principle to shorten my life, when its longer duration is likely to bring more evil than satisfaction.”¹² He says that it should be asked “whether this principle founded on self-love can become a universal law of nature.”¹³ He claims: “Now we can see at once that a system of nature of which it should be a law to destroy life by means of the very feeling whose special nature it is to impel

¹¹ Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics* p.57

¹² Ibid, p.57

¹³ Ibid, p.57

to the improvement of life would contradict itself, and therefore could not exist as a system of nature; hence that maxim cannot possibly exist as a universal law of nature, and consequently would be wholly inconsistent with the supreme principle of duty.”¹⁴

Kant’s argument for the impossibility for self-destruction follows from his “external cause argument” and “not in the same subject” argument:

- 1) Suicide is motivated by misfortune and founded on self-love, which means improving one’s life.
- 2) It is contradictory to think that we can improve life by destroying it.
- 3) Therefore, an agent should strive to preserve his own life.

There is another aspect of Kant’s argument for the impossibility of self-destruction. Kant argues: “He who contemplates suicide should ask him self whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. If he destroys himself in order to escape from painful circumstances, he uses a person merely as a means to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life. But a man is not a thing, that is to say, something which can be used merely as means, but must in all his actions be always considered as an end in himself. I cannot, therefore, dispose in any way a man in my own person so as to mutilate him, to damage or kill him.”¹⁵

Thus, Kant’s argument for the impossibility of self-destruction can also be formulated as follows:

- 1) Suicide is motivated by misfortune and founded on self-love, which means improving one’s life.
- 2) It is contradictory to think that one can improve life by destroying his humanity.
- 3) Therefore, an agent should strive to preserve his humanity.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.57

¹⁵ Ibid, p.57

According to Kant, self-preservation is one of the man's duties towards himself and God. In the *Lectures on Ethics* Kant argues: "Suicide evokes revulsion, because everything in nature seeks to preserve itself..."¹⁶ Therefore, Kant also argues that human nature is self-affirming in the same sense as Spinoza. He talks about preservation of life, and not about the aversion of pain, and living life in pleasure: "No there is no necessary that so as I live, I should live happily, but there is a necessity that so long as I live, I should live honourably."

Living the life in pleasure and avoiding the pain is not Kant's concept of self-preservation. For it was so "all our self-regarding duties would be aimed at the pleasuredness of life."¹⁷

Kant argues that self-preservation is a subjective end.¹⁸ In the *Lectures on Ethics* Kant argues: "In other respects, there is much in the world that is higher than life. The observance of morality is far higher. It is better to sacrifice life than to forfeit morality. It is not necessary to live, but it is necessary that, so long as we live, we do so honourably..."¹⁹

On the other hand, Kant argues that humanity is an objective end. He argues: "Humanity in our person is an object of highest respect and never be violated by us."²⁰ He emphasizes that if a man can preserve his life no otherwise than by dishonouring his humanity, he ought rather to sacrifice.²¹ Thus the preservation of life is not the highest duty, one often has to give up life in order to have lived in honourable way: "So if I can preserve my life only by disreputable conduct, virtue absolves me from the duty of preserving it; because here a higher duty beckons and passes judgement on me."²²

Spinoza and Kant: The Irrationality of Suicide

In the E4P72 Spinoza argues: "A free man never acts by fraud, but always with good faith." In the E4P72Schol. He says: "If a man can liberate himself

¹⁶ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p.146

¹⁷ Ibid, p.147

¹⁸ It is founded on hypothetical, and not on categorical imperative.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.147

²⁰ Ibid, p.150

²¹ Ibid, p.151

²² Ibid, p.151

from a present danger of death by deception, would not consideration for the preservation of his own being advice him to deceive? It may be answered in the same manner, that if reason advised him that, it would advise it to all men, and therefore reason would advice men not to unite their forces and have laws in common save in deception one to the other, that is, not to have common laws, which is absurd.”

This argument can be compared to Kant’s categorical imperative, and it seems contradictory to the Spinoza’s conception of *conatus* as objective end. It can also be compared to Kant’s claim in the *Lectures on Ethics*: “So if I can preserve my life only by disreputable conduct, virtue absolves me from the duty of preserving it; because here a higher duty, beckons and passes judgement on me.”²³ Kant’s point is that if the maxim that life can be preserved by “disreputable conduct” is universalised it would contradict to moral law, i.e., moral law would be impossible.

On the other hand, Spinoza didn’t have anything like the categorical imperative on his mind. The proposition E4P72Schol. shows that Spinoza argues that self-preservation (*conatus*) is rational concept. In the E4P24 Spinoza argues: “To act absolutely according to virtue is nothing else in us then to act under the guidance of reason, to live so, and to preserve one’s being (these three have the same meaning) on the basis of seeking what is useful to oneself.” “Man is a rational being, and he shouldn’t try to preserve his being blindly, regardless to any circumstances.

According to Spinoza, it is impossible to commit suicide rationally or freely. Spinoza argues that an agent’s “adequate ideas” about the world and his own essence are changed by the operation of external causes, that is why he commits suicide.

Bennett²⁴ argues that the case of Seneca presented in the E4P20Schol. refutes E3P4 (and thus E4P20Schol.). According to Bennett, Seneca committed suicide and this fact refutes Spinoza’s claim that self-destruction is impossible, i.e., that “nothing can be destroyed except by an external cause.” But Spinoza argues that self-destruction makes an agent assume a nature

²³ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p.151

²⁴ Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* p.238

contrary to its real one by the affection of “latent external causes”, which affect his body and mind. (E4P20Schol.) Therefore, a man who commits suicide, does not do it from the “necessity of his own nature”. (E4P20Shol). As Spinoza explains in E4P20shol. Seneca didn’t will his own self-destruction, he was forced by Nero to commit suicide. Hence, his suicide is a consequence of the operation of an external cause.

Kant also argues about the rationality of self-preservation. According to Kant, the preservation of one’s life is a strict duty ”which is resting upon the personhood according to him as a rational being.”²⁵

For Kant suicide is irrational, because the rational autonomy of an agent is negated by this act of self-destruction. He argues that suicidal agent chooses happiness, over the source of all values – rational autonomy. He emphasizes that suicide is desperate act, rather than the calculated one.

According to Kant, suicide can only be rational and permitted “when a man can no longer live in accordance with virtue and prudence, and must therefore put an end to his life from honourable motives.”²⁶ If an agent cannot preserve his life other than by violating the duties to himself, then an agent should sacrifice it, rather than to violate those duties.

Kant gives an example of Cato who committed suicide when he realised that he can’t escape from Caesar. Cato’s suicide is rational, because he did it to prevent himself from falling into Caesar’s hands and in order to save his honour. But, still, Kant argues that this suicide was not “noble”: “If Cato, under all the tortures that Caesar might have inflicted on him, had still adhered to his resolve as steadfast mind, that would have been noble, but not when he laid his hands upon himself.”²⁷

There are still some counterexamples that haven’t been examined in Spinoza’s and Kant’s conception of suicide.

Although Spinoza claims that self-destruction of an agent is impossible (except through an external caus), it is still possible to think of an agent who chooses to commit a suicide. It is possible to think of an agent who ceases to exist.

²⁵ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p.489

²⁶ Ibid, p.145

²⁷ Ibid, p.145

According to Spinoza's conception of suicide, the choice of an agent (who chooses to commit suicide) would not be the rational choice. This choice would be a consequence of the operation of an external cause, by which an agent is prevented to exist, or by which he was affected that it made him "assume the nature contrary to its former one"²⁸ and cease to exist.

For Kant, suicide as the choice of an agent is absurd, because an agent "has employed his choice to destroy the power of choosing itself".²⁹ Kant argues that if freedom is the condition of life, it cannot be employed to abolish life, since it destroys and abolishes itself.

Suicide can also be a consequence of the false belief. An agent may perform an action that is self-destructive, but not because he wills self-destruction, but because of a false belief. If somebody takes a medicine in order to improve his health, but, on the contrary, seriously damages his health, his intention is not self-destructive. On the contrary, his action seems to lead towards his self-preservation.

This example doesn't undermine Kant's conception of suicide, because he denies the possibility of suicide as the rational choice. It also doesn't undermine Spinoza's conception of suicide. According to the E3P4 and E3P20Schol. a false belief can be perceived as an external cause (for example, as a mistake of the doctor, who wrongly informed an agent about the medicine) which made an agent to perform a self-destructive action.

The same can be said for suicide as a consequence of the depletion of one's power. For Kant, the depletion of one's power is not founded on one's intention, or rational choice. So suicide in this case is irrational. As it is said, Spinoza would consider the depletion of an agent's power as a cause of the operation of the forces external to the thing's essence. Matson's counterexample: "The sun will perish, and it is possible, indeed, highly probable, that it will perish by burning itself out, by depleting its nuclear and then its gravitational energy"³⁰ does not fit into Spinoza's theory of self-destruction. As it is said, Spinoza argues that it is impossible that self-destruction follows from the thing's essence, from the necessity of its own

²⁸ E4P20Schol.

²⁹ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p.144

³⁰ in Barbone & Rice, "Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide", p.79

nature, thus, it is impossible that sun burns itself out from the necessity of its own nature. But Spinoza's theory is not undermined by Matson's example. Spinoza's explanation would be that the depletion of the energy of the sun is caused by the thing external to the essence of the sun.

For Kant, suicide is a violation towards an agent duty to himself. "Not to commit a suicide" is a perfect duty, which means that it is absolute prohibition. For Kant, suicide is immoral, because it is the violation of the humanity, which is an objective end. On the other hand, Spinoza in his *Ethics* doesn't discuss the morality of the suicide. He argues that suicide is impossible and absurd, but he only discusses its causality. Suicidal behaviour is a consequence of the failure of resisting contingencies within the environment itself.

Conclusion

I have argued that Spinoza's and Kant's arguments against self-destruction can be perceived as "external cause arguments" (a suicide can only be a consequence of an external cause) and "not in the same subject arguments" (things that are contrary by nature cannot coexist in the same subject). Subsequently, these two arguments can be recognized as premises of their argument for the impossibility of self-destruction. Both, Spinoza and Kant argue that it is impossible to commit a suicide rationally or freely. They claim that to the extent that we live rationally, we seem to enhance our self-preservation, so we cannot want our own self-destruction. Spinoza and Kant argue that suicide is "against the reason".

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