The Moral Status of Suicide

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In *The Right to Suicide*, Victor Cosculluela argues that suicide is morally permissible if and only if it does not violate any of the agent’s duties to others that override his individual rights. I argue, against Cosculluela’s view, that evaluating the moral status of suicide depends on the consideration of at least three morally relevant factors: duties to others, the intrinsic features of a person’s life, and the duty of self-respect. First, I explain Cosculluela’s argument in which he claims that the only moral factor that can limit the moral permissibility of suicide is duties to others. Second, I discuss one of Margaret Battin’s counter-examples to Cosculluela’s argument and explain that assessing the moral status of suicide depends on a stronger consideration of the intrinsic features of a person’s life than Cosculluela thinks. I then argue that, in addition to duties to others and the intrinsic features of a person’s life, the duty of self-respect is a third relevant factor that affects the moral status of suicide.

Cosculluela argues that suicide is an “overrideable right” that derives from more general rights, including the right to avoid suffering, the right to self-determination, and the right to maximize one’s own wellbeing and to avoid reductions in one’s own wellbeing. Importantly, however, the right to suicide can only be derived from one of these rights if no other options are available...

At this point, Cosculluela’s argument should be clear: suicide is morally permissible if and only if it does not violate any of the agent’s duties to others that override his right to suicide.

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2 The purpose of this paper is not to provide an exhaustive moral theory of suicide; rather, it is to show that duties to oneself, intrinsic features of a person’s life, and the duty of self-respect are at least some of the relevant factors in determining the moral status of suicide.
3 Ibid., 431.
Thus, in his view, an adequate moral assessment of suicide involves weighing an agent’s right to suicide against his duties to others. Duties to others is the only factor that can limit the moral permissibility of suicide, but certain features of a person’s life can strengthen one’s right to suicide. I now argue, against Cosculluela’s view, that evaluating the moral status of suicide depends on the consideration of at least three morally relevant factors: duties to others, the intrinsic features of a person’s life, and the duty of self-respect. In the following section, I explain why intrinsic features of a person’s life can limit one’s right to suicide.

Cosculluela’s argument that duties to others can limit the moral permissibility of suicide seems plausible: Insofar as a person’s suicide will harm others in some way, or require her to break important promises to others, that person’s duties to others will count against the possibility that her suicide is morally permissible. If I am a single mother of three children, my duties to my children may override my right to suicide; if I have promised to care for my elderly parents, my duty to keep my promise to them may override my right to suicide. But it seems wrong to say that duties to others is the only morally relevant factor that can limit the moral permissibility of suicide.

To be fair, Cosculluela does not reject the moral significance of the intrinsic features of a person’s life in evaluating the moral status of suicide entirely. He argues that the intrinsic features of a person’s life does make a moral difference in the sense that such features can strengthen a person’s right to suicide. But recall that, in his view, intrinsic features of a person’s life cannot limit the moral permissibility of suicide. Cosculluela’s distinction between a particular factor’s ability to strengthen a person’s right to suicide and a particular factor’s ability to limit the moral permissibility of a person’s suicide allows him to maintain the thesis that duties to others is the only factor that can limit the moral permissibility of suicide. Put another
way, other factors can strengthen the moral permissibility of a particular suicide by strengthening the agent’s right to suicide, thus making it more difficult for the agent’s duties to others to override that right. But those factors cannot themselves limit the moral permissibility of suicide directly.

But this seems implausible. Clearly, if certain intrinsic features of a person’s life can strengthen a person’s right to suicide, it is also true that certain intrinsic features of a person’s life can weaken one’s right to suicide; and a factor that weakens a person’s right to suicide just is a factor that limits the moral permissibility of suicide. Different morally relevant factors will limit the moral permissibility of suicide in different ways: duties to others may limit the moral permissibility of suicide by overriding individual rights, while intrinsic features of a person’s life may limit the moral permissibility of suicide by weakening that person’s right to suicide. But both factors have the ability to limit the moral permissibility of suicide all the same.

One of Margaret Battin’s counter-examples to Cosculluela’s argument can be used to show how assessing the moral status of suicide depends on a stronger consideration of the intrinsic features of a person’s life than Cosculluela admits. The example goes as follows: An elderly woman with a terminal illness and a teenage boy whose favourite television show has been cancelled plan to commit suicide, and the two individuals have identical duties to others. Battin argues that, in Cosculluela’s view, the elderly woman and the teenage boy will share the same right to suicide even though they have drastically different reasons for killing themselves. Battin seems to think that Cosculluela entirely neglects the moral significance of the intrinsic features of the elderly woman’s and the teenage boy’s lives. But if my reading of Cosculluela is correct, then the problem is not that he neglects the moral significance of the intrinsic features of

\[4\] Ibid., 433.

\[5\] Ibid.
a person’s life altogether, but that he fails to see that those features really can limit the moral
permissibility of suicide.

Cosculluela’s response to Battin’s counter-example demonstrates this point. He claims
that, even if the elderly woman’s relations to others are identical to the teenage boy’s, we are
allowed to judge the moral status of their suicides differently based on the consideration that the
elderly woman is suffering profound pain while the teenage boy is not. The elderly woman’s
intense suffering strengthens her right to suicide and thus may override her duties to others,
while the teenage boy’s trivial matters fail to strengthen his right to suicide in any way; thus the
elderly woman’s suicide may be morally permissible while the teenage boy’s suicide is morally
impermissible.

Cosculluela’s response to Battin is unsatisfying for two reasons. First, it is inconsistent
with his previous claim that, in the case where a person has no duties to others, that person’s
right to suicide can be justified simply by appealing to his right to self-determination. If that
claim is correct, then if the elderly woman and the teenage boy both had no duties to others, then
in both cases we should be able to appeal to the right to self-determination to justify suicide in
each case. But most of us think, and Cosculluela seems to agree, that the elderly woman’s
suicide and the teenage boy’s suicide cannot be justified simply by appealing to the right to self-
determination, which is at least in part because of the moral significance of the intrinsic features
of their lives. The elderly woman’s intense suffering and the teenage boy’s trivial reasons for
contemplating suicide are morally weighty considerations that matter independent from how they
affect duties to others. Second, it is not just that that the elderly woman’s intense suffering
strengthens her right to suicide against her duties to others (Cosculluela’s view forces us to stop

Comment [KS11]: Here, the writer is clear that her objection is not the
same as Battin’s objection, since she thinks that Battin has "read"
Cosculluela incorrectly (i.e. she has not interpreted his argument
correctly.)

In philosophy, distinguish clearly between arguments/objections that
are your own and arguments/objections that belong to
the authors you are discussing.

6 Ibid.
here), but that the teenage boy’s trivial reasons for contemplating suicide significantly weaken the possibility that he may exercise his right to suicide. Thus intrinsic features about the teenage boy’s life limit the moral permissibility of his suicide. Obviously, then, intrinsic features of a person’s life is another morally relevant factor that can limit the moral permissibility of suicide.

At this point, it should be clear that in addition to duties to others, intrinsic features of a person’s life is a second morally relevant factor that can either strengthen or limit the moral permissibility of suicide. I will now discuss our third morally relevant factor in determining the moral status of an agent’s suicide, namely, the duty of self-respect.

There are a number ways in which self-respect can be understood, but in its basic form, respecting oneself means recognizing one’s own moral worth and value and acting upon that recognition. The justification for accepting the moral duty of self-respect depends on the idea that, just as I have duties toward others because they are persons with moral status and dignity, I have duties to myself because I am a person with equal status and dignity. Shelly Kagan offers a preliminary account of what a duty of self-respect might look like that includes the following components: (1) the requirement to count your own wellbeing as no less important than others’ wellbeing; (2) the requirement to develop your personal talents in order to maximize your wellbeing and contribute to the overall good; and (3) the recognition that because you are an equal member of the moral community, you are required to stand up for your rights; specifically, you are required to protest and defend yourself against others’ mistreatment of you.8

If we accept the duty of self-respect, then it will often count against the moral permissibility of suicide; my belief that my own life has moral worth and value seems to imply a

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8 Ibid., 152.
second belief, namely, that my life’s continuing rather than ending is a good thing. And insofar as suicide communicates the message that one’s life does not have moral worth and value, it conflicts with our principle of self-respect.

Consider the following example: I am contemplating suicide following a tragic breakup because I believe that my life is not worth living unless I am romantically involved with my former partner. What’s more, suppose that I have no duties to others, and suppose that I have exhausted every other option available to me that could eliminate my intense feelings of loss—I attended therapy, wrote in a journal, began a drug treatment for depression, and so on. On Cosculluela’s view, my suicide is morally permissible, and it can be justified simply by appealing to the right to self-determination. But many of us think that a person who commits suicide following a tragic breakup is not morally justified in doing so regardless of whether she has outstanding duties to others or not. Suicide, in this case, is incompatible with self-respect: I fail to recognize that my own life has worth and value beyond merely having relationships with other people. The merit of acknowledging the importance of the duty of self-respect in the case of suicide is that it accounts for the common intuition that our lives have worth and value in and of themselves; they are not disposable pieces of property when all else fails.

The duty of self-respect seems to have a second important implication for the moral status of suicide. Earlier I claimed that including degrading conditions on the list of intrinsic features of one’s life that may justify suicide seems problematic. The reason is that the problem of whether degrading conditions is the kind of feature of a person’s life that can justify suicide seems to depend on considerations of self-respect that Cosculluela overlooks. More specifically, the component of self-respect requires us to recognize our equal moral worth in comparison to others and the obligation to stand up for that worth in the face of mistreatment.
Consider the following example: Jane is a victim of domestic violence whose husband has abused her for five years; the physical, psychological, and emotional pain of being subject to abuse is so severe that Jane is contemplating suicide. Suppose, too, that Jane has no children and no outstanding duties to others. Although the intrinsic features of Jane’s life (i.e. physical, psychological, and emotional pain) are bad for her wellbeing, and although she has no outstanding duties to others, many of us will think that Jane’s suicide is not morally permissible.

Our intuitions can be explained by the moral relevance of self-respect: Jane’s suicide communicates the message that she has accepted her position of degradation; that her moral worth and value is inferior to that of others such that her life is not worth living. But Jane ought not to accept her degraded position; rather, she ought to recognize her own moral worth and value and protest her position of degradation.

To clarify, although the duty of self-respect counts against the moral permissibility of suicide in cases where the agent is responding to degrading conditions, it is still possible that some of these cases will turn out morally permissible. In other words, the duty of self-respect is just one of many important factors that has some effect on the overall moral status of suicide, and the weight of other morally relevant factors may strengthen the agent’s right to suicide to the extent that her suicide becomes morally permissible. Second, even when a particular suicide is morally impermissible in part because of a violation of the duty of self-respect, it will often be the case that the agent ought not to be blamed. The reason is that degrading social conditions is a major cause of reductions in an individual’s self-esteem and sense of self-worth and, consequently, his or her self-respect.9 It is important to acknowledge that assessing whether a particular agent is morally blameworthy for his actions requires an understanding of the various

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social conditions that may constrain his ability to perform the actions that we judge to be morally permissible. It is entirely consistent to hold both that an act is morally impermissible and that the agent ought not to be blamed.

At this point, an important question should be raised: **Does suicide necessarily imply a rejection of one’s own moral worth and value?** If it does, then it seems that the duty of self-respect will always count against the moral permissibility of suicide; it will always tell us suicide is wrong. If this is true, then a permissible suicide will be one in which the duty of self-respect is overridden by other morally relevant factors. But if suicide does not necessarily imply a rejection of one’s own moral worth and value, then it is at least possible that suicide can be consistent with self-respect.\(^\text{10}\) I do not wish to take a stance on this here, but the problem highlights what my argument does and does not show. It shows that, (1) if we accept the duty of self-respect, then it is a relevant factor in determining the moral status of suicide, and (2) that the duty of self-respect has been shown to limit the moral permissibility of suicide in certain cases. I have not argued that *every* suicide necessarily conflicts with self-respect.

It seems that, contrary to Cosculluela’s argument, the moral status of suicide cannot be determined simply by weighing an agent’s right to suicide against his duties to others. I hope to have argued persuasively that evaluating the moral status of suicide depends on at least three morally relevant factors: duties to others, intrinsic features about the person’s life, and the duty of self-respect. Specifically, I have argued that in addition to a consideration of one’s duties to others, an adequate moral assessment of suicide requires a stronger consideration of the intrinsic

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\(^{10}\) The puzzle here seems to be that the duty of self-respect requires one both to count one’s wellbeing as equally important as others’ and to stand up for one’s own moral worth and value in cases where one has been wronged in some way. The issue of whether suicide can ever be consistent with self-respect may depend on how these two components of self-respect weigh against each other; if degrading conditions have caused a deathblow to my wellbeing, then my duty to stand up for my moral worth and value may be overridden.
features of a person’s life that goes beyond Cosculluea’s claim that intrinsic features can only strengthen one’s right to suicide. In my view, intrinsic features can also limit the moral permissibility of suicide. Further, I have shown that the duty of self-respect is a third morally relevant factor in assessing the moral status of suicide that limits the moral permissibility of suicide in certain cases. The question of whether suicide can ever be consistent with an agent’s self-respect remains unanswered. It does, however, shed light on the broader problem that much work needs to be done before we establish an exhaustive moral theory of suicide.

Bibliography


Comment [KS17]: The writer sums up her argument and ends with a suggestion about what philosophical work is still left to do on this topic.