2008

Suicide and Evolution

Michael Benjamin Miller
The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Michael Benjamin Miller on February 29, 2008.

________________________________________
Michael Ruse
Professor Directing Thesis

________________________________________
David McNaughton
Committee Member

________________________________________
Thomas Joiner
Committee Member

Approved:

________________________________________
Piers Rawling, Chair, Department of Philosophy

________________________________________
Joseph Travis, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
I dedicate this thesis to my dear friends and family, for enduring all of the invariable madness that ensues from pursuing such a lengthy and difficult intellectual endeavor. I also wish to thank Zach Catanzarite, for without his inspiration this project certainly never would have materialized- his years of conversing with me on this topic was absolutely essential, thanks Z. Also, I must thank Michael Ruse for taking a chance on a young man with strange intellectual ambitions. Finally, thanks to David McNaughton for assaulting my primitive thoughts at every single step in this lengthy process- I am a better philosopher because of his acute criticisms.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract v

Introduction 1

1. Evolutionary Theory and Suicide 4
   Aquinas and Suicide
   Biology and Death
   Non-Human Suicide
   The Evolution of Evolutionary Theory
   Memetics
   Suicide and Evolution

2. Historical Conceptions of Suicide 28
   Plato and Suicide
   Hume and Suicide
   Kant and Suicide
   Contemporary Debates Concerning Suicide
   My Proposed Operational Definition of Suicide

3. Action Theory and Suicide 46
   Intentionally X-ing Versus Intending to X
   Justification of My Proposed Definition of Suicide
   Knobe and Ascribing Praise/Blame

Conclusion 56
References 60
Biographical Sketch 63
ABSTRACT

I intend to examine a particular human behavior, suicide, from an evolutionary perspective. It has been nearly 150 years since Darwinism has captivated the minds of mankind and I consider this thesis to be a continuation of Darwin’s work, a naturalistic explanation of the phenomenon of suicide. It is commonly thought that evolution is concerned primarily with survival and reproduction and that any behavior that works against these ends ‘goes against nature’. The main argument which I posit in Chapter 1 is an attempt to demonstrate how it is that suicide ‘is in accordance with nature’ and to explain the evolutionary origins of the commonplace intuition that suicide is wrong. I am claiming that suicide is a natural phenomenon, that it can be explained by an analysis of the evolutionary forces that sculpted the behaviors that Homo sapiens inherited from our evolutionary ancestors. This requires an analysis of the evolution of concepts within evolutionary theory that support such a claim. I begin this analysis with a discussion of Biology and Death, illuminating the common intuitions concerning suicide and evolution. I examine the behavior of various organisms to find instances of non-human suicide, what appears to be natural self destruction. Thus, I examine the historical progression of key evolutionary concepts and ideas beginning with Darwin himself. Central to my understanding of suicide and evolution is memetics, or cultural evolution. As human beings attempting to understand our evolutionary function, we must look to culture as the engine for evolutionary development if we are to understand our current biological dispositions as well as the selective forces acting upon individuals. From there, I discuss what little has been said on suicide and evolution. The arguments, concepts, and beliefs presented in this chapter are all aimed at providing a reasonable explanation for the claim that suicide is in accordance with nature, as well as explaining the source of our contrary intuition.

In Chapter 2 I intend to provide the reader with a philosophical conceptual landscape of suicide and also to introduce my own operating definition of suicide. I have divided the chapter into five sections; Plato and Suicide, Hume and Suicide, Kant and Suicide, Contemporary Debates Concerning Suicide, and My Operating Definition of Suicide. In the first four sections I will present what each philosopher has to say concerning suicide. Since most of what philosopher’s have to say concerning suicide is
pertinent to moral philosophy I will accordingly be presenting their arguments for or against the immorality of suicide. Couched within these arguments are their definitions of suicide, though sometimes they give us a definition explicitly. Thus, I will also be presenting what each philosopher would consider as suicide- that is, I will explain what class of actions count as suicidal for Plato, Hume, and Kant. In the fourth section I will demonstrate the current philosophical importance of the definition of suicide in relation to the fields of ethics and action theory. In the final section of this chapter, I will present my own proposed operational definition of suicide- which is somewhat modeled upon what these philosophers argued- but I will not justify or defend my definition until the final chapter.

Since this chapter takes up the issue of morality, given that the previous chapter concerned suicide there is a need to clarify the contact points between these two important philosophical realms. I want to limit the analysis of morality in this section to simply demonstrating what influential thinkers in philosophy have had to say about its moral status as well as their definition of suicide. What does evolution have to say about morality? In this thesis I assume the following relationship: evolution is silent when it concerns moral truths. Evolution provides us with an understanding of our emotive capacities and this understanding seems to be at odds with various forms of moral realism, but this is mistaken. The best evolutionary tale one can tell does not entail that moral realism is false. I take it to be the case that when we explain why we have the emotive capacities that we do- for the sake of increasing fitness- then we may then have some reason to question our moral intuitions. However this is not an argument that I can pursue in this thesis. I am claiming that evolutionary theory can help explain why there has been so much moral revulsion against suicide historically, but that is not to deny that there is in fact an independent moral truth that holds suicide to be immoral. A full explication of the relationship between evolution and ethics is a massive undertaking that I am not going to embark upon. Here I am concerned with the facts of our evolutionary history that impact historical conceptions of suicide- thereby attempting to demonstrate a commonplace ambiguity in the concept.

Chapter 3 is where I provide justification for my definition and extension of suicide. This justification comes from a contemporary debate concerning the nature of
intentionality. Under a rejection of the Simple View of Intentionality my definition of suicide as intentionally killing oneself entails an extension of the concept that rallies against common intuitions by including altruistic suicides as well as the commonplace egotistical suicides. That is, under a rejection of the Simple View, if suicide is intentionally killing oneself then the extension of the concept includes individual intentionally kill themselves yet do not intend to kill themselves (they intend to save, for instance). This swells the class of actions that count as suicidal well beyond what the folk definition admits, thus introducing the class deemed altruistic suicide. There is a nice philosophical point to be made concerning the definition or extension of suicide- either the intuition concerning the definition and extension of suicide is correct and the definition is imprecise or the definition is correct and the intuition imprecise. I also present Joshua Knobe’s research from Ameliorative Psychology, thereby reinforcing my argument that suicide has historically been conceptually misunderstood due to emotive responses. Knobe’s research demonstrates that people are more likely to ascribe intentionality to cases in which the side effect of the agent’s action is negative/bad. I suggest that there is something similar going on with the folk conception of suicide. Finally, I conclude the thesis with a discussion of what has been learned and why it is important.
“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”

Albert Camus (pg. 5)

If one says ‘yes’ to suicide, then nothing else matters. If one says ‘no’ to suicide then an investigation of the world becomes possible. Suicide is a concept that is closely tied to our notions of meaning, value, truth, choice, right and wrong, and self identity- to name a few. The purpose of this investigation is to analyze the concept of suicide from a series of philosophical perspectives- philosophy of science (evolutionary theory), history of philosophy, ethics, and philosophy of psychology (action theory). This is an exercise in conceptual analysis that spans broad fields of knowledge making highly contentious claims which illicit strong emotive responses. The range of this thesis is undeniably massive, and the philosophical perspective I hold of evolution is not very well appreciated in contemporary philosophical circles, nor in academia at large.

It is commonly thought that evolution is concerned primarily with survival and reproduction and that any behavior that works against these ends ‘goes against nature’. The main argument which I posit in Chapter I is an attempt to demonstrate how it is that suicide ‘is in accordance with nature’ and to explain the evolutionary origins of the commonplace intuition that suicide is wrong. This requires an analysis of the evolution of concepts within evolutionary theory that support such a claim. I begin my analysis with a discussion of Biology and Death, illuminating the common intuitions concerning suicide and evolution. I examine the natural order on the planet Earth to find instances of non-human self destruction, which look to be the precursors to human suicide. Then, I provide a skeletal framework of the evolution of evolutionary theory highlighting the origination of this problem with Darwin himself, then taking the reader on a scatterbrained journey through 150 years of theoretical development. Along the way, we will find reason to believe that our intuitions and emotional responses concerning particular concepts are due to our evolutionary history, and not sound reasoning. Conceptions of suicide have been governed by knee jerk reactions which are fantastic for increasing fitness and horrible for rational investigation. Central to my understanding of
suicide and evolution is memetics, or cultural evolution. As human beings attempting to understand our evolutionary function, we must look to culture as the engine for evolutionary development if we are to understand our current biological dispositions. From there, I discuss what little has been said on suicide and evolution. The arguments, concepts, and beliefs presented in this chapter are all aimed at providing a reasonable explanation for the claim that suicide is in accordance with nature, as well as explaining the source of our contrary intuition.

In Chapter II, I provide the reader with a philosophical landscape of the concept of suicide. I begin with Plato’s treatment of suicide and work my way through David Hume, Immanuel Kant, as well as more contemporary theorists like Dan Brock, Daniel Callahan, Peter Windt, R. G. Frey, and Suzanne Stern-Gillet. Plato, Hume, and Kant receive a more thorough analysis because of their historical importance in philosophy. I reconstruct their definitions and extensions of suicide and discuss their arguments concerning the moral status of suicide. Then, I demonstrate the importance of the debate over the definition of suicide in relation to such hot topics like euthanasia and Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS). I also show that various contemporary philosophers have, and continue to, argue over the definition and extension of suicide for two major philosophical projects—the classification of actions in general and providing moral assessments. Suicide is philosophically important in its own right, but it is also important for moral, religious, political, and legal reasons. I offer my own definition of suicide as intentionally killing oneself as well as my own extension of the concept which includes both altruistic and egotistical suicides.

Chapter III is where I provide justification for my definition and extension of suicide. This justification comes from a contemporary debate concerning the nature of intentionality where I present Michael Bratman’s reasons for rejecting the Simple View of Intentionality. Then I side with influential philosophers such as Bratman and Al Mele in rejecting the Simple View. Under a rejection of the Simple View of Intentionality my definition of suicide as intentionally killing oneself entails an extension of the concept that rallies against common intuitions by including altruistic suicides as well as the commonplace egotistical suicides. I also present Joshua Knobe’s research from Ameliorative Psychology, thereby reinforcing my argument that suicide has historically
been conceptually misunderstood due to emotive responses. I conclude the thesis with a discussion of what has been learned and why it is important.
CHAPTER 1
EVOLUTIONARY THEORY AND SUICIDE

Aquinas and Suicide

In the *Summa Theologica* St. Thomas Aquinas argues that suicide is a mortal sin. First, Aquinas sets forth five objections to the idea that suicide is a mortal sin, providing religious arguments that seem plausible. He then begins his assault upon suicide by providing three reasons why suicide is “unlawful” in the religious sense. Finally, he deals with each of the five objections one by one demonstrating why each of them is out of accordance with the Christian tradition of thought.

Here are the three reasons why suicide is “unlawful” and a mortal sin. Aquinas states;

First, because everything naturally loves itself, the result being that everything naturally keeps itself in being, and resists corruptions so far as it can. Wherefore suicide is contrary to the inclination of nature, and to charity whereby every man should love himself. Hence suicide is always a mortal sin, as being contrary to the natural law and to charity.

What does Aquinas mean by ‘everything naturally loves itself’? The most obvious interpretation is a theological one in everything naturally loves itself because of God. That is, because God is good and God created everything then naturally loving oneself is simply obeying the will of God. Whatever the interpretation presumably it will involve God being the creator of the universe, with laws that are subservient to his will. As I set forth examples of “animal suicides” the notion that everything naturally loves itself will become more questionable, because if ants do commit suicide then they don’t naturally love themselves (humans have free will so they can choose) then it seems that either ants sin or somehow violate the will of God. My interpretation of this argument is that suicide is unnatural in that it violates natural laws. This is important because one of my aims in this thesis is to combat this precise notion. I want to demonstrate that suicide is in fact in accordance with natural laws.

Secondly, because every part, as such, belongs to the whole. Now every man is part of the community, and so, as such, he belongs to the community. Hence by killing himself he injures the community, as the Philosopher declares (Ethic. v, 11).
Aquinas is referring to Aristotle and his claim that “man is a social creature”. I agree that an individual is part of the group and that it certainly seems plausible to claim that as part of the group that individual has some responsibility to the group. The claim that by killing oneself one injures the community is what I take issue with. The question turns upon what it is that one considers to be the best thing for a particular community; psychological welfare, high standard of living, long life expectancy, low infant mortality rate, etc. Being a theologian Aquinas is presumably concerned with the communities’ receptivity and adherence to the word of God, or something of that sort. However, if one considers what is “good” for a community in evolutionary terms then the notion of harm becomes that which decreases the fitness of the community- anything that decreases the ability of the organisms to survive and reproduce. The question then becomes does suicide decrease the ability of a community of organisms to survive and reproduce? This is the question that I will endeavor to answer by introducing several conceptual mechanisms from evolutionary psychology. Aquinas’s assertion that suicide is wrong because it harms the community will meet with resistance once we take a look at contemporary evolutionary theory. Whether or not suicide harms the community in the way that Aquinas is referring to is another question. Though there certainly will be an important relationship between the notion of harm we find in Aquinas and the notion of harm we find in evolutionary theory.

Thirdly, because life is God’s gift to man, and is subject to His power, Who kills and makes to live. Hence whoever takes his own life, sins against God, even as he who kills another's slave, sins against that slave's master, and as he who usurps to himself judgment of a master not entrusted to him. For it belongs to God alone to pronounce sentence of death and life, according to Deuteronomy 32:39, "I will kill and I will make to live."

Aquinas’s third argument against suicide is obviously theological. He takes it to be the case that one is throwing the gift of life back at God whenever one commits suicide. I wonder about the statement ‘For it belongs to God alone to pronounce sentence of death and life,’ for it seems to imply that if one were to commit suicide then they would be pronouncing their own sentence thereby making it the case that not only God gets to pronounce the sentence of death. This argument seems to entail a contradiction, if the above implication holds true.
The arguments that Aquinas provides have argumentative force if one takes the existence of God to be a true premise. I am attempting to analyze suicide from an atheistic perspective, one which relies heavily upon naturalism thus the investigation into philosophy of science. I take it to be the case that Aquinas captures an intuition that many people share- suicide is somehow unnatural. My aim is to demonstrate how suicide can be in accordance with nature, that is, the result of natural forces and phenomenon. I will also attempt to use evolutionary theory to explain the occurrence of the stigma against suicide throughout history.

**Biology and Death**

“Death is no longer adaptive, if it ever was”- (Thomas Joiner, pg #115)

Joiner is presenting a very common and reasonable intuition concerning the relationship between evolution and death. Evolution is concerned with survival and reproduction and death implicitly seems radically opposed to these ends. Death is the end of the survival of the individual organism and correspondingly their fitness (their ability to reproduce) goes to zero. Our concern is with suicide, a particular form of death, and evolution- the machine that generates life itself. Is death ultimately just a failure of evolution? Or, can death itself be a means for the generation of new life? Let us consider death from a biological perspective. Approximately 13.5 billion years ago the universe came into existence, then 4.5 billion years ago the planet we call Earth was created by the physical processes of accretion and gravity. 3.5 billion years ago the first single celled organism arose from the primordial ooze. Life as we know it on this planet is a struggle against entropy- the process by which all order becomes disorder. Amid the chaos of physical interactions structure/organization/homeostasis became manifest; from chaos order comes into being. This order, organization, homeostasis is what we call life. An organism spends its entire existence attempting to maintain homeostasis (order), and constantly battling against death (disorder). Eventually, all organisms that are born must die; eventually, all life loses the battle against entropy and becomes disorganized. If Joiner is correct in that death is no longer adaptive, then we have little hope of understanding the possible evolutionary nature of suicide. However, there is another option.
If death is to be adaptive, then it must either be adaptive for the individual or the group. Prima facie, it seems highly unlikely that the death of the individual is somehow adaptive. As an individual qua individual, it is obvious that suicide runs counter to survival and reproduction. However, an individual is a particular instantiation of genes, and an individual qua genes could have an adaptive death. Further, an individual is also a member of various groups; family, society, and Homo sapiens. The adaptive nature of one’s individual death or suicide could result from the individual’s relation to the group. The individual organism is hardwired for survival and reproduction yet the individual’s actions can be subservient to the greater goal of survival and reproduction of the species. Thus, the goal of this Chapter is to demonstrate that the death of the individual—even by his own hand—can be in accordance with the natural order of existence. However, the evolutionary logic I am attempting to illuminate simply rallies against one of our most deep felt and common intuitions—suicide is wrong and it goes against nature. Therefore, I will attempt to explain the evolutionary logic behind this intuition as well.

J. Gay-Williams demonstrates the common, mistaken understanding intuition that suicide goes against nature when he says:

Every human being has a natural inclination to continue living. Our reflexes and responses fit us to fight attackers, flee wild animals, and dodge out of the way of trucks. In our daily lives we exercise the caution and care necessary to protect ourselves. Our bodies are similarly structured for survival right down to the molecular level. When we are cut, our capillaries seal shut, our blood clots, and fibrogen is produced to start the process of healing the wound. When we are invaded by bacteria, antibodies are produced to fight against the alien organisms, and their remains are swept out of the body by special cells designed for clean-up work. Euthanasia does violence to this natural goal of survival. It is literally acting against nature because all of the processes of nature are bent towards the end of bodily survival. Pg # 45

It is undeniable that the human body performs many functions that promote bodily survival. Williams is certainly correct that we as individual beings are hardwired for survival, but that is not the entire story. Williams’ cellular biology is terribly lopsided. Even here, as he attempts to make his case for bodily survival he demonstrates the kind of logic that allows one to posit adaptive death. When we are cut or injured, the cells in our body go to work to preserve the individual organism. But it does so at the sacrifice of individual cells. As we shall see later on in this chapter Programmed Cellular Death is
part of nature as well. However, the major fallacy becomes clear in the statement “all of the processes of nature are bent towards the end of bodily survival”. Williams has fallen victim to one of the major misunderstandings concerning evolution, the notion that evolution somehow privileges the survival of the individual organism over the survival of the group. Evolution does not care about the survival and reproduction of one particular organism, in fact, evolutionarily processes readily offers up the individual’s fitness for the sake of the group’s fitness. This misunderstanding of the multifarious forces that comprise evolution (the tension between the individual and group) is part of what generates the commonplace notion that suicide goes against nature.

**Non-Human Suicide**

Is suicide solely a human phenomenon? The answer to this question varies from individual to individual, from one branch of academia to another. Most psychologists would assert that only humans commit suicide, whereas most biologists would assert that there are many examples of suicide within the various species that exist on this planet. Given that the common definition of suicide is intentionally killing oneself–it seems that I must assert that only humans commit suicide. The kind of intentionality that is being utilized in the definition of suicide is rare within the animal kingdom. There is debate over whether or not whales, dolphins, monkeys, or apes have the kind of complex systems of communication that could indicate the kind of mental content we find in Homo sapiens. But as we look at life on the planet we can reasonably assert that Homo sapiens are quite unique in their abilities to cognize and thus unique in the content of their mental worlds. If Homo sapiens are the only species blessed with intentionality, then that necessarily excludes any other species from committing suicide. However, any decent evolutionary explanation of a particular trait is an explanation of the evolutionary origins of the history of common descent of the trait in question. From whence did this glorious intentionality come? The consensus within evolutionary theory is that Homo sapiens share their closest ancestral link (of the species that did not go extinct) with chimpanzees. But chimpanzees don’t have the kind of intentionality that we do. They do share the cognitive modules that produce emotions and limited reasoning skills. Our evolutionary history is too long and complicated for me to try and explain here. It should be clear that
Homo sapiens owe their uniqueness to their evolutionary history— to the trials and tribulations of countless generations of species that proceeded humankind.

Even though Homo sapiens are the only species to have the kind of intentionality that produces the ability to commit suicide, they are not the only species that have traits that can be described as self-destructive. The question concerning the various kinds of knowledge that bacteria, viruses, fungi, fish and the like have is truly interesting but not important to the point I am making. The fact that no species has the kind of intentionality humans have actually allows me to make a stronger claim about the nature of suicide. The origins of suicide as we find it in humans are found in self-destructive behaviors in nature. Thus, suicide is part of nature, not opposed to it. Consider sexual cannibalism, a mating ritual in which the male partner is devoured after copulation. Now certainly we don’t want to say that the male spider had knowledge of the female’s devious intentions, nor that the female had any sort of devious intention, however we do want to say that the female’s actions were the result of her instincts—her evolutionary programming. The male was acting upon the instinct to procreate and the female was acting upon the instinct to procreate and provide for her young— the male provides useful nutrients. Well, the male spider was not suicidal and the female spider was not homicidal—either definition makes use of intentionality and certainly spiders don’t have intentionality. The instinctual nature of the act is what allows me to make the more powerful claim that suicide is part of nature. If after 3.5 billion years of evolution on this planet we find that there are still many instances of non-human suicide-like behavior, then we can reasonably ask why it is that these behaviors have not been selected against. That there is no intentionality at work is a benefit, not a burden to our analysis. The example of sexual cannibalism exhibits the following: no choice, no intentionality, just pure evolutionary sculpting. Those species that operate on the instinctual level are in a fundamental sense ‘closer’ to evolutionary ends than we humans are. Intentionality throws a wrench into the machinery of evolutionary logic; the ends toward which humans move can be different than the ends of evolution. Creatures that act instinctually are engrained with the resultant naturally selected evolutionary processes, persistence of traits, then, seem to be the best evidence we have for ascertaining evolutionary logic. It seems that when we

---

1 I am grateful to David McNaughton’s formulation of this problem, which I unabashedly have stolen.
speak of evolution we must be very careful to prevent the generalizations that hold for 99% of life on the planet from obscuring our understanding of the evolutionary history of Homo sapiens. As we shall see in section two, evolutionary explanations that apply to humans are of a different type than evolutionary explanations of bacteria, fungi, and plants. By introducing examples of non-human self destructive behavior I am attempting to show the source of suicidal behaviors in humans. There is an evolutionary link between currently existing humans and the first single celled organism, and self destructive behaviors can be found in both single and multi cellular organisms. The further back we go in the history of life on the planet the further organisms are distanced from consciousness and intentionality. This distance is what provides the plausibility for the claim that suicide is part of nature, due to its origins in self destructive behavior.

Evolutionary psychologists are constantly trying to bridge the species gap by looking at persistence of traits. For instance, Daly and Wilson investigate the maternal behavior of mice, in order to better understand infanticide within humans. We will do the same with altruistic and egotistical suicide. Egotistical non-human suicide refers to traits of an organism that lead to its self destruction and confers no increase in fitness to others. Altruistic non-human suicide refers to traits of an organism that lead to its self destruction and that also confers some increase in fitness to some other organism. This appears highly contentious, but biologists are constantly characterizing the actions of animals as either increasing or decreasing the fitness of the group. Here we find an interesting problem, aren’t non-human suicides by definition impossible (assuming we exclude extra terrestrial minds like ours)? That certainly looks like a claim that I am committed to. However, note that my definition of egotistical and altruistic non-human suicide is cast in terms of self destructive traits and behaviors. To keep the conceptual difference between suicide and self destructive behavior I will therefore refer to non-human self destructive acts as suicide*. Suicide refers to an act performed by humans, suicide* refers to the self destructive behaviors of every other organism. Further, altruistic suicide* can be found in many places within nature, whereas egotistical suicide* in non-human animals is rare. In other words, traits that are beneficial to the fitness of others while being detrimental to the individual are much more prevalent than traits that lead to the destruction of the individual while conferring no increase in fitness to others.
Now I will illustrate several examples of suicidal* behavior that persists in non-human animals. Highly social insects provide not only the most obvious cases but also very intriguing instances of altruistic suicide*. Within the division of labor in ant and termite colonies many roles exist. The majority of these insects lack reproductive capabilities; thus the only function of some is to reproduce (queens) and the primary function of others is to protect (soldiers). When the alarms trigger, the soldiers place themselves in harm’s way on the front lines, even if injured. These soldier ants give their lives fighting invaders for the good of the colony. Similarly, certain termites, when attempting to thwart a predator, explode themselves thereby covering the enemy in a sticky goo that prevents them from moving. Other examples of insect kamikaze attacks include the excellent example of honeybees. When these bees sting, the stinger is ripped from them, thereby tearing out vital organs and causing death. These bees attempt to protect the hive at the cost of their lives. This behavior is also indicative of other bees and wasps. Social insects are excellent examples of animal altruistic suicide*- indeed, as we shall see in the next section Darwin himself was perplexed when he saw these behaviors.

However, as we move to “higher” animals, such as birds, squirrels, and monkeys, things become more complex. The outright kamikaze attacks are less prevalent, and behavior becomes more difficult to define as suicidal*. Warning calls can protect the group by diverting attention away from predators, but this act does not always result in the death of the one doing the calling. Upon seeing a predator, ground squirrels raise their hind legs and emit a call that alerts the group to a predator’s presence (Wright, 157). While the predator can thus detect the prey’s location, it does not typically result in the death of the prey. Perhaps the most well known example is that most animals protect their young to the death. Even if a predator is much stronger, larger, and better equipped for battle, a mother fights for her young. This is not true of all animals, but it is certainly true of some, especially those that invest a large amount of time and energy into their young.

Various birds have similar behavioral mechanisms. One extreme example is the nighthawk. When the nighthawk observes a predator, it flies away from the nest and pretends injury, holding out a wing in a characteristically injured manner. This action
distracts the predator from the nest and towards what the predator believes is an easy target. As the predator closes in, the nighthawk flies away (Wilson, 59). Similarly, when members of a baboon troop forage for food, the males take up strategic positions that enable them to see and be seen. If predators attack, then these males alert the troop and bring up the rear, attacking if necessary.

The instances of egotistical suicide* within animals, however, are far less numerous. I have struggled to find an instance of egotistical suicide* within an animal that was not in captivity or injured. Nonetheless, wild animals in captivity and sick or injured animals do occasionally commit egotistical suicides. Jacques Cousteau swore that he would no longer capture animals from the wild when he saw something exceedingly strange. He saw a captive dolphin intentionally ram into the side of a tank until it killed itself. Another strange example is an octopus that a scientist was performing experiments upon. This octopus actually ate parts of itself until it died: suicide* by self-cannibalism. There are many examples of wild animals in captivity that refuse to eat and therefore die. Take an animal out of its natural habitat and put it in captivity and its life expectancy drops precipitously. Sick and injured animals in the wild often refuse to eat and thereby die. In these examples the traits exhibited do not confer any increase in fitness onto others, thus they appear to be for the sake of the individual organism itself.

There are many species that exhibit behaviors that can be described as altruistically suicidal*. These behaviors are in accordance with evolutionary logic, the individual confers an increase in fitness to others. Such a trait actually benefits the group, helping it to increase in size. At a certain point, we can boil down evolutionary theory into simple population growth and decay. The behaviors that I have illustrated help the group to increase in numbers. That is why there are so few examples of egotistical suicide* in non-human animals- such behaviors do nothing to help a group that is struggling for survival.

Defining certain behaviors of animals as suicidal* is a contentious move on my part. Animals don’t have minds like ours, thus they don’t commit suicide. I bypassed this objection by noting that evolution molds the behavior of all organic life, and if a behavior appears to be self destructive (whether it be for altruistic or egotistical reasons)
then this non-human action is suicide*. This distinction is important because I am seeking to show that suicide is part of nature by examining suicide* throughout nature. Here, I will make an even more contentious claim- cells commit suicide*. Apoptosis (cellular suicide) - one half of Programmed Cellular Death in which after a certain number of cellular replications, the cell tears down its own cellular wall. This is necessary for many reasons, to separate our fingers and toes, to eliminate unnecessary brain cells, etc. During our embryological development the fetus has webbed hands and toes. Before we exit the womb the cells that comprise the webbing commit cellular suicide thereby allowing us to have separated digits. A third of our brain cells commit cellular suicide in order to organize the massive amount of information that we acquire in our youth into a neural structure that maximizes our ability to survive. If the process does not occur, it tends to leave the individual with schizophrenic tendencies. Programmed cellular death is a necessary part of our existence as a species. Humans use a lot of resources, we also can have quite a few progeny if we try (even more if we do not die). This requires that we have a natural limit to our life spans. Otherwise, we would be standing shoulder to shoulder in a matter of a few hundred years.

The existence of apoptosis illustrates how fundamental intentional self destruction is to nature. Apoptosis is an act that is programmed into our very DNA. We must remember that we are made up of two primary types of cells- somatic and germ cells. Germ cells are the cells that carry our DNA from this generation to the next. Somatic cells comprise the rest of the organism. Apoptosis is constantly occurring in order to maintain homeostasis in your body, but after a certain number of replications the somatic cells that comprise your brain, heart, liver, lungs, and other vital organs will send a chemical message from the nucleus to the cellular membrane and tell it to self destruct. The message spreads from cell to cell until, invariably you die. The lesson here is simple- self destruction is part of nature. Suicide* is essential to nature, and we should not be terribly surprised when we find human acts of suicide to be in accordance with nature as well.

The Evolution of Evolutionary Theory
Theodosius Dobzhansky asserts, “Nothing in biology makes sense, except in the light of evolution” (Appleman, 255). Evolution is concerned with survival and reproduction, and suicide seems radically opposed to such ends. My aim in this section is to demonstrate how the counter intuitive claim— that suicide is in accordance with nature—is in accordance with evolutionary logic. Thus, I will introduce the relevant progressions in evolutionary theory that allow for such an understanding of suicide. A quick note on the ambiguities within the phrase ‘the relevant progressions in evolutionary theory,’ what counts as relevant changes from one object of investigation to the next. That which is relevant to explaining the amusing features of the duckbill platypus will be different from that which is relevant to explaining the aggressive nature of army ants. Throughout this section, I admittedly am turning an eye to the progression of evolutionary theory relevant to explaining human behavior. First, I will differentiate between sexual selection and natural selection. Then, when regarding natural selection, I will analyze the historical unfolding of the various units of selection; individual, group, and the gene. Finally, I will introduce three other concepts that I find to be important to our investigation.

While building his theory of evolution Darwin differentiated between the various mechanisms that comprise evolutionary theory. Darwin offered that as humans manually select for traits we can envision a similar process where adaptive features are naturally selected for. The great difference between these two processes being that manual selection implies an agent doing the selecting and natural selection is devoid of agency. This is a crucial feature of evolution, which is why evolutionary theorists like Richard Dawkins have chosen to discuss this in detail, as in The Blind Watchmaker. Natural selection is considered of primary importance within Darwin’s writings. However, he also mentions that we should consider the importance of sexual selection- the process by which certain behaviors and features (which are beneficial in sexual reproduction) evolve.

Sexual selection is another form of selection that needs to be at hand, if we are to be able to explain the evolutionary nature of suicide. Evolution is concerned with survival and reproduction, and by examining sexual selection we are investigating the

---

2 I am indebted to Justin Leiber for his enlightening commentary upon this topic.
individual’s particular traits that make them appealing partners to other individuals within the species. When we investigate sexual selection in the animal kingdom, we find certain dominating patterns. One of these patterns illustrates how adaptive dangerous behavior can be. To illustrate, certain species of fish will tempt fate by swimming too close to a predator in order to impress a prospective female mate. Acting dangerously in the hopes of increasing ones potential to mate is an evolutionary trend that we find counter intuitive. Playing it safe is a good strategy under some circumstances and is a horrible strategy at other times. In periods of fierce competition for resources the individual that is willing to risk life and limb is more likely to succeed than the individual who does not.

Darwin encountered social insects in his studies. From Darwin's viewpoint, survival of the fittest means that natural selection works on the level of the individual. Commenting upon the sterile social insects, Darwin records that there was “one special difficulty, which at first appeared to me insuperable, and actually fatal to my whole theory” (Wilson, 56). With the individual as the unit of selection, Darwin could not make sense of the altruistic nature of sterile social insects. Despite ignorance of genetics, Darwin presented a solution to this problem. Darwin suggested that natural selection acted at the level of the family and not the individual. Since the soldier ants were sterile, explaining their altruistic behavior required looking at the transmission of beneficial traits through the family itself. This is a brilliant insight, for Darwin preceded by 100 years modern science’s findings about the altruistic traits of social insects.

William D. Hamilton created the precise formulation of Darwin's idea of “family selection.” In 1964, Hamilton introduced his theory of kin selection. The unit of selection is the family, not the individual, he argued. Hamilton used inclusive fitness to explain altruistic behaviors within animals. Inclusive fitness is “the sum of an individual's own fitness plus the sum of all the effects it causes to the related parts of the fitness of all its relatives” (Wilson, 56). When one applies inclusive fitness and kin selection to the sterile soldier ants, their sacrifice makes evolutionary sense. Hamilton took this evolutionary logic one step further, giving us an altruistic formula:
Here, \( r \) is the chance that the altruistic gene is in a recipient, \( b \) is the benefit, and \( c \) is the cost. If the cost is less than a complication of an act’s benefit and the chance that the altruistic gene will receive the benefits, then the altruistic act is naturally selected. *Because* social insects have high levels of genetic similarity, it is reasonable to believe that altruistic suicide benefits the altruistic gene.

Robert L. Trivers took this logic even further by introducing the notion of reciprocal altruism. Essentially, altruistic acts an individual performs can possibly come back to benefit that individual, thereby raising inclusive fitness. The Good Samaritan example illustrates this point:

A man is drowning and another man jumps in to save him, even though the two are not related and may not even have met previously. The reaction is typical of what human beings regard as “pure” altruism. However, upon reflection one can see that the Good Samaritan has much to gain by his act. Suppose that the drowning man has a one-half chance of drowning if he is not assisted, whereas the rescuer has a one-in-twenty chance of dying. Imagine further that when the rescuer drowns the victim also drowns, but when the rescuer lives the victim is always saved. If such episodes were extremely rare, the Darwinist calculus would predict little or no gain to the fitness of the rescuer for his attempt. But if the drowning man reciprocates at a future time, and the risks of drowning stay the same, it will have benefited both individuals to have played the role of rescuer. Each man will have traded a one-half chance of dying for about a one-tenth chance. (Wilson 58)

This logic accounts for the moral obligations many of us feel. Kin selection only applies to those individuals whom one has close genetic ties to. The rise of modern societies means that the majority of people we interact with are not closely genetically tied to us. Thus, with reciprocal altruism, Trivers attempts to explain why humans perform altruistic acts within large societies.

Thus far, we have described the unit of selection changing from the individual to the group. However, this is misleading; particular genes are the target of natural selection. Fully laying out the debate between group selection and individual selection is too great a task to undertake here. Indeed, I have not even mentioned Gould's species selection or cellular selection. Richard Dawkins claims that “the fundamental unit
of selection, and therefore of self-interest, is not the species, nor the group, nor even, strictly, the individual. It is the gene, the unit of heredity” (Dawkins, 11). In a strange turn of events we started with the individual, went to the group, and now return to the individual- on the genetic level. Michael Ruse’s comments regarding group selection and individual selection are worth noting. In *Darwin and Design*, Ruse asserts, “no gene change, no evolution” (Ruse, 209). Ruse also observes, “talk of selfish genes, in reference to the way that selection works on genes or because of them, may be rhetorically dramatic but it is hardly all that new or peculiar” (Ruse, 209). Thus, there is nothing novel or problematic about the use of the terminology ‘selfish gene’ and this notion is commonplace in the study of evolution.

In David Hull and Michael Ruse’s anthology *The Philosophy of Biology* we find a collection of several highly influential essays in philosophy of biology. In “Philosophical Work on Units of Selection,” Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson assert that “we are inclined to be pluralists at the level of heuristic approaches and rather more monistic at the level of factual statements about nature” (Hull & Ruse, pp. 217). What they mean here is that we should utilize the individual, group, and gene when we are doing our evolutionary theorizing. Sober and Wilson do us a service in that they square Dawkins genetic selectionism with the insight from Michael Ruse. Ultimately, talk of evolution is talk of gene change. But, we need pluralism in our understanding of the various selective forces within evolutionary theory. Though there is debate concerning whether or not we can always point towards one unit of selection in all explanations of evolved behavior I agree that the dominant three levels of selection act as valuable heuristics that cannot be discounted. Despite the apparent flaws with group selectionism, it seems highly improbable that we can explain the evolution of highly social creatures-humans- without referencing the selective forces that act upon the group. However, when we are trying to explain the evolution of humans, we invoke the social paradox: society provides the individual with an ideological base to build with, yet these individuals comprise society thereby altering the ideological base. This means that when we speak of human evolution we must look towards the group and the individual organism, as well as to the genetic level. Gene selectionism has proved to be the most
powerful of heuristics, which is why some evolutionary theorists champion this level of selection and no other. While it is certainly true that the genetic selection is fundamental to evolution, there is an interconnection between genes, individual organisms, and groups. Consider the following; an individual organism is an instantiation of a particular set of genes, yet, an individual is also simply a member of a group. But a group is nothing other than a set of instantiated genes within a particular range. These three levels are undeniably interconnected, and much confusion abounds when evolutionary theorists do not make the proper differentiation- they end up speaking past one another. Even the most ardent supporter of group selectionism will not deny that evolutionary change is the result of genetic changes. These three heuristics are all valuable in their own right, it simply depends upon what it is that the theorist in question is trying to show. This is crucial to our understanding of the evolutionary logic governing the persistence of suicidal behavior, because these selective pressures can conflict with one another.

There are four other concepts within evolutionary epistemology that I need to introduce before we move on to memetics. Dawkins introduces an extremely important distinction between replicators and vehicles. Genes are replicators and individual organisms are vehicles. Dawkins views natural selection as occurring almost exclusively on the genetic level. There is a complex relationship between genes and the resulting organism. Genotype leads to phenotype, that is, the phenotype is a manifestation of the genotype; but this must be taken against the backdrop of environmental influences. The phenotype is actually quite variable depending upon the environmental circumstances in which the individual organism develops. For instance, take an infant and place them in a contemporary middle class American family and then observe its development. Now, if instead the infant were placed in a family of wild dogs then we would observe quite a different set of behavioral outcomes. Our genes act as a recipe for our physiological development, thus the behavioral outcomes are highly contingent upon environmental conditions.

In “On the Relationship Between Evolutionary Definitions of Altruism and Selfishness,” David Sloan Wilson articulates the difference between evolutionary altruism and psychological altruism. Evolutionary altruism is devoid of intentionality.
That is, it is cast solely in terms of an increase in the fitness of other organisms at the expense of the agent’s fitness. A mother sharing her food with her offspring is a decent example. Psychological altruism is much more akin to the contemporary societal definition of altruism—it is cast solely in terms of the agent’s intentions. An example of psychological altruism would be if I were to take a homeless man into my home, and provide him with food and money. This is a crucial distinction because there is much confusion between these two very different types of altruism. Let me clarify, I can perform an act of evolutionary altruism and have absolutely no claim to psychological altruism. Or, I can perform an act of psychological altruism that leaves me no claim to having performed an act of evolutionary altruism. Evolutionary altruism is a necessary conceptual tool, if we are to explain the persistence of altruistic suicide. Psychological altruism is necessary for our systems of moral praise and blame. Due to the diverse nature of these concepts, when they do converge, and they will in our study of suicide, we find exceedingly counter-intuitive results.

In The Moral Animal, Robert Wright asserts “emotions are just evolution's executioners” (Wright, 88). Which means that emotions are triggers for evolutionary sculpted ends. For instance, the feelings of love and adoration one feels towards their family are due to the genetic closeness one shares with these family members. All illusions aside, the selfish gene cares not for familial love—except for insofar as it is beneficial to the gene itself.3 Obvious genetic closeness equals an evolutionary interest in their well being. Beneficial, adaptive traits have the tendency to proliferate throughout the species and emotions can be the triggers for these adaptive behaviors. I suggest that the reason why suicide has been historically misunderstood is because of the evolutionary sculpting that created the emotions we have concerning death. A reasonable fear of death is a very adaptive mechanism. People tend not to think about death in general, their own death in particular, and certainly not taking their own lives. As psychological creatures in a social realm it is highly adaptive to have an emotive response that prevents one from such introspection. The emotive revulsion provides the function

3 Most assuredly, we do care about the notion of familial love. It is useful for the reader to remember that so far our task is descriptive, not prescriptive. Further, it is certainly plausible that just in virtue of the fact that there is an adaptive feature to a behavior, that feature need not lack value in an independent manner.
of preventing suicidal ideation. Unfortunately, the emotive revulsion also leads to
grandiose misconceptions and mischaracterizations of individual who commit suicide
that tend to promote more bad than good.

In Unto Others, Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson analyze the strange
consequences of unselfish (altruistic) behavior upon the group. We find that humans
arrange their societies around a moral code, a framework upon which the individual can
graft onto and devise some sort of meaning. Within the inner workings of the
phenomenon of altruistic behavior within the group we find strange results. One would
expect that if a behavior reduced the fitness of an individual then it would
correspondingly reduce the fitness of the overall group. This is not so. In actuality,
Sober and Wilson find that altruistic behaviors that reduce the individual’s fitness
increase the group’s fitness. They assert, “There is no magic or mysticism here; the
altruists increase globally, despite decreasing in frequency within each group, because the
two groups contribute different numbers of individuals to the global population” (Eliot,
Sober, 23). This counter-intuitive result is the product of what is known as Simpson’s
paradox. Essentially, Simpson’s paradox illustrates that within a multi-group dynamic,
local phenomenon become outweighed within the global scale. This is a difficult concept
to grasp, requiring an in depth analysis of various groups and the corresponding global
results.4 For our purposes, all that is required here is that we recognize that there are
conceptual tools in existence that can explain these counter intuitive results.

My analysis of the unfolding of the units of selection problem is crucial to
understanding the evolution of man. Our environment is no longer what it once was in
the Pleistocene era. We no longer live in small nomadic herds amongst wild and
untamed nature. Modern man lives in vast sociological frameworks; contemporary
society is radically different from anything we once knew. As such, I believe that we
must utilize group selection to explain contemporary human behaviors. Man is born into
a society with massive ideological frameworks, this is what requires an analysis of
memetics. The three other concepts I introduced are useful in that they help to explain:

---

4 For such an analysis see Sober’s “What is Evolutionary Altruism?”, pg 470-474 (in Hull and Ruse’s The
Philosophy of Biology). Or, Sober and Wilson’s Unto Others, pg 23-26.
1) the structure of descent- vehicles and replicators, 2) a source of confusion in discussions of altruism, 3) that man’s emotions are molded by evolutionary ends, and 4) how such counter intuitive traits as suicide can increase the fitness of the group while damming the individual.

**Memetics**

To explain culture we begin with what, in *The Literary Animal*, David Sloan Wilson refers to as ‘a forward traveling evolutionary spiral’. “Genes prescribe epigenetic rules, which are the regularities of sensory perception and mental development that animate and channel the growth of culture. Culture helps to determine which of the prescribing genes survive and multiply from one generation to the next” (p. ix).

Evolutionary theory has taught us that not everything concerning evolution is necessarily biological. The vast, complicated ideological frameworks that constitute culture are not biological. Culture is the result of our biological constitution and the necessity for procuring a method for maintaining the survival of the species. We began in small, nomadic herds and throughout the ages the groups we aggregated in became larger and more complex. As a result culture itself became more complex, with more sophisticated belief structures and increasingly more specialized areas of investigation. Thus, we evolved to have philosophy, science, religion, art, etc. Wilson recognizes that out of our biological evolution, culture emerged. This is a fundamental premise, absolutely essential if we are to have any meaningful understanding of our evolutionary history.

Wilson is not the only one concerned with the evolution of culture. Richard Dawkins provides us with a conceptual tool to aide our understanding of the evolution of culture with his notion of memes. Memes (from the Greek ‘mimos’- to mimic) are ideas that seek to replicate- similar to genes. Susan Blackmore and Daniel Dennett pick up on the threads of Dawkins arguments in their books *The Meme Machine*, and *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*. Now there is serious debate concerning the usefulness of the notion of memes. Their ontological status is one questionable ground- are memes different from ideas, and in what way? Furthermore, as Michael Ruse pointed out in a conversation I had with him- memes seem to be a re-hashing of our talk about ideas, and if this is so then we should see clear reasons as to why we should be talking about memes instead of
ideas. Nevertheless, one can still make a plausible case that a meme is a particular instantiation of an idea within an individual. Then one can further say that once an individual has this meme, it seeks to replicate itself. Or as Dennett says, “A scholar is just a library’s way of making another library” (Dennett, 346). That is, the conceptual tool that Dawkins provided, of vehicles and replicators, can be applied to memes as well. An individual is a vehicle for memes, and society is riddled with different memetic factions attempting to get other groups to instantiate their memeplex. A memeplex is simply another name for an ideology, various religions, philosophies, and other intellectual endeavors count as memeplexes. When groups compete for survival, they fight over resources. Human society has the added element of memetic competition. Consider the historical battle between faith and reason, religion and science, or within philosophy between empiricism and rationalism- on some level humanity itself can be characterized as a conflict between powerful memeplexes. Survival of the fittest need not only apply to genetic concerns- ideas/memes are in constant struggle for instantiation/survival. Michael Ruse is correct, memetics is just a re-hashing of our talk about ideas. However, that only supplies a prima facie reason to reject memetics. The parallel between vehicles and replicators in the genetic and memetic sense is very useful, or so I find. Consider philosophy itself, various individual philosophers are battling for the instantiation of their memes to the greatest degree possible. What is the role of a teacher, if not to eliminate certain memes and replace them with “better” memes? Regardless of where one stands in this debate, one thing should be clear- we must be capable of meaningfully speaking about the transmission of ideas within human societies if we are going to be able to provide a compelling explanation of the evolution of the human animal.

The culture that one is born into has an undeniable effect upon their paradigm. This paradigm tends to govern processes which are profoundly important for any evolutionary explanation- it governs sexual selection and one’s ability to survive. The memetic structure of ones society greatly conditions the processes that are crucial to biological evolution. Socialization instantiates various memes within the individual, and these memes have a profound impact upon the next generations’ memes and genes. One memeplex will result in an individual becoming a celibate Priest, while another results in
an individual owning his own harem. Memeplexes create individuals that are pacifists, bellicose, sexually promiscuous, altruistic, egotistical, to name a few. We simply cannot dismiss the impact of culture upon our evolutionary history. Now it should be noted that memes owe their existence to genes, as they are within Homo sapiens. The question of memetic or genetic superiority in relation to the driving force of evolution is of great importance. I have no place to argue for memetic superiority here, I can only illustrate to the reader that- ever since the ancient Athenian state- individuals have been willing to die for an idea.\footnote{This is a fairly arbitrary starting point- one could take ancient Egyptian or Eastern society as the beginning of memetic superiority. All that I wish to make clear is that we can point to ancient Athens- the state in which Socrates existed- and assert that there were individuals that were willing to give their lives for the sake of an idea.}

**Suicide and Evolution**

While researching the vast literature on evolutionary theory, I was surprised to find very little on the phenomenon of suicide. Actually, I had found nothing until Dennett mentioned Dawkins’ 1982 book *The Extended Phenotype* in passing. In this book Dawkins makes the following assertion:

> Obviously a meme that causes individuals bearing it to kill themselves has a grave disadvantage, but not necessarily a fatal one. Just as a gene for suicide sometimes spreads itself by a roundabout route (e.g. in social insects, or parental sacrifice), so a suicidal meme can spread, as when a dramatic and well-publicized martyrdom inspires others to die for a deeply loved cause, and this in turn inspires others to die, and so on. (Dawkins, 111)

Here, Dawkins is reiterating one of the counter intuitive practices within evolutionary theory: the death of the individual as an adaptive trait. Notice that the emphasis is upon the cultural conditioning of the individual’s ideology, in such a way that suicide is a sacrifice for the sake of an idea. Dawkins presumably has religious suicides in mind here. The central idea from this passage is that the death of an individual can be adaptive. The individual is a vehicle for replication of memes and a meme that is powerful enough to inspire the death of that vehicle is adaptive in that that sacrifice promotes other individuals/vehicles to instantiate the meme in question. Now the meme need not be religious in nature, it could be a meme for freedom or for familial love. Even
if one rejects the notion of memes as artificial machinery superimposed upon ideas, one must still accept that individuals are willing to give their lives for the sake of an idea.

Dennett takes up this line of thinking in *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* and makes the following assertion:

Suppose Jones encounters or dreams up a truly compelling argument in favor of suicide—so compelling it leads him to kill himself. If he doesn’t leave a note explaining why he has done this, the meme in question—at least the Jonesian lineage of it—is not going to spread. (Dennett, 363)

Now Dennett is certainly right about one thing— if Jones never explains his overpowering pro-suicide argument to anyone, it will die with him. However, notice the qualifications in place here: first, he “encounters or dreams up” the argument and, second, if he dies without telling anyone the “Jonesian” lineage will not spread. Dennett glosses over these two qualifications without any further analysis of their foundations. I contend that an explanation of the evolution of suicidal behaviors must contend with the foundations of this first qualification—“encountering or dreaming up” the suicidal meme. Essentially, Dennett has stumbled upon a plausible ground for positing the adaptiveness of suicidal behavior, yet he did not recognize it.

A contemporary example will help to illustrate the intersection of memetics, suicide, and evolution. Currently there is a war raging in Iraq. On a daily basis young Muslim men are strapping bombs to their chests and blowing up themselves, civilians, and American soldiers. We hear of these ‘suicide bombings’ on a daily basis, and they are a source of sadness and confusion for many people. The communities in which these young men originate do not call consider these acts suicides. In fact, these young men are considered to be performing altruistic acts of self sacrifice that ensure their entrance to heaven, 72 virgins and all. Here we get a glimpse of the rhetorical power of the meme suicide. Because they are killing our soldiers what they are doing is morally wrong, thus they are called ‘suicide bombers’. Because they are helping to spread the holy word of Islam they are martyrs, worthy to be emulated. Now, from an evolutionary point of view these young men are killing themselves for the sake of the culture in which they were socialized. These ‘suicide bombings’ have a snowball effect. The more they occur the more frequently young men idealize them and join up to take their place in the ranks of
soldiers fighting for the freedom they so desperately yearn for. Self sacrifice for an ideal is difficult to combat. Consider the young American men and women watching the news, hearing about the daily casualty reports. Some of these young men and women will join the armed forces, in an attempt to help protect America or free the Iraqis or to aid their fellow soldiers. Such individuals are motivated by patriotism to place their lives on the line. They may end up dying on the battlefield in order to ‘preserve our way of life’. A soldier that jumps on a live grenade to save another person is a hero, a martyr, not an individual who committed altruistic suicide. We glorify self sacrifice that results in death, i.e. the American soldier that dies in combat saving others and we condemn their soldiers as suicide bombers as they attempt to spread their own ideas about freedom and God. Calling a soldier that jumps on a grenade an act of altruistic suicide interferes with the rhetorical power of the suicide meme. Calling an insurgent who blows himself (and others) up a suicide bomber reinforces the suicide meme. In either case, the individual in question willingly gives up his own life for the sake of a particular set of ideas, whether they be religious, political, or otherwise ideological. Now there is serious debate to be had whether or not the soldier that jumps on a grenade counts as suicide, and I will take this issue up in Chapter III. What I wish to make clear here is that the ideas of the culture in which one is socialized has a profound impact upon the processes of survival and reproduction. Culture is the new engine of human evolution, and the study of memetics is absolutely fundamental to any reasonable understanding of the human animal.

An examination of suicide from a biological perspective is an appropriate precursor to the philosophical perspective because one of the main objectives of this thesis is to examine in which ways our philosophical understanding of suicide has been ‘conditioned’ by our evolutionary history. Homo sapiens evolved cognitive modules that enhance their fitness. I believe that by understanding how and why these cognitive modules evolved will yield a greater ability to grasp the enigma of suicide. An evolutionary understanding of the phenomenon of suicide yields the capability to explain the origin of suicide in our evolutionary forefathers, how it is in accordance with evolutionary logic (suicide doesn’t go against nature), as well as the aversion that Homo sapiens currently have toward the concept itself. My analysis of non-human suicide was supposed to challenge our intuitions that suicide is unnatural by demonstrating how
fundamental acts of self destruction are in nature. The existence of many cases of suicide* in non-humans challenges the intuition that suicide is unnatural and provides a plausible ground upon which to posit that suicide is in accordance with nature. The conceptual components we acquired from an analysis of the evolution of evolutionary theory provide us with a foundation upon which we can build an explanation for the persistence of altruistic and egotistical suicide. I do not claim to have shown that suicide is adaptive in all cases, rather I have endeavored to combat the intuition that it is purely a pathology. What makes this difficult is that this descriptive project seems to make normative claims. This Chapter has been dedicated to describing the phenomenon of suicide from an evolutionary perspective. This description entails mitigating various debates in philosophy of biology, thus my analysis has layers upon layers of contentious claims. Some individuals reject group selectionism as naïve, some individuals don’t believe that any talk about memes can be informative, psychologists typically refuse to consider anything other than human suicide as a form of suicide, and the notion that emotions are evolution’s executioners is dangerous from a moral realist’s perspective. Undoubtedly, a deeper- more fully detailed-analysis of all of these issues is necessary before one could reasonably claim to have shown the adaptive nature of suicide.

Nevertheless, much has been uncovered in this Chapter- we now have grounds upon which to argue that historically the concept of suicide has been governed by some kind of knee-jerk reaction.6 Rather than using the tools of reason to analyze the concept of suicide, most philosophers’ conceptions of suicide are simply reflections of our evolutionary history. The lack of the use of reason in relation to the study of suicide is a forgivable offense- evolution has engrained the individual towards the ends of survival and reproduction to such a fantastic degree that, despite that death certainly scares us, the notion of taking our own lives is unthinkable. Thus, historically suicide has been forever accompanied by rhetoric- making suicide a moral wrong, the ultimate form of egotism, and the like. By recognizing the relevant conceptual advancements in evolutionary theory we can demonstrate that our intuitions in this matter- the nature of suicide and its relation to evolution- are questionable, if not altogether incorrect. Suicide is part of

---

6 This is why I introduced Wright’s claim that emotions are evolution’s executioners- I find that it is of the utmost importance when explaining the mistaken views that have been historically held concerning suicide.
nature, and individuals that commit suicide are not going against nature, they are acting in accordance with it. Further, the commonplace intuition that suicide is unnatural is itself the result of evolutionary forces- individual organisms are instilled with a fight or flight response which carries over into the memetic sphere as a knee-jerk emotional response against the mere thought of suicide. Evolution has instilled in us the intuitive revulsion towards suicide. By means of conceptual analysis, I have tried to move beyond such intuitions, and in doing so have found an important sense in which suicide is in accordance with nature.
In *The Laws* Plato provides a set of laws for society. Of these laws, he dedicates a small passage to suicide. Plato believes that society ought to have a law that forbids suicide, and if an individual does commit suicide that he should be punished. Plato begins “But what about the killer of the person who is, above all, his ‘nearest and dearest’, as the expression is? What penalty ought he to undergo? I am talking about the man who kills himself” (pp. 391). Plato then continues to provide what he believes are the five conditions for classifying acts as suicidal. Two of these five conditions can be considered positive conditions, and the remaining three are negative conditions.

The first of these two positive conditions for the performance of an act of suicide is as follows, “(the man who kills himself) (1) uses violence to take his fate out of the hands of destiny” (pp. 391). Suicide is a violent act, in which the agent manages to rally against destiny and produce his own fate. That which motivates this claim will become much clearer when we analyze Plato’s argument against committing suicide. The second condition exemplifies the negative value judgments that Plato has concerning suicide, “(the man who kills himself) imposes this unjust judgement on himself in a spirit of slothful and abject cowardice” (Plato, ibid). This second condition presents those individuals who commit suicide as lazy and despicable cowards. This characterization of suicide is quite common, and a historical analysis of suicide will yield quite similar results. It is fair to say that in general negative value judgments predominates discussions of suicide.

However, Plato recognizes that not all instances of suicide are quite so clear cut. Thus, he introduces three negative conditions- meaning that if an agent who appears to have committed an act of suicide fulfills one of these three conditions, then he actually is not to be said to have committed suicide. The first condition, “(the agent) is not acting in obedience to any legal decision of the state” (pp. 391). Self execution as mandated by the state is different from suicide. One cannot help but to think about Socrates drinking the
hemlock; in this case, Socrates did not commit suicide rather he performed an act of self execution. The punishment that would normally befall an individual is not enacted. As we shall see later, such cases yield moral praise and hero worship as opposed to moral blame.

The second negative condition is “(the agent) whose hand is not forced by the pressure of some excruciating and unavoidable misfortune” (pp. 391). Plato has a heart, he sympathizes with individuals who are either in unbelievable pain, or are on a path to inevitable destruction. In these cases, Plato finds an agents’ suicide to be rationally justified. This maps on well to our intuitions, we are willing to create a loophole in the system for those individuals that are in dire suffering. Now, “the pressure of some excruciating and unavoidable misfortune” is really a vague statement. If my whole life I really wanted to be a professional philosopher, and it becomes clear that that will never occur (for any number of reasons; political, intellectual, etc.) then I might be justified in killing myself under this condition. Fortunately, with the principle of charity in hand we can reject such situations.

Now the third negative condition is quite startling, “(if the agent) has not fallen into some irremediable disgrace that he cannot live with’” (pp. 391). The previous condition seemed to take care of cases in which the agent was in dire suffering, but this condition is aimed precisely at the agents’ feeling of disgrace to such a degree that he cannot live with it. One could argue that this third condition falls under the category of the second condition- being in a situation in which your disgrace is so profound that you cannot even live with it certainly seems like an excruciating and unavoidable misfortune. The first salient difference here is simply temporal. The second condition is a preemptive strike against the obtaining of a horrible situation, whereas in the third condition the agent is already in a horrible situation. Justifying suicide in instances where one is disgraced might map on well to our notions of having a lack of psychological well being, but this is a stretch. Which yields the second salient difference between the second and third negative conditions- disgrace implies one’s individual relation to the society as a whole including the various subgroups- one’s family, one’s community, or one’s state.7

7 It is strange to find this in Plato, though we certainly find it historically in Eastern societies and in contemporary fundamentalist Muslim societies. In these societies suicide for the sake of familial honor is
If an agent performs an act of suicide, then both of the positive conditions obtain as well as the three negative conditions. I take the positive conditions to be conjoined in the following way—by going against fate and placing destiny in one’s own hands it seems like one is making a judgment about oneself. Even if this is not tenable, the negative moral judgments that Plato proclaims in the second condition certainly apply to the first condition. I take the three negative conditions to be disjunctive, though one could certainly argue that these three conditions overlap. Nevertheless, if any one of these three negative conditions obtains, then that individual falls through the cracks, so to speak. His action is not one of suicide, but something like quasi-suicide. It could be self execution for the sake of the state, or self destruction for the sake of the self (avoiding the inevitable misfortune), or it could be self destruction for the sake of the family/self/state. In either case, we find that the relevant difference for Plato between acts of suicide and quasi-suicide lies within the relation between the agent and the reason for the performance of the act. Just any old form of misery won’t cut it for Plato, it must be misery of a certain type if it is to be anything other than suicide.

What happens if an agent does perform an act of suicide? That is what should the state do with an individual whose act description fulfills both positive conditions and none of the negative conditions? Plato asserts the following three provisions:

(1) People who parish in this way must be buried individually, with no one to share their grave.

(2) They must be buried in disgrace on the boundaries of the twelve territorial divisions, in deserted places that have no name.

(3) The graves must not be identifiable, either by headstone or title.

So if one were to commit suicide then one should disgracefully be buried alone in a nameless grave. This clearly illustrates the moral blameworthiness nature of the act of suicide for Plato. Though the agent no longer remains—Plato did have an immaterial view of the soul—his dead body should suffer the most that it can be made to suffer, that is, in the minds of his dead relatives. This law is meant to be a deterrent. It is meant to

well established and justified. No negative value judgments follow in these instances, and this is what we find in Plato.
instill in the minds of citizens the following: commit a cowardly act of suicide and we will not honor your memory. It looks like this law exists for the sake of society, the law is a social construct meant to reinforce a societal aversion towards suicide. However, an analysis of Plato’s argument against suicide is the next step in our analysis.

In Plato’s Phaedo we find Socrates awaiting his punishment (self execution, he is to drink hemlock) for corrupting the youth and for believing in false gods. As he waits in his cell he does what he always has done- philosophizes with his compatriots. While waiting for the execution Socrates, Cebes, and Simmias enter into a discussion about suicide. Socrates says “these human beings, for whom death is preferable, are not morally justified in doing themselves a good turn, but must wait for someone else to do it for them” (ibid, pp. 44, 62A). Cebes asks Socrates to explain why it is wrong to commit suicide, because they had previously been discussing philosophy as the practice of death and there is seemingly a contradiction here (Phaedo, pp. 46). Socrates then gives two different analogies- the first is that mortals are in prison, and that man should not free himself from it- which Socrates finds inadequate. The second is “the doctrine that gods are our guardians and that we men are one of the gods’ possessions” (ibid, pp. 44, 62B). After Cebes assents that this is a good analogy, Socrates continues “Now if one of your possessions were to destroy itself, without your having indicated that you wanted it to perish, you would be annoyed with it, and if you could punish it, you would?”(ibid, pp. 44, 62C). Cebes assents that he would, which leads Socrates to state that “So perhaps in that case it is not unreasonable, the idea that one should refrain from bringing one’s life to an end until God sends some necessity, such as the present one in my case” (ibid, pp. 44, 62 C).

Cebes then launches an assault upon the previous argument that the wise philosopher should welcome death, given what Socrates has just said. Cebes reasons that a wise man would recognize that the gods are the best guardians possible and that to try and escape them and do better on his own would be an unwise move. Whereas an ignorant man might well reason that he should leave a good master, thus yielding the strange result that the wise philosopher shouldn’t seek death and the ignorant man should. Upon stating this argument, Simmias chimes in that he agrees and pleads for Socrates to defend himself- because it is obvious that Cebes and Simmias both have Socrates’ current
situation in mind. Socrates believes that he will go to “other wise and good gods” as well as to “men now dead who are better than the men on earth”, and that this justifies his lack of griping about his current state of affairs (ibid, pp. 45, 63C).

As to the seeming paradox concerning the wise philosopher and the guardian gods, Plato wiggles his way out by asserting that there is a greater set of gods and men that await Socrates on the next plane of existence. Whether or not this is an adequate solution is beyond the scope of my investigation- only a cursory level examination is necessary, and it yields an emphatic no. The importance of the Phaedo for our discussion has been to highlight Plato’s argument against suicide. Suicide is wrong because we belong to the gods and we have no right to destroy ourselves- unless the gods dictate that it be so. Thus, Socrates is justified in killing himself because the state has handed him a death sentence, this is a necessity handed down by God.

Hume and Suicide

Hume believes that we naturally recoil and feel horror at the thought of our own death. When superstition is coupled with this natural terror, we become imprisoned by ideological chains. Thus, in this essay Hume’s aim “let us here endeavour to restore men to their native liberty, by examining all the common arguments against Suicide, and shewing, that That action may be free from every imputation of guilt or blame” (Hume, “On Suicide”, pp. 580). An analysis of the common arguments against suicide leads Hume to wrestle with three deontological considerations: suicide as a violation of a duty towards God, a violation of a duty to our neighbors, or a violation of a duty to ourselves. In the following section I will explain Hume’s analysis of these three arguments against suicide

Hume’s first assault is upon the notion that suicide is a transgression of our duty to God. He offers the first consideration, “in order to govern the material world, the almighty creator has established general and immutable laws, by which all bodies, from the greatest planet to the smallest particle of matter, are maintained in their proper sphere and function” (ibid, pp. 580). Here Hume is referring to the providence of the deity- the foresight, care, direction, or guidance of God. Hume believes that perhaps the main
reason suicide is considered a transgression of our duty towards God is because suicide appears to be a violation of the providential plan that God has made for us. This is a misconception, which he tries to reconcile in the following “the providence of the deity appears not immediately in any operation, but governs everything by those general and immutable laws, which have been established from the beginning of time. All events, in one sense, may be pronounced the action of the almighty: They all proceed from those powers with which he has endowed his creatures” (ibid, pp. 581). To illustrate, consider Hume’s example of a house that falls under its own weight and a house that is destroyed by the hands of men. In the former, there seems nothing wrong with asserting that that house fell because of the laws of matter and gravitation, which God created. In the latter case, because human agency is involved we seem to want to decree that this event is different. Hume asserts that the human faculties and the laws of motion and gravitation are equally the result of God’s workmanship.

Perhaps the reason that suicide is considered wrong is precisely because of the human agency that is present in the event. Hume argues, “there is no one event, however important to us, which he has exempted from the general laws that govern the universe, or which he has peculiarly reserved for his own immediate action and operation” (ibid, pp. 581). From God’s perspective, no particular event carries any more weight than any other. However, there are quite obviously many events- suicide being a prime example- that are especially important to us. Is the reason why these events are so important to us because of the importance of human life? Hume famously asserts “but the life of man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster” (ibid, pp. 583). This takes human existence off of its pedestal, placing it back on par with everything else in existence- from the perspective of the universe. Hume then makes the following observation:

Were the disposal of human life so much reserved as the peculiar province of the almighty that it were an encroachment on his right for men to dispose of their own lives; it would be equally criminal to act for the preservation of life as for its destruction. If I turn aside a stone, which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature, and I invade the peculiar providence of the almighty, by lengthening out my life, beyond the period, which, by the general laws of matter and motion, he had assigned to it (Pp. 583).
In a brilliant move, Hume turns the argument concerning the value of human life right upon its head. If destruction of human life is a violation of God’s decree, then it would be equally true of the preservation of life. Hume uses this to illustrate that if the main force of the argument against suicide (as a transgression of our duty towards God) rests upon the value of human life, then we find a conclusion that no one would be willing to assent to.

Hume then turns yet another closely related argument upon its head. Suicide is wrong because my life is not my own. However, “if my life be not my own, it were criminal for me to put it in danger as well as to dispose of it” (ibid, pp. 584). Consider what we call heroic action—acts in which the agent performs a feat at great danger to himself for the sake of someone else. Hume states, “Nor could one man deserve the appellation of Hero, whom glory or friendship transports into the greatest dangers, and another merit the reproach of Wretch or Miscreant, who puts a period to is life, from the same or like motives” (ibid, pp. 584). The grounds upon which one posits suicide to be wrong yield a most startling conclusion—heroic acts are wrong in virtue of the fact that they endanger the life of the agent.

Finally, Hume concludes his argument against the immorality of suicide as a transgression of a duty towards God with what appears to be a direct assault upon Plato’s argument against suicide. The very short dialogue goes as follows:

*But you are placed by providence, like a sentinel, in a particular station; and when you desert it, without being recalled, you are guilty of rebellion against your almighty sovereign, and have incurred his displeasure.* I ask, why do you conclude, that Providence has placed me in this station? For my part, I find, that I owe my birth to a long chain of causes, of which many and even the principle, depended upon voluntary actions of men. *But providence guided all these causes, and nothing happens in the universe without its consent and co-operation.* If so, then neither does my death, however voluntary, happen without it’s consent; and whenever pain and sorrow so far overcome my patience as to make me tired of life, I may conclude, that I am recalled from my station, in the clearest and most express terms. (pp. 585)

The first step in this argument mirrors Plato’s argument remarkably well. Instead of humans being possessions of the gods, we are sentinels that they placed here. And as follows in Plato; we desert our position (we destroy ourselves) and thus we incur the wrath of the almighty (we annoy the gods and deserve punishment). Hume’s response to
Plato is that we do receive some necessity from God, when we can no longer endure this existence. Socrates received his necessity from God in the form of state mandated execution, Hume believes that we find a similar necessity when “pain and sorrow so far overcome my patience as to make me tired of life”.

Hume then continues his assault upon the deontic arguments against suicide with an analysis of the duty to our neighbors. Though this section of the essay is quite short, it is nevertheless illuminating. He states, “a man, who retires from life, does no harm to society. He only ceases to do good; which, if it be an injury, is of the lowest kind” (ibid, pp. 586). To justify this claim, Hume reminds us of the reasonable expectations that one has upon entering into a social contract. No one believes that one should endure great suffering in order to produce a minute amount of good, that is simply asking too much of the individual. I am not expected to give all of my money to charity, because of the detriment it would cause to my own existence and the minimal amount of good it would do. Why is suicide any different?

Further, “suppose, that it is no longer in my power to promote the interest of the public: suppose that I am a burden to it… in such cases my resignation of life not must not only be innocent but laudable” (ibid, pp. 587). For Hume, suicide can possibly be beneficial to society and in such cases not only should the individual defy moral blame, but he should be deserving of praise. In this, Hume’s treatment again differs greatly from Plato. Hume continues asking us to consider a case in which an individual with important information is captured and faces torture. He knows that this information will be torn from him, and that it is in the public’s best interest for him to “put a period to a miserable life” (ibid, pp. 587). This resembles Plato’s second negative condition of suicide, but differs in that Hume places the emphasis upon the possible benefits to society- that the individual should perform the act for the sake of society.

Finally, Hume turns his assault upon the duty towards oneself. He only reserves two short passages to this topic, but they are powerful statements. It begins, “that Suicide may often be consistent with interest and with our duty to ourselves, no one can question, who allows, that age, sickness, or misfortune may render life a burthen, and make it worse than annihilation” (ibid, pp. 588). The reason why Hume takes this to be so clear, so self evident is because he believes, “for such is our natural horror of death, that small
motives will never be able to reconcile us to it” (ibid, pp. 588). In other words, humans are so engrained with the lust for life that one who wishes for his own demise cannot be thought to be suffering minimally. It is only when the conditions of one’s life are exceedingly painful that we can overcome our natural horror of death and accordingly commit suicide.

Hume concludes the essay with the following statement:

If Suicide be supposed a crime, ‘tis only cowardice can impel us to it. If it be no crime, both prudence and courage should engage us to rid ourselves at once of existence, when it becomes a burthen. ‘Tis the only way, that we can then be useful to society, by setting an example, which, if imitated, would preserve to every one his chance for happiness in life, and would effectually free him from all danger of misery (ibid, pp. 588).

Here we find that if suicide is a crime then it is because of a lack of the virtue of bravery (reminiscent of Aristotle’s treatment of suicide). However, if it is not a crime then whenever we find ourselves in a horrible existence the courageous and prudent thing to do is to put a period to our lives. By doing so we are useful to society (this is a huge claim in the history of the concept of suicide). We are useful because we help to systematically remove the superstition that yields these unwarranted fears, and, perhaps more importantly, because we free mankind from the damming situation of persisting in a miserable existence.

Kant and Suicide

In Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, Immanuel Kant endeavors to explicate the foundations for a metaphysics of morals. Our aim is to understand what Kant has to say about suicide. Kant argues that the best way to understand our duties is through the formulation of Universal laws. He introduces the famous categorical imperative, “act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant, Groundwork, pp. 88, 52). Then he tells us that the universal imperative of duty can be expressed as “act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature” (ibid, pp. 89, 52). This grounds universal laws within the framework of nature.
Kant continues by using some illustrations to demonstrate this maxim at work. His first illustration is of suicide, “a man feels sick of life as the result of a series of misfortunes that has mounted to the point of despair,” but he still retains the use of his reason and can therefore ask himself “whether taking his own life may not be contrary to his duty to himself” (ibid, pp. 89, 53). According to Kant, the calculus runs as follows “from self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life if its continuance threatens more evil than it promises pleasure” (ibid, pp. 89, 53). The suicidal man then questions whether or not this maxim can become a universal law of nature. Kant then argues, “It is then seen at once that a system of nature by whose law the very same feeling whose function (Bestimmung) is to stimulate the furtherance of life should actually destroy life would contradict itself and consequently could not subsist as a system of nature” (ibid, pp. 89, 53). This argument relies upon the premise that the function of life is to “stimulate the furtherance of life,” which seems plausible. If this is so, then one ought not commit suicide because this maxim cannot possibly be a universal law of nature, and “is therefore entirely opposed to the supreme principle of all duty” (ibid, pp. 89, 53). One common misconception about the application of Kant’s categorical imperative is that Kant rejects suicide on the grounds that if everyone were to do so then there would be no one left. According to H. J. Patton (whose interpretation of Kant I am utilizing), “there is clearly no trace of such an argument here (or indeed anywhere else, so far as I know), and the reader should be on his guard against such absurdities” (ibid, pp. 137). I agree with Patton, there is no such argument here- but that raises the question, why exactly does Kant believe that suicide is a violation of the duty to oneself?

The answer to this question becomes clear when Kant takes up the discussion of being simply a means to an end versus being an end in itself. For Kant, it is always wrong to treat people simply as a means to an end. Kant formulates this idea in the “practical imperative… act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in our own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end” (ibid, pp. 96, 66-67). To ascertain whether or not the practical imperative is practical Kant applies this principle to the previous example- suicide.

The suicidal man asks himself, “Can my action be compatible with the Idea of humanity as an end in itself?” (ibid, pp. 97, 67). Kant reasons that such an individual “is
making use of a person merely as a means to maintain a tolerable state of affairs till the end of his life” (ibid, pp. 97, 67). It is unclear precisely what Kant has in mind here, is he asserting that suicide is wrong because from the time one decides to commit suicide to the time he actually commits suicide he is using himself ‘as a means to maintain a tolerable state of affairs till the end of his life’? That doesn’t seem quite right. If Kant’s aim is suicide, then why is he focusing in on suicidal ideation? At any rate, we can interpret this passage as asserting that a suicidal individual—when he actually performs the act—is using himself as a means to an end (of his own suffering). Kant then reminds us, “But man is not a thing—not something to be used merely as a means: he must always in all his actions be regarded as an end in himself,” and concludes “Hence I cannot dispose of man in my person by maiming, spoiling, or killing” (ibid, pp. 97, 67). Kant’s objection to suicide is that to perform an act of suicide is to treat oneself simply as a means to an end—and that is always wrong.

Kant wrote The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue, in which he also discusses suicide. In the section entitled “Concerning Suicide” Kant gives a clear definition of suicide “the deliberate killing of oneself can be called self murder (homocidium dolosum, “deceptive murder”)” (Kant, Metaphysical Principles of Virtue, pp. 82, 422). Then Kant considers the three ways in which suicide can be seen as a transgression of one’s duties; a transgression of a duty to oneself, a transgression of a duty to others, and a transgression of a duty to God. In the framework of the historical philosophical dialectic, Kant is frequently seen to be responding directly to Hume’s skepticism. The same kind of phenomena is clearly at work here as well, Kant is responding to Hume’s treatment of suicide.

Kant provides four examples in which suicide is a transgression of a duty towards others. First, suicide can be “a transgression of the duty of one of a married couple to the other” (ibid, pp. 83, 422). Second, suicide can be a transgression of the duty of parents to their children. Third, suicide can be a transgression of the duty a subject has towards his government. Finally, suicide can be a transgression of the duty a subject has towards other subjects (ibid, pp. 83, 422). Of the possibility of suicide being a transgression of a duty towards God, Kant asserts “(a transgression) of man to God by forsaking the station entrusted to him in this world without being recalled from it” (ibid, pp. 83, 422).
Remarkably, this is the same argument that Plato gave concerning the immorality of suicide and the same argument that Hume assaulted. Apparently, Kant did not care for Hume’s handling of this argument.

Regardless of the aforementioned transgressions, Kant’s aim is to explain how it is that suicide is always a transgression of one’s duty to oneself. Of which he states, “a man is still obligated to preserve his life simply because he is a person and must therefore recognize a duty to himself (and a strict one at that)” (ibid, pp. 83, 422). Kant takes it that since the suicidal man is a person, and that since persons have a duty to humanity, that suicide is always wrong. The force of Kant’s argument is found in the following passage, “To destroy the subject of morality in his own person is tantamount to obliterating from the world, as far as he can, the very existence of morality itself; but morality is, nevertheless, an end in itself” (ibid, pp. 84, 423). Kant’s main objection to suicide, then, is that the suicidal man is directly assaulting morality to the greatest degree that he can by performing an act of suicide.

After explaining why suicide is wrong, Kant moves on to “Casuistical questions”-questions that critique a strict principle-based approach to reasoning. Kant presents us with five situations that seem to question his treatment of the strict moral assertions he has just made concerning suicide. First, “is committing suicide permitted in anticipation of an unjust death sentence from one’s superior?”- here we see allusions to Socrates’ self execution as mandated by the state (unjustly?). Second, consider a case in which, like Frederick the Great, a leader carried a ‘fast acting poison’ around with him during wartime, so that if he were captured “he might not be forced to conditions of ransom which might be harmful to his country?” (ibid, pp. 84, 423). Third, what if a man were inflicted with an incurable, potentially maddening misfortune? Would his suicide, presumably to protect others from his madness, be wrong? Fourth, what of smallpox inoculation? What if one were to die because they had received the inoculation? Finally, “Is it self-murder to plunge oneself into certain death in order to save one’s country? Or is martyrdom—the deliberate sacrifice of oneself for the good of mankind—also to be regarded, like the former case, as a heroic deed?” (ibid, pp. 84, 423). Kant does not answer any of these questions, rather he simply presents what could potentially be
problematic situations for his assertion that suicide is wrong because it is a transgression of one’s duty to oneself.

**Contemporary Debates Concerning Suicide**

Most of the contemporary debates concerning suicide arise in the ethical arena, concerning the moral justifiability of suicide. Euthanasia and Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS) lead to heated debates within contemporary American life. These debates are important for moral, legal, and political reasons, and the moral intuitions one has concerning suicide will greatly impact their assessment of the moral justifiability of euthanasia and PAS.

As with most philosophical debates, there are those that argue that PAS is highly immoral, and those that argue it is morally justifiable. Dan Brock argues that PAS is morally justified on the grounds that it is within the patients’ ethical rights. Daniel Callahan argues that PAS is immoral. Callahan claims;

Our common moral intuition that suicide is ordinarily an act of depression, that it usually bespeaks some degree of treatable depression, and that it ought not to be encouraged, strikes me as entirely valid. It is a way to defend ourselves, and help others defend us, from the despair that life can bring our way; and it is generally recognized that we need to help each other cope with it, not succumb to it. Callahan, pp. 202.

While my project is admittedly a descriptive one, I believe that here is one place in which the descriptive project can help the normative project. Callahan is correct about the content of our moral intuitions concerning suicide- that is certainly what many people believe. Further, Callahan is correct in asserting that our intuitions are meant to insulate us from the despair of material life. However, if we take these two points and hold them up against the content of Chapter I, then we will see that the function of our intuition concerning suicide is precisely to help increase the fitness of society. This does not speak to the moral justifiability of suicide, it speaks to how it is that we as human beings utilize the rhetorical power of memes in order to advance evolutionary ends. This is a dangerous point in the debate between ethics and evolution. The best evolutionary story one can tell will only show why moral intuitions evolved and what they evolved for. At best, one can then question the role of these intuitions in the pursuit of moral truths.
There certainly could be some independent grounds that allow for moral realism, but it is unlikely that evolutionary theory will be a friend in this project.

The definition of suicide is philosophically important not only for ethics but for action theory and psychology as well. The debate concerning the definition of suicide and the extension of suicide is nothing new. Peter Windt argues that “the concept of suicide is ‘open-textured,’ and provides a Wittgensteinian analysis of the concept ‘suicide’ in terms of criteria, characteristics in virtue of which an event is a suicide, but which are neither necessary not sufficient conditions” (Windt, pp. 39). Windt believes that this approach will minimize misconceptions and help to promote debate. R. G. Frey argues that “it is not killing oneself but killing oneself intentionally constitutes suicide” (pp. 36). At the time, this was an important distinction; action theory was in its infancy and Frey took intentionally killing oneself to indicate that suicide refers to cases in which one intends to die. This is the precise issue I will analyze in Chapter III. Frey argues against the intuition that suicide is always morally wrong, claiming “‘Socrates died a noble and dignified death and suicide is ignoble and undignified.’ On the contrary; the fact that Socrates died a noble and dignified death does not show he did not commit suicide, but rather that suicide need not be ignoble and undignified” (Frey, pp. 38). In a Humean fashion, Frey attempts to demonstrate that allowing moral intuitions to govern the classification of suicidal acts leads to misconceptions that support the rhetorical devices that reinforce the moral intuitions. Suzanne Stern-Gillet denies Frey’s claim that Socrates committed suicide. Stern-Gillet claims that though certainly Socrates died by his own hand, it was not a suicide. “My ground is that any definition of suicide (such as Durkheim’s or Frey’s) which allows for Socrates’ inclusion in this class is incomplete insofar as it blurs important distinctions between what are, in fact, different manners of viewing a person’s death” (Stern-Gillet, pp. 118). Here, we find Stern-Gillet sticking to her intuitions concerning the extension of suicide, refusing to admit what I would call altruistic suicides. Windt, Frey, and Stern-Gillet are all debating the definition of suicide, as well as the extension of the concept precisely because of their philosophical importance. These issues are vital to our classification of actions in moral, religious, political, and legal senses.
My Proposed Operational Definition of Suicide

To clearly illustrate what I propose the operational definition of suicide should be, I will first discuss the salient features of suicide as analyzed by Plato, Hume, and Kant. Now Plato, Hume, and Kant all seem to be talking about different things, and are they disagreeing on a substantive matter? Yes. These three philosophers are either implicitly or explicitly providing us with a definition of suicide. Plato offers us a moralized definition of suicide and he provides value judgments as he sets forth the extension of the concept. As well, Plato provides us with an argument for the immorality of suicide. Hume seems to be providing a morally neutral account of suicide, as well as an argument for the morally neutral nature of the act. Kant provides an argument for the immorality of suicide and then deals explicitly with the extensional problems that result from the definition of suicide. Here I shall glean the definition and extension of suicide from each of the philosophers. I am claiming that one can analyze what each has to say about suicide and from their arguments for or against its morality derive a definition of suicide as well as the extension of that definition. This is important because it provides the reader with a philosophical landscape concerning the definition and extension of suicide that will be the launching point of my analysis.

For Plato, suicide refers to the class of actions in which the following two conditions are met, “(the man who kills himself) uses violence to take his fate out of the hands of destiny”; AND “imposes this unjust judgement on himself in a spirit of slothful and abject cowardice”. These are the two positive conditions that Plato gave us, which seem to be inherently linked together- a man that takes fate into his own hands also imposes what Plato would call an unjust judgment upon himself. If any of the three negative conditions mentioned in the first section obtain, then that act does not count as suicidal. I submit that we can characterize Plato’s definition of suicide as only admitting into the class of suicide those acts which count as egotistical suicides. I am using the classification of egotistical suicide to apply to all instances in which an agent intentionally kills himself because of his own egotistical considerations. For Plato, this is the only kind of suicide, where an agent removes himself from the charge of the gods without their consent. He makes exceptions for people that kill themselves because; the state mandates it, there is some impending excruciating misfortune, or if the agent falls
into irremediable disgrace. In these cases, the agent is not to said to have killed himself and is therefore not subject to legal or moral punishment.

The case is quite different for Hume. Hume does admit into his definition of suicide the class of actions which can be described as egotistical suicide. Hume simply undercut Plato’s argument against the immorality of suicide in these cases and says that the necessity from God comes in the form, “pain and sorrow so far overcome my patience as to make me tired of life”. This is egotistical suicide, and it is not morally blameworthy for Hume. However, Hume admits a larger class of actions into his definition of suicide. While considering the argument that suicide is a transgression of our duty to others (society), Hume argues, “suppose, that it is no longer in my power to promote the interest of the public: suppose that I am a burden to it… in such cases my resignation of life not must not only be innocent but laudable”. This is where the class of actions that are suicidal swell in size beyond that of Plato’s classification. My contention is that Hume admits into the class of actions that count as suicidal what I refer to as altruistic suicides. I am using the classification of altruistic suicide to refer to all cases in which the agent intentionally kills himself for the sake of others. For Hume, then, suicidal acts include both egotistical and altruistic suicides.

Kant’s definition of suicide is opposed to Hume’s and much more similar to Plato’s. Kant tells us that “the deliberate killing of oneself can be called self murder (homocidium dolosum, “deceptive murder”). He characterizes the intentions of the suicidal individual much like Plato, stating “(he) feels sick of life as the result of a series of misfortunes that has mounted to the point of despair”. Of course, Kant then argues that suicide is always a violation of our duty to ourselves. However, in the section on casuistical questions Kant then asks, “Is it self-murder to plunge oneself into certain death in order to save one’s country?” My answer is an emphatic “Yes”, altruistic suicide is indeed one of the two primary classes of actions that count as suicidal.

I propose that the operating definition of suicide should be the following: suicide is applied to all cases in which an agent intentionally kills himself. This definition can then be broken down into two further sub classifications- egotistical or altruistic suicide. Now, despite that my definition of suicide is the same as both Plato and Kant, nevertheless they seemingly would reject the extension of my definition of suicide. That
is, they reject the very notion of altruistic suicide. Indeed, this looks to be a highly contentious move on my part. I believe that I can justify my sub classifications of suicide by appealing to a recent movement in action theory- a rejection of the simple view of intentionality. However, this is not the place for such an argument, I will argue for my definition of suicide later on in Chapter III. Since, at this point, my definition of suicide is stipulative I should make it as clear as possible.

One way to understand the extension of my definition of suicide is to cache it out in a more common folk usage. Suicide refers to two classes of actions, “classical” suicide and self sacrifice resulting in death. “Classical suicide” refers to the class of actions that adhere to the common usage of the term, as well as to what Plato and Kant had in mind. Altruistic suicide refers to the class of actions that we would normally count as self sacrifice that happen to result in the death of the agent. Perhaps some examples would help illustrate; soldiers jumping on grenades, mothers sacrificing themselves for their children, police officers dying while attempting to save innocent civilians, firefighters that die while trying to save little children in a burning building, and religious martyrs all count as altruistic suicides. Arguably, most people would simply state that these individuals are sacrificing themselves for others- not committing acts of altruistic suicide. Once again, I will not justify this shift in the concept of suicide until later on. However, I am confident that when I am finished with my conceptual analysis there will be good reason to admit my definition into both technical and common usage. For the time being, my good reader must simply grant that my definition of suicide depicts a particular class of actions- “classical suicide” and self sacrifice that results in one’s death- and that I am simply placing my own labels upon these two classes of actions- egotistical suicide and altruistic suicide.8

The main point of this chapter is to provide the reader with a philosophical landscape of the concept of suicide. Plato, Hume, and Kant are highly influential thinkers in the history of philosophy and their conception of the status of the morality of the act as well as their conceptions of the definition and extension of suicide are illuminating. The seemingly easy task of identifying the definition and extension of

---

8. The addition of altruistic suicide to the preexisting notion of egotistical suicide is due to the extension of applying considerations from rejecting the Simple View of Intentionality.
suicide is here shown to be more difficult than initially thought. The history of the concept of suicide has been dominated by assertions of immorality, which brings us back to my claim in Chapter I that the concept of suicide has been governed by evolutionary intuitions. As previously stated, I will not attempt to adjudicate the morality/immorality of suicide; nor shall I attempt to detail the relationship between evolution and ethics. Evolution can explain why we have the knee-jerk reaction concerning suicide but it cannot go any further when considering its moral status. The definition and extension of suicide is currently important in the debate concerning euthanasia, which is why I briefly analyzed various ways in which current theorists argue about how to define it. Thus, I offered my own definition of suicide which I will now argue for in Chapter III.
CHAPTER 3

ACTION THEORY AND SUICIDE

Intentionally X-ing Versus Intending to X

In Chapter II I claimed that the definition of suicide is intentionally killing oneself. I also did not provide any particular reasons for my understanding of the extension of this definition of suicide. To refresh the reader’s mind, I claimed that intentionally killing oneself included two primary classes of suicide—altruistic and egotistical. Though there is nothing contentious about my definition of suicide, it is undeniable that my understanding of the extension of suicide—the class of actions in the actual world that count as suicidal—is quite contentious. Now I shall make good on my promise, and provide the reader with reasons to accept my understanding of the extension of the definition of suicide. It is important to note that even if my definition of suicide is found to be mistaken there is a nice philosophical point that remains: there is an ambiguity in the relationship between the definition of suicide and its extension.

Providing a philosophical account of intentionality is one of the major features of action theory. In this section, I am going to examine the Simple View of Intentionality, as well as the Rejection of the Simple View of Intentionality. I am going to provide a surface level analysis of the issues involved in the relationship between intending to X and intentionally X-ing. In order to do so, I am going to examine part of the debate between Michael Bratman and Hugh McCann. Then, I will introduce a case from action theory—provided by Joshua Knobe—that is analogous to cases of suicide. The aim of this section is to provide the reader with an account of the conceptual components necessary to enhance the plausibility of my claim that the extension of the definition of suicide includes both altruistic and egotistical suicides, as well as to introduce an analogous case that will help to support my contention. This is no easy task, since there are so many different things going on when one analyzes intentionality. Further, there is a real problem of intuitive plausibility concerning different varieties of cases. As Al Mele demonstrates:
According to Christopher Peacocke, it is “undisputed” that one who makes a successful attempt “to hit a croquet ball through a distant hoop while believing that one’s chances of success are tiny” intentionally hits the ball through the hoop. But Gilbert Harman informs us that “it is quite controversial” whether someone who successfully tries to sink a putt “is properly said to have intentionally sunk the put”. Mele pp. 22.

I am no action theorist; I am a NeoDarwinian doing action theory. Accordingly, I simply will not be speaking to many of the issues that would be of undeniable importance to the action theorist. My surface level analysis is meant to be an argument for the plausibility of the claim that the extension of suicide includes both egotistical and altruistic categories.

We begin with Michael Bratman, in his article “Two Faces of Intention”. Bratman is speaking to many problems within this article, the Single Phenomena View, consistency and the simple view, motivation and motivational potential, and future-directed action- to name a few. My focus is upon Bratman’s discussion of the relationship between intending to X and intentionally X-ing. Bratman states, “for me intentionally to A I must intend to A; my mental states at the time of action must be such that A is among those things I intend. I will call this the Simple View” (pp. 179). One could think of the Simple View of intentionality as follows: whenever an agent intentionally X’s he intends to X. Intentionally X-ing and intending to X are wedded at the hip. Bratman acknowledges that the Simple View of intentionality certainly does have its advantages; it provides an intuitive account of the relationship between intentionally X-ing and intending to X and it “recognizes the distinctiveness of intentions” (pp. 180). The intuitive plausibility of the Simple View, though, is not enough for Bratman to endorse it.

Bratman then explains where he stands on the issue:

I find the Simple View unacceptable. Our conception of the state of intention is that a single state tied to two very different sorts of phenomena. Intention is Janus-faced, tied both to co-ordinating plans and intentional action. The Simple View does not allow sufficient theoretical room for both these faces of intention. Bratman, pp. 180.

Bratman takes it to be the case that “intention is Janus-faced” and that the Simple View of intentionality cannot accommodate this duality. If the Simple View is not sufficient for handling the Janus-faced nature of intentionality, then what view is? Bratman presents the Rejection of the Simple View of Intentionality, where “that while to A
intentionally I must intend to do *something*, I need not intend *to do A*” (pp. 181).

Bratman proposes that intentionally X-ing and intending to X are not wedded at the hip in the manner that the Simple View of intentionality suggests.

Rather than explain the arguments by which Bratman rejects the Simple View, I will simply present a case that demonstrates his thought on this matter. Bratman presents the following thought experiment:

Suppose I intend to run the marathon and believe that I will thereby wear down my sneakers. Now it seems to me that it does not follow that I intend to wear down my sneakers, and in a normal case I will not so intend. One sign of the absence of such an intention will be the fact that I am not at all disposed to engage in further reasoning aimed at settling on some means to wearing down my sneakers… My attitude towards wearing down my sneakers does not play the role in further means-ends reasoning that an intention to wear them down would normally play.

Even so, if I proceed to run the marathon and actually do wear down my sneakers then I might well do so intentionally. Perhaps this is clearest in a case with two further features. First, I not only believe I will wear them down; I consciously note this while I am running. Second, wearing them down has some independent significance to me; Perhaps they are a family heirloom. In a case with these two further features I think we would classify my inaction as intentional. Yet it does not seem that these further features must change what I intend in running the race. Given my relevant beliefs and desires, in executing my intention to run the race I may intentionally wear down my sneakers; and this even though I do not intend to wear them down. So while what I intend does not include wearing down my sneakers, the motivational potential of my intention does. Bratman, pp. 199.

According to the Simple View of intentionality, if I intentionally run a marathon then I intend to run a marathon. So far, so good; however, it is in the case of the shoes that the plausibility of the Simple View of intentionality begins to become questionable. Under the Simple View of intentionality if I intentionally wear down my sneakers then I *intend to wear down my sneakers*. Here is where the opponent of the Simple View can begin to demonstrate the inadequacy of the relationship between intentionally X-ing and intending to X. To the opponent of the Simple View it seems extremely probable, indeed if not outright correct, to claim that I can intentionally wear down my sneakers without intending to wear them down. As Bratman has explained, I must intend to do *something* and in this case I intend to run a marathon. This speaks to the problem of motivation in performing intentional actions under a Rejection of the Simple View. To put that problem succinctly, where does an agent get the motivation to perform an action-intentionally wearing down one’s sneakers- if not in the ‘intending to wear down one’s
sneakers’? Though the problem of motivational capacity is outside of the scope of my investigation, it should be noted that Bratman does have a solution to this problem. For our purposes, under the Rejection of the Simple View of intentionality this motivational capacity can be found in the replacement for ‘intending to X’ with I must ‘intend to do something’. Now back to the problem with the Simple View, Bratman points out, “The Simple View forces us to read these complexities back into the agent’s intentions: it includes in what is intended everything done intentionally” (pp. 201). I agree with Bratman’s treatment of the Simple View of intentionality. For I find that ‘including in what is intended everything done intentionally’ to be a mistaken understanding of the nature of intentionality. It is important to note that the case above is a special circumstance case, and that affects my analysis. As I introduce my own cases where an agent intentionally X’s while intending to Y, one could argue that they are not special circumstances as in the Bratman example.

Not everyone agrees with Bratman in that we should reject the Simple View of intentionality. For instance, Hugh McCann argues that we should accept the Simple View of intentionality. There is debate concerning whether or not we ought to reject the Simple View. Nevertheless, I will reject the simple view of intentionality.

That being said, I follow action theorists like Bratman and Mele in rejecting the Simple View of intentionality. I take it to be the case that an agent can intentionally X without intending to X. I have not demonstrated the undeniable truth of the Rejection of the Simple View of intentionality, I simply agree with Bratman and Mele in that if an agent intentionally X’s that they intend to do something, and that something need not be to intend to X. Obviously, there are many instances in which one intends to X and intentionally X’s, which is precisely what has given the Simple View unquestioned status for so long. However, there are cases in which and agent intentionally X’s without intending to X. The status of this claim is subject to debate, but in the rest of this analysis I take it to be true.

In conversation with Al Mele, he reminded me that ‘intentional actions (for the most part) are in the world, intentions are in the head”. Certain mental actions, planning, deliberating, etc. count as intentional actions but by and large intentional actions are in the world. By in the world, I mean actually performed by an agent in the physical world.
I, for example, am currently intentionally typing these words. There is a division between intentional and non-intentional actions. When I am at the doctor’s office and he taps my knee to test my reflexes, I don’t intentionally react with a jerk of the leg. If I were trying to avoid paying the doctor’s fee and I kicked him in the head repeatedly, that would be an intentional action. The debate concerning where one should draw the line between intentional versus non-intentional action is of great importance, but I need not speak to it too much here. Intentions, by contrast, are most certainly not in the world. Right now I am having the intention to write these words. Intentions are in the head. There is a difference between intentionally X-ing and having the intention to X, one is an action in the world and the other is a thought in one’s mind.

**Justification of My Proposed Definition of Suicide**

What does all of this have to do with the extension of the definition of suicide? In the performance of an act of suicide the agent intentionally kills himself. What the agent intends is another issue altogether, which is precisely why it is that I introduced the distinction between the Simple View and the rejection of the Simple View of intentionality. Under the Simple View of intentionality if an agent intentionally kills himself then he intends, he has the intention to, kill himself. The intention to kill oneself is probably what most people have in mind when they assert that an agent kills himself (“classical suicide”), seeing as how most people accept the Simple View unreflectively.

Suicide is intentionally killing oneself. But that tells us relatively little about the nature of suicide, for that speaks nothing to the intentions of the agent. The intentions of an agent are reasonably very important when we engage in ethical, political, and legal philosophy; and the intentions are important for classifying actions and for my understanding of the concept of suicide. The understanding of suicide that I am advocating is a two tier analysis, the first tier is tied to intentionally X-ing and the second tier is linked to the intention to X. So according to my proposed analysis, if we are to classify an action in the world as suicidal the first question is: did the agent intentionally kill himself? This becomes a question of whether or not the agent performed the action intentionally, and whether or not he did so advisedly- with the knowledge of the consequences/results of his action. Take the following two cases: Jones is the son of a
gun shop owner, he knows a great deal about guns. Jones takes a gun that he loaded, took the safety off, put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger. Jones intentionally killed himself—barring the possible psychological pathologies he might have: i.e. Jones thinks that he is God and can thus sustain a gunshot to the head. Consider a second case with Smith; Smith has lived in a pre-modern society for his entire life. One day, for some reason Smith is brought to America and is staying in a hotel room by himself. Smith has never even seen or heard of a gun before, he looks in the drawer by his bed and there is a gun there. Smith takes the gun, puts it to his head and pulls the trigger. Smith did not intentionally kill himself. Smith did not meet the advisedly condition, Jones did.

After one has determined that the agent intentionally killed himself, the tenants of conceptual analysis force us to say that he committed suicide. Whether or not he did so, for most moral, political, and legal systems will turn on whether or not he intended to kill himself. Thus, the second tier of the analysis of suicide that I am advocating requires that once we classify the action as suicide, we must then speak to the question of what he intended to do. What the agent intended to do can fall under one of two primary classifications, the intention was either altruistic or egotistical. Two cases concerning Bill and Ted; Bill is a soldier in the US army and is stationed in Iraq. One day, Bill is standing in a tent with eight of his friends. An insurgent tosses a grenade into the tent. Bill recognizes that he can either jump on the grenade or try to dive out of the tent. Bill jumps on the grenade, it explodes killing Bill but saving the rest of the soldiers in the tent. It seems natural to say that Bill is a hero, indeed, but it seems wrong to assert that Bill committed suicide. However, Bill intentionally killed himself, though he did not intend to die. Bill intentionally killed himself but lacked the intention to kill himself; he had the intention to save his friends. Bill performed an act of altruistic suicide. Second case, Ted is a forty year old American who is recently divorced— for the fifth time. Ted is terribly unhappy with his life for several reasons; no friends, no family, horrible job, etc. One day Ted takes a gun and shoots himself in the head. Ted intentionally killed himself and had the intention to kill himself. Ted performed an act of egotistical suicide. What separates Bill from Ted was what each intended to do, not what each intentionally did. Both Bill and Ted commit suicide, that is, both intentionally killed themselves. However,
Bill intentionally killed himself without intending to kill himself, he intended to save; Ted intentionally killed himself while intending to kill himself.

The previous two examples illustrate how the Rejection of the Simple View of intentionality affects the extension of the definition of suicide as intentionally killing oneself. One could certainly object to the Bill and Ted example, but only on certain grounds. One could simply assert that the Simple View of intentionality is correct and that anyone who intentionally kills themselves intends to kill themselves. But this will only affect the second tier portion of our analysis, because Bill intentionally kills himself. However, one could then respond that Bill did not intentionally kill himself, he intentionally saved the other soldiers. This response would presuppose an understanding of intentionality that is out of accordance with the dissenting groups within action theory and it would presuppose a moralized definition of intentionality, which to me seems patently false. Simply accepting the Simple View of intentionality is not enough to reject the claim that Bill intentionally killed himself; rather, it speaks to the second tier analysis. If this is incorrect then it seems to mean that the reason why it is incorrect to say that Bill intentionally killed himself is because of what he intended to do. This would require placing conceptual emphasis upon what an agent intends and not what he intentionally does. Certainly, there are various ethical systems that take what one intends to do to be more important than what one intentionally does- in certain cases- but I do not believe that would be a useful heuristic for classifying actions within philosophy. If one went that route then it is difficult to see how such a system could even be tenable, that is, if the first tier of one’s analysis of action was to take what one intends to be of more importance than what one intentionally does. There may be good considerations of this sort for moral philosophy, but not for action theory.

One could attack the second tier of my proposed analysis by claiming that one can never truly know another agent’s (even one’s own) intentions, so the categories of altruistic and egotistical are superimposed fictions upon something utterly unknowable. Ascribing intentions to agents is notoriously difficult in normal cases- such as; did you intend to slam the door? Cases of suicide muddy the conceptual water even further- for without some sort of evidence of future intentions to kill oneself or save, or without a suicide note, how are we to go about ascribing intentions to people that are already dead.
The following two cases illustrate the problem at hand, Zach and Josh. Zach is a firefighter who loves his job, one day Zach is at work and sees a small child in the fifth floor window yelling for help. Zach knows from his experience that the building in question is going to collapse any minute, and that running into the building would almost certainly ensure his death. Nevertheless, Zach runs into the building and dies— an instance of altruistic suicide. On the opposite side of the same building Josh, a rather sad and unhappy firefighter, sees the same child and makes the same rational assessment—running into that burning building would almost certainly result in death. Josh runs into the building and dies— but as he runs in he thinks to himself, “finally the sweet release of death”, this is an instance of egotistical suicide. Without some sort of evidence—behavioral, written accounts of their intentions, etc. – how can we be certain that Zach performed an act of altruistic suicide and Josh performed an act of egotistical suicide? That is, to bring it back to our previous cases, how can we be certain that Bill wasn’t really intending to kill himself? Providing a reasonable account for ascribing intentions to agents is a necessary component to the second tier of my analysis. I don’t find this to be a fatal objection, simply because there are many different moral, judicial, and political philosophical systems that provide such a methodology. That is, my theory isn’t to be flawed simply because there is a problem with ascribing intentions to agents; many theories of great value carry that same burden.

I think that the confusion concerning the issue of the relation between suicide, intentionally X-ing, and intending to X is quite justifiable. First and foremost, the conceptual components that allow for such a distinction have been around for a relatively short while. Second, I believe that there is an evolutionary history that helps explain the historical misconceptions concerning suicide (as I argued in Chapter I). Third, people in general are not terribly careful with their language, the difference between intention and intentionally is still unappreciated by some philosophers. When theorists define suicide as intentionally killing oneself what they really mean to say is that suicide applies to all cases in which an individual intends to kill himself. I believe that the intent to kill oneself captures what has historically been considered suicide. But let us consider some of the ramifications for such an understanding of suicide. It would require that what an agent intends to do to be much more important than what he intentionally does. This is
plausible with morally loaded actions and intentions, an ethical philosophy needs to be capable of speaking directly to those things that it shuns and praises. So suicide would be applied to cases where an agent intends to kill himself, and moral praise - hero worship - would be hoisted upon the individual that died in the process of intentionally performing an action in which he knew his own death to be a very likely consequence in virtue of the fact that he intended to save. One could possibly make such a move to save their moralized definition of suicide, but such a system would be simply unacceptable by a reasonable action theoretic framework. The definition of suicide has historically been morally charged, which I believe has helped to cause confusion and further exasperate problems already apparent. By stripping suicide of its moral nature, claiming that suicide applies to all cases of intentionally killing oneself, one thereby has a conceptual framework to explain suicide and also to make moral assessments. That is, the second tier of my analysis exists to speak to the question of moral assessments. The force of the argument against my analysis of suicide then becomes questionable, for if my definition is in accordance with action theory, all the while allowing for the moral judgments we all so desperately seem to need to make, and while illuminating the nature of the concept, my understanding accommodates rival theories while expanding our explanatory power.

Knobe and Ascribing Praise/Blame

There is further reason to suspect that many people have simply been wrong in their understanding of suicide - whether it be the confusion concerning the extension of the concept or the mistake of taking what one intends to do to be more important than what one intentionally does. In “Intentional action and side effects in ordinary language” Joshua Knobe presents two experiments concerning side effects and ascriptions of moral praise and blame. As Knobe informs us, there is a debate in action theory concerning whether or not side effects are intentional; Mele believes that it is always wrong to consider side effects intentional acts, and Bratman asserts that there are times in which side effects are brought about intentionally (pp. 190). I agree with Mele on this issue, but that has little bearing on Knobe’s experiments and his conclusions.

Knobe surveyed ordinary folk about two cases, the first being a CEO case. In the first case, the subjects were asked to do two things determine the blameworthiness of the
act (from 0-6) and to assess whether or not the action was intentional. As Knobe presents the case:

The vice-president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, ‘We are thinking of starting a new program. It will help us increase profits, but it will also harm the environment.’
The chairman of the board answered, ‘I don’t care at all about harming the environment, I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let’s start the new program.
They started the new program. Sure enough, the environment was harmed.

Then a different group of subjects were given the same case, but instead of harming the environment the implementation of the new program helped the environment. The results, “In the harm condition, most subjects (82%) said that the agent brought about the side effect intentionally, whereas in the help condition, most subjects (77%) said that the agent did not bring about the side effect intentionally” (pp. 192).

Knobe then utilized the following second case:

A lieutenant was talking with a sergeant. The lieutenant gave the order: ‘Send your squad to the top of Thompson Hill.’ The sergeant said: ‘But if I send my squad to the top of Thompson Hill we’ll be moving the men directly into the enemy’s line of fire. Some of them will surely be killed.
The lieutenant answered: ‘Look, I know that they’ll be in the line of fire, And I know that some of them will be killed. But I don’t care at all about what happens to our soldiers. All I care about is taking control of Thompson Hill.’
The squad was sent to the top of Thompson Hill. As expected, the soldiers were moved into the enemy’s line of fire, and some of them were killed.

Then a different group of subjects were given the same case, but instead of harming the soldiers, the command helped the soldiers. The results, “In the harm condition, most (77%) subjects said the agent brought about the side effect intentionally, whereas in the help condition most (70%) subjects said that the agent did not bring about the side effect intentionally” (pp. 193). Knobe then explained the results from both experiments. He claimed that “there seems to be an asymmetry whereby people are considerably more willing to blame the agent for bad side effects than to praise the agent for good side effects” (pp. 193). Further, Knobe asserted that the asymmetry of ascribing praise and blame could be at the root of the asymmetry concerning the application of the concept intentional (pp. 193). Knobe concludes, “they seem considerably more willing to say that
a side effect was brought about intentionally when they regard that side effect as bad than when they regard it as good” (pp. 193).

I find Knobe’s conclusion to be correct, and that it applies to my analysis of the concept of suicide. The point of introducing the Rejection of the Simple View of intentionality was to demonstrate that there are instances of intentionally killing oneself where the agent does not intend to kill himself. The historical confusion concerning suicide can be seen as resulting from determining side effects to be intentional, thereby being analogous to Knobe’s CEO case and asserting that the negative side effect was intentional. I could build a similar case to demonstrate that the ascription of intentionally killing oneself varies when the side effect of killing oneself helps or harms. The CEO’s intention to harm the environment would be analogous to an agent intending to kill himself for egotistical reasons. Whether or not such a case would elicit the same kind of response Knobe received can only be known after experimental verification. One could argue that there are mitigating factors that would prevent a similar response.

Nevertheless, there is an extremely useful conceptual tool that helps me to explain my understanding of suicide; namely, if a side effect is bad then people in general are much more likely to consider the side effect to be intentional, and less likely if the side effect is good. According to my two tier analysis, suicide applies to all cases of intentionally killing oneself and the intentions of the agent then determine whether the suicide was altruistic or egotistical. Intentionally killing oneself produces side effects—saving others or reducing one’s psychological pain and this would be analogues to helping the environment or harming the environment.

**Conclusion**

This thesis has been an attempt to provide an analysis of suicide from a biological, historical, and philosophical framework. Undoubtedly, many questions remain unanswered and many arguments are left wanting. However, I hope to have shown that there are reasonable scientific theses that allow one to posit that suicide is in accordance with nature, not opposed to it. The perspective of evolution that I am advocating is a thesis unto itself, thus I presuppose an immense amount of knowledge and do not argue as rigorously as many would like. Nevertheless, I believe that the presentation of concepts within Chapter I indicate that as beings with an evolutionary
history there is a possible fitness increasing, adaptive, evolutionary nature behind the performance of suicidal acts. The ‘Just So Story’ I have created presents an explanation for the historical sources of confusion surrounding the concept of suicide. Our moral intuitions are the product of our evolutionary history, thus an aversion to suicide on the individual and societal levels increases the ability for the species to deal with the woes of material existence, and indeed to thrive in our environment. Suicide is an integral part of nature. Ironically, I am utilizing evolutionary concepts in order to argue that our commonplace of suicide is incorrect- and that the stigma against suicide is an evolved fitness increasing mechanism that promotes evolutionary ends. I am using evolutionary arguments to argue against that which evolution has produced. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Chapter I is the assertion that our fundamental evolutionary nature is not to seek truth, rather it is to seek the maximal fitness. Or perhaps the most disturbing aspect is that the suicide of an individual human can increase the ability of the group to survive and reproduce- nature simply does not give a damn for the individual, the individual is subservient to the survival and reproduction of the group. This is an admittedly dark picture of human existence; survival and reproduction are undeniably important to us, but many of us feel that our lives are about much more.

In Chapter II I attempted to present various philosophical understandings of the definition, moral status, and extension of suicide. By presenting the views of Plato, Hume, and Kant I have shown the historical extent of the debate. Whether or not suicide is morally justified is still a question to be answered, but hopefully many of the most popular arguments have been debunked. I have also argued that suicide is a philosophically important concept in contemporary debates concerning euthanasia and PAS. Not only for these reasons is suicide philosophically important, but simply for the reasons provided by Western analytic philosophy in the tradition of conceptual analysis.

In Chapter III I have dabbled in action theoretic concerns. I raised the debate concerning the Simple View of Intentionality, with its proponents and opponents. Under a Rejection of the Simple View of Intentionality defining suicide as intentionally killing oneself entails that the extension of suicide includes acts where the agent intentionally kills himself yet does not intend to kill himself. One can simply accept the Simple View and not have to make such a commitment. Such a theorist would insulate themselves
from this problem, but would have to deal with many more. Even if one were to reject the Simple View, one could still claim that the extension of suicide precludes the class of actions in which an individual intentionally kills himself yet does not intend to kill himself. Such an individual would assert that suicide refers to those cases in which an individual intentionally kills himself AND intends to kill himself. They could do so and claim that since suicide is a moral concept this is warranted. Even if one were to take such a route, they must admit that the operating definition of suicide as intentionally killing oneself is incorrect. That is, the definition found in the folk conception, psychology, as well as legal and political institutions is wrong. This is a nice philosophical point, there is a source of confusion concerning the operating definition of suicide and we should do our best as philosophers to try and remedy it. The two most philosophically sound opinions, in my opinion, are to accept the definition of suicide as intentionally killing oneself and then to demonstrate that the extension of the definition is much larger than has been historically admitted, OR, to argue that the definition of suicide is actually intentionally killing oneself while intending to kill oneself- thereby precluding ‘altruistic suicides’ from the extension of the definition. In either case, the Simple View of Intentionality is rejected, however, one option rebels against our intuitions concerning suicide, and the other modifies the definition to fit with those intuitions.

As a philosophical project, I find that the simple motivation to enhance one’s understanding of the concept of suicide to be suitable grounds upon which to launch such a lengthy analysis. However, there are pragmatic implications of such an investigation. The folk understanding of suicide has an undeniable impact upon how it is that the survivors of friends and loved ones who commit suicide are able to deal with such a loss. The greater our understanding of suicide- as it operates in the folk conception of our society- the greater the ability of survivors to comprehend the seemingly irrational, unfathomable nature of the act of their loved one. Definitional issues are especially important in our psychological institutions and the more misconceptions that exist, the less capable we are of dealing with preventing and treating suicide. Definitional issues aside, providing an evolutionary account for the adaptive, fitness increasing, nature of the act allows survivors to understand that their loved one was not a freak of nature, not an aberration, not a mistake. Those who do commit suicide are performing an act of
evolutionary altruism, those who perform acts of altruistic suicide are performing acts of psychological altruism and those who perform acts of egotistical suicide are performing acts of psychological egotism. Place blame or praise accordingly, nevertheless these two acts share a common natural evolutionary history. Suicide will exist as long as life exists, that is simply the nature of the beast.
REFERENCES

   Bok, Sissela. “Physician-Assisted Suicide”
   Brock, Dan W. “The Moral Justifiability of Assisted Suicide”
   Callahan, Daniel. “The Immorality of Assisted Suicide”
   Kamm. F.M. “A Right To Choose Death”
   Nesbitt, Winston. “Is Killing No Worse Than Letting Die?”
   Oddie, Graham. “Killing and Letting Die”
   Wellman, Carl. “A Moral Right to Assisted Suicide”


Dominican Province Online Edition Copyright © 2006 by Kevin Knight

Battin, M. Pabst & Mayo, David J. Suicide: The Philosophical Issues
   Bogen, James. “Suicide and Virtue”
   Brandt, Richard B. “The Rationality of Suicide”
   Clements, Colleen D. “The Ethics of Not-Being: Individual Options for
   Suicide”
   Feinberg, Joel. “Suicide and the Inalienable Right to Life”
   Mayo, David J. “Irrational Suicide”
   Motto, Jerome A. “The Right to Suicide: A Psychiatrist’s View”


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Michael Benjamin Miller was born on May 9, 1982 in Lakeland, Florida. He graduated from George Jenkins High School in May of 2000. Michael attended Jacksonville University where he received a B.S. in Philosophy with a minor in Physics in May of 2004. Michael is a teaching assistant at Florida State University and intends to obtain his PhD, hopefully by 2010.