

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Last Words on Suicide

A REPLY TO THE CRITICS

OF

"IS SUICIDE A SIN?"

BY

COLONEL R. G. INGERSOLL.

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INTRODUCTION.

[COLONEL INGERSOLL'S letter to the New York *World* on the question, "Is Suicide a Sin?" provoked a large number of letters from all sorts and conditions of men—and women. Some of them were very *ill*-conditioned, insulting the great Freethinker they were incapable of answering. Colonel Ingersoll, however, would not condescend to their level. At the desire of the editor, he wound up the controversy, which he did in the following letter.]

LAST WORDS ON SUICIDE.

FIRST,—In the article written by me about suicide, and published in the *World*, the ground was taken that “under many circumstances a man has the right to kill himself.”

This has been attacked with great fury by clergymen, editors, and the writers of letters. These people contend that the right of self-destruction does not, and cannot, exist. They insist that life is the gift of God, and that he only has the right to end the days of men; that it is our duty to bear the sorrows that he sends with grateful patience. Some have denounced suicide as the worst of crimes—worse than the murder of another.

The first question, then, is :—

Has a man, under any circumstances, the right to kill himself ?

A man is being slowly devoured by a cancer; his agony is intense, his suffering all that nerves can feel. His life is slowly being taken. Is this the work of the good God? Did the compassionate God create the cancer so that it might feed on the quivering flesh of this victim?

This man, suffering agonies beyond the imagination to conceive, is of no use to himself. His life is but a succession of pangs. He is of no use to his wife, his children, his friends, or society. Day after day he is rendered unconscious by drugs that numb the nerves and put the brain to sleep.

Has he the right to render himself unconscious? Is it proper for him to take refuge in sleep?

If there be a good God, I cannot believe that he takes pleasure in the sufferings of men—that he gloats over the agonies of his children. If there be a good God, he will, to the extent of his power, lessen the evils of life.

So I insist that the man being eaten by the cancer—a burden to himself and others, useless in every way—has the right to end his pain and pass through happy sleep to dreamless rest.

But those who have answered me would say to this man : "It is your duty to be devoured. The good God wishes you to suffer. Your life is the gift of God. You hold it in trust, and you have no right to end it. The cancer is the creation of God, and it is your duty to furnish it with food."

Take another case. A man is on a burning ship, the crew and the rest of the passengers have escaped—gone in the lifeboats—and he is left alone. In the wide horizon there is no sail, no sign of help. He cannot swim. If he leaps into the sea, he drowns ; if he remains on the ship, he burns. In any event he can live but a few moments.

Those who have answered me, those who insist that under no circumstances a man has the right to take his life, would say to this man on the deck : "Remain where you are. It is the desire of your loving, heavenly Father that you be clothed in flame, that you slowly roast, that your eyes be scorched to blindness, and that you die insane with pain. Your life is not your own, only the agony is yours."

I would say to this man : "Do as you wish. If you prefer drowning to burning, leap into the sea. Between inevitable evils you have the right of choice. You can help no one, not even God, by allowing yourself to be burned, and you can injure no one, not even God, by choosing the easier death."

Let us suppose another case :—

A man has been captured by savages in Central Africa. He is about to be tortured to death. His captors are going to thrust splinters of pine into his flesh, and then set them on fire. He watches them as they make the preparations. He knows what they are about to do, and what he is about to suffer. There is no hope of rescue—of help. He has a vial of poison. He knows that he can take it, and in one moment pass beyond their power, leaving to them only the dead body.

Is this man under obligation to keep his life because God gave it until the savages, by torture, take it ? Are the savages the agents of the good God ? Are they the servants of the infinite ? Is it the duty of this man to allow them to wrap his quivering body in a garment of flame ? Has he no right to defend himself ? Is it the will

of God that he die by torture ? What would any man of ordinary intelligence do in a case like this ? Is there room for discussion ?

If the man took the poison, shortened his life a few moments, escaped the tortures of savages, is it possible that he would, in another world, be tortured for ever by an infinite savage ?

Suppose another case : In the good old days when the Inquisition flourished, when men loved their enemies and murdered their friends, many frightful and ingenious ways were devised to touch the nerves of pain.

Those who loved God, who had been "born twice," would take a fellow man who had been convicted of heresy, lay him upon the floor of a dungeon, secure his arms and legs with chains, fasten him to the earth so that he could not move, put an iron vessel, the opening downward, on his stomach, place in the vessel several rats, then tie it securely to his body. Then these worshippers of God would wait until the rats, seeking food and liberty, would gnaw through the body of the victim.

Now, if a man, about to be subjected to this torture, had within his hand a dagger, would it excite the wrath of the "good God" if, with one quick stroke, he found the protection of death ?

To this question there can be but one answer.

In the cases I have supposed it seems to me that each person would have the right to destroy himself. It does not seem possible that the man was under obligation to be devoured by cancer ; to remain upon the ship and perish in flame ; to throw away the poison and be tortured to death by savages ; to drop the dagger and endure the "mercies" of the Church.

If, in the cases I have supposed, men would have the right to take their lives, then I was right when I said that "under many circumstances a man has a right to kill himself."

Second,—I denied that persons who killed themselves were physical cowards. They may lack moral courage ; they may exaggerate their misfortunes, lose the sense of proportion ; but the man who plunges the dagger in his heart, who sends the bullet through his brain, who leaps

from some roof and dashes himself against the stones beneath, is not and cannot be a physical coward.

The basis of cowardice is the fear of injury or the fear of death, and when that fear is not only gone, but in its place is the desire to die, no matter by what means, it is impossible that cowardice should exist. The suicide wants the very thing that a coward fears. He seeks the very thing that cowardice endeavors to escape.

So the man, forced to a choice of evils, choosing the less, is not a coward, but a reasonable man.

It must be admitted that the suicide is honest with himself. He is to bear the injury, if it be one. Certainly there is no hypocrisy, and just as certainly there is no physical cowardice.

Is the man who takes morphine, rather than be eaten to death by a cancer, a coward ?

Is the man who leaps into the sea, rather than be burned, a coward ?

Is the man who takes poison, rather than be tortured to death by savages or "Christians," a coward ?

Third,—I also took the position that some suicides were sane ; that they acted on their best judgment ; and that they were in full possession of their minds.

Now, if, under some circumstances, a man has the right to take his life, and if, under such circumstances, he does take his life, then it cannot be said that he was insane.

Most of the persons who have tried to answer me have not only taken the ground that suicide is a crime, but some of them have said that it is the greatest of crimes. Now, if it be a crime, then the suicide must have been sane. So all persons who denounce the suicide as a criminal admit that he was sane. Under the law, an insane person is incapable of committing a crime. All the clergymen who have answered me, and who have passionately asserted that suicide is a crime, have by that assertion admitted that those who killed themselves were sane.

They agree with me, and not only admit, but assert, that "some who have committed suicide were sane and in full possession of their minds."

It seems to me that these three propositions have been demonstrated to be true : First, that under some circum-

stances a man has the right to take his life ; second, that the man who commits suicide is not a physical coward ; and, third, that some who have committed suicide were at the time sane and in full possession of their minds.

Fourth,—I insisted, and still insist, that suicide was and is the foundation of the Christian religion.

I still insist that, if Christ were God, he had the power to protect himself without injuring his assailants ; that, having that power, it was his duty to use it ; and that, failing to use it, he consented to his own death, and was guilty of suicide.

To this the clergy answer that it was self-sacrifice for the redemption of man, and that he made an atonement for the sins of believers. These ideas about redemption and atonement are born of a belief in the "fall of man," on account of the sins of our "first parents," and of the declaration that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin." The foundation has crumbled. No intelligent person now believes in the "fall of man"—that our first parents were perfect, and that their descendants grew worse and worse, at least until the coming of Christ.

Intelligent men now believe that the general course of the human race has been upward ; that, while some tribes and nations have gone backward and perished, others have advanced ; that the world is nearer civilised to-day than ever before.

Intelligent men now believe that ages and ages before the dawn of history man was a poor, naked, cruel, ignorant, and degraded savage, whose language consisted of a few sounds of terror, of hatred and delight ; that he devoured his fellow-man, having all the vices, but not all the virtues, of the beasts ; that the journey from the den to the home, the palace, has been long and painful, through many centuries of suffering, of cruelty and war ; through many ages of discovery, invention, self-sacrifice, and thought.

Redemption and atonement are left without a fact on which to rest. The idea that an infinite God, creator of all worlds, came to this grain of sand, learned the trade of a carpenter, discussed with Pharisees and scribes, and allowed a few infuriated Hebrews to put him to death that he might atone for the sins of men and redeem a few

believers from the consequences of his own wrath, can find no lodgment in a good and natural brain.

In no mythology can anything more monstrously unbelievable be found.

But if Christ were a man and attacked the religion of his time because it was cruel and absurd ; if he endeavored to found a religion of kindness, of good deeds, to take the place of heartlessness and ceremony ; and if, rather than deny what he believed to be right and true, he suffered death, then he was a noble man—a benefactor of his race. But if he were God there was no need of this. The Jews did not wish to kill God. If he had only made himself known, all knees would have touched the ground. If he were God, it required no heroism to die. He knew that what we call death is but the opening of the gates of eternal life. If he were God, there was no self-sacrifice. He had no need to suffer pain. He could have changed the crucifixion to a joy.

Even the editors of religious weeklies see that there is no escape from these conclusions—from these arguments ; and so, instead of attacking the arguments, they attack the man who makes them.

Fifth,—I denounced the law of New York that makes an attempt to commit suicide a crime.

It seems to me that one who has suffered so much that he passionately longs for death should be pitied, instead of punished—helped rather than imprisoned.

A despairing woman who had vainly sought for leave to toil, a woman without home, without friends, without bread, with clasped hands, with tear-filled eyes, with broken words of prayer, in the darkness of night, leaps from the dock, hoping, longing for the tearless sleep of death. She is rescued by a kind, courageous man, handed over to the authorities, indicted, tried, convicted, clothed in a convict's garb, and locked in a felon's cell.

To me this law seems barbarous and absurd, a law that only savages would enforce.

Sixth,—In this discussion a curious thing has happened. For several centuries the clergy have declared that, while infidelity is a very good thing to live by, it is a bad support,

a wretched consolation, in the hour of death. They have, in spite of the truth, declared that all the great unbelievers died trembling with fear, asking God for mercy, surrounded by fiends, in the torments of despair. Think of the thousands and thousands of clergymen who have described the last agonies of Voltaire, who died as peacefully as a happy child smilingly passes from play to slumber; the final anguish of Hume, who fell into his last sleep as serenely as a river, running between green and shaded banks, reaches the sea; the despair of Thomas Paine, one of the bravest, one of the noblest men, who met the night of death untroubled as a star that meets the morning.

At the same time these ministers admitted that the average murderer could meet death on the scaffold with perfect serenity, and could smilingly ask the people, who had gathered to see him killed, to meet him in heaven.

But the honest man who has expressed his honest thoughts against the creed of the Church in power could not die in peace. God would see to it that his last moments should be filled with the insanity of fear—that with his last breath he should utter the shriek of remorse, the cry for pardon.

This has all changed, and now the clergy, in their sermons answering me, declare that the Atheists, the Free-thinkers, have no fear of death—that to avoid some little annoyance, a passing inconvenience, they gladly and cheerfully put out the light of life. It is now said that infidels believe that death is the end; that it is a dreamless sleep; that it is without pain; that, therefore, they have no fear, care nothing for gods, or heavens, or hells, nothing for the threats of the pulpit, nothing for the Day of Judgment, and that when life becomes a burden they carelessly throw it down.

The infidels are so afraid of death that they commit suicide.

This certainly is a great change, and I congratulate myself on having forced the clergy to contradict themselves.

Seventh,—The clergy take the position that the Atheist, the unbeliever, has no standard of morality—that he can have no real conception of right and wrong. They are of the

opinion that it is impossible for one to be moral or good unless he believes in some Being far above himself.

In this connection we might ask how God can be moral or good unless he believes in some Being superior to himself.

What is morality? It is the best thing to do under the circumstances. What is the best thing to do under the circumstances? That which will increase the sum of human happiness—or lessen it the least. Happiness in its highest, noblest form, is the only good; that which increases or preserves or creates happiness is moral—that which decreases it, or puts it in peril, is immoral.

It is not hard for an Atheist—for an unbeliever—to keep his hands out of the fire. He knows that burning his hands will not increase his well-being, and he is moral enough to keep them out of the flames.

So it may be said that each man acts according to his intelligence—so far as what he considers his own good is concerned. Sometimes he is swayed by passion, by prejudice, by ignorance; but when he is really intelligent, master of himself, he does what he believes is best for him. If he is intelligent enough, he knows that what is really good for him is good for others—for all the world.

It is impossible for me to see why any belief in the supernatural is necessary to have a keen perception of right and wrong. Every man who has the capacity to suffer and enjoy, and has imagination enough to give the same capacity to others, has within himself the natural basis of all morality. The idea of morality was born here, in this world, of the experience, the intelligence of mankind. Morality is not of supernatural origin. It did not fall from the clouds, and it needs no belief in the supernatural, no supernatural promises or threats, no supernatural heavens or hells, to give it force and life. Subjects who are governed by the threats and promises of a king are merely slaves. They are not governed by the ideal—by noble views of right and wrong. They are obedient cowards, controlled by fear, or beggars governed by rewards—by alms.

Right and wrong exist in the nature of things. Murder was just as criminal before as after the promulgation of the Ten Commandments.

Eighth,—Many of the clergy, some editors, and some writers of letters who have answered me have said that suicide is the worst of crimes—that a man had better murder somebody else than himself. One clergyman gives as a reason for this statement that the suicide dies in an act of sin, and, therefore, he had better kill another person. Probably he would commit a less crime if he would murder his wife or mother.

I do not see that it is any worse to die than to live in sin. To say that it is not as wicked to murder another as yourself seems absurd. The man about to kill himself wishes to die. Why is it better for him to kill another man, who wishes to live?

To my mind, it seems clear that you had better injure yourself than another. Better be a spendthrift than a thief. Better throw away your own money than steal the money of another—better kill yourself if you wish to die than murder one whose life is full of joy.

The clergy tell us that God is everywhere, and that it is one of the greatest possible crimes to rush into his presence. It is wonderful how much they know about God, and how little about their fellow men. Wonderful the amount of their information about other worlds, and how limited their knowledge is of this.

There may or may not be an infinite Being. I neither affirm nor deny. I am honest enough to say that I do not know. I am candid enough to admit that the question is beyond the limitations of my mind. Yet I think I know as much on that subject as any human being knows or ever knew, and that is—nothing. I do not say that there is not another world, another life; neither do I say that there is. I say that I do not know. It seems to me that every sane and honest man must say the same. But if there be an infinitely good God and another world, then the infinitely good God will be just as good to us in that world as he is in this. If this infinitely good God loves his children in this world, he will love them in another. If he loves a man when he is alive, he will not hate him the instant he is dead.

If we are the children of an infinitely wise and powerful God, he knew exactly what we would do—the temptations that we could and could not withstand—knew exactly the

effect that everything would have upon us ; knew under what circumstances we would take our lives, and produced such circumstances himself. It is perfectly apparent that there are many people incapable by nature of bearing the burdens of life, incapable of preserving their mental poise in stress and strain of disaster, disease, and loss, and who, by failure, by misfortune and want, are driven to despair and insanity, in whose darkened minds there comes, like a flash of lightning in the night, the thought of death—a thought so strong, so vivid, that all fear is lost, all ties broken, all duties, all obligations, all hopes forgotten, and naught remains except a fierce and wild desire to die. Thousands and thousands become moody, melancholy—brood upon loss of money, of position, of friends, until reason abdicates and frenzy takes possession of the soul. If there be an infinitely wise and powerful God, all this was known to him from the beginning, and he so created things, established relations, put in operation causes and effects, that all that has happened was the necessary result of his own acts.

Ninth,—Nearly all who have tried to answer what I said have been exceedingly careful to misquote me, and then answer something that I never uttered. They have declared that I have advised people who were in trouble, somewhat annoyed, to kill themselves ; that I have told men who have lost their money, who had failed in business, who were not in good health, to kill themselves at once, without taking into consideration any duty that they owed to wives, children, friends, or society.

No man has a right to leave his wife to fight the battle alone if he is able to help. No man has a right to desert his children if he can possibly be of use. As long as he can add to the comfort of those he loves, as long as he can stand between wife and misery, between child and want, as long as he can be of use, it is his duty to remain.

I believe in the cheerful view, in looking at the sunny side of things, in bearing with fortitude the evils of life, in struggling against adversity, in finding the fuel of laughter even in disaster, in having confidence in to-morrow, in finding the pearl of joy amid the flints and shards, and in changing, by the alchemy of patience, even evil things to

good. I believe in the gospel of cheerfulness, of courage and good nature.

Of the future I have no fear. My fate is the fate of the world—of all that live. My anxieties are about this life—this world. About the phantoms called gods and their impossible hells I have no care, no fear.

The existence of God I neither affirm nor deny. I wait. The immortality of the soul I neither affirm nor deny. I hope—hope for all of the children of men. I have never denied the existence of another world, nor the immortality of the soul. For many years I have said that the idea of immortality, that, like a sea, has ebbed and flowed in the human heart, with its countless waves of hope and fear beating against the shores and rocks of time and fate, was not born of any book, nor of any creed, nor of any religion. It was born of human affection, and it will continue to ebb and flow beneath the mists and clouds of doubt and darkness as long as love kisses the lips of death.

What I deny is the immortality of pain, the eternity of torture.

After all, the instinct of self-preservation is strong. People do not kill themselves on the advice of friends or enemies. All wish to be happy, to enjoy life ; all wish for food and roof and raiment, for friends, and as long as life gives joy the idea of self-destruction never enters the human mind.

The oppressors, the tyrants, those who trample on the rights of others, the robbers of the poor, those who put wages below the living point, the ministers who make people insane by preaching the dogma of eternal pain ; these are the men who drive the weak, the suffering, and the helpless, down to death.

It will not do to say that "God" has appointed a time for each to die. Of this there is, and there can be, no evidence. There is no evidence that any god takes any interest in the affairs of men—that any sides with the right or helps the weak, protects the innocent or rescues the oppressed. Even the clergy admit that their God, through all ages, has allowed his friends, his worshippers, to be imprisoned, tortured, and murdered by his enemies. Such is the protection of God. Billions of prayers have

been uttered ; has one been answered ? Who sends plague, pestilence, and famine ? Who bids the earthquake devour, and the volcano to overwhelm ?

Tenth,—Again, I say that it is wonderful to me that so many men, so many women, endure and carry their burdens to the natural end ; that so many, in spite of “ age, ache, and penury,” guard with trembling hands the spark of life ; that prisoners for life toil and suffer to the last ; that the helpless wretches in poor-houses and asylums cling to life ; that the exiles in Siberia, loaded with chains, scarred with the knout, live on ; that the incurables, whose every breath is a pang, and for whom the future has only pain, should fear the merciful touch and clasp of death.

It is but a few steps at most from the cradle to the grave—a short journey. The suicide hastens, shortens the path, loses the afternoon, the twilight, the dusk of life’s day ; loses what he does not want, what he cannot bear. In the tempest of despair, in the blind fury of madness, or in the calm of thought and choice, the beleaguered soul finds the serenity of death.

Let us leave the dead where nature leaves them. We know nothing of any realm that lies beyond the horizon of the known, beyond the end of life. Let us be honest with ourselves and others. Let us pity the suffering, the despairing, the men and women hunted and pursued by grief and shame, by misery and want, by chance and fate, until their only friend is death.

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