
Among the top ten causes of death in the United States, suicides take more than 30,000 lives each year. And the rates are rising. The increase is highest among the young, but has been experienced as well by middle-aged white women, soldiers, and veterans of the armed forces.

Faced with these grim statistics and the self-inflicted death of two friends, Jennifer Michael Hecht, who teaches poetry at the New School University in Manhattan, has become convinced that we must "erect an adamant prohibition against suicide and thereby mitigate the struggle over it." In Stay, she tries to reverse two "wrong turns" that have shaped public consciousness about suicide over the centuries.

Relying heavily on God's disapproval of suicide, Hecht demonstrates, religion imposed corporal (and postmortem) punishments on offenders. In response, secular philosophers concluded that all persons were masters of their own fate and should be free to kill themselves. The result, Hecht claims, has been the loss of powerful and persuasive intellectual and moral arguments for staying alive. Hecht provides a useful survey of attitudes toward suicide from the Stoics in Ancient Greece to the existentialists in twentieth century France. Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy (in which a sleep "that ends heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to" is "a consummation devoutly to be wished;" but the dread of "something after death, the undiscovered country…makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of"), she points out, marked a time in which religious intolerance toward suicide was questioned.

In the 1750s, Hecht adds, the Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote, mockingly, that self-killing does not encroach any more on the province of the Almighty than a magistrate's sentence of death or an individual turning aside a stone which is about to fall on his head. Hume's treatise, according to Hecht, "is one of the most potent origins of our culture's perception of philosophy as pro-suicide. It is also, she concludes, "a cold one." And so, in the second half of Stay, Hecht summarizes the work of modern philosophers "who have offered resolute advice to keep living." Her aim --"nudging secular philosophy toward a robust rejection of suicide and nudging individuals, too" -- is admirable. Hecht is right, of course, that suicide often follows a defective judgment about present circumstances and future prospects. She does not, alas, make a compelling moral case for an "adamant prohibition" against suicide --or an argument that is likely to "nudge" desperate individuals to bet on their future selves.

Hecht's strongest argument builds on substantial evidence (based on "suicide clusters") that when a person takes his or her own life it is more likely that another individual will then do so. Less clear, however, especially in light of her acknowledgement that contagion can be mitigated, is whether the chain of causation justifies the judgment that "in killing yourself you are likely to be killing someone else too, by influence." Is it morally wrong as well, one might ask, to write about suicide, as Shakespeare did more than fifty times, or report on it in the mass media? Most important, perhaps, Hecht does not...
adequately distinguish, as did Albert Camus, among others, claims that suicide is a tragic and unnecessary act that weakens the bonds of humanity, from assertions that it is, nonetheless, an inherent individual right

In her zeal to stimulate “hope in our future selves,” Hecht, at times, simplifies. “Either the universe is a cold dead place” in which “sentient but atomized beings” try to make meaning, she writes, or a place “that is alive with a growth of sentient beings whose members have made a pact with each other to persevere.” And the act of ending life, Hecht asserts, following philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, does not work because it “freezes life in the situation that inspired the suicide.

Some of Hecht’s recommendations also seem too abstract to dissuade potential suicides. As she herself indicates, when “life seems too hard even to endure, the idea of saving the world may be off the table.” Nonetheless, she proclaims that working through suicidal impulses “is an act of radiant generosity, a way in which we can save each other.” The “job,” she adds, “is to try to stay curious about what is happening and about what might happen – to experience life despite its capacity to seem brutal and pointless…for some people, some of the time.” Borrowing from Nietzsche, Hecht suggests that individuals in distress embrace pain as “inherent in existence and part of our path toward wisdom.”

Hecht is surely right that ideas matter, that some may take solace in knowing “that there is a philosophical thread extending over twenty-five hundred years that urges us to use our courage to stay alive,” and that talking about problems – and the power of connections and small actions – in advance of “an acute state of misery,” can help. But she leaves us wondering whether laughing at life and death may be more effective than pleas to embrace pain as a pathway to wisdom in stemming the appalling rate of suicide.