

The Morality of Suicide: A Surreponse

Alvin J. Reines

All dialogue on the fundamental issues confronting Reform Judaism serves to deepen our understanding of its nature. Accordingly, I welcome the article by Sanford Seltzer and Bernard Zlotowitz,¹ "Suicide as a Moral Decision: A Response to Alvin J. Reines." In responding to their article, I will limit myself to the theological and philosophic issues it raises and to critical inaccuracies. The fact that I do not deal with a number of statements the authors make does not mean I agree with them, merely that I consider them irrelevant to the subject under discussion, emotive, or homiletical. I advise the reader to refer to my original article, "Reform Judaism, Bioethics, and Abortion,"² and to my response to various correspondents who commented on that article.³

In general, the authors appear to be under a misapprehension regarding the nature of my article. My purpose was to present, from a polydox conceptualization of Reform Judaism, a systematic theologico-philosophical exposition of the fundamental principles of Reform governing bioethical issues and the morality of abortion. My article, consequently, is concerned with theological and philosophic concepts, not with the concrete psychological, medical, legal, and social issues that are related to suicide. Had the authors inquired into how my theologico-philosophic views apply to the concrete existential problems of suicide, I would have been pleased to respond. The existential condition of the human person, which underlies the phenomenon of suicide, has long been a particular concern of mine.⁴ In my article and my first response, the concrete instances I cite were intended only to illustrate the moral principles I set forth.

I will present the points of the surreponse seriatim, those more general and fundamental preceding particular items.

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A

The first point to be made is that the authors have misunderstood my basic statement regarding suicide. They ascribe to me the following: "Any attempt at suicide, therefore, be it successful or not, is moral so long as it is voluntary and deliberate, and the perpetrator of the act is of sound mind." My stated view is not that an attempt at, or act of, suicide is moral *only* if performed by a person voluntarily, deliberately, and when of sound mind, but that attempts at, or acts of, suicide are *always* moral,⁵ whether committed voluntarily, deliberately, and when of sound mind or otherwise. The point I made is that there is universal agreement that acts of, or attempts at, suicide when committed involuntarily, accidentally, or while of unsound mind are not immoral; hence, since there is agreement on the absence of culpability in such cases I limited my discussion to the situation where there is disagreement over morality: suicides attempted or performed by persons voluntarily, deliberately, and when of sound mind.

B

The core of the basic issues raised (more implicitly than explicitly) by the authors can be sharply depicted by an analysis and critique of their statement, "Reform Judaism does not condone the deliberate taking of one's life by someone who is of sound mind. ... It further condemns as immoral the actions of those who would assist such individuals..." For this statement to be valid, the following three conditions (at the minimum) must be met.

1. It must be demonstrated that Reform Judaism possesses credible and ethical justification for decreeing that suicide is immoral.
2. Assuming the first condition has been met, it must be shown that Reform has an ethical right to exercise absolute authority over the minds of its adherents, namely, the right to dictate to them that they must believe suicide is immoral (the same argument would be extended to any other exercise of absolute authority by Reform over its adherents).⁶
3. If the first two conditions have been fulfilled, the authors must then demonstrate that Reform Judaism has delegated to them absolute authority over their fellow Reform Jews thus bestowing upon the authors the right to dictate to other Reformers that they must believe suicide is immoral.

If the authors cannot meet the above conditions, then their statement, "Reform Judaism does not condone, etc.," is an *ipse dixit* assertion, subjective (without, that is, objective justifica-

tion), fallible, and personal. *Ipse dixit* assertions have authority over no one, not even those who make them.

With respect to the first condition enumerated above, that it be demonstrated Reform Judaism possesses ethical and credible justification for decreeing that suicide is immoral, the only such justification that has been offered in the history of religion is the theological argument given by Orthodox (also Rabbinic) Judaism (and by other religions as well, notably Roman Catholicism). Since I have already discussed this argument in my article, I will summarize the points relevant here.

1. Only a creator God who has brought humankind into existence and given them "life" (the property that distinguishes a vital entity from a dead body) can claim a right to ownership of a person's "life" superior to that of the person whose "life" it is. A creator God of humankind, in other words, would be the ultimate owner of the "life" of every person, and, consequently, whoever destroys her/his "life" by suicide would be destroying that which belongs to another, the creator God.

2. No Jewish religious system has ever put forth the notion that any Jew (and certainly not a non-Jew) on her/his own — that is, without ownership over another Jew having been delegated to her/him by a creator God — possesses a right to ownership over another Jew's "life" superior to the latter's own right in her/his "life." Therefore, so far as all other human beings acting on their own authority is concerned, a Jew possesses ultimate ownership of her/his own "life," with the right, consequently, to do with it as she/he chooses.

3. Thus for suicide to be immoral, it must be an offense against a creator God who is the ultimate owner of every person's "life." Suicide, however, is not an offense against a creator God unless he has communicated in an inerrant revelation that he forbids the destruction by a human being of her/his "life." There can be a creator God who is the ultimate owner of every person's life, but who does not prohibit a person from taking her/his "life." In such a case suicide would not be immoral. Hence if no inerrant revelation from a creator God prohibiting suicide exists, then every person is the ultimate owner of her/his "life" and possesses a moral right to do with it as she/he chooses.

4. Reform Judaism possesses no inerrant revelation from a creator God,⁷ let alone a revelation in which suicide is prohibited. Every Reform Jew, consequently, is the ultimate owner of her/his "life," and possesses, therefore, a moral right to do with it as she/he chooses, which includes the moral right of suicide.

In light of the above reasoning, there is no need to inquire further into the other two conditions that must be met to see that the

authors' statement, that Reform Judaism maintains suicide is immoral, is nothing more than an *ipse dixit* assertion. Since suicide in Reform Judaism is moral, it is nonsensical to maintain Reform possesses authority to compel its adherents to believe that suicide is immoral, or to claim Reform has bestowed upon the authors authority to decree such a belief in the Reform community.⁸ The authors are claiming for themselves no less than a right to ownership of every Reform Jew's "life" superior to that of the Reform Jew whose "life" it is. Without credible, convincing evidence to verify and justify so awesome a claim to authority and power, it must be strenuously and forcefully rejected.

C

With respect to my presentation of the position of Orthodox Judaism on suicide, I have these comments.

1. My description of Orthodox belief regarding suicide is accurate: the position of Orthodoxy is that voluntary, deliberate suicide by a person of sound mind is a heinous sin. (Note that despite the authors' difficulty in acknowledging that voluntary, deliberate suicide by a sane person occurs, Orthodoxy obviously does do so since it condemns it as a sin, which would make no sense if such suicide never occurred.)

2. That Orthodoxy recognizes there are persons who take their own lives accidentally or when mentally ill and such persons are not culpable, in no way alters its fundamental principle that voluntary, deliberate suicide by a person of sound mind is profoundly immoral. (The fact that some Orthodox rabbis attempt to adjudge as many suicides as possible to have been mentally ill is, to my mind, tacit recognition that the Orthodox law is inhumane, and theirs is an attempt to mitigate its severity in practice.)

3. The reason for discussing the Orthodox position on suicide in my article was heuristic. First, by offering a complete theological contrast with the Reform position I set forth, it contributed to a clearer understanding of my exposition. Second, the Orthodox position makes eminently clear the basic theological conditions necessary for suicide to be judged immoral: (a) a prohibition against suicide commanded by a creator God in an inerrant revelation; (b) the "life" that a suicide destroys does not belong to her/him, namely, it belongs to a creator God, the ultimate owner of every person's "life." By recognizing that in Reform the first of these conditions is not met, it becomes evident why suicide in Orthodoxy is a grave sin and in Reform it is moral.

4. However, from the point of view of scientific scholarship, as I noted in my article, Orthodoxy's belief that a creator God in an

inerrant revelation has prohibited suicide is erroneous. No prohibition against suicide appears in the Bible or the Talmud, the two basic revelatory documents of Orthodox Judaism. It is only in post-talmudic Rabbinic and Orthodox Judaism that suicide is declared a sin, and then only through eisegesis. My pointing out the late emergence of the condemnation of suicide had nothing to do with chronology, and everything to do with theology. It is of more than passing interest for a Reform Jew to know that the oldest Jewish religious documents, the Bible and the Talmud, do not declare suicide to be immoral, and that Orthodoxy is in error in thinking so.

5. Still, putting aside the factual incorrectness of Orthodoxy's belief regarding suicide, its view of the two conditions (referred to above) necessary for suicide to be declared immoral is theoretically correct. Hence the Orthodox view of the sinfulness of suicide appears in the Halacha, the body of law whose source, according to Orthodoxy, is directly or ultimately the creator God. Orthodox Jews observe the Halacha, understandably, because they believe that they have been commanded to keep its laws by the creator God who has absolute authority over them.

6. This leads to the reason I did not refer to the Reform positions on suicide the authors cite. As I stated, I was presenting a theologico-philosophic exposition. The Reform positions the authors say that I omitted simply are not relevant to such an exposition because all they are is pseudo-Halacha. As we have seen, in Reform Judaism we have no inerrant revelation. Consequently, we do not have Halacha, law whose source is the inerrant revelation of a creator God. There are those Reformers, however, who have produced a body of beliefs and observances that are arbitrarily taken from, or fashioned after, the Halacha. These are presented to the Reform community with the color of authority although, in fact, they constitute nothing more than the personal opinions of those who offer them. They amount, in other words, to *ipse dixit* assertions. Pseudo-Halacha has no relevance to a theologico-philosophic exposition since there is nothing theological or philosophic about it. The only justification offered for following pseudo-Halacha is that it resembles the Halacha that Orthodox Jews follow, and which was widely observed by Jews at various times in the post-biblical period, particularly during the Middle Ages, although largely disregarded since the Enlightenment and the exodus from the ghetto.⁹ Being without the revelatory base of Halacha, pseudo-Halacha is theologically of no significance, and, philosophically, of no value.

The authors' misunderstanding of my basic position is perhaps nowhere better displayed than in their statement:

In presenting his case, Reines underscores that “no person has a moral right to do anything to another person’s mind or body without the latter’s consent.” The logic of that position renders his argument untenable, for anyone contemplating suicide would be obligated to secure permission of loved ones, friends, and possibly neighbors, representatives of the community in which one resides and even state or federal officials.

Their confusion results from isolating the phrase from its context. The point I made is that no one has a right to exercise authority over a person without her/his consent, and this means no one has authority to “do anything to another person’s mind or body without the latter’s consent,” that is, force the person by exercising absolute authority to believe or behave in a way she/he does not wish to. When a person performs an act she/he has a moral right to do, such as suicide, she/he is not exercising authority over others and forcing them against their will to engage in any particular kind of behavior. They possess self-authority to determine for themselves if and how they shall react to a suicide: to mourn or not, to feel guilty or not. One has a duty to respect the right to autonomy of other human beings, and to retain this respect even though they may use their self-authority to act in a manner different from that which we would have wished.

D

Sigmund Freud committed suicide, aided and abetted by his doctor, Max Schur.

Throughout the month he continued to slip downhill. Eating, drinking, and sleeping all became more difficult. On the morning of the twenty-first, while Schur was sitting by his bed, Freud spoke to him: “My dear Schur, you certainly remember our first talk. You promised then not to forsake me when my time comes. Now it’s nothing but torture and makes no sense any more.”

Schur had not forgotten. Freud thanked him and added, without the slightest trace of emotion or self-pity, “Tell Anna about this.”

“When he was again in agony,” Schur has written, “I gave him a hypodermic of two centigrams of morphine. He soon felt relief and fell into a peaceful sleep. The expression of pain and suffering was gone. I repeated this dose after about twelve hours. Freud was obviously so close to the end of his reserves that he lapsed into a coma and did not wake up again. He died at 3:00 a.m. on September 23, 1939.”¹⁰

Yes, Freud, through his discovery of psychoanalysis, understood more profoundly than had anyone before him that suicide could be the result of emotional disturbance. But Freud also knew when

suicide was the rational and moral action to take. The authors should learn from Freud not only that mental illness can precipitate suicide, but that suicide can be the moral action of a person acting voluntarily, deliberately, and while of sound mind. Freud’s suicide was wise and courageous, the last moral action of a rational giant.

I must add, in conclusion, that I find many suicides tragic events that never should have occurred, particularly those among adolescents. The solution is not to declare suicide to be immoral, which it is not. Such a false declaration prevents no one from taking his own life, and only adds guilt and shame to the emotional misery of the persons contemplating suicide and the family of one who has committed suicide. A religion competent for the *weltanschauung* of the modernist Jew, and a religious education relevant to the young modernist Jew, can contribute to decreasing the incidence of suicide.¹¹ I do not believe the simplistic religion of theistic absolutistic supernaturalism (exemplified by the *Gates of Prayer*) presented by the Reform establishment to our lay persons, and particularly the religious education of the young focused obsessively on theistic absolutism, are competent to provide the insights necessary to deal with the human condition as experienced by the great majority of contemporary Jews. Until the freedom that a polydox conceptualization gives to Reform Judaism is concretized in creative new theological approaches and soterial processes,¹² the Reform Jewish community will continue to fail our youth who so very much need a relevant Judaism, and we will lose from our community the youth whom we so desperately need to be our future.¹³

NOTES

¹ Rabbis Seltzer and Zlotowitz will henceforth be referred to as “the authors.”

² *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Winter 1990; henceforth referred to as “my article.”

³ *Ibid.*, Fall 1990; henceforth referred to as “my first response.”

⁴ A. J. Reines, *Polydoxy: Explorations in a Philosophy of Liberal Religion* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1987), pp. 55ff. This book will henceforth be referred to as *Polydoxy*. Also see “Reform Judaism: The Shock of Freedom,” in *Jews in a Free Society* (1978), pp. 128ff.

⁵ Unless the person has voluntarily and when of sound mind entered into a sub-covenant promising not to commit suicide. The immorality there is breaking one’s promise. See my first response.

⁶ Absolute authority is authority exercised over a person even against his will; see *Polydoxy*, pp. 15ff. The term *authority* henceforth will be used with the meaning of “absolute authority.”

⁷ *Polydoxy*, pp. 21f.

⁸ For the position that the concept of absolute authority in principle contradicts the nature of Reform Judaism, see *Polydoxy*, pp. 12-32.

⁹ Among Jewish religious systems without Halacha are the various prophetic systems, Pentateuchal Judaism, and Saduceeism. The Central Conference of American Rabbis declared its freedom from Halacha in resounding fashion in 1895: “...the more the conditions of modern life and environments of our modern life force it upon us, the more persistently we have to assert that our relations in all religious matters are in no way authoritatively and finally determined by any portion of our post-Biblical and patristic literature” (*The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. IV, p. 216). The wide diversity in the beliefs and practices of the Jews over the millennia proves the meaninglessness of the ill-conceived term “normative Judaism” employed by the authors. There are only different Jewish religions, each with its own fundamental principles (see *Polydoxy*, pp. 95ff).

¹⁰ R. Clark, *Freud: The Man and the Cause* (New York, 1980), pp. 256-257; also, P. Ropazen, *Freud and His Followers* (New York, 1975).

¹¹ A competent and relevant modernist religion can contribute to decreasing needless suicide, but other factors are beyond religion: psychological, genetic, economic, cultural, and so forth. I have set forth a philosophy of religious education I believe appropriate to modernist Jewish youngsters; and several texts exist that concretely communicate this philosophy to students of religious schools.

¹² A soterial process constitutes the steps that are taken to attain ultimate meaningful existence; *Polydoxy*, pp. 63ff.

¹³ See my article, “Ontology, Demography, and the Silent Holocaust,” *Judaism*, Fall 1989.