The Right over Life

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Most philosophers, in all periods of history, have at some point discussed suicide, and either condemned it or justified it in various ways. Aristotle condemns suicide absolutely, regarding it as an injustice committed against oneself and against the City, and as an act of cowardice, opposed to virtue. For Plato, even if the philosopher aspires to leave this body, in which the soul is jailed, and to return to the world of the Ideas, as a mere man he has no right to decide by himself the moment of at which his soul may leave his body, since it is the Divinity which put him there. Besides, the philosopher, through a Divine gift, possesses the privilege of contemplating supreme reality and the Idea of the Good, and thus of discovering that evil is a lack, an ignorance. It is the duty of the philosopher to try to share this truth with other men. So long as he is alive, he must work for Good in the City. Basically, one who commits suicide does it out of ignorance of the true Good. However, Plato is more moderate than Platonism. He admits three exceptional situations in which he tolerates suicide: condemnation, a very painful and incurable disease, and a miserable fate.

Augustine recapitulates Plato’s views on suicide, and hardens them, while trying to provide them with theological foundations. He condemns suicide implacably, in the name of the commandment “Thou shall not kill”. The Augustinian arguments against suicide will inform the whole view of the Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas, as a good Aristotelian, will deny to man the right to kill himself, on the basis of three arguments: suicide is opposed to the natural inclination of man, the Natural Law, and the love which man owes to himself ; man belongs to his fatherland and to its society, and he does not have the right to deprive them of his presence and activity ; it is up to God, whose property we are, to decide as to our life and our death.

From the Renaissance, the view on suicide starts to change, in the name of humanistic arguments. Thomas More, in his Utopia (1516), presents religious dignitaries who encourage sick persons doomed to die in suffering to put an end to their existence.

Montesquieu considers the criminalisation of suicide to be unreasonable, while Rousseau affirms that pain of sufficient severity as to deprive man of his will and reason justifies him in killing himself. Hume’s position, in his Essay on Suicide, is closely akin to Rousseau’s. However the controversy is reopened by German idealism: Kant and Fichte condemn suicide in the name of the categorical imperative, the moral law, which does not allow its universalisation, and are followed by Hegel, who judges that no person should arrogate such power to himself. Nietzsche will uphold an opposite view, one with stoic undertones, as expressed in the saying of Zarathustra: “One must know how to die proudly when one can no longer live with pride”.

So, Philosophers can be classified into three main categories on these matters. Some, for whom the reason for living is exterior to man, condemn suicide in the name of the Divinity, of the City, or of abstract Moral Law. Others, taking Nature, or Man in his mere naturalistic aspects, as the ultimate point of reference, authorise suicide, without however encouraging it, when health, will, or intelligence deteriorate, and man has only suffering, pain, and loss of dignity ahead of him. The stance of the third group, the Stoics, is linked to the acknowledgment of the value of man: man is trapped within the game of the world, but, unlike other beings, he possesses reason, which enables him to know what depends on him and what does not depend on him. What depends on him is his inner life, his reason, and his will. We must be able to become independent of what happens to us, and, therefore, disdain all things which happen to us independently of our will – to disdain death above all. This is not to glorify suicide, but it does justify keeping one’s own self-control, derived from reason and will, which make us independent of living and dying. What is of value is not the act of suicide but the inner freedom which allows this act when it is more reasonable than continued life. This is precisely the higher view of suicide, upon which J. Evola based himself in “The Right over Life”, published in Diorama mensile (a column of the paper Regime Fascista) on the 17th of May 1942, though he elevates the topic further by considering it from the point of view of Aryan teachings.

We do not propose to discuss the right to life in general, here, but the right to one’s own life, adapting the ancient formula jus vitae necisque (i.e., the power of life and death – ed.), to refer to the freedom to accept one’s own existence or voluntarily put an end to it. This problem we propose to consider from the purely spiritual point of view, omitting therefore considerations of a social character, which – in this field as in any other – can have real significance only if they are supported by deep interior conviction, by true principles and by a higher sense of responsibility. This responsibility is to be understood as being essentially towards oneself, and not as being restricted to the narrow horizons of a single lifetime, but as encompassing our entire destiny, both earthly and supraterrestrial. We will also avoid any references to devotional criteria, given the rather conditioned and unenlightened nature of the latter. We prefer to remain faithful to the criteria of a realism of superior character.

The view of Seneca

From this point of view, the most severe and manly form in which the absolute right to own and control our own life has been affirmed is that of stoicism, especially in the formulations of Seneca, whose fundamental stance shows the effect – according to some people – of a spirit not only Roman but Aryan-Roman in type, though limited by a certain stiffening and by a certain exasperation.

To understand the importance of Seneca’s position, and, in general, the essence of the ideas that we want to exhibit here, we must start by condemning expressly any justification of the right to commit suicide in which passion plays a part. The man who kills himself under the influence of passion is to be condemned and despised, because he is a defeated, fallen man. His action only testifies to his passivity, his incapacity to impose himself upon the impulses of the life of the senses ; placing oneself above such impulses being the first condition to be able to be considered really as a man. On such cases it is therefore not necessary to waste any further words.

Seneca’s justification of the right to suicide is interesting because it puts itself resolutely above such a plane. The general view of Seneca and of Roman stoicism is that life is a struggle and a test. According to Seneca, the true man is above the gods themselves because these, by nature, are not subjected to adversity and misfortunes, whereas man is exposed to them, but has the power to overcome them. Unhappy is the one who has never met misfortune and pain – Seneca says – because he did not have the occasion to experience and to know his power. Something superior to exemption from pain was granted to men, namely, the power to overcome it. And the persons who are the most afflicted are to be considered as worthier, just as, in war, the positions which expose us to the most enemy fire, and the most dangerous missions, are entrusted to the strongest and most qualified elements, whereas the less brave, the less strong, and the most indecisive persons are employed in the less demanding life of the civilian zone.

Now, it is in the context of a similar manly and combative view of life that Seneca justifies suicide, by putting these words into the mouth of the deity (De Providentia,VI,7-9) : not only to have given to the true man, to the wise, a force stronger than any contingency, but also to have seen to it that nothing is able to hold man to this destiny if he no longer desires it : the way ‘out” is opened – patet exitus – “Wherever one does not want to fight, it is always possible to withdraw. Nothing is easier than to die”.

Aryan teachings

This teaching, si pugnare non vultis, licet fugere, which alludes to the voluntary death that the wise man has the power to give to himself, is to be understood in the spirit of the text, not as a cowardice, or as an escape. It is not a question of withdrawing because one does not feel strong enough in front of a given test. It is rather one of having had enough of a game in which one no longer sees any point, having proved to oneself that one has the capacity to overcome similar tests. It is therefore a cold detachment, we would almost say Olympian, achieved by a person who continues to dominate all of the elements of life.

In the ancient Aryan traditions, we find justifications for voluntary ‘departure’ from earthly life which are not devoid of a certain affinity with the view of Roman stoicism as we have just explained it. Wherever one has been led to renounce life in the name of life, that is to say, by one form or another of a will to live or a will to pleasure which cannot find satisfaction, killing oneself is reproved. In such cases, this action does not mean a liberation, but precisely the opposite: it is an extreme, if negative, form of attachment to life, of dependence on life and on ‘desire’. No ‘afterlife’ awaits the one who uses such violence on himself ; the law of an existence devoid of light, of peace, and of stability will be reimposed upon him. On the contrary, only he who has attained complete detachment regarding this life, to the point where to live or not to live is a matter of indifference to him, is justified in putting an end prematurely to his terrestrial life. But then, it could be asked, what exactly can move such a person, who has reached such an apex, to take the initiative of such a violent solution, especially considering that it is difficult for one who has achieved such a perfection not to have grasped, to some extent, the supra-personal signification of his existence on earth, and to have felt, at the same time, that this existence is nothing but a short passage, an episode, the manifestation for a given mission or a special test, “a journey during the hours of night”, as the Easterners say. To feel some boredom, some impatience, some intolerance for the time which is still ahead of us, wouldn’t this show perhaps a residue of human weakness, something still not ‘resolved’ and soothed by the sense of eternity, or, at least, of the non-terrestrial and non-temporal ‘vast distances’?

Is life ‘mine’?

Aside from that, another consideration of principle arises. One can have power, in reality, only over what belongs to him. Power to put an end to one’s own life is therefore conditional upon the extent to which this life can be said to be really ‘mine’. And when speaking of ‘life’ one cannot ignore the body, or the physio-psychological organism in general, on which one has to act in order ‘to be done’ ; the life possessed by the feelings and sensations themselves cannot be excluded either. Now, in principle, can all this be said to be really ‘mine’ and ‘myself’? Here everyone experiences a certain delusion, which, however, an instant of reflection is enough to dispel. A text of the Aryan tradition, which we have already mentioned, (\*) puts the problem in very tangible manner in a conversation. The wise man asks: “A sovereign has the power to have executed, exiled, or pardoned, whomsoever he wishes in his kingdom, does he not?” – “Certainly”. “By the same criterion, then : my body is myself, it can achieve this desire for me : does it follow that it is ‘my body’, or that it is not ‘my body’? Or, analogously : this feeling is myself, this perception is myself, it can achieve this desire for me : does it follow that it is ‘my feeling’ or ‘my sensation’, or that it is not ‘my feeling’ or ‘my sensation’?”. The reply of the one who is questioned will necessarily have to be: we cannot speak of ‘our body’, of ‘our’ life’, because this ‘our’ refers to things over which we have power, while, in fact, our power over these is nil or less than nil. We are not the principle or cause of ‘our’ lives, but rather the recipients of them, so that, in the ancient Aryan traditions, life is considered as a ‘loan’, to be requited by performing the duty of passing on to someone else such a life, by giving birth to a son. And it is for this reason that the first-born child was called “the son of duty”.

Besides, if our life was us ourselves, and our own, it would be possible to leave terrestrial life by means of a pure action of the spirit or of the will, without violent external actions: we know however that this is something impossible to almost all men, because only certain ancient traditions consider a ‘way out’ of this kind, and only in relation to absolutely exceptional figures. By killing ourselves in the common manner, the physical one, we savage a thing which cannot be said to be ours and does not depend upon us: a thing, therefore, regarding which it cannot be said, legitimately, that we have ‘power’ – jus vitae necisque – even less can this be said here than it can be said regarding our children, because these, at least, were begotten by us. Here an objection may however arise: it may be said that, precisely because we did not want and create our life, we do not have to accept or to preserve in all cases such a loan or gift. We may therefore ‘have done with it’ at some point. Here, naturally, it must be presupposed that the condition already indicated, that is to say, that of detachment from life as such, as ascertained by ourselves with positive proofs and not with mere words or suggestions, is realised. Otherwise, to consider life as something alien which we can keep or return to the one who, without our approval, gave it to us, would be a mere mental fiction. Therefore, we still remain in the field of exceptional cases. What are we to think about these?

Test of reaction on destiny

The answer to this question is determined by one’s general vision of the world. The vast majority of modern Western men, given the predominant religion, have become accustomed to seeing in physical birth the principle of their life. For them, the problem, naturally, is rather serious, because where birth and therefore earthly life are not considered as effects either of chance or of some mere conjunction of external circumstances, they must be regarded as having been caused by the divine will.

In either case, man’s personal will plays no part in them, so, where people are not religious enough to accept their life through love of God, in resignation and in obedience, the attitude of the one who claims his freedom towards a thing which he did not want can always be reasserted.

But the view found in the majority of the most ancient Indo-European traditions does not coincide with the one we have just indicated. As a rule, it was felt that there was a pre-existence with respect to earthly life and a relation of cause and of effect, sometimes even of choice, between the force pre-existing to physical birth and life itself. The latter, in such case, even though it could not be attributed to the most exterior and already human will of the individual, comes to represent an order suffused with a specific sense, something which has a meaning – albeit hidden – for the ‘I’, as a series of experiences important not in themselves, but with respect to our reactions. In short, then, life here below is no longer chance, and therefore cannot be considered either as something to be accepted nor to be rejected according to our wishes, or as a reality which is imposed on us, regarding which we are merely passive, with the alternative of a dull resignation or of a continuous test of resistance. Instead the feeling arises that earthly life is something in which we, before being earthly men, got, so to speak, ‘mixed up’ and, to a certain extent, involved, whether as in an adventure, a mission, or a choice, whichever you prefer, thus taking on the problematic and tragic aspects of it as part of a whole.

It is hard to believe that the superiority, or more simply the detachment, towards life, which would allow us to ‘have done with it’, does not bring with it in most cases a sense of the nature of existence, as we have explained it here, which, at least in a few cases, would justify the decision to ‘have done with it’. Everyone knows that, sooner or later, this end will come, so that, faced with any contingency, the wisest attitude would be to discover its hidden meaning, the part which it has in the entire life which, according to our explanation, is centred on us and is contained within our transcendental will. The only negative which would be decisive would be a – sincere – impatience for the eternal, for an existence which is no longer terrestrial, such as expressed in the mystical Spanish sentence: in tam alta vida espero, que muero porquè no muero (I hope for so high a life as to die of not being able to die). Otherwise, life as a test must be exacerbated, instead of passing to a direct and violent intervention: there are the heroic vicissitudes of war, there are the highest peaks, there is the dangerous life of explorations or missions – there are thousands of means by which to ask ‘destiny’ a most peremptory and insistent question, and to receive from things themselves the reply, in order to determine the extent to which there is still a profound, impersonal reason to continue here a human life.

Julius EVOLA

Editor’s Notes:

The reader will recognise in this article considerations brought forward by J. Evola on the same subject in the 30th chapter of Ride the Tiger, which, as a matter of fact, bears the same title : “Il Diritto sulla vita” (“The Right over Life”). In addition to this, there is also “The Right over Life in East and West”, an essay published in 1955 in East and West, the review of the Orientalist and traveller Giuseppe Tucci. Both versions are paraphrased and expanded ones, containing certain identical sentences but not whole identical paragraphs: in the former, not only are Seneca’s views on suicide exhibited and discussed, but also those of Buddhism, of creationist religions, and of Heidegger, and, more generally, the existentialists. The latter essay, as its title suggests, develops the views of Eastern religions in a comparative perspective, as against those of Stoicism, rather than existentialism. However, the text we present here constitutes an earlier and independent draft, but cannot be regarded exactly as the ‘first draft’ of either of the others, since they were written between 13 and almost 25 years later. Besides, it is only in the 1942 essay presented here that J. Evola refers to the Aryan teachings on these matters, and it is for this reason that we have thought it interesting to present, not to mention the fact that its shorter length, and its greater focus on these Aryan teachings, give it a density which in turn confers upon it a remarkable force.

(\*)”In speaking of “Olympian bearing” and of detachment we should not think of something like the indifference of a badly understood Stoicism. The Aryan “renunciation” is fundamentally based on a will for the unconditioned considered also as liberty and power. This is apparent from the texts. The Buddha, while challenging the opinion that the stems of ordinary personality are self, asks his interlocutor if a powerful sovereign wishing to execute or proscribe one of his subjects could do so. The answer is naturally, yes. Then the Buddha asks: “You who say: ‘my body is my self,’ do you now think that you have this power over your body: ‘Thus let my body be, thus let my body not be’?” – and the question is repeated for the other elements of the personality. The interlocutor is forced to answer no, and thus the view that the “I” is body, feeling, and so on comes to be confuted. (Majjhima-Nikaya, 35).” The Doctrine Of Awakening, Chapter 7, ‘Determination Of The Vocations’, Paragraph 12.

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