Suicide: A Betrayal of African Communalist Personhood

Otto Dennis
Akwa Ibom State University
Inameti Lawrence Udo
Akwa Ibom State University

Abstract

Incidence of suicide is a global phenomenon. Some individuals, worldwide, voluntarily terminate their lives every day. Even in Africa, where that used to be spared due to the peoples' ancient consideration of the act as taboo, it is no longer so in contemporary time because the people are now increasingly challenged by heightening complexities of life. The challenges wield hopelessness, frustration, depression, and meaninglessness of life, leaving suicide to be contemplated as the only meaningful succor. But taking to suicide is problematic. Humanity stands to suffer extinction if it is summarily adopted as the ultimate solution to personal burdens. Complicating the problem further is the fact that the act, which is engaged from personal freewill, raises many questions. For instance, does freedom license individuals to choose suicide due to burdensome frustration? Do its contemplators consider its implications on themselves, their community, and the future of humanity? Can ancient African value system still sustain a moral check on the act among her contemporary peoples? This paper deploys analytic method of philosophical discourses to respond to the questions with respect to ancient African perception of life and suicide. It asserts that, in spite of complexities and challenges of life, contemporary Africans need to re-embrace the norms and values of the old. No individual has any moral justification to terminate their life, for that betrays his or her communalist personhood.

Keywords: suicide, African value system, communalist personhood, morality

Introduction

Human life is characterized by lots of difficulties. To start, individuals are conceived and born without the privilege of being first consulted on their choice of where, when, how, and for whom to be born. From the choicelessness in circumstances

of birth, they grow to discover themselves constantly struggling to change or make the best of their personal lives and society. Many people are born to discover that they belong to poor, unimportant, subservient, or less-privileged homes, communities, and nationalities. And this constitutes the ones who struggle more to change their circumstances of life than an alternate few, who are born into wealthy, famous, powerful, or privileged homes, communities, and nationalities. This marks the first point of natural expression and experience of social inequality and unfairness.

From this nature's point of inequality and unfairness, the poor often desires to change their life's circumstance and equate or associate with the wealthy or, at least, be comfortable in life. Some of them, sometimes, eventually succeed and acquire wealth, fame, and power, through hard work, smartness, or favor of oddities of life. Yet, they end up encountering a second social inequality and unfairness, especially while attempting to equate with the privileged-few. That is artificial institutionalization of class structure, where members of the privileged class deliberately introduce in society systems that divide and confine individuals to their circumstances of birth and life. The grand aim of the systems is to constantly render it difficult or completely impossible for members of the less-privileged class to ascend or aspire to ascend the privileged class.

Plato's *The Republic* (2003) makes a plausible classical literature for locating the forgoing notions of first and second social class stratifications. But while the Plato's idea originally aimed to solve societal problems of leadership, security, production and supply, it eventually created another. That is the misunderstanding and, thus, misusage of the stratification by members of the privileged class – conceived as superior and involving those in leadership and security positions – to perpetually oppress and subjugate the remaining large population of the less-privileged – conceived as inferior and involving those concerned with production and supply. From the problem, all sorts of life's difficulties arise to challenge the less-privileged, causing them frustration, depression, disappointment, hopelessness, and meaninglessness of personal

life. In line with the experience, lots of government policies of today's world are made to artificially constrain the less-privileged from breaking through or succeeding so much in their vocations as to equate with the privileged. Consequently, the less-privileged – being human beings and having similar aspirations for good life just like the privileged, and yet frustrated by the privileged – are forced to either protest the injustice and unfairness (say, in the fashion advocated by Karl Marx) or contemplate and adopt alternative ways of life. Sometimes, the alternative ways of life involves taking to vices such as robbery, rape and/or, ultimately, suicide (for those who lack the courage to protest and/or engage in the vices). This presents one of the historical backgrounds to emergence of suicide as one of the many practices and problems of humanity.

Paplos et al (2003, 109) submits that ventriloquists of suicide have always been individuals who found life meaningless and, thus, better terminated than remain a nuisance to themselves, their family and society at large. And, while that seemed to be a familiar experience in the West, it never used to be for peoples of ancient Africa until this contemporary era (Khan 2005, 462). This is because human life used to be perceived by ancient Africans as a supreme value in itself (Omomia 2017, 44). Its unnatural termination through suicide or any other reason than the highest good, therefore, used to be morally wrong (Omomia 2017, 44). Also, suicide used to pose a moral problem to ancient Africans because it destroyed societal norms and values by striking at the common instinct of human self-preservation (Omomia 2017, 44). It used to be seen as "bad death" and the ventriloquists were not given full burial rites; they were buried in the "bad bush" outside the village (Aderibigbe 2002, 56). Once one's life, which was perceived as the most fundamental of all possible values, was terminated, everything else in socio-moral web of a community amounted to nothing. Indeed, the scholastic adage: "*vivere vivientibus est esse*" (life is existence itself) lends credence to this, where it justifies that one loses everything, if one loses life (Fagothey 1959, 53). Ogar and Asira (2010, 84) also buttress the position by explaining that "morality often submits to actions that attune with social norms and values…which debates on

virtually every human issues including suicide…" Consequently, ancient African culture completely forbade suicide.

It is worrisome that the act is gradually becoming an option to life that is contemplated and engaged by contemporary Africans. Arguably, this, to a greater extent, is caused by circumstances that are fraught with increased challenges of life of the present complexities. Individuals are currently confronted with and pressured by higher and more complex socio-economic and political demands of life that necessitate a disregard for ancient moral laws. Yet, this raises some existential concerns that especially border on an equally ancient thinking that humanity would be extinct if everyone were to adopt suicide as the ultimate solution to personal burdens. The concern is rendered more perplexing by the fact that the conduct is engaged from freewill. The questions necessitated by this are: do individuals' free moral agency license them to take their lives in situations where life appears meaningless? What is the effect of suicide on the agents and their community? What are the extended moral implications of suicide on future society? Does contemporary Africa still have any moral clout left to stem the increasing tide of suicide among her peoples and the world? What should be done to ameliorate the increasing number of suicide cases in Africa?

This paper aims at deploying analytic method of philosophical discourses to respond to these and more questions, without forgetting existing arguments for and against rightness of suicide. It contributes to knowledge the African existentialist perception of life which asserts that in spite of complexities and challenges of life, contemporary individuals need to re-embrace the norms and values of the old. Accordingly, no individual is justified to voluntarily terminate his or her life through suicide, for such an act betrays African communalist personhood.

From this outset, it is imperative to clarify that by analytic method of a philosophical discourse is meant breaking down of complex terms, notions, concepts, or views into simple ideas in order to present them and explain their implications more understandably than they were in the complex form

(Etukudoh 2017, 47). It is, therefore, in accordance with this technique that this paper approaches the issue of suicide.

Also, the Africans concerned by this paper are the black peoples of the sub-Saharan region of the continent of Africa. And although that involves various ethnicities, like the Annang, Ibibio, Oron, Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani, etc., which may have variations in cultural practices and, thus, may not merit to be perceived as a homogenous people as such, which would share common views of life (in this case, on suicide), they are still homogeneous because the cultural variations are too insignificant to render them completely heterogeneous. Indeed, they are inseparably bound by identical metaphysico-social belief-system, which is characterized by spiritualism, communalism, collectivism, and synthesis. This is further analyzed later in the paper.

1. The Concept of Suicide

The term suicide or *ekpan* (in Annang and Ibibio dialects) was introduced in 1651 by the Englishman, Walter Charleton, as a neutral and less judgmental perception of act of self-killing (Mynatty 2007, 317). In spite of this, it lacks a univocal definition. Consequently, Etim (2010, 42), for instance, defines it as a voluntary act carried out by a person who intends to cause and actually causes his or her own death." And a stricter sense of philosophic conceptualization considers it to be the direct killing of oneself by one's own authority (Fagothey 1959, 285). By 'direct killing' is meant an act in which death is intended either as an end or a means to an end. Gonsalves (1985, 246) explains this more by submitting that "the action is capable of only one effect and that effect is death, or the action is capable of several effects including death and among these, death is the effect intended, either for its own sake or as a means to something else." This means that for an action to be called suicide, it must be deliberate and a function of one's volition. The ventriloquist – as a rational being – is the sole decider of the act. In other words "if a person who is ordered by a civil authority to carry out a legitimate death sentence upon himself or herself does so, it is not suicide in the strict sense" (Peschke 1996, 316). Suicide cannot be engineered or

commanded by another person. A prisoner or slave who is commanded by his master to run into a moving train, for instance, has not committed suicide. Similarly, a soldier who matches out to fight on the order of his State and dies in the war is not a victim of suicide. This is because the deaths of the individuals in the respective instances are not voluntarily decided by them. They are rather compelled by external authorities.

Suicide, according to Emile Durkheim (1951, 157-256) can be classified into egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic kinds. Egoistic suicide is committed when individuals who are overwhelmed by unsolvable challenges of life feel that they have no place in society or that they just cannot fit in anymore. Mynatty (2007, 317) explains this further by submitting that it occurs where a person who does not want to live for or with others kills himself or herself. It is an act that arises from plain despair in the meaning of one's life. Altruistic suicide, according to Durkheim, is a consequence of one's love for collective unconsciousness (i.e. sacrificing one's life for the love of community or communal interest). Again, Mynatty (2007, 317) explains this further by averring that it involves a person opting for a heroic sacrifice of his life in order to save others from great evil. Anomic suicide, Durkheim says, is a consequence of certain breakdown of social equilibrium. This is common in modern world where people take their lives due to frustration either by a decrease or an increase in the economic possessions. Then, fatalistic suicide is taken out by individuals who are kept under tightly regulated slavery or persecution that results in depression. In such condition, individuals feel that they are so fated or destined in life and, thus, consider and actually choose suicide as a requirement to fulfill the destiny.

Thompson (1982, 110) explains the above Durkheimean classification as a view based on his (Durkheim's) reasoning on degrees of imbalance of social integration and moral regulation. And Dohrenwend (1959, 473) buttresses this by positing that there are effects of various crises on social aggregations-war, for example, leading to an increase in altruism, economic boom or disaster contributing to anomie. Such is a function of the relationship subsisting between a suicide actor and society which occurs as a result of social disorganization, lack of social

integration or social solidarity (Thompson 1982, 111). It is a social phenomenon that breaks down vital bond of life. For him, people commit suicide during a fall in the economy – due to lack of satisfaction of basic needs which seem to reduce life to nothing. Similarly, people also commit suicide during a rise in the economy – due to frustrations accruing from lack of fulfillment of purpose (Dohrenwend 1959, 473).

Of the four types of suicide enumerated by Durkheim two, namely the egoistic and anomic variants, are more rampant among individuals than others. This is because suicide generally arises from self-interest, and is borne out of self-defeat, cowardice and lack of confidence to face the hurdles of life. And all that characterize the two variants. A suicide actor has no consideration for those who depend on him or her; no care for those who love him or her; and no trust in God. He or she sees existence as unnecessary and suicide as a solution. The only thing in his or her mind is to satisfy himself or herself by fast-tracking his or her exit from the world since he or she feels that further living is useless.

Suicide can also be divided into two forms viz positive and negative (Gonsalves 1985, 247-248). By Positive suicide is meant the performance of a speedy deadly act against oneself such as having oneself poisoned or hanged (Gonsalves 1985, 247). By negative suicide, on the other hand, is meant the slow withdrawal or withholding of those things that are essential and indispensable for human living, like failing to eat food and starving oneself, until one dies (Gonsalves 1985, 248).

However, in spite of any variant of or approach to suicide, individuals who take to it are usually depressed, frustrated, disappointed, guilty, and mentally deranged by burdens or challenges of life. Depending on personal evaluation of the weight of the challenges, availability of resources to surmount them and individuals' sense of contentment as well as courage to manage the available resources in surmounting the challenges, they resort to the act. There are certain levels of suffering which destabilize, dehumanize and depersonalize individuals such that they no longer think constructively. The elderly and disabled people, for instance, having the feeling that they are a burden to their families, sometimes decide to

end their lives. Long-term illness and chronic pain also drive people to commit suicide.

2. Moral Justification of Suicide

As discussed above, suicide seems to be a rational moral choice that should be permitted in certain deploring situations of life, especially because it arises from human freewill (Ekwutosi 2008, 99). Indeed, given such background, Hume (qtd in Ekwutosi 2008, 96) posits that some people view the conduct as a right action to take. But certain questions are urged by the view. That include: does any situation of life really warrant self-killing or killing at all? If one kills himself or herself for any reason at all, where lies the meaning and impact of the first law of nature which admonishes self-preservation? It is from these questions that a second approach to suicide emerges, which considers the conduct as an act motivated by cowardice and disobedience to the first law of nature (Higgins 1956, 203). The approach anchors its position on the natural maxim that asserts that good must be done and evil avoided (*Bonum faciendum et malum vitandum*) (Higgins 1956, 252). A follow up law derivable from that is the biblical command: "thou shall not kill," which forbids human killing of any kind. This is because human killing of any kind is evil. Since evil must be avoided – in line with natural law – and suicide is an evil act because it involves killing, suicide is, therefore, wrong.

From these bipolar approaches to suicide, a moral dimension is obviously introduced to its assessment. That begs for justification of the rightness or wrongness of the conduct. The leading question in this regard is: is suicide morally justifiable? This question has since occasioned a stiff debate among philosophers and theologians, where some of them argue plausibly in support of the rightness of the act, and others also argue plausibly against its rightness. Let us briefly reflect on some of the arguments.

3. Arguments in Support of Rightness of Suicide

In advocating suicide, one plausible moral argument is that human beings – as rational entities – are naturally

endowed with the freedom to choose anything at all, including whether to live or die. This means that if an individual desires to die, he or she is free to take his or her life, particularly as the life belongs to him or her. Suicide, in this view, is "a private affair and requires no interference from any other person" (Ekwutosi 2008, 99). Hume is one of the numerous philosophers who see nothing wrong with one voluntarily taking his life since the life belongs to him. In his words, "if all events equally reflect God's providence, then suicide cannot be a departure from that divine will" (qtd in Ekwutosi 2008, 96). He applauds suicide as a rational and courageous act that is anchored on personal and social utility. According to Ekwutosi (2008, 96), Hume further buttresses his position by submitting that "it is a kind of blasphemy to imagine that any created being can, by taking his own life, disturb the order of the world." Consequently, no one should consider suicide as an act that distorts or is capable of distorting the world order in any way.

Also supporting suicide are some Stoics and Epicureans who reason that a good person is one who controls his or her own destiny (Marietta 2016, 153). Based on that reasoning, they submit that:

> Suicide is a noble act. It is a lesser evil act when compared with the greater evil of living an unbearable, worthless and valueless life due to sociologically, economically or biologically challenges (Marietta 2016, 153).

Another argument supporting rightness of suicide arises from the perception of life as a gift from God and a receiver of any gift at all has the right to manage the gift whichever way he or she chooses (Ijieze 2009, 105). Having bequeathed life to human beings as a gift, God – the giver – ought not to demand any further explanation regarding how it is used, for the gift then becomes the property of every living individual. As owners of the property, when keeping the gift becomes more harmfully unbearable than doing away with it, it is more reasonable to do away with it than keep it. Ijieze (2009, 106) further asserts in support of this view that "…no gift is expected to be retained indefinitely at the expense and to the harm of the receiver."

Furthermore, there is an advocacy of suicide from the perspective of self-defense, permitting individuals to attack and

destroy for safety and security reasons any unjust aggression on their lives (Fagothey 1959, 257). This argument is supported by socio-political actions of States, where they claim such rights of territorial (self) defense in events of war and capital crime. If the state justiciable claims such a right, why can one not destroy his or her life in circumstances that have perpetually proven to be unjustly aggressive? It is equally justiciable, therefore, that individuals take their lives in order to save themselves from further agony of life's unkind treatments.

From a religious perspective, some Oriental sects can be found to support suicide. Hinduism and Jainism, particularly, permit and even recommend a form of passive ascetic self-destruction in which a person embraces death from hunger and starvation (Warren 1978, 1621). In ancient China, suicide was instituted as a practice for honor or vengeance (Warren 1978, 1622). However, the Chinese repudiated male self-destruction, since they held that a man's highest duty was to preserve himself for the family. They rather permitted female self-destruction which is akin to "Sutteeism – in which a woman killed herself to avoid violation to the rights of her deceased husband" (Warren 1978, 1622).

4. Arguments against Rightness of Suicide

There are many derisive perceptions of the above pro-suicide arguments. One of them is from Plato, whose thought in *Phaedo* is that suicide is an act of rebellion against the gods. This is because, for him, human beings are chattels of the gods which cannot act in any way, especially killing themselves, without approval by such owners. If anyone acts without authority from the gods, Plato submits that it is rebellious. Indeed, he invites us to personally reason through such act of rebellion by responding to the question: "…would you not be angry if one of your chattels should kill itself when you had not indicated that you wanted it to die?" (*Phaedo* 62). The usual answer is that you would.

John Locke also reasons along the Platonic line where he submits that life is a gift from God that is merely entrusted on human beings as stewards (Omoregbe 1989, 207). In that regard, while God reserves the absolute ownership of the gift,

human beings only reserve a limited ownership. This means that human beings have no justification whatsoever to take their lives because it is not their absolute property. They are, rather, meant to preserve it and render its account of stewardship to the owner – God – whenever that is required.

Still reasoning along a similar view, but more materially than spiritually, Aristotle argues against rightness of suicide from the background of community ownership of the individual. According to him in *Nichomachean Ethics* (2009, vii), since every piece of unit is a component of a whole and the whole cannot function without its units, then every individual is a member of a community and the community cannot function without individuals. If any individual therefore kills himself or herself, he or she destroys not only himself or herself but also the community as the community may malfunction from the loss.

St. Thomas Aquinas buttresses the above Aristotelian position, albeit inversely, by asserting that:

> One does not only wrong the society when he or she commits suicide, he or she also offends the self. This is because, naturally, everything loves itself and, with that self-love, seeks to perpetuate its being. If human beings as part of nature, who ought to heed the law by loving and perpetuating their being in life, rather turn around to hate themselves to the point of discontinuing their being through suicide, then they disobey the natural law and offend their being. (Fagothey 1959, 121)

Arguing in support of the above position of Aquinas, Bernard Haring (1964, 359) avers that "suicide is a terrible aberration which is diametrically opposed to a well ordered self-love and the natural instinct of self-preservation." The right to life arises from the dictates of natural law (Fagothey 1959, 122). Hence, Aquinas emphasizes the need for conforming to natural law by arguing that self-preservation is a natural tendency, and one is obliged to preserve his or her life (Fagothey 1959, 122). Peschke (1996, 302) supports this by considering suicide as "a violation of one's duty to love oneself…"

Another argument against the rightness of suicide is Thomas Higgins' consideration of the conduct as an act of cowardice. Higgins asserts that "suicide as an escape from overwhelming personal disaster, an evil life, misery, frustration, or dishonor, far from being an act of fortitude is an

act of cowardice…" (1956, 203). Explaining further, he posits that:

> Persons who take their lives under such circumstances have a fundamentally false view of life, namely, that happiness in this life is man's last end. Suicide as an escape from being a burden to others also manifests the erroneous conception that the purpose of life is temporary felicity (203).

Additionally, there is the argument against suicide from the perspective of 'choosing it as the lesser of evils, especially when no moral wrong is involved.' Moral evil may never be preferred to any physical evil no matter how severe the latter may be. Moral evil touches on the core of existence where it concerns termination of life. From Immanuel Kant (1963, 85), it is to be learnt that suicide destroys the basis of morality. When humanity cares less about the immorality latent in suicide, it means that morality itself is rooted out of existence (Kant 1963, 85). Mankind, who is naturally at the centre of morality, kills morality when he kills himself. Also, an individual would be free to wreck himself or herself if he or she was responsible only to himself or herself. But that is not the case, for individuals are also responsible to other members of society as well as God.

Further, Kant's first formulation of the Categorical Imperative, which asserts that one should act only on that maxim whereby one can and at the same time will to become a universal law, forbids suicide (1998, 224). This is because if one considers suicide as a preferred escape from life's travails then he or she inadvertently legislates for the rest of humanity the same preference as a law. Where all of humanity is governed by such a law, no one will be left to make sense of life. Humanity would simply be annihilated. This is why Kant (1998, 221) argues that it would be totally inconsistent with self-love to commit suicide. And the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) (2012, 2281) defends the position by presenting suicide as a conduct that offends the love of self-due to its contradiction of the human natural inclination to preserve and perpetuate life. It also perceives suicide as disobeying neighborly love due to its unjust breakage of ties of solidarity with family, nation and other human societies that we have obligations.

Legally, an attempt at committing suicide is a punishable crime. This is supported by section 327 of the Criminal Code of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which states that "any person who attempts to kill himself is guilty of misdemeanor and is liable to imprisonment for one year" (716). Unfortunately, the piece of legislation is limited as it only applies to attempted cases of the act. This is because those who succeed in committing the act do not live to face the long arm of the law.

5. African Perception of Suicide

As stated earlier in the outset of this essay, the African thought system that it focuses is that of the ancient black peoples or Negroes of the sub-Saharan region of the continent. It is the people that Otto Dennis (2015, 49) describes as:

> …the traditional type of individuals, whose character could be viewed as being purely native or unadulterated by foreign cultures and traditions that infiltrated the continent since the advent of colonialism. These sort of individuals oppose the modern, contemporary and urban Africans whose character are too eclectic (and, thereby, adulterated - by colonialism, elitism and globalization) to be purely African (in the sense of our thinking in this essay). Except for their black complexions, modern, contemporary and urban Negro Africans are admixtures of several cultural modes of life - African, Judeo-Christian, Caucasian traditions, et cetera, which eventually diminish the Africanness in them.

The traditional Africans therefore, although composed of different ethnicities and had slightly different social cultures, still shared identical philosophical view of existence. That was expressed in spiritualism, communalism, collectivism, co-existence, or synthesis. An ancient Negro African used to be a spiritual individual whose personhood or individuality was attained through participation in communal life (Menkiti 1984, 171-181; Ruzicki 2010, 51). Menkiti (1984, 172) explains this more succinctly where he states that "…it is the community that defines an individual as a person…" That is because the reality of communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories, whatever this may be (Menkiti 1984, 171).

By 'communal world' is meant the interpenetrating relations that exist between all forces. The basic existential assumption of traditional Africa was that force - vital force or

life-force - constitutes the primary element of reality (Dennis 2015, 50). Everything, including plants, animals, stones, mountains, water, time, the dead (who are considered to be alive in a certain way), the yet-to-be-born, mind (a living person's consciousness) and matter (the physical universe, the world environment), are all considered to be endowed with life-force (Dennis 2015, 50). The world is one of extraordinary harmony of the forces where there is unifying synthesis and mutual compatibility of all things interacting in an inseparable and interpenetrable mix (Dennis 2015, 50).

Human beings are the dominant force among all created visible forces (Tempels 1959, 20). They are at the center, realizing themselves in the midst of a hierarchy where some forces act above and others act below them (Tempels 1959, 21). Outside the hierarchy of forces, the human species has no existence (Tempels 1959, 21). This constitutes the sense of solicitude for beings that John Mbiti (1969, 141) expresses in the statement: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." Similarly, it is the sense of society that Ruch and Anyanwu (1981, 325) refer to as collectivist or, more suitably, communal. This, therefore, is how communalism was and still remains the authentic personality of an African.

To further elucidate the ontologico-communal personhood of an African, we deem it pertinent to compare it with its Western counterpart. Accordingly, we aver that it is contrary to the sort of solipsistic individualism projected by Rene Descartes in his "I think therefore, I am," which typifies Western personhood. This is because Western culture perceives the individual as being causal unit of communal or societal make-up, norms and values, and not the other way round. Authentic Western personhood entails individuals constantly living out their conscientious choices of uniqueness in all situations of life (Heidegger 1962, 68). It involves development of a solid and genuine personality from informed and convinced positions of reality. Every declaration of 'I want to…,' 'I am…,' or 'I shall…,' for instance, is respected and treated as a legislated norm, especially where the individual – as a moral agent – bears the responsibility of the choice (Unah and Dennis 2011, 11).

It is in view of this form of individuality that Martin Heidegger (1962, 68-69) postulates that "an authentic life is a life lived in a way one has freely chosen." That is why he and the entire existentialist movement admonish individuals to avoid seeking refuge in the 'public self,' for that contrasts with the free and concrete 'I', eclipses the 'I', and portends absorption or a lostness in the community or communal life. It is why existentialist philosophers generally rise against depersonalization, depersonification and dehumanization of the individual occasioned by losteness in the 'they world,' public, community or society. They perceive such self-absorption as inauthentic personhood, which must be avoided. They advocate establishment and restoration (i.e. where the 'I" is already eclipsed) of mankind to his or her dignifying status of strict individualistic freedom in society.

Yet existence of one individual axiomatically implies existence of others too, for no one person exists without others. Even Heidegger acknowledges this flip-side of existence where he perceives mankind's being-in-the-world as that characterized by being-with-others (1962, 149-163). Similarly, Martin Buber (2000, 114) speaks of existence as an "I" and "Thou" experience. These theories portray mankind as an entity that is not only individualistic but also inalienably social. They recognize the sociality as an essential element of authentic existence too. Life assumes relevance and meaning when man relates healthily and heartily with others and the world.

From the alternative socialist perspective of Western conception of personhood, African communalist conception of existence asserts its authority even more. However, rather than individuals causing group existence (like the strict individuality of the West), the converse is obtained in Africa. African individuals approach life in constant consciousness of an interconnection with some 'other,' whose relation necessarily determine their behavior – for they must consider the equal thriving of that 'other' in all they do (Dennis 2015, 50). The 'others' or community, in turn, offers individuals' security and care, especially where that relates to conducts and phenomena that are personally or socially harmful. The communal security

and care is characterized by corporate solidarity and mutual aid that are posed and generally accepted as norms and values.

It is instructive to note that the above conception of personhood in Africa does not deny the fact that mankind is born into the world as single individuals and, as such, has certain rights and responsibilities to the self. It recognizes and respects such elements as the fundaments of existence. Indeed, the community relies on such individualistic senses of responsibility for moral advancement and sustainability. But the individuality is compulsorily aligned with laid down norms and values of the society, as the norms and values are (themselves) products of a long history of studies and experiences on individual behaviors across ages, genders, professions, vocations, and religions.

The norms legislate that individuals are not the sole owners of their lives. The community also reserves the ownership (even more). Hence, no one is expected to conduct themselves in ways that please them – like contemplating and committing suicide. Anyone who lives in that way is deemed self-centered and acommunity (i.e. outside the community) and invites upon themselves the communal wrath, whatever that may be. Sometimes, depending on offence, such self-centeredness can earn offenders (with their entire family) complete banishment from the community, excommunication, or ritual appeasement and cleansing, etc.

With specific respect to suicide, the penalty used to be public ritual cleansing, which is borne by the immediate family and community of the actor. This is because it was considered a curse for anyone to take their life as doing so betrays the people's communalist personhood. It rattles the balance or completely scuttles the sacred spiritual, collective, holistic, co-extensive, and symbiotic bond subsisting between the actor and the rest of the life-forces, especially the living humans, the living dead, and the yet-to-be-born individuals of his or her family and community. Hence, the cleansing serves the purpose of restoring the scuttled spiritual balance of the community. The community and immediate family of the actor, through publicisation of the ritual cleansing, are also shamed and stigmatized for generations to come. As mentioned earlier,

depending on community, the family can be banned – in addition to the shame and stigmatization. These undergird the justification for absolute condemnation of suicide in African culture as a taboo.

6. Conclusion

From the discussion so far, particularly the ancient African perception of suicide, we conclude that contemporary Africans need to re-embrace the norms and values of old. This is because, in spite of the complexities and challenges of their lives, living needs to be invaluably esteemed as it used to be. The communalist way of life, which characterized ancient African culture, dictates that it is morally wrong to deliberately kill oneself (irrespective of the different arguments supporting it). Despite the possibility of self-projection in the spirit of the "I" and, thus, the thinking that one should decide for himself or herself whatever he or she pleases, individuals should equally recognize that fellow individuals and the world environment demand from them the responsibility of living for collective good.

Resorting to suicide due to life's complexities, challenges, or crises implies destroying the complementary union of society, degrading human values, and betraying the self. The authentic self is that which remains committed to life, in spite of its awareness that it is fraught with problems. To allow oneself to be overwhelmed by life's problems to the point of contemplating and actually committing suicide is inauthentic. Individuals need to rise above such inauthentic inclinations and cling to their authentic personhoods.

The society also has the responsibility of caring for individuals, for they constitute its foundation. The destitute are to be especially cared for, lest they become hopeless in their helplessness and contemplate or commit suicide. Religion needs to preach against suicide in all its ramifications, while government – alongside alleviation of poverty and unemployment – needs to open counseling centres closer to the people to educate them and discourage depression. Failure of governments in this regard, especially in Africa, may continue to encourage suicides.

REFERENCES

Aderibigbe, Ibigbolade S. 2002. "The Moral Issues in African Religion." In *Studies in Religious Understanding in Nigeria*, edited by Abubakre et al., 50-63. Lagos: Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions.

Aristotle. 2009. *The Nichomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Buber, Martin. 2000. *I and Thou*. New York: Scribner.

Catholic Church. 2012. *Cathecism of Catholic Church*. 2nd Edition. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Catholic Encyclopaedia. 2009. New York: Robert Appleton Company.

Dennis, Otto. 2015. "African Paradigm for Corporate Social Responsibility." *Journal of Management and Training for Industries* 2(2): 41-55.

Dohrenwend, Bruce P. 1959. "Egoism, Altruism Anomie and Fatalism: A Conceptual Analysis of Durkheim's Types" *American Sociological Review* 24(4): 446-473.

Durkheim, Emile. 1951. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson. New York: The Free Press.

Ekwutosi, Cosmas M. 2008. *Bioethics: History and Contemporary Issues*. Anambra: Rex Charles and Patrick.

Etim, Michael. 2010. "The Collapse of the Enlightenment Project and its Consequences." A speech at St Joseph Major Seminary, Ikot Ekpene.

Etukudoh, Christopher N. 2017. "The Methods of Philosophy." In *Introduction to Philosophy and Logic*, edited by Victor Daniel B. Inoka, 45-49. Obio Akpa: Akwa Ibom State University.

Fagothey, Austin. 1959. *Right and Reason*. USA: The C.V Mosby Comp.

Gonsalves, Milton A. 1985. *Fagothey's Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice*. Columbus: Merill Publishing Company.

Haring, Bernard. *Christian Renewal in a Changing World*. New York: Mercier press, 1964.

Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarie and E. Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Higgins, Thomas. 1956. *Man as Man: The Science and Art of Ethics*. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company.

Ijezie, Ignatius C. 2009. *Biomedical Ethics Foundation and Contemporary Issues*. Aba: Rex Press.

Kant, Immanuel. 1963. "On Suicide". In *Lecture on Ethics*. Translated by L. Enfield. New York: Harper and Row.

_____. 1998. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by M. J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Khan, Murad M. 2005. Suicide Prevention and Developing Countries. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*. 98(10): 459-463.

Marietta, Don. 2016. *Introduction to Ancient Philosophy*. New York: Routledge.

Mbiti, John S.1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Menkiti, Ifeanyi. A. 1984. "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought." In *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, edited by Richard A. Wright, 171-181. Maryland: Lanham.

Mynatty, Hormis. 2007. "Death by Choice." In *Catholic Contributions to Bioethics*, edited by Baiju Julian and Hormis Mynatty, 50-56. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation.

Ogar, John N. and Asira E. Asira. 2010. "Suicide: A Contemporary Issue and its Moral Challenge." *The Legion: An Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2(1): 84-90.

Omomia, Austin O. 2017. "Religious Perceptions of Suicide and Implications for Suicidology Advocacy in Nigeria." *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research* 5(2): 34-56.

Omoregbe, Joseph I. 1989. *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*. Lagos: Joja Publishers.

Paplos, KG *et al.* 2003. "Suicidal Intention, Depression and Anhedonia among Suicide Attempters." *Annals of General Hospital Psychiatry* 2(109). https://doi.org/10.1186/1475-2832-2-S1-S109 (Accessed 10/02.2021)

Peschke, Karl H. 1996. *Christian Ethics: Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican* 11. New Delhi: Rekha Printers.

Plato. *Phaedo.* Translated by F. J. Church. New York: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1951. First written in 3rd Century BC and first published in English in 1675.

_____. *The Republic.* 2003. Translated by Desmond Lee, Maria Helena da Rocha Pereira, and Benjamin Jowett. London: Penguin Classics.

Ruch, Ernest A. and Kane C. Anyanwu. 1981. *African Philosophy: An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa.* Rome: Catholic Book Agency.

Ruzicki, Tim. 2010. "A Traditional African Concept of Community Related to Ethical Intuitionism." *Macalester Journal of Philosophy* 5(1): 48-52. http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo/vol5/iss1/10.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. 1956. New York: Methuen and Comp.

Tempels, Placid. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*, Presence Africane.

Thompson, Kenneth. 1982. *Emile Durkheim.* London: Tavistock Publications.

Unah, Jim and Otto Dennis. 2011. "Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophical Sexism: Implications for the Philosophy of Posterity." *Forum on Public policy: A Journal of the Oxford Roundtable* 1(3): 1-15.

Warren, T. Reich, ed. 1978. *Encyclopedia of Bioethics* 4. London: The Free Press.

Otto Dennis, PhD is an Ibibio Nigerian who currently lectures Philosophy at Akwa Ibom State University, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. He has published in international, national, and local journals as well as books. Some of these can be accessed through his Google Scholar account. He specialises in Ethics, and

yet sustains interest in Metaphysics (Ontology), Phenomenology, Existentialism and Post-Modernism, which he also has mastery.

Inameti Lawrence Udo, PhD is an Annang Nigerian who currently lectures Philosophy at Akwa Ibom State University, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. He has published widely in international, national, and local journals as well as books. His professional area of specialisation is African Philosophy. Yet he also sustains tangential interest in Logic and Socio-Political Philosophy

Address:
Otto Dennis, Ph.D
Department of Philosophy
Akwa Ibom State University
E-mail: ottodennis@aksu.edu.ng

Inameti Lawrence Udo, Ph.D
Department of Philosophy
Akwa Ibom State University
E-mail: inamsifon2004@yahoo.com