



Adam Smith and the Stoic principle of suicide

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Abstract

A substantial portion of Adam Smith's discussion of Stoicism in TMS VII is dedicated to the Stoic "principle of suicide," according to which suicide is sometimes morally required. While scholars agree that Stoicism exercised considerable influence over Smith, no recent work has explored his views on suicide, despite the central role it plays in his treatment of Stoicism. I argue that Smith opposes the principle of suicide on both epistemic and moral grounds, providing an important critique of Stoicism. I also show how Smith departs from other early modern accounts of suicide by offering a notably humane analysis of this tragic act. I conclude by considering what Smith's discussion of Stoicism and suicide tells us about how his moral theory, and I forward a reading of Smith as a skeptic.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Part VII of Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) is dedicated to examining the systems of moral philosophy in the Ancient and Modern periods. Smith spends the bulk of TMS VII discussing the Stoics; at least half of this discussion concerns what he calls the "principle of suicide," according to which suicide is sometimes morally required (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.34). Smith's examination of suicide is opaque, and at first blush, it seems strange that he dedicates so much space to the topic. The Stoics he most frequently references rarely discuss suicide.¹ Moreover, no modern scholars recognize anything like the "principle of suicide" as a central doctrine of Stoicism.² These factors likely explain why scholars either brush past or altogether ignore these sections of TMS VII, despite the almost universal recognition of the deep impact of Stoicism on Smith's thinking.³

For the Stoics, praiseworthy suicide requires that an agent knows both his role in the system of nature and the point at which he can no longer fulfill this role. Smith argues that such knowledge is inaccessible to anyone but God, and so the Stoic can never know when it is proper to commit suicide. Inasmuch as the Stoic claims to know his role in the system of nature and so raises himself to the position of God, he silences his natural, sociable sentiments. Because these sentiments furnish us with the only information available about our proper ends, Smith argues that

silencing them threatens our ability to act morally. Hence, the Stoic principle of suicide is faulty on *epistemic* and *moral* grounds.

I argue that Smith's critique of the Stoic view of suicide leads him to take a unique position on the morality of suicide: that it is a blameless act. Further, I argue that Smith's manner of engagement with the Stoics gives us reason to interpret him as a skeptic. The paper is divided as follows. In Section 2, I examine Smith's discussion of the Stoic principle of suicide. In Sections 3 and 4, I present Smith's epistemic and moral critiques of this principle, respectively. In Section 5, I consider the significance of Smith's treatment of suicide in an early modern context. In the last section, I propose a new route for reading Smith as a skeptic.

2 | THE STOIC PRINCIPLE OF SUICIDE

The basic tenet of Stoicism is that each person is endowed with self-love, which recommends them to the perfection of their nature (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.15). Whatever tends to the perfection of one's nature is deemed choiceworthy; whatever tends to its diminishment or destruction is considered worthy of rejection (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.16). Virtue therefore consists in pursuing choiceworthy objects. The objects that nature recommends to us as choiceworthy are the "prosperity of our family, of our relations, of our country, of mankind, and of the universe in general" (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.18). However, not all of these objects are equally choiceworthy. The prosperity of ourselves and our family is considered subservient to the prosperity of mankind or to the universe (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.16).

For the Stoic, it is our dependence on the universe that makes our well-being subservient to the system of nature. Epictetus compares the relation a foot bears to the body to the relation that a human being bears to the universe.⁴ A foot is dependent on the body for its existence and so it is proper for the foot to undergo whatever is required to preserve the body; it may need to "trample in the dirt ... tread upon thorns ... [or] to be cut off for the sake of the whole body" (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.19). It would be wrong for the foot to resist because its refusal would be a violation of its place in the order of nature. It is equally absurd for us to bemoan hardships that contribute to the good of the system of nature. After all, such bemoaning is irrational—as human beings, we possess duties and privileges in virtue of the place we enjoy in the system of nature. As Marcus Aurelius points out, "thou hast seen a hand cut off or a foot, or a head severed from the trunk, and lying at some distance from the body. Just so does the man treat himself, as far as he may, who wills not what befalls [him]."⁵ To claim that we ought not to suffer for the system of nature is to forsake our place in this system.

For the Stoic, the proper attitude to take towards nature is resignation (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.18; VII.ii.1.21). As Epictetus notes, one ought "not to plan about anything as though he were a detached unit, but to act like the foot or hand, which, if they had the faculty of reason and understood the constitution of nature, would never exercise choice or desire in any other way but by reference to the whole."⁶ When the Stoic is deliberating, Smith notes, he "does not look upon himself as a whole, separate and detached from every other part of nature," but "enters ... into the sentiments of that divine Being, and considers himself an atom, a particle, of an immense and infinite system, which must and ought to be disposed of, according to the conveniency of the whole" (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.20). Only once the Stoic recognizes that his own prosperity is subservient to that of the universe can he grasp his place in nature. As Marcus Aurelius reminds us, he should take "the same view of ... what Nature approves as of thy health, and so welcome whatever happens, should it even be somewhat distasteful, because it contributes to the health of the Universe ... for he [i.e., Nature] has not brought this on a man, unless it had brought welfare to the Whole."⁷

Virtue requires more than subservience to nature; one must also fulfill the duties associated with one's station in life. Discharging the duties assigned with one's station involves maintaining "perfect rectitude of conduct," or a sense of exact propriety according to the station that one occupies (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.27). Here, we can begin to understand the claim that suicide is sometimes morally required, or praiseworthy. For an act to be praiseworthy, it must meet the conditions of exact propriety. If the Stoic can specify the conditions under which suicide is proper, he can make the case that it is praiseworthy to do so in said circumstances. Notice: to say it is proper to commit suicide in a

particular situation is to say that it would be blameworthy to not do so.⁸ When the Stoic is no longer capable of discharging his duties and can no longer fulfill his assigned role, it is proper to commit suicide. At this point, “life ... [becomes] the object of rejection” and so “the propriety of conduct, the rule which the Gods had given him for the direction his conduct, required him to do so” (Ibid.).

We now know the conditions under which suicide is considered praiseworthy by the Stoics: whenever one is no longer able to fulfill the duties associated with one's station as assigned by nature. But what does it look like for an instance of suicide to meet these conditions? In order for the category of “proper” suicide to be practically useful—that is, to be able to inform us about what to do—it must be the case that we can know our proper station and the point at which we are no longer capable of discharging our duties. But how can we know when this is the case?

3 | THE EPISTEMIC ARGUMENT

How can we know when it is right to commit suicide? One standard might be the degree to which we think our life is going well. A person may feel that her life is “full,” that her desires are fulfilled, and that her existence is purposeful. Another may have his desires frustrated, be devoid of purpose, and may reach a point at which it no longer seems worthwhile to continue living. By this standard, it would be improper for the first person to commit suicide but at least permissible for the second to do so. While well-being is a plausible standard, this cannot be the whole story for a Stoic. Our ability to discharge our duties is not tied to our well-being.⁹ One may fulfill the duties of being a parent while remaining dissatisfied; one may also experience contentment at shirking these duties.

For the Stoics, the propriety of suicide is determined by the extent to which one's existence adds to the prosperity of the universe. As Smith points out,

The prosperity of the whole should, even to us, appear preferable to so insignificant a part as ourselves ... if, indeed, any opportunity of extricating ourselves should offer, it became our duty to embrace it. The order of the universe, it was evident, no longer required our continuance in this situation, and the great Dictator of the world plainly called upon us to leave it, by clearly pointing out the road which we were to follow ... we might be assured [that our doing so] tended most to the prosperity and order of the whole, which was what we ourselves, if we are wise and equitable, ought most of all to desire. (Smith, VII.ii.1.18) 1985¹⁰

The Stoic's duty is to support the “order of the whole” and to commit suicide only when he is no longer in a position to do so. But to determine the propriety of suicide, he must first know the role that he occupies in the system of nature, the duties associated with this role, and his ability to fulfill them. As Epictetus reminds us, “you are an actor in a play the character of which is determined by the Playwright ... if He wishes you to play the part of a beggar, remember to act even this role adroitly; and so if your role be that of the cripple, an official, or a layman. For this is your business, to play admirably the role assigned to you.”¹¹ The first step for any Stoic is to identify his assigned role in nature.

We might take Epictetus literally when he refers to one playing the role of the official, beggar, or a citizen, and think of these stations as being populated with positional duties that one is expected to fulfill. If one is born an aristocrat and acts in a way that brings shame on one's family—say, by currying the favor of a foreign despot—it is proper to commit suicide, particularly if it is requested by someone of stature. The disgraced aristocrat can no longer fulfill his role in society on account of his sullied reputation.¹² Smith's discussion of suicide in TMS VII centers on the loss of one's social position. He is thinking of these cases where someone's honor has been besmirched.

But there's a problem. One occupies a number of roles that provide one with overlapping and conflicting duties. Perhaps the aristocrat is also a father—is he allowed to abscond from his fatherly duties on account of his political embarrassment? Smith argues that pride often lurks behind these supposedly honorable means of safeguarding one's

position: “under the Emperors this method of dying seems to have been, for a time, perfectly fashionable ... we find an account of several persons who chose to die in this manner, rather from vanity and ostentation, it would seem, than from what would appear, even to a sober and judicious Stoic, any proper or necessary reason” (Smith, 1985 VII. ii. 1.33). In committing suicide, the Stoic, an aristocrat in our case, hardly acts like a “sober and judicious” spectator, tending to the duties of their station. Smith pushes this criticism further, balking at the idea that reputation is relevant in determining whether to commit suicide, claiming that were the Stoic to enter into the “views of the great Superintendent of the universe,” the “complete approbation of his own breast” should be significant to comfort him (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.39; 28).

For Smith, this epistemic gap between ourselves and nature creates a tension in the Stoic's view. Consider: perhaps one could appeal directly to the system of nature; such an appeal might take the form of a rational intuition that one is no longer of use nature. Smith argues that achieving this degree of knowledge is impossible, noting that such “sublime speculations” about one's place in the order of things are beyond the “narrowness of our comprehension” (Smith, 1985 VI.ii.3.6.). Since we cannot look to the universe to guide our conduct, we should instead seek the approval of the impartial spectator (Smith, 1985 II.ii.2). Our only access to the “exquisite and divine beauty” of nature and of moral perfection, he maintains, is through one's “observation upon the character both of himself, and of other people,” and the hard work of moral progress (Smith, 1985 VI.iii.25). To determine whether one should commit suicide, the Stoic must attain a perspective that is, in fact, unattainable.

In this case, the Stoic must rely on a moral exemplar, who enjoys a greater connection to nature, to set the standard of propriety for suicide. But, as is clear in Seneca's work, there are two different standards for proper suicide—one for the sage and another for the rest of us.¹³ The sage possesses all knowledge concerning matters virtuous, vicious, and indifferent and is not bothered by illness, poverty, or any other external impediments to their will.¹⁴ While Seneca means for the sage to be our model, he is also aware that most people are fearful of death and hardship. For those of us nonexemplars who wish to be free of destitution, ailments, and weariness, there is always suicide.¹⁵ But even in these conditions, Seneca claims that the sage might reason that “if the body is useless for its duties, why wouldn't it be appropriate to escort the failing mind out the door?”¹⁶ The sage might even comfort themselves: “that flesh will never drive me into fear ... I shall never show “respect” for this paltry body. When I see fit, I shall dissolve my partnership with it.”¹⁷

So what makes the sage's decision to commit suicide proper? For Seneca, when the sage commits suicide, he *freely chooses* to exit life but does not *flee* from it out of fear or cowardice.¹⁸ The sage's decision to commit suicide is not determined by negative emotions that bind his will.¹⁹ Seneca treats the difference between the sage and others as an *internal* one. But Smith argues that few people fit the model of the sage, meaning that virtuous suicide will be open only to a few (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.26). Even with the sage, the standard of propriety is on shaky ground, not only because they may be acting pridefully by committing suicide but also since the decision to do so is meant to proceed from a recognition of an *external standard*: that they can no longer perform their duties (Smith, 1985 VII. ii.1.31). After rejecting a conventionalist standard of propriety, Seneca offers the standard of the sage, who is meant to provide guidance about when committing suicide is proper. But the latter is unattainable and fails to give us guidance about the circumstances under which it is virtuous to end our lives.

Absent a workable standard of propriety for suicide, the decision to commit suicide boils down to deciding whether life is worth enduring. Smith notes that, for the Stoics, “there neither was nor could be any evil in death; and that, if their situation became at any time too hard for their constancy to support, the remedy was at hand, the door was open, and they might, without fear, walk out when they pleased” (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.30). If one simply walks out when one pleases, one implies that the only relevant standard when deciding to commit suicide is the desire to not live. Seneca even suggests, one's being fed up with life is a sign from nature that one *should* end it:

Life is not always something to hang onto. Our good does not consist merely in living but in living well. Hence the wise person lives as long as he ought to, not as long as he can. He considers where he will be living, and how, and with whom, and what he will be doing ... If he encounters many hardships that banish

*tranquility, he releases himself. Nor does he do so in a time of need; rather, as soon as he begins to have doubts about his fortunes, he makes a careful assessment to determine whether it is time to quit.*²⁰

If one's life is troublesome and there is no respite on the horizon, it follows that one is justified in committing suicide. But if Stoicism requires that one submit to the system of nature, then suicide should be prohibited: any situation can be overcome by understanding that it, while unfortunate from one's own perspective, is in fact necessary to the system of nature.

Let us take stock. To determine if it is proper to commit suicide on Stoic grounds, one must know one's station, its associated duties associated, and the point after which one can no longer fulfill these duties. We began with a conventional criterion of suicide's propriety, based in an institutionalist conception of one's station. We then considered the moral criterion of its propriety, based in the sage. We ended with the personal criterion of its propriety, based in one's desire to cease living. Smith claims that the first criterion of propriety is indefensible because it is impossible to satisfy on epistemic grounds, while the second criterion collapses into the third. However, the third gets us no further to understanding when it is proper to commit suicide. Our body may succumb to disease; we may have our reputation dragged through the mud; we may lose those we love; we may see our country be torn apart. Still, the desire to cease living can always be neutralized by our submission to nature.

I return to these latter points in Section 6, where I argue that this critique of the Stoic view of suicide gives us a new route to interpreting Smith as a skeptic. Smith's critique centers on the Stoics' moral epistemology; on this view, an agent's knowing what she ought to do is founded on her appreciating propriety relations holding between herself and nature. To discuss this point further, I turn to Smith's moral argument against the Stoic principle of suicide, which deepens the critique of Stoicism and further illuminates the nature and scope of Smith's skepticism.

4 | THE MORAL ARGUMENT

The Stoic is epistemically immodest when he claims to know the conditions under which it is proper to end his life. In directing focus towards the system of nature, the Stoic diverts his attention away from its proper object: the "little department" he occupies (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.44). Two consequences follow from this immodesty. First, the Stoic becomes less receptive to the sociable affections directed at his little department and to the commitments that flow from it. Second, the Stoic cultivates an excessive degree of self-estimation, in the form of pride, which exacerbates the first problem—thereby further obscuring the question of when it is proper for one to commit suicide.

When the Stoic focuses his attention on the system of nature, he treats himself and those related to him as *components* of this system (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.20). As Marcus Aurelius points out,

*Let my first conviction be that I am part of a Whole, which is under Nature's governance; and my second, that a bond of kinship exists between myself and all other similar parts. If I bear those two thoughts in mind, then ... being a part...I shall cheerfully accept whatever may be my lot. In the second place, inasmuch as there is this bond of kinship between myself and my fellow parts, I shall do nothing that might injure their common welfare.*²¹

Instead of collapsing the spheres of natural moral concern, Smith argues that Stoicism calls on us to cultivate unhealthy attitudes towards our "little department," so that even when we act on their interests, we do so for the wrong reasons.²² For the Stoic, the obligations we have to others are captured by the relation they bear to us. Instead of engaging with others in their particularity, the Stoic interacts with them *as parts*; their individuality is subsumed under the relation they bear to the Stoic within the system of nature (Smith, 1985 III.iii.11). For example, the obligations I have concerning my father bottom out in the fact that he is a father and I am a child. But this

consequence is inadequate (Smith, 1985 VI.ii.1.1-9).²³ When I consider what I owe my father, I do not find the category “parent–child” to be informative; I look instead to his desires, goals, and our shared history when deciding what I owe him. By using an abstract relation as a guide for how to act, Smith argues that the Stoic replaces our sentiments with an idealized set of attitudes that destabilize morality (Smith, 1985 VI.ii.3.3).

In this way, Smith does not fall into the same trap as other early modern commentators, who criticize the Stoics for advocating apathy. According to Smith, “man, according to the Stoics, ought to regard himself, not as something separated and detached, but as a citizen of the world, a member of the vast commonwealth of nature” (Smith, 1985 III.3.11). Nevertheless, Smith maintains, the Stoic does not properly relate to his personal relations. He instead treats them primarily as potential objects of beneficial conduct, or as sources of obligation, as opposed to well-springs of love or solace, which require a degree of vulnerability to others that is not recommended by the Stoics (Smith, 1985 III.4.11). Without vulnerability, one cannot enter into the sentiments of even those with whom one frequently interacts. Besides being unable to properly attend to the needs of these individuals, the Stoic cannot suitably gauge how his actions will impact the emotional well-being of other people.

In Section 5, I return to how Smith thinks someone gets to this unfortunate place. First, let us consider how the Stoic thinks we should relate to our sentiments. We are meant to downplay our affections, which leaves us unable to interact with others in ways that befit these relationships (Smith, 1985 VI.ii.3.6). When our sentiments have been shaped so that we only consider the perspective of nature, we see those around us merely as potential beneficiaries of our conduct. From here, it is a short step to deciding to slip the cable when we perceive that we are no longer needed. However, this perception of our superfluousness is of dubious value since it arises from sentiments that have been warped by our acceptance of a “wrong system” like Stoicism (Smith, 1985 I.i.3.3).²⁴ In these cases, we do not accurately consider the harm we will cause to others if we commit suicide.

By downgrading our emotional responses, we foster a stubborn indifference to feeling. One consequence of cultivated indifference is that it undercuts mutual sympathy, which is crucial for determining the propriety of one's sentiments or modes of conduct. As moral agents, we should be concerned to bring our sentiments into coincidence with others. It is the coincidence of sentiment that provides us with a standard of what to approve of and how to act (Smith, 1985 I.i.2.1; VI.ii.1.17). If we are unwilling to partake in the exchange of mutual sympathy, we are likely to favor our own judgment over that of others, even at great cost. When our sense of approval floats free from mutual sympathy, we are more likely to be perverted by a wrong systems like Stoicism. This system, alongside deadening our sensitivity to others, leads us into error and produces a distorted sense of our relations to our little department. We view the decision to leave this life as a matter best left to the system of nature and our sense of what it calls upon us to do. When taking this perspective, we are unable to consider the joy and significance that comes from friendship, and our attachment to those we love.

Pride compounds the problem. As Smith notes, pride was the contributing factor to suicide becoming “perfectly fashionable” during the Roman Empire (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.32). He discusses pride in a few places in TMS and distinguishes it from vanity. The proud person, Smith notes, “disdains to court your esteem. He affects even to despise it, and endeavours to maintain his assumed station, not so much by making you sensible of his superiority, as of your own meanness” (Smith, 1985 VI.iii.35). A vain person “is very seldom convinced of that superiority which he wishes you to ascribe to him. He wishes you to view him in much more splendid colours than those in which, when he places himself in your situation, and supposes you to know all that he knows, he can really view himself” (Smith, 1985 VI.iii.36). The vain person courts others' esteem and wishes to receive it; the prideful person's sense of his own merit instead leads him to have contempt for esteem altogether (Smith, 1985 VI.iii.45).²⁵

This repugnance for esteem separates the prideful person from the magnanimous one. As scholars have pointed out, magnanimity is an important virtue for Smith.²⁶ The distinction between pride and magnanimity is based in how one reacts to fortune. While magnanimity involves possessing fortitude in response to life's struggles, pride “render [s] us altogether indifferent and unconcerned in the success or miscarriage of [that] which Nature has prescribed to us as the proper business and occupation of our lives” (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.47). This indifference is compounded by Stoics' severity, which is at odds with the “great cheerfulness” that Smith associates with magnanimity.²⁷ For Smith,

cheerfulness signifies a generous spirit; the core of generosity is gratitude and a general concern for public interest (Smith, 1985 IV.ii.10-11). This concern is not echoed by the Stoic, whose “hardness of heart” renders him insensible to the joys of sociability and silences his sensitivity to the needs of his “humble department,” including the need for him to continue existing (Smith, 1985 VI.iii.15; VI.ii.3.6).

We can now bring together the elements of Smith's moral criticism of Stoicism. When we adopt the perspective of nature, we sever our connections to others. The consequence is increased self-assurance, which gives way to excessive self-estimation in the form of pride. This pride codifies our sense of independence, which only further disconnects us from our sociable nature and leads us to consider actions such as suicide as praiseworthy. In the next section, I contextualize Smith's critique of Stoicism within the wider lens of discussions of suicide in the 18th century, showing that it lays the groundwork for our modern understanding of suicide as the result of a tragic psychological process and not as a moral failing. I then move to consider Smith's skepticism in Section 5.

5 | THE MORALITY OF SUICIDE

Smith rejects the Stoic principle of suicide on both epistemic and moral grounds. However, he also argues that suicide is, in fact, morally blameless. According to Smith, the decision to commit suicide stems from melancholy or a sense of helplessness that swamps our drive for self-preservation (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.34). In misidentifying the cause of “proper” suicide, the Stoic misidentifies suicide as itself being an object of possible approval or disapproval. As suicide is the result of an unnatural process, Smith argues that it is inappropriate to ascribe praise or blame to a person for undertaking this act. Smith instead views suicide as tragic, and he thinks of a person who commits suicide as the proper object of pity or commiseration—a remarkable view for the early modern period (Ibid.).

Traditional prohibitions of suicide stress our relation to God as a dependent; we are under the stewardship of God and cannot leave our post.²⁸ Smith does not see suicide as a violation of our duties to God; in fact, he does not speak of us having any duties to God.²⁹ He notes that we are led to believe in God through our attempt to cope with the injustices of life.³⁰ Still, the idea of God and providence does not, for Smith, ground any duties but merely “enforces our natural sense of duty” bestowed on us by the impartial spectator, or our conscience (Smith, 1985 III.5.12). The objects of our duties are dictated by our natural sentiments, which direct us to care for ourselves and for our “little department” (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.44). Smith is silent about the possibility of these sentiments being directed at God.

Though committing suicide may not violate any duties towards God, some argue that suicide rebuffs our natural sociability.³¹ Given what Smith says about our “little department,” he could reasonably reject suicide on these grounds. However, the textual evidence does not bear this out. Smith makes note of the “punishment” that befalls the “surviving friends and relations” of one who commits suicide (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.1.34). Despite their feelings of guilt, these relations “are always perfectly innocent”; after all, one cannot be responsible for another's suicide (Ibid.). Even though Smith recognizes the “heavy calamity,” we feel when a loved one takes their own life, he claims that the impartial spectator feels “commiseration” for them (Ibid.). For Smith, the decision to end one's life proceeds from a “melancholy” that is beyond the scope of one's agential control (Ibid.). Suicide does not violate our duties to others, since the victim is not acting in a *deliberately* unsociable manner.

Smith uses similar reasoning when considering whether suicide is a violation of duties to ourselves.³² Smith holds that we possess robust duties to ourselves, which we see in Smith's discussion of self-command. Smith refers to “that noble firmness, that exalted self-command” which, when exercised alongside the virtues of prudence, justice, and beneficence, “produces a character of the most exalted wisdom and virtue” (Smith, 1985 VI.iii.19; VI.iii.11). The aim of self-command is to control the two classes of emotions: quick firing passions like anger and fear and more stable dispositions like love of ease or pleasure (Smith, 1985 VI.iii.3.3). A virtuous person is to cultivate her self-command, so that she can manage those selfish and violent passions that are obstacles to moral conduct. Smith implies at various points that melancholy is not within the scope of our control; like a disease, melancholy is something that we contract.³³ Self-command is futile in the face of deep and sustained melancholy, unlike anger, fear, or our more

selfish tendencies. Smith concludes, therefore, that suicide does not violate a duty to ourselves since the melancholy from which it originates is largely inescapable.

Smith's view on suicide overlaps most with that of Hume, who argues that suicide does not violate our duties to God, to ourselves, or to others. Regarding our duties to God, Hume notes that committing suicide is either in our power or not. If it is not in our power, responsibility for our suicide falls to God. If committing suicide is in our power, it is the result of prudence, which God gave us to pursue our needs.³⁴ Further, committing suicide does not violate a duty to ourselves since it is always done out of self-interest.³⁵ When it comes to our duties to others, Hume notes that by committing suicide, we merely *cease to do good for them* rather than actively harm them.³⁶ In our death, we stop receiving any benefit from society, and so our no longer producing benefits for others is not blameworthy. There are times when suicide is a coward's response to hardship, but Hume sees it as a potentially courageous response to our existence becoming a burden to ourselves or to others.³⁷

Smith gives different reasons for the view that suicide is not immoral. Consider Hume's comments on the duties to ourselves—he notes that “I believe that no man ever threw away life, while it was worth keeping.”³⁸ Though Hume recognizes that some are driven to commit suicide out of an “incurable depravity or gloominess of temper,” Smith would find Hume's analysis of suicide to be naïve, as Hume implies that suicide is undertaken after calculating that one can no longer expect to enjoy the prospect of living.³⁹ Smith does not see suicide as a choice so much as a tragic event. A similar naivety can be seen in Hume's treatment of our duties to others, put in terms of the benefit we produce for society. He notes: “why then should I prolong a miserable existence, because of some frivolous advantage which the public may, perhaps, receive from me?”⁴⁰ Smith's concern is not the impact that our suicide has on society but rather on the well-being of our friends and family. Certainly, we cause harm to them by no longer living, but he does not see the victim of suicide as being morally culpable. For Smith, the tragedy is precisely that fact that it is a blamelessness act.

Smith agrees with Hume that it would be wrong to feel indignation for those who commit suicide. As Hume points out, “what is the meaning, then, of that principle, that a man, who, tired of life, and hunted by pain and misery, bravely overcomes all the natural terrors of death, and makes his escape from this cruel scene; that such a man, I say, has incurred the indignation of his creator?”⁴¹ Since God did not construct people's frame to withstand sustained melancholy, it would be unjust to punish them for crumbling under the weight of this disease. However, Smith objects to Hume's claim that there is any honor in committing suicide since committing suicide *is never willfully done*. Likewise, when a moralist claims that a victim of suicide commits a sin against God, themselves, or others, the moralist shamefully attempts to bring moral considerations to bear on the tragedy.

Smith treats suicide as a tragic but blameless act. Given the philosophical context in which he was writing, Smith's view is remarkable. He manages to block the moralistic criticisms of suicide, undercut the Stoic idea that suicide is honorable, and expose Hume's treatment of suicide as overly flippant. At the same time, Smith offers a humane take on this horrific event and places the blame for suicide on the character most responsible—melancholy. In the last section of the paper, I detail how Smith's engagement with the Stoic view of suicide bears on his moral theory. I argue that Smith's criticisms of Stoicism give weight to the interpretation of him as a skeptic.

6 | SMITH THE SKEPTIC?

What does Smith's criticism of the Stoic principle of suicide reveal about his foundational commitments as a moralist? I suggest that Smith is a skeptical moralist, on two fronts. First, his method for determining what is virtuous does not proceed on the basis of first principles, whether about moral motivation or the aims of human action. Instead, Smith begins his moral inquiry by observing how we proceed in our moral lives, gathering evidence about how we react to different situations, and making note of its impact on our ability to live well alongside others. Second, Smith rejects the Stoic's appeal to rational intuition in determining what we are called upon to do. His account of moral virtue is based in sympathy—judgments about how we ought to act are based in the concordance with our fellows, as

opposed to nature or other abstract ideas of propriety. In this way, Smith's ethics is fallibilist along the lines of Academic Skepticism under Carneades, or in the hands of Cicero.⁴²

Skepticism comes in different forms, though it is tied to a rejection of philosophical schools. Smith engages with the various schools in TMS VII, when asking his two questions: "what is the tone of temper, and tenour of conduct, which constitutes the excellent and praiseworthy character?" and "what power or faculty in the mind is it, that this character, whatever it be, is recommended to us?" (Smith, 1985 VII.1.2). For the first, Smith considers three possibilities: the *propriety* of one's conduct (Plato, Aristotle, and Stoics), or the extent to which one's conduct is *prudent* (Epicureans), or *benevolent* (Neo-Platonists). For the second, Smith considers that we judge others as praiseworthy either on account of how their conduct comports with *self-interest* (Epicureans), or our *reason* (Plato, Aristotle, and Stoics), or our *sentiments*, conceived of as either a *moral sense* (Hutcheson) or as a sense of *utility* (Hume).

One plausible way to interpret TMS VII is as Smith's attempt to show how his theory corrects the shortcomings of others. On this view, Smith engages his predecessors with the aim of producing a synthetic moral system. Some scholars have placed Smith in the history of *eclecticism*, a cousin of the skeptical tradition.⁴³ Both eclectics and skeptics reject the dogmatism of the schools—the latter focus on criticizing the foundations of their doctrines, while the former treat their doctrines as a toolbox, using them "piecemeal."⁴⁴ As one scholar notes, eclecticism was an "even more destructive challenge to the schools, in that it questioned the unity of their doctrines as schools and was harder to dismiss out of hand than skeptic[ism]."⁴⁵ The eclectic thereby neutralizes the schools' influence by showing that one can accept particular doctrines without becoming a school partisan and that one can combine the insights of opposing schools. But this interpretation misses the spirit of TMS VII.

Smith certainly incorporated the doctrines of the opposing schools in his ethics. His account of prudence is in line with the Epicureans; his view of benevolence with the Neo-Platonists; his account of propriety with the Peripatetics and Stoics. We might therefore interpret Smith as an eclectic—a philosopher who forms his view from common moral experience and the writings of predecessors, insofar as their doctrines are confirmed by experience. But to refer to Smith as an eclectic in this sense is uninformative since, in many ways, the history of modern ethics is of the triumph of eclecticism, where the stranglehold of the Ancient schools fades into the background.⁴⁶ The term "eclecticism" also falls short in helping to explain *why* Smith's criticism of his predecessors takes a particular shape. Why does Smith reject the doctrines of the schools in favor of common moral experience?

Consider Smith's engagement with Stoicism. Smith's criticism of the Stoics is aimed at their moral epistemology. For Smith, the Stoic is not licensed to the claim that nature calls upon them to do anything, much less to commit suicide. This assumed license leads the Stoic to draw spurious conclusions about the character of duty and the nature of obligation. What begins as an error ends up having tremendous consequences; the Stoic rejects proximate, albeit defeasible, evidence for how they ought to act on account of a presumed access to nature. As a result, the Stoic does not feel the weight of those duties tied to their little department. By identifying the Stoics' failure to properly ground moral judgment, Smith is not undercutting the possibility of making reasonable attributions of praise and blame but shifting our sense of what evidence is required for these attributions.

For Smith, our judgments and attributions receive weight from their concordance with others. Through testing and revising our judgments, they are considered to be more trustworthy. This method of testing and revising of our beliefs is recommended by Carneades, the first systematizer of Academic Skepticism, and a hero of David Hume's: "In ordinary life, when we are investigating a small matter we question one witness, when it is a greater matter, several witnesses, and when it is an even more essential matter we examine each of the witnesses on the basis of the mutual agreement among the others."⁴⁷ We call on our fellows to both substantiate our claims and to curb our self-certainty. Without their assistance, we proceed naively, avoiding that which is required to develop the skills for competent moral judgment. Smith supplements the model of revision by attempting to shape our conduct through moral illustration. By providing us with portraits of virtue, Smith endeavors to awaken our sentiments and intensify our attachment to the ideas of propriety given to us by sympathy.

This latter project comes to fruition towards the end of TMS VII, where Smith discusses his approach to practical ethics. According to Smith, ethics ought to proceed by offering descriptions of virtues and vices in order to illustrate

the “deformity and misery” of the latter and the “propriety and happiness” of the former (Smith, 1985 VII.iv.3). The aim of this exercise is to get clear on the “sentiment of the heart” from which each virtue originates and to convey a “general way of acting” associated with their exercise (Ibid.). Though the approach is imperfect, Smith argues that an observer armed with a “delicate and an accurate pencil” can replicate our experiences of the virtues and awaken us to their value (Smith, 1985 VII.iv.4). By providing us with “agreeable and lively pictures” of virtue, our love for them becomes “inflamed” (Smith, 1985 VII.iv.6). Once we are inflamed, we are more likely to guide our judgments by the correct ideas of propriety and merit and to act in a virtuous manner as well:

By the justness as well as the delicacy of their observations they may often help to both correct and to ascertain our natural sentiments with regard to the propriety of conduct, and suggesting many nice and delicate affections, form us to a more exact justness of behaviour, than what, without such instruction, we should have been apt to think of.” (Ibid.)

The descriptions the moralist offers open the possibility for us to relate differently to our sentiments. Through this process, we gain more productive ways to express these sentiments in our conduct and a better understanding of how they bolster our moral commitments.

For Smith, the attempt to justify our moral conduct in terms of rational intuition, or by appeal to abstract conceptions of propriety run headfirst into skeptical arguments. By not recognizing the strength of these objections, one risks operating in a foolish or dangerous manner. Many figures in the skeptical tradition, like Carneades or Cicero, stress that we should heed the duties of common life since they provide the only reasonable measure for how we ought to act. However, few go beyond this injunction to avoid doing violence to the appearances for the sake of communing with a deeper source of value. Smith uses his criticism of the Stoics as a jumping off point to constructing an ethics of common life—an effort on which he reflects in the discussion of practical ethics. Smith focuses on suicide because it is limit case, where the reasons to go on seem to come up short. In so doing, Smith is able to show how our connection to ourselves and others fails, and how it can be preserved.

In this paper, I have examined Smith's discussion of the Stoicism and suicide. Along the way I have answered three questions. What does Smith find problematic about the Stoic view of suicide? How does Smith's views on suicide contribute to our understanding of how modern philosophers dealt with this topic? What does Smith's engagement with the Stoics tell us about his moral theory? I argue that Smith's opposition to the Stoic view of suicide is best thought of as containing both an epistemic and moral component, which function together as his critique of Stoicism. I argue, further, that Smith's treatment of suicide is distinctly humane, as it treats this act as the consequence of a pathology, and not as a moral failing. I also argue that Smith's criticism of the Stoics gives us reasons to see his ethics as operating broadly in the tradition of Academic skepticism. There is work to substantiate this latter claim; still, I hope to have helped clear the path for this future inquiry.⁴⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Smith draws mostly on Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Cicero in his discussion of Stoicism. For more on the background of Smith's engagement with Stoicism, see Brown (1994), Montes (2004), Montes (2008), and Vivenza (2001). For more on the transmission of Stoic ideas in the early modern period, see Brooke (2012) and Maurer (2016).

² Suicide is a minor topic in Stoic moral theory. See Inwood (1985), Long (2002), and Sellars (2006). One of the potential reasons that Smith discusses suicide is that his conception of Stoicism is tied up with discussions about the popularity of honor suicides among Roman nobleman (which comes through in Smith's treatment of Cato and others). Another potential reason that Smith discusses suicide is in response to Hume's essay “Of Suicide.” The editors of TMS—D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie—suggest such a possibility; this suggestion is also taken up by Rasmussen (2017, p. 233). However, neither of these historical explanations provide insight into the philosophical significance of Smith's views on suicide, something I aim to do in this paper.

- ³ The following make no reference to Smith's discussion of suicide: Brooke (2012), Forman-Barzliai (2010), Heydt (2016), Maurer (2016), Montes (2004), Montes (2008), Levy and Peart (2008), and Waszek (1984). Brown (1994), Griswold (1999), Montes (2008), and Schliesser (2017) each make one reference to the topic. Vivenza (2001) dedicates three paragraphs to suicide. For the purposes of this paper, I am not interested in whether Smith gives an accurate portrayal of Stoicism. I aim to show how Smith's engagement with the Stoic principle of suicide tells us something important about his own view of suicide and his own moral theory.
- ⁴ Epictetus (1928a, II.v.24–26). The translation here is provided by Smith: TMS VII.ii.1.19.
- ⁵ Aurelius (1983, VIII.34).
- ⁶ Epictetus (1928a, II.x.3–4). cf. Brubaker, 2006.
- ⁷ Aurelius (1983, V.8).
- ⁸ This implication is part of the reason why Smith rejects any account of virtue based in an abstract conception of propriety (Smith, 1985 VII.ii.48–50). If acts are virtuous because they are proper—in this sense—all proper acts are equally virtuous. In other words, there is no sense in which something can be virtuous to a *degree*. It follows that there is no category of “permissibility” since all permissible acts are considered obligatory on Stoic grounds.
- ⁹ See Smith (1985 VII.ii.1.27).
- ¹⁰ See Cicero: “[for the Stoic] when a man has a preponderance of the things in accordance with nature, it is his proper function to remain alive; when he has or foresees a preponderance of their opposites, it is his proper function to depart from life” Long and Sedley (1987, p. 425).
- ¹¹ Epictetus (1928b, I.17).
- ¹² It can be helpful to think of Panaetius' doctrine of the four *personae* in this context, according to which one's character is thought of as a confluence of one's humanity, individuality, social position, and occupation. Suicide is justified on the grounds that one or more aspects of one's *personae* is endangered. See Cicero (1991, I.107–121), Griffin (1986), and Gill (1988).
- ¹³ Seneca, “Letter 75.8–18” (pp. 237–238).
- ¹⁴ Seneca, “Letter 71.5” (2007, p. 26). Seneca even suggests that the wise are superior to God insofar as they are free of the anxieties of life, not by nature but through a force of will. See “Letter 53.11” (2015, p. 155).
- ¹⁵ Seneca, “Letter 91.21” (2015, p. 341).
- ¹⁶ Seneca, “Letter 58.34” (2007, p. 9).
- ¹⁷ Seneca, “Letter 65.21” (2007, pp. 13–14).
- ¹⁸ Seneca, “Letter 24.25” (2015, p. 90).
- ¹⁹ Seneca, “Letter 77.6” (2015, p. 247).
- ²⁰ Seneca, “Letter 70.4–5” (2015, p. 209).
- ²¹ Aurelius, (1983, X.6).
- ²² Some scholars argue that Smith interprets the Stoics as collapsing our spheres of natural moral concern, as illustrated by the *oikeiōsis*. On this point, I depart from Forman-Barzliai (2010). For more on Smith's use of *oikeiōsis*, see Montes (2004), Montes (2008), Waszek (1984), and Vivenza (2001).
- ²³ An anonymous referee suggested that Smith targets Hutcheson's Christian Stoicism at TMS VI.ii.1.1–9. While Hutcheson wavers on the topic of differentiated caring, his considered view seems to be that “one should more peculiarly employ his activity for the interest of such whom the stronger ties of nature have peculiarly recommended, or entrusted to his care, as far as their interests consist with the general good, and that his ordinary occupations should be destined for their benefit” (2007, p. 122).
- ²⁴ See Schliesser (2017, p. 2) for a nice explanation of what Smith means by a “wrong system”: “It is possible that Smith intended to use ‘wrong systems’ in the sense of ‘false’ or ‘not true’ systems, but Smith ... could have stated *that*; so I assume that the category of ‘wrong systems’ includes systems with bad moral and/or political consequences, including ones that may be true (in some sense).” I follow Schliesser in construing Smith's references to “wrong systems” in this manner. Pride leads one to see one's own concerns as being of greater importance than those of others. This is made worse by the fact that “the pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors” (WN III.ii.10). Smith sees a tight connection between pride, love of domination, and persuasion. While a proper examination of this topic would require another paper, it is important to remember that Smith maintains that “the desire of being believed, the desire of persuading, of *leading and directing other people*, seems to be one of the strongest of all our natural

- desires" (VII.iv.25) [emphasis mine]. People yearn for a "harmony of minds"; a yearning that, conjoined with pride and love of domination, may lead one to subdue one's fellows to achieve this harmony (Smith, 1985 VII.iv.28).
- ²⁵ Pride leads one to see one's own concerns as being of greater importance than those of others. This is made worse by the fact that "the pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors" (WN III.ii.10). Smith sees a tight connection between pride, love of domination, and persuasion. While a proper examination of this topic would require another paper, it is important to remember that Smith maintains that "the desire of being believed, the desire of persuading, of *leading and directing other people*, seems to be one of the strongest of all our natural desires" (VII.iv.25) [emphasis mine]. People yearn for a "harmony of minds"; a yearning that, conjoined with pride and love of domination, may lead one to subdue one's fellows to achieve this harmony (Smith, 1985 VII.iv.28).
- ²⁶ Schliesser (2003), Hanley (2009, pp. 132–174), Corsa (2015), and Schliesser (2017, pp. 358–370). Hanley has a great discussion of magnanimity's pitfalls: "the tragedy of magnanimity lies in the fact that the dazzle of its display renders both the possessor and its spectator unable to assess worth—an ironic failing given that the turn to magnanimity was itself justified as an attempt to recover the concept of moral worth from its vulgarization by the rich and great" (2009, p. 170).
- ²⁷ Hume (1985, xlvi).
- ²⁸ Heydt (2016) refers to this view as the "standard account" in the early modern period and provides Samuel Clarke as his chief example of a proponent of this view (p. 223).
- ²⁹ A traditional account of our duties to God is found in Pufendorf (2003, pp. 60–69). He distinguishes between theoretical and practical duties (Ibid., p. 60). Regarding the former, we are obligated to believe in God's existence; that God created and governs the world and that God is infinitely perfect and one (Ibid., pp. 60–64). Regarding the latter, Pufendorf further distinguishes between internal worship—to honor, love, and fear God, and to acquiesce to God's will—and external worship, which emphasizes prayer and ritual (Ibid., pp. 64–65). Smith lectured on natural religion at Glasgow, but we do not have copies of these lectures and there is no discussion of duties to God in his corpus. See Heydt (2017).
- ³⁰ We look to God to "render to every one according to the works which he has performed in this world. And thus we are led to the belief of a future state, not only by the weaknesses, by the hopes and fears of human nature, but by the noblest and best principles which belong to it, by the love of virtue, and by the abhorrence of vice and injustice" (Smith, 1985 III.2.33).
- ³¹ Heydt (2016) refers to this view as an "other-regarding" prohibition on suicide (p. 229). He discusses Pufendorf, Hobbes, and the Anglican utilitarians in this context. While the latter group develop an other-regarding moral system, few of them say anything about suicide. Even Rutherford sees the prohibition on suicide as being based in our relation to God as dependent. It seems the other-regarding prohibition is less prominent in early modern period than were the other two prohibitions discussed here.
- ³² Heydt (2016) refers to this view as a "dignity/autonomy" prohibition on suicide (p. 13). He sees this view as being represented in the work of Barbeyrac and Carmichael, and as being suggested by Butler and Reid. It is unclear whether the "dignity/autonomy" argument against suicide functions separately from the dependency argument for any of these figures.
- ³³ cf. TMS III.3.4; III.3.9; VI.ii.3.2; V.2.6.
- ³⁴ Hume (1985, p. 585).
- ³⁵ Ibid., pp. 586–587.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 588.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 586.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 582.
- ⁴² For more on these topics, see Hankinson (1994), Thorsrud (2009), Bett (2010), and Bett (2013).
- ⁴³ Garrett and Hanley (2015)
- ⁴⁴ Garrett (2014, p. 9).
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Garrett and Hanley (2015), Garrett (2014), and Schneider (1997).
- ⁴⁷ This quote is reported by Sextus Empiricus (2005, pp. 38–39).

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