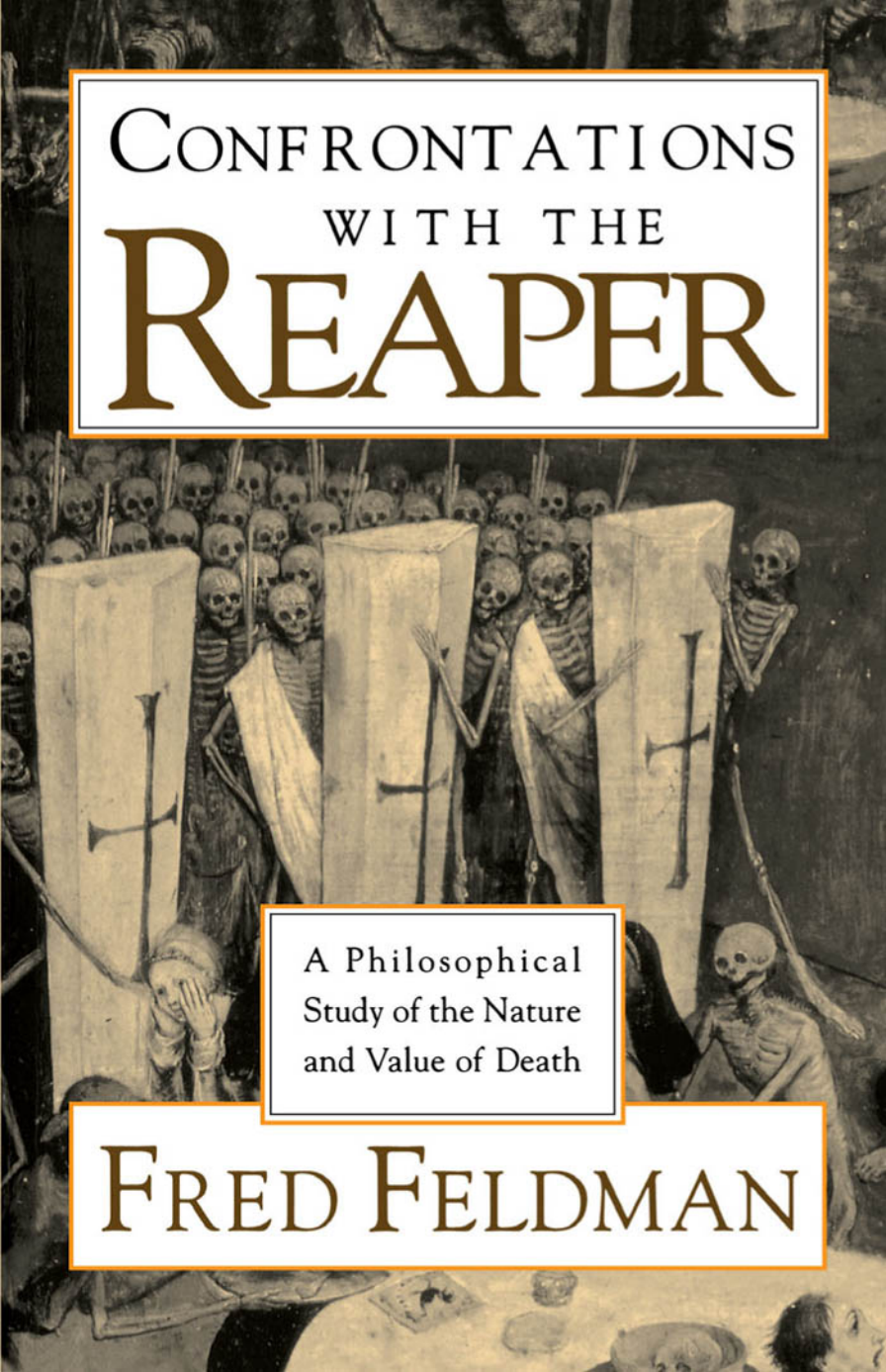
Confrontations with the Reaper



A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death

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The Morality and Rationality of Suicide

Welcoming the Reaper

There are certain circumstances in which a visit from the Reaper is anticipated not with foreboding, but with a hopeful sense that suffering will soon be ended. Consider, for example, the case of an elderly man who has lived a rich and satisfying life. Suppose that his wife died years earlier, and his children are now grown and entirely independent. No one relies on him for emotional or financial support. Suppose he has contracted a painful, incurable, fatal disease. Suppose this disease has debilitated the old man, so that he is no longer able to perform any worthwhile sort of work. He is no longer useful either to himself or to others.

Let us imagine that this man sees no point in engaging in a lengthy, agonizing, and ultimately unsuccessful battle against this disease. Instead, he prefers simply to put his affairs in order, write some notes to his children and his few remaining friends, and then to kill himself—perhaps by taking an overdose of sleeping pills, and then settling down in his car, with the motor running, in the tightly closed garage.

Very many people, I suppose, would see nothing wrong with the old man's choice. Of course, we all would be saddened to learn that this man was placed in such unpleasant circumstances. No reasonable person could maintain that it is, on the whole, a good thing that this man has been put in a position in which death seems preferable to further life. However, given that he is in this situation, many of us would say that his method of dealing with it

cannot be faulted either from the perspective of morality or from the perspective of rationality. This man's choice appears to be neither immoral nor irrational.

Nevertheless, a number of philosophers have argued that the choice of suicide is never rational. No matter how miserable one's situation, the decision to terminate one's life is, according to these philosophers, always irrational (or at least "arational"). Other philosophers have argued that such a decision must always be immoral. I take it that their point is that it is always morally wrong to commit suicide. Let us consider the arguments.

Three Arguments for the Immorality of Suicide

There are three classic arguments apparently designed to show that it is always morally wrong to commit suicide. Each of these was formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas[1] (though others, both earlier and later, have also defended them).[2]

Aquinas presents the three arguments in the following passage from *Summa Theologica:*

> Suicide is completely wrong for three reasons. First, everything naturally loves itself, and it is for this reason that everything naturally seeks to keep itself in being and to resist hostile forces. So suicide runs counter to one's natural inclinations. . . . Second, every part belongs to the whole in virtue of what it is. But every man is part of the community, so that he belongs to the community in virtue of what he is. Suicide therefore involves damaging the community. . . . Third, life is a gift made to man by God, it is subject to him who is *master of death and life.* Therefore, a person who takes his own life sins against God. . . . God alone has authority to decide about life and death.[3]

None of these is a particularly impressive argument. Let us briefly consider how they are supposed to work and why they are so unpersuasive. The first argument seems to have two premises. One of these states that every act of suicide "runs counter to natural inclinations." The other states that every act that "runs counter to natural inclinations" is morally wrong. Since they

make use of the vague expression "runs counter to natural inclinations," one cannot be sure precisely what these premises mean. Thus it will be impossible to refute either of them conclusively. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that each premise *seems* false, or at least quite dubious. In the natural course of events, lemmings commit mass suicide by leaping off cliffs and falling into the sea. This is a quite remarkable phenomenon, but there is no good reason to insist that when they do this, the lemmings are doing something that "runs counter to their natural inclinations." In fact, when they commit mass suicide they seem to be doing precisely what they are naturally inclined to do. Thus, it is not clear that all who commit suicide thereby do something that runs counter to their natural inclinations.

Furthermore, and perhaps more relevantly, quite a few people apparently are naturally inclined to kill themselves. Some of these people admittedly are suffering from depression. Perhaps their decisions run counter to their natural inclinations. But others, perhaps facing circumstances like those of the old man described above, seem to be naturally inclined to take their own lives. So, in spite of its obscurity, I have my doubts about the first premise.

In connection with the second premise, consider what happens when you go for a medical checkup involving close scrutiny of parts of your body that are not normally exposed to strangers. You allow the doctor to treat you in ways that seem, in some important sense, to "run counter to natural inclination." Yet no reasonable person would want to say that all such behavior must be morally wrong. So the second premise is open to serious question, too. Since both premises are apparently false, the first argument fails.

The second argument is based on the notion that whenever a person commits suicide, he thereby damages some community of which he is part. Apparently, the point here is that by committing suicide, he deprives his community of his good works. This allegedly shows that every act of suicide is morally wrong. I see no reason to suppose that the premise is true. Surely there are some cases in which a person is so incapacitated that he is no longer able to make a worthwhile contribution to the welfare of others. Perhaps the old man described above is so debilitated by his disease that he can't even do a tiny bit of volunteer work at the hospital. In other cases, while it might be possible for someone to make some

contribution to the welfare of others, the costs to himself in continued suffering might very substantially outweigh the benefits to others. On balance, it might simply be too much to ask of him. Thus, I am convinced that the second argument fails, too.

The third argument seems to rely on the notion that certain decisions should be left up to God. In particular, decisions about the date of a person's death should never be made by the person himself.

In his essay "On Suicide," David Hume attempted to refute this argument.[4] If there is a God, and it is responsible for the creation of this world, then, ultimately, God is responsible for absolutely everything that happens. Thus, whether a person commits suicide or struggles valiantly to keep himself alive, he is usurping God's will to exactly the same extent. In an interesting passage, Hume asks a rhetorical question. According to the argument under consideration, we "rebel against God" if we commit suicide. Hume asks:

> Why [is it] not impious, say I to build houses, cultivate the ground, or sail upon the ocean? In all these actions we employ our powers of mind and body, to produce some innovation in the course of nature; and in none of them do we any more. They are all of them therefore equally innocent, or equally criminal.[5]

Hume's point is that suicide is no different from any other "innovation in the course of nature." Either they all involve rebellion against God, or none of them does. No one would want to say that every action, no matter how trivial, involves a rebellion against God. Why should we think that suicide is different?

In light of the views defended above in Chapter 11, my own position on the morality of suicide should be clear. I claimed that there is one moral standard applicable to every act. As I see it, morality requires us to make the world as good as we can make it. We make the world better when we maximize the extent to which individuals get the primary intrinsic goods they deserve. I pointed out that this view about morality in general entails a view about the morality of killing. It is morally right to kill a person whenever doing so makes the world better; whenever doing so is a necessary condition for the maximization of what I called 'universal justice level'. Under all other circumstances, killing is wrong.

Suicide is a special sort of killing in which the killer and the killed are the same individual. On my view, suicide is no exception to the general principle about killing. Suicide is morally permissible when it makes the world better. And I think there are circumstances in which suicide does make the world better. Consider the old man discussed above. He has a number of options, including suicide. Provided that no other person would thereby be deprived of primary intrinsic goods that he or she deserves, and provided that he himself either no longer deserves or no longer will be able to get such goods, it surely might be the case that he makes the world better by removing himself from it. If so, justicized act utilitarianism implies that it would be morally permissible for him to kill himself. Of course, in any case in which the would-be suicide has some better option, suicide would be morally wrong. Suicides are not normatively homogeneous. Some are right, some are wrong. It all depends on the circumstances. This seems to me to be a plausible view about the morality of suicide.

It may be possible to sketch, in fairly rough terms, some of the implications of this view about suicide. According to this approach, suicide is morally permissible when it maximizes the quality of the fit between the amounts of primary intrinsic goods people deserve and the amounts of such goods they get. If a person is very old and has already had all the life and pleasure he deserves, and his death will not harm any other deserving individual, then it may be permissible for him to take his own life.

The case of a younger person is more difficult. He may still deserve lots of life and pleasure. If he kills himself, he will not have the opportunity to enjoy these. However, if he is certainly not going to be able to enjoy the primary intrinsic goods he deserves in any case—perhaps because of irreversible illness—and his death will not harm any other person, then it may be permissible for him to kill himself.

There are some cases in which a healthy young person, fully deserving a long life, may commit suicide. If, by killing himself, a person insures that many others get to enjoy intrinsic goods that they would otherwise not be able to enjoy, then it may be permissible for the young person to kill himself. An example may be provided by the case of a soldier who, in time of war, sacrifices himself in order to insure the welfare of his comrades.

But all such generalizations are extremely speculative. In order to reach a firm decision about the morality of some proposed suicide, one would have to know what alternatives are available to the one who proposes to kill himself. One would also have to know the outcomes of all these alternatives. One would have to know, for each outcome, the extent to which those who exist in it deserve the primary intrinsic goods, and the extent to which they get these goods. When we are ignorant of these crucial details, we are not qualified to announce firm conclusions about the morality of suicide.

Let us turn, then, to a consideration of the question whether suicide is always *irrational.*

An Argument for the Irrationality of Suicide

There are several different things that might be meant by saying that someone's behavior is "irrational." Prominent among these is the idea that neither the person himself nor anyone else would be able to explain his behavior by showing that he had good reasons for behaving as he did. Thus, suppose we find someone behaving in a way that "makes no sense" to us—for example, we find him eating dead worms from a rusty bait bucket. We think he must be crazy. We ask him why he is doing this. He is unable to provide any explanation. We ask his friends what he is trying to achieve. They shrug their shoulders. They don't get it either. We conclude that his behavior is completely irrational.

In "Suicide and Rationality," John Donnelly seems to claim that suicides are in this sense irrational. He briefly describes the case of some miserable person whose fortunes are at an all-time low. This person is contemplating suicide. Donnelly says:

> On the brink of such an act, some philosophers would argue that the agent in question could justify his contemplated action by arguing that "I would be better off dead than alive" or something similar, such as "I will take my life and finally attain some consolation in death." But this type of reply is senseless inasmuch as it presupposes that a corpse can be the subject of various *psychological* predicates.[6]

Donnelly's point is plausible: if the person succeeds in killing himself, he will not subsequently have any psychological experiences. After death, he will not be *happy* to any degree and will not be *consoled.* Accordingly, it would be absurd for him (or for anyone) to attempt to rationalize his action by saying that he will be happier dead, or that death will bring him consolation. It would be, as Donnelly says, as nonsensical as it would be to say that some cadaver is "at peace with the world."[7]

If a would-be suicide really thinks that he will be happier dead, and gives this "reason" for proposing to kill himself, then he is confused. His rationale is, as Donnelly suggests, hopelessly muddled. Donnelly mentions some other equally unacceptable proposed explanations. He concludes that there is simply no way in which the behavior of the suicide can be shown to be reasonable, in the relevant sense.

I think Donnelly has overlooked some plausible interpretations of the remarks about being "better off dead." Obviously, it would be a mistake to suppose that the old man described above would be *happier* dead. However, the sick old man might think of his choice as a choice among several possible lives. He might recognize that, since he has already lived out the initial eighty-year segment of his life, he has no further choice with respect to that. No matter what he does now, the life he ultimately turns out to have led will have to start with that combination of events. However, he might think that he does still have some choices with respect to the life he leads. One possible life ends with suicide in the eightieth year; another ends with disease-caused death in the eighty-fifth year. The second possible life is just like the first up to the eightieth year, but differs from the first in that it contains a painful and unhappy five-year-long terminal segment. The first life ends with suicide in the eightieth year, and has no such painful terminal segment.

If asked to explain why he chooses suicide, the old man might say that he prefers the shorter life to the longer; that he thinks it is better, from a self-interested point of view, for him to live the eighty-year life rather than the eighty-five-year life. If he wanted to make use of the terminology introduced earlier in Chapter 9, he might say this: "Since I suffer five years of uncompensated pain the longer life, the value-for-me, measured hedonically, of the longer life is much lower than the value-for-me, measured in the same

way, of the shorter life. But I will get to live the life that is better for me only if I commit suicide now. For this reason, I choose suicide." It seems to me that if he explains his behavior in this way, he gives a perfectly good reason for committing suicide. Nothing in this explanation presupposes that the elderly man will continue to have psychological experiences after death, or that he will be "happier dead than alive."

I should emphasize the fact that this rationale is not in any way based on a comparison between the painful five-year segment in the longer life and some corresponding but painless five-year segment occurring after the suicide in the shorter life. The elderly man does not compare how it goes for him in the next five years in one life with how it goes for him in the next five years in the other life. The life that ends with suicide does not have another five-year segment. I am not suggesting that we compare the value-for-him of this imaginary post-mortem segment of the suicide life with the value-for-him of the five-year segment of the non-suicide life. I am suggesting that we compare the value-for-him of the shorter life as a whole with the value-for-him of the longer life as a whole. This sort of comparison seems to me to be conceptually unproblematic, as I tried to show above in Chapters 9 and 10.

Some remarks in Donnelly's paper suggest that he may be thinking that one serious trouble with suicide is that it involves a choice between two options (life and death) when one of these options (death) is unalterably shrouded in mystery. The would-be suicide cannot know enough about death to make a reasoned choice between these options.[8] This sort of argument is somewhat more explicitly developed by Philip Devine in *The Ethics of Homicide.* Let us consider what Devine has to say.

An Epistemic Argument Against the Rationality of Suicide

Devine recognizes that "rational" has several senses. In one sense, a "rational choice" is one made calmly and deliberately. Devine acknowledges that, in this sense, the choice of suicide might be rational. But he dismisses this as largely irrelevant, since someone might make a "blatantly foolish or even pointless" decision in this calm and deliberate way.[9]

Another sense of 'rational' is more relevant to present concerns. In this sense, when we assess a decision as "rational," we mean to indicate something about the quality of prior knowledge and reasoning that went into the decision. At a minimum, we mean to indicate that the person who made the decision had adequate knowledge of the various options among which he was choosing. As Devine says, " . . . a precondition of rational choice is that one knows *what* one is choosing, either by experience or by the testimony of others who have experienced it or something very like it.'[10]

But by its very nature, death allegedly precludes any such prior knowledge. Assuming that each of us dies at most once, no one has the benefit of past personal experience to serve as a guide when contemplating suicide. No one can say, "Last time it worked out well. I shall try it again." Similarly, since no one returns from death with first-hand reports of what it is like, we cannot make use of testimonial evidence. No one can say, "All my dead friends reported that it worked out well for them. I shall try it, too." Devine alludes to these epistemic difficulties by saying that the choice of death "presents itself inevitably as a leap in the dark."[11]

In virtue of this alleged "opaqueness of death"[12], Devine concludes that the choice of suicide can never be rational. He insists that "human beings characteristically find themselves in profound imaginative and intellectual difficulty when they attempt to envisage the end of their existence."[13] How can a choice be rational, he seems to ask, when the chooser cannot even imagine the thing he is choosing?

So Devine is apparently relying on two premises here. According to the first, anyone who chooses death does not know what he is choosing. According to the second, it is never rational to choose something, if you do not know what you are choosing. The conclusion is that the suicide, who chooses death, must be making an irrational choice.

But each premise is open to serious question. According to the first, those who choose death do not know what they are choosing. They cannot even imagine what death will be like.

Since I have claimed that death is an enigma, it might appear that I am committed to accepting this premise. However, this would be a mistake. Even though I cannot formulate a satisfactory philosophi-

cal analysis of the concept of death, I think I do know what it will be like for me to be dead. Here's what it will be like: I will be lying cold and inert on a slab; I will appear greyish and pale; a kindly doctor will be saying, "Alas, poor Feldman, I knew him well." Of course, I do not imagine that I will be *feeling cold* or *feeling tired* or *hearing the doctor saying these grim words.* I am confident that I will be having no psychological experiences whatsoever.

So the first premise is apparently wrong. If I choose death, I do know (in what seems the relevant way) what I am choosing.

Sometimes we make rational decisions even though we do not know precisely what we are choosing. Suppose I am a contestant on a television game show. Suppose I have answered some questions correctly, and now I have a choice: I can either (a) take my modest cash prize (let us assume it is ten dollars); or else (b) take a chance on the mystery prize. I have no idea what the mystery prize is, but I have good reason to suspect that it might be something worth thousands of dollars.

In these circumstances, I might decide to risk my modest winnings on the mystery prize, even though (in some sense) I do not know what that prize is. I think this decision, under the circumstances, might be "reasonable." If my evidence suggests that it is likely that the mystery prize will be quite valuable, then it is even more appropriate to say that my choice is "reasonable." If so, the example shows that we can make rational decisions concerning choices, even in cases in which we do not know *what* we are choosing.[14] Thus, I suspect that both of Devine's premises are mistaken. We sometimes do know what we are choosing when we choose death; we can sometimes rationally choose an option even when we do not know what we are choosing.

"Calculative Rationality" and Suicide

Devine hints at yet a third concept of rationality while discussing some examples that are alleged to refute his thesis. He admits that there might be a sense of 'rational' in which it would be correct to say that the choice of death in these cases is rational. But he goes on to say:

> [B]ut if so their rationality is not of the calculative sort. We are dealing, that is, not with a situation concerning which rational men will exhibit a range of estimates, but with a situation in which one man's estimate is as good as another, because what is being done is a comparison with an unknown quantity.[15]

I want to focus on the idea that there is a "calculative" sort of rationality, and that the choice of suicide cannot be rational in this way.

There is a well-established tradition according to which one concept of rational choice can be explicated by appeal to the notion of "expected utility." An example may help to introduce the concept. Suppose I have some disease. Suppose it can be cured either by surgery or by drugs. Suppose it sometimes goes away without any treatment. My doctor cannot tell me in advance precisely what will happen to me, but he can tell me the likelihood of various outcomes for each option.

Suppose the doctor tells me this: surgery is very expensive, but it will almost certainly work. There's a 1 percent chance that it will fail. Drugs are much less expensive, but they are also less certain. There's a 20 percent chance that they will fail. Hoping for spontaneous remission is of course free. But there is only a 5 percent chance that it will work.

In order to calculate the expected utility for me of each course of action, it will be helpful to draw up a little chart. On the chart, we list the three main courses of action (surgery, drugs, no treatment). For each course of action, we list the main possible outcomes (cure, no cure), the likelihood of the outcome given the course of action, and the values for me of the outcomes. Our chart then looks something like this:

Course of Action	*Outcomes*	*Likelihood (%)*	*Value for me*
Surgery	cure	99	100
	no cure	1	−50
Drugs	cure	80	110
	no cure	20	−40
No treatment	cure	5	115
	no cure	95	−35

A cure with no treatment is more valuable for me (115 points) than a cure with drugs (110 points) or a cure with surgery (100 points) simply because the cure with no treatment would be free, whereas a cure with surgery would be very expensive and a cure with drugs would be fairly expensive. Similar considerations also explain why no cure is worse for me if I undergo surgery (−50 points) than it would be if I take no treatment (−35 points).

To find the *expected utility* for me of surgery, we calculate as follows: multiply the value-for-me of each possible outcome of surgery by the likelihood of that outcome given surgery. Add the products. Thus, in this example, we multiply 99 by 100 (giving 9900) and 1 by −50 (giving −50). We then add these products, yielding an expected utility for me of surgery of 9850. Similar calculations for the other options yield the result that drugs have an expected utility for me of 8000 and no treatment has an expected utility for me of −2750.

Under these circumstances, it would be rational (in this calculative sense) for me to opt for surgery, because it maximizes expected utility for me. In other words, when we take into account the values-for-me and likelihoods of all the possible outcomes of each option, we find that the option that is most reasonable for me to choose, given my limited knowledge, is surgery. Of course, surgery might fail. I might turn out to be in the unfortunate 1 percent. But still my choice would have been rational in the relevant sense.

Devine suggests that suicide cannot have rationality "of the calculative sort." I suspect that he means that suicide cannot maximize expected utility for any person. If this is his view, I think he is mistaken. I think the choice of suicide might maximize expected utility for some person, and I think the calculations are in principle feasible.

Consider again the elderly man mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. He might think that his main options are (a) suicide; and (b) continued life. He might also think that the possible outcomes of suicide are (a1) bliss in heaven; (a2) torment in hell; and (a3) no further experience of any sort—we can call this "oblivion." He might think that the possible outcomes of continued life are: (b1) misery followed by eventual death; and (b2) miraculous recovery and happiness. His chart might look like this:

Courses of Action	*Outcomes*	*Likelihood %*	*Value for him*
Suicide	Heaven	1	+1000
	Hell	1	−1000
	Oblivion	98	0
Continued life	Misery	99	−500
	Miracle	1	+500

In this case it is clear, I think, that if the elderly man chooses suicide, his choice is perfectly rational (in the calculative sense). After all, the expected utility for him of suicide is zero, whereas the expected utility of continued life is −49,000. I think the calculations in this case are neither more nor less problematic than corresponding calculations that would be made in other, entirely uncontroversial cases.

I have claimed that under certain circumstances suicide can be the rational choice (in several senses of 'rational'). I should emphasize that I am certainly not suggesting that suicide is *always* a rational choice. For purposes of contrast, we can consider the case of a teenager suffering from clinical depression. He might feel miserable, and he might be obsessed with thoughts of suicide. He might be overwhelmed by the desire to take his own life. Yet since clinical depression can quite often be treated successfully by the careful administration of certain drugs, and since even if not treated it often clears up in less than a year, it would be horribly *irrational* (in several senses of the term) for the depressed teenager to opt for suicide. The value-for-him of a short, suicidal life is vastly lower than the value-for-him of a longer life in which he seeks appropriate medical treatment and is cured. Similarly, provided that he gets some reliable information about the success rates of various antidepressant drugs, the expected utility for him of suicide will also be lower than the expected utility for him of continued life.

Thus, in spite of the fact that I have claimed that there are circumstances in which a visit from the Reaper is to be welcomed, it should be clear that I do not advocate suicide for everyone who feels despondent. Furthermore, I think it would be grotesquely irresponsible for anyone simply to allow a depressed but otherwise healthy friend to kill himself. A depressed would-be suicide is

probably not capable of estimating the values-for-himself and probabilities of various outcomes. He might think that continued life promises little. We might know better. We might know that there is a good chance that with appropriate treatment he will soon begin to feel better and that he will probably go on to live a long and reasonably happy life. Nothing I have said here should be taken to imply that in such a case, we are simply to allow the depressed person to kill himself if he so chooses.

Euthanasia

Suppose the elderly man mentioned above is extremely weak. Suppose also that his garage doors are rusty and hard to operate. He is unable to close these doors without help. Suppose I am a neighbor of this man, and I understand his circumstances. Finally, suppose he asks me to help him close the doors, so that he will be able to kill himself. What should I do? Could it be morally right for me to help this man to commit suicide?

My answer to this question must be hedged with "ifs." We first must consider whether the world as a whole will be better with this old man out of it. The relevant consideration is the extent to which everyone gets the primary intrinsic goods he or she deserves. It might be that the universal justice level is higher if I help my neighbor kill himself than it would be if I were to refuse. *If* this is the case, then it seems to me that morality permits me to help this man kill himself.

However, even in this case, it does not follow that my action would be *legally* permissible, or even that it ought to be legally permissible. It might be that the law ought to be written in such a way as to make it legally wrong for me to help the old man kill himself. This may seem paradoxical, so I should explain.

Although some suicides help to make the world better, others do not. Others involve net decreases in the extent to which people get the primary intrinsic goods they deserve. In very many instances, those who might be present at the scene would not be able to tell with any assurance whether a particular suicide is one of the good ones or one of the bad ones. All sorts of considerations might cloud their judgment. They might be confused in part because they

love and sympathize with the would-be suicide, and he is begging for their assistance. In an altogether different sort of case, they might be confused because the would-be suicide is a burden to them, and they stand to inherit millions if he dies.

It would be a bad idea to frame a law in such a way as to allow us to assist all and only those sucides that make the world better. The problem is that we often cannot tell whether a particular suicide is of this "optimific" sort. We would then be unable to determine whether the law permits or prohibits a certain course of action. It would be a terrible law. In this situation, it might turn out to be best simply to rule that all such attempts at euthanasia are legally prohibited. *If* this is the case, then the law ought to be written in this way. There ought to be a law saying that we must not help the old man commit suicide.

In this sort of case, helping the old man might turn out to be morally required but legally prohibited. I hope that I will never face a dilemma of this sort. But if it should happen, I hope that I will have the courage to do what morality requires.