

on the eve of being left to struggle with poverty, shrink, coward-like, from the change and seek refuge in the grave of the suicide.

If it be granted that suicide is on the increase, not amongst the labouring classes, as a result of the pressure of poverty and want, but amongst those who are subject to no such pressure, the question returns, How is the increase to be accounted for? Is it due to a relaxation of the feeling of awe, or the sense of obligation, which is the outgrowth of religious faith? The *New York Times* had an article on the subject, during the discussion stirred up a few weeks since by Mr. Ingersoll's advocacy of the right of the individual to take his own life whenever, for any reason, he became tired of it, in which it affirmed that "before the Christian era nobody thought of suicide as necessarily a crime." The statement is, probably, much too sweeping. Yet it is undeniable that one of the effects of the Christian religion, wherever it has prevailed, has been greatly to strengthen the estimate of the value of life, and the sense of responsibility and obligation connected with it. Life, as the gift of God, immortal in its very nature and dependent for bliss or woe in the hereafter upon the manner in which the obligations it carries with it are discharged in this initial stage, became an inexpressibly solemn and sacred thing. Though we are not of the number of those who believe that the Christian religion is losing its power over the hearts and consciences of men, on the whole, but the opposite, we can readily conceive that with the spread of agnosticism there may be a decline in the influence of religion over the minds of a certain large class of men and women, who may be described as having been on the border-land between religion and infidelity. Many of these, in whom the wish is father to the thought, may, it is not unlikely, gladly give ear to the teachings of agnostics, and of infidels of the Ingersoll type, and, in the hour of despondency or anguish of body or mind, find in those teachings the help they need to enable them to throw off the lingering restraints of old religious impressions, which have hitherto tended to "puzzle the will" and make them rather bear the ills they may have had than fly to others which they know not of.

When we set aside the restraints of religion we undoubtedly part with by far the strongest of all arguments in favour of the sanctity and inviolability of life, whether our own or that of others. But apart from religious obligations and consequences, is there nothing to be said in reply to the specious reasonings of those who would teach us that our life is in our own hands, a thing which we have a right to destroy whenever we may choose to do so? The influential *New York* journal above referred to, puts the case as follows:

Before the Christian era nobody thought of suicide as necessarily a crime. The

"high Roman fashion" of going out of the world was resorted to by all Romans who were tired of the world without any more notion of disrepute than used to attach to the harakiri among the Samurai of Japan. Indeed, we are not aware that any jurist or moralist has ever undertaken, on secular grounds, the treatment of suicide or attempted suicide as a crime. Is it not conceivable that a person, the victim, for instance, of old age, or of incurable and disabling disease, may commit suicide in order unselfishly to relieve others of the burden of his support? Or take the case of a single man or woman without dependents. Whom does such a person wrong by committing suicide? Unless we take the "theological standpoint," the suicide of such a person is entirely a private affair. Indeed, it is impossible to defend the law of the State of New York upon grounds of public policy or upon any other than religious grounds.

We do not know whether the consistent secularist will grant any weight or authority to the intuitive or instinctive element in our constitution. If so he can hardly deny that the idea of self-destruction is repulsive and revolting to the universal and seemingly innate feeling of human kind. The *Times*' statement is, as we have said, much too strong with reference to the state of opinion on the subject before the Christian era. The *Indianapolis Sentinel* reminds us that "while the Stoic and Manichean philosophers commended suicide, they commended it only to the virtuous," and well says that:

"It would seem more consistent to commend it to the wicked, if to anyone, for if a man recognizes no duty to God, he at least ought to recognize a duty to the world. A virtuous man is of some service to the world, and no matter what discouragements he may have, he certainly ought to live on and do what good he can. A wicked man might have some excuse for ridding the world of his harmful presence, but it is very evident that the wicked never commit suicide for that purpose. With them the act is a result of supreme selfishness, and, indeed, there are few cases in which it is not selfishness with anyone."

A good way of testing the character of any general principle or doctrine relating to conduct is to ask what would be the effect upon society were it to become universal in practice. There are, probably, very few of us who have not, or have not had, at some period of our history, moments when life seemed no longer worth living, "so weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, seemed all the uses of this world." In such moods they could almost wish to be persuaded that the Almighty had not "fix'd his canons 'gainst self-slaughter." Let but that persuasion become universal, and everyone, whether in fiery youth, in perplexed and over-burdened middle-life, or groaning under the infirmities of old age, feel himself at liberty to "shuffle off the mortal coil," at pleasure, by his own act, and picture the result. We shrink from attempting it. One would never know at what moment he would stumble over the stark form of friend or neighbour. Life

would soon be bereft of all light and sweetness, in the dread of its accumulating horrors, especially in the dark days of dreary November, or in times of epidemic disease, or financial depression.

Then, again, if one may, for the sake of freeing himself from his own cowardly apprehensions, or of relieving others of the burden of some duty involving trouble or expense, divest himself of life, why may he not carry the principle a little further and apply it in his relations to others? Why should not the father or mother refuse to sustain the lives of their offspring when they feel the task to be a burden or a restraint? Why may not the son or daughter likewise dispose of the aged and helpless parent who has outlived his or her usefulness? Why should not society or the state improve the quality of its human stock by weeding out the sickly, the deformed, the imbecile? Such things were freely done in those noble days "before the Christian era."

Apart from the sanctions of religion, the one and all-sufficient answer to all such teachings—teachings which we can scarcely doubt have, even within the last few weeks, since Mr. Ingersoll became their new apostle, nerved the hands of many to do the fatal deed—is that at the best, in nine cases out of ten, suicide has its origin in a selfishness so intense and craven that it shirks all the duties of life, all the obligations of friendship and kindred, and, forgetting all else, all the pain and grief of friends, all the injury done by pernicious example to society, obeys only the impulse of the moment. One of the highest services Christianity has rendered to humanity is in the altruistic spirit it has fostered in the race, whereby it has taught them to build hospitals, to endow charities, to cherish the infirm, minister to the suffering, and generally to deem the noblest life the life of self-denial and sacrifice for others. We speak of this here, simply to suggest the test of the reaction of these principles and sentiments upon the evolution of the characteristics of the highest qualities in those who cherish these altruistic sentiments and do these altruistic deeds.

We hold that we have only to contrast the effect of the practice of such principles in the development of the noblest types of manhood, with the effects upon human character which would be the inevitable result of obedience to such a cult of selfishness, such a justification of a cowardly shrinking from pain or sorrow, as that proclaimed by Ingersoll and the *New York Times*, in order to see clearly which is most in accordance with the law of upward development of the race, whether we regard that law merely as an evolutionary process, or as the outcome of a beneficent Divine Will.

Heaven keep you from a bad neighbor and from a man who is learning the cornet.