

# A Philosophical Analysis Into The Causes And Prevention Of Deliberate Self Harm

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The UK government has just launched the first ever national enquiry into deliberate self harm among young people (Mental Health Foundation, 2004). This follows an earlier report published by the Mental Health Foundation, which reveals that in the UK, one in ten teenagers commits acts of deliberate self-harm, usually by cutting, as the way of expressing the pain endured from bullying, sexual abuse or family break-up (Mental Health Foundation, 2003). This paper will show that recognising the external circumstances that lead to deliberate self-harm is not in itself sufficient to lead to its reduction for this requires a deeper analysis of those kinds of ideas associated with the external cause. Drawing on Spinoza's metaphysics an analysis of the causes of the emotions leading to self-harm will reveal how this lies in a misguided view of personal identity. The practical implications of this investigation will help those who currently commit such acts to develop a more positive idea of their own self-worth and may help to prevent future generations from seeing self-harm and suicide as the only solution to dealing with unfavourable circumstances.

To say we are affected by external events which sometimes cause us to feel anxious is not very informative. It seems and is taken as self-evident that personal crises — whether splitting up with a lover or losing one's job — are likely to result in feelings of loss or unhappiness. In a more detailed understanding of how external events may affect our mental health, we can make recourse to reasons why people commit acts of self-harm or suicide; and in a fairly simplistic recognition that this is due to a loss of power leading to feelings of self-loathing or disgust, can analyse the external causes leading to such acts. It is not surprising to discover that a person's decision to commit suicide is the result of some external situation or circumstance that they themselves found unbearable, e.g. having been violently attacked, bullied or sexually abused. However, the fact that many people are subject to similar distressing situations but not all succumb to the same effects means that whilst a situation or external event may be responsible for having caused a feeling of pain or distress, the event or situation can only be a partial cause of a person's distress. In accepting that this is the case, we call those who seem unable to appropriately overcome a situation, 'obsessed' 'hysterical' 'depressed' 'mentally ill'. Never mind the fact that we may never have been through the particular situation that the depressed person faces, we demand of those who we regard as not severely depressed to 'get over it.' We allow a greater time span for some than for others, indeed we expect a person who has been rejected in love to 'get over' their grief a shorter time span than those who have lost a child. This is to say, we create a certain hierarchical model of pain, amounts of pain and the time it should take to get over this pain. And if a person fails to 'get over' whatever pain or grief they feel in the amount of time that we have allocated

it should take, class them as suffering from an internal weakness, or else, if the external cause appears trivial, as simply 'misdirected.' We may offer advice: to the rejected we say, 'you'll find someone else' to the bereaved parent 'they wouldn't have wanted you to suffer' to the unemployed 'you'll get another job' and to others, whose distress we can't help or whose symptoms are incomprehensible to us, we offer pills, or pity and wish the world was a better place. What this says is that, whilst our own personal lives may not be the way we may wish, whilst our desires may remain largely unsatisfied, our goals not yet reached, whilst our insecurities may sometimes overcome us in tears of frustration, yet we have an idea of how things should be, and this idea, whether we call it happiness or self-contentment is a certain satisfaction that 'I'm all right.' The question is, where does *this* idea originate? If this idea originates from the same place as those who succumb to a neurosis then we face the possibility of ourselves also succumbing to the depression and state of anxiety that those who we regard as 'depressed' or 'mentally ill' face. 'I'm all right' I say, because I *haven't* been abused or bullied, my partner *hasn't* left me, my child *hasn't* died, I'm not homeless, unemployed, or suffering any pain. But what if! What if someone raped me, my partner left me, my child died, I was to lose my job? We tell ourselves not to think about such things or else we say 'I'm so lucky' 'I'm so fortunate' and inside pray, or hope that nothing terrible will ever befall us, and for the remainder of our days, we shall be, 'all right.' But if we take this attitude seriously, and admit that our stability lasts only as long as no crisis affects us, then at the same time we are forced to admit not only that our psychological well-being is extremely shaky but that it depends entirely on external circumstances. And yet, since we already know that external circumstances are only a partial cause of our state of mind, something else must elicit our idea of how things should be, something contained within ourselves, which either others lack or fail to realise.

For Spinoza, what we fail to realise is our own *conatus* or endeavour which he states, is 'the force whereby each particular thing perseveres in existing.' (Spinoza, 1955, *Ethics*, EII P45n). To understand why we fail to recognise this intrinsic force, lies in our failure to distinguish our own endeavour, which is active, from the ideas we hold of ourselves as psycho-physical beings, which render us passive, so long as do not have a 'clear and distinct' idea of what these ideas are, or from where they derive.

Though we generally locate ideas in the mind which we separate from the physical body, for Spinoza the mind 'has no knowledge of the body, and does not know it to exist, save through the ideas of the modifications whereby

the body is affected' (Spinoza, 1955, EII P12, P19). Since all ideas relate to *ideata* (literally, something of which an idea is of, whether another idea or physical object) all the ideas of the mind relate to sensations in the human body. When we feel a certain way, we attempt to define this feeling or passion as an idea, be it a qualm, uneasiness or sense of elation. But since we can never adequately describe or conceptualise these physical states, Spinoza terms these ideas 'inadequate'. It is easy to accept that our descriptions remain inadequate, for the affects in the body can only be felt, as likewise, concepts can only be thought. This explains why we think of 'ideas' as mental concepts as distinct from physical affects, for whenever we attempt to add them together we cannot form an adequate idea of both. Therefore, we do not have an adequate idea of ourselves conceived as psycho-physical beings but have 'only a fragmentary and confused knowledge' (Spinoza, 1955, EII P29c, P29n). And insofar as we are confused, we are passive. In other words we believe that if only we were someone else, such things as these (bullying, sexual abuse and so on) would not happen to us.

Though all ideas, including adequate ideas, directly correspond to feelings, only painful affects hinder our endeavour or power to persevere. Even though we may recognise that the pain we feel has been caused by an external object or event, we make the mistake of affirming that the sensation we feel is part of our own essence or endeavour (Spinoza, 1955, EIII exp.). It is because we regard negative affects as 'part of us' that we are hindered in our endeavour to persevere and for this reason, Spinoza states

all the endeavours of a man affected by pain are directed to removing that pain...the greater the pain, the greater the power of activity employed to remove it; that is, the greater will be the desire or appetite in endeavouring to remove it (Spinoza, 1955, EIII P37pf).

If we accept that most of us seek to remove sensations of pain, either by avoiding situations of conflict or seeking pleasures which may override mental angst, explanations of self-harm seem elusive. However, once we accept that the prevailing social attitude of mental pain is, by its very terminology, something separate from physical pain, and that mental pain, is rarely, if ever, conceived as equivalent to physical pain, self-harm should not really surprise us. As most ideas are associated with an external cause, and mental pain is regarded as 'less' serious than a physical condition, we can recognise the self-abuser as someone who seeks to make manifest her mental pain as *real*, as an *actual pain felt in the body*. And this is because the pain (which results from say, acts of sexual abuse or bullying) is not, to her, a superficial idea or a mental concept but already felt as a real physical sensation. That society (including many philosophers) has created a mind/body dichotomy must therefore be seen as part of the problem. If there *is* no dichotomy, and emotional trauma is recognised as a real sensation (and not merely thrown aside as some kind of obsessive brain state or stigmatised as mental illness), self-harm could perhaps be avoided. The reason the self-abuser harms herself at all, is, by this account, because she blames herself for having been initially harmed:

'there's something wrong with me', failing to recognise that the felt (mental) pain is actually caused by external circumstances of which she can do nothing. Since we know that acts of deliberate self-harm are committed as the result of an external cause (e.g. bullying), the person who inflicts self-harm on herself, does so to signify the external recognition of what is generally regarded as an entirely mental condition. The self-harm inflicted thus awards its agent some relief because the pain felt is seen as more real than the mental agony. But by the same token, the self-abuser conceives her internal state of pain (which is concealed) as part of her own personal identity.

It would be all too easy to blame the self-abuser for having inadequate ideas. But as I have shown most of the ideas we hold are inadequate ones, ideas we nevertheless have no problem in holding so long as our life-conditions remain 'all right.' It is only when we recognise that all ideas of external bodies are ideas felt in our own body i.e. mitigated through ourselves and our own understanding, can we take responsibility for our own ideas. Failing to recognise that our emotional states, especially feelings of anxiety, stem from an idea associated with an external cause turns us into passive victims. As Spinoza states in the deftly entitled chapter of *The Ethics* 'Of Human Bondage,' 'when a man is a prey to his emotions, he is not his own master, but lies at the mercy of fortune' (Spinoza, 1955, EIV pref.). Though it might seem that the only solution to those ideas leading to self-harm would be to remove the cause, this alone will not do. This is because those who commit acts of self-harm do not do so when the perpetrator is present, nor as a means of retaliation, but as a result of the harm inflicted. And this pain, since it is as much an idea as a physical sensation, may well continue, past the teenage years and into adulthood, with disastrous effects for the agent (the pain may well increase and lead from self-harm to suicide). What needs to be challenged, is not merely the removal of the cause, whatever that is (e.g. a cessation of bullying) but a change in the psychological attitude and physical state of the agent, so that the self-abuser no longer sees herself as a passive victim but as an active agent who, whilst subject to external events and acts beyond her control, is nevertheless able to recognise her own self-worth. This recognition seems doubly necessary, given society's sympathetic response to physical signs, and its lack of empathy towards those who suffer anxiety or mental pain.

To become active in Spinoza's sense requires that we recognise our own endeavour as one of self-love (Spinoza, 1910, p.125). But to reach this state, a state in which the idea of ourselves is solely positive, requires that we understand why and how external circumstances affect us, to recognise when they affect us, and to realise that, whilst we are affected, that this affect is rooted or caused by something beyond our control which is not 'part of us' and has, in fact, nothing to do with our personal identity. When we are active and have adequate ideas we are not affected by any external cause but at that moment experience what it is to be our own person i.e. self-contained (Spinoza, 1955, EIII p12pf). As self-containment is accompanied by a feeling of love of which we ourselves are the cause, the more active one is, that is, driven by our own essence, the more

joyful we feel, for we are free from the burden or turmoil of our emotions or affects which derive from the empirical world (Spinoza, 1955, EIV P54pf). The difference between the inner sensation of joy or self-love, which stems from our own endeavour, and the kinds of pleasures founded upon external causes, is that real joy is unshakeable, whereas an external pleasure is temporal, short lived and transient. Spinoza calls the recognition of our own endeavour or power of activity, *acquiescentia in se ipso*: 'self-approval', which he remarks is 'a man's true power of action or virtue' and 'is in reality the highest object for which we can hope' (Spinoza, 1955, EIV P52pf). Knowledge of this idea confers a feeling of inner strength, such that, whatever befalls us in our everyday life will not shake us or de-stable our conviction in our self. But whilst it would be nice to say 'if X occurs I won't be affected' most of us would agree that it would be 'all right' to be affected so long as the affect did not cause us to lose, or feel on the point of losing that aspect of ourselves which drives us to persevere and which we can hold onto in times of stress. For those who suffer real torments at the hands of others, such an idea will at least help the 'victim' to recognise that they are not to blame for being the object of someone else's misguided ideas, but empower them, by helping them to recognise that *this situation*, however painful it may be, has nothing to do with who they are, in essence. Though for Spinoza, only a person who has a full and comprehensive knowledge of the self can be said to feel *real joy (beatitudo)*, which is internal and depends on no external object or cause, we can however, recognise and experience glimpses of such joy.

Spinoza's philosophy reveals that we all act on the basis of how we perceive reality. As our perceptions of reality are mainly confused — mingled with the perceptions of others and endorsed by the social body in which we live — we need to question from where our ideas originate. This is primarily important for those whose ideas lead to self-depreciation, for these ideas are detrimental to our well-being and self-empowerment. This is where a philosopher, such as Spinoza, can help, by forcing us to question the basis of our ideas, and thereby to challenge our perceptions of what we constitute as being real. In the case of children and teenagers who are not exposed to philosophical texts, who are not in fact, required, or asked, to question themselves or their perceptions of reality (and this includes most adults too), it is hardly surprising, when, subject to physical or mental abuse, their only resort is to blame themselves. For before our attempts to philosophise, we need to be affirmed, by others, of who we are. Indeed, in the case of young children, positive affirmation is vital to physical and mental growth (Spinoza, 1955, EV P39n). Like all philosophical texts, Spinoza's philosophy is aimed at those who have already established the need to question themselves, the meaning of life, the nature of reality, the way the world seems to be and other 'highbrow' questions which are usually undertaken only after one has survived many trials and tribulations of life. In Spinoza's case, this applies to those who have already begun to question what it means to be happy, in order to realise that even external pleasures: of falling in love, being successful, or achieving some status in society, are fleeting and likely to lead us into states of anxiety (when our loved one leaves us, when we lose our job and so on). The world, as Spinoza points out, will always let us down and thus is

not a good place in which to place our self-trust (Spinoza, 1955, OIU, pp.5-6). Sadly, those who commit acts of self-harm are, it seems, let down more than most, and in the case of abused teenagers, are, in the majority of cases, unable to escape the social climate in which such abuse occurs. For the rest of us, i.e. society at large, Spinoza demands that we take social and political responsibility for the ways we treat others and recognise the ways others are treated (Spinoza, 1951, PT, pp.313-4). Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the various ways this may be achieved, philosophical analysis, which demands of the agent to question and confront her own ideas, may be preferable to psychotherapy which focuses only on resolving those inadequate ideas themselves, whilst keeping them in place, through dealing only with the symptoms but not with the ideas held in relation to an external cause. Instead, a philosophical analysis recognises that the way reality is viewed determines not only a person's self-identity but the way they will act and respond to external stimuli.

In order to deal with the affects felt in the body of which the mind has only inadequate ideas, the person has first to recognise their own endeavour or internal force. This endeavour (which Spinoza also equates with 'will' 'appetite' and 'desire') is an idea which relates only to itself (Spinoza, 1955, EV P18pf), and which constitutes the first cause or essence of the human mind (Spinoza, 1955, EII P22pf). Since this idea is free of pain, Spinoza terms the state wherein we reach full comprehension of ourselves 'freedom'. Freedom, lies not in our having a self which is the *conatus* or will, without which we wouldn't exist but in *knowing* the self. And the first attempt at gaining such knowledge lies in our ability to understand the cause of the emotions through the ability to reason.

Since understanding where our affects or emotions derive, brings us closer to being driven from our own internal power, i.e. from our *conatus* it is clear that we can be 'more free' or 'less free,' where 'freedom' is the recognition of our ideas, primarily those which Spinoza terms 'inadequate'. As he states:

Everyone shapes his actions according to his emotion, those who are assailed by conflicting emotions know not what they wish; those who are not attacked by any emotion are readily swayed this way or that. All these considerations clearly show that a mental decision and a bodily appetite, or determined state, are simultaneous, or rather are one and the same thing, which we call decision, when it is regarded under and explained through the attribute of thought, and a conditioned state, when it is regarded under the attribute of extension, and deduced from the laws of motion and rest (Spinoza, 1955, EIII P2n).

The realisation of our own endeavour can only be obtained, *in the first instance* through *practical* recognition of our limitations and strengths. Since the original cause of an affect may not be immediately graspable — for if it was, we would have adequate ideas and not be affected at all — it is necessary to question and understand in a general sense the origin and

nature of the emotions (Spinoza, 1955, EV P3, P4n). This is where a philosophy of the emotions such as that suggested in Spinoza's *Ethics* can act as a guide. For example, Spinoza says that the idea of *indignation* is a feeling of 'hatred towards one who has done evil to another' (Spinoza, 1955, EIII def.aff. 20). Determining whether this defines *my* definition or feeling of 'indignation' leads to a deeper analysis which requires that I discover the underlying cause of my own personal affect of indignation (Spinoza, 1955, EV P4n). However, since the cause of an idea may be hidden, as Spinoza says, the effect of 'latent external causes' (Spinoza, 1955, EIV P20n), quite a vigorous process of analysis may be necessary, in order to rid ourselves of the affect in the body and to change our inadequate ideas into ones which are adequate. That Spinoza clearly believes we all have the power to carry out such a rigorous process of analysis is clear, for he says:

everyone has the power of clearly and distinctly understanding himself and his emotions, if not absolutely, at any rate in part, and consequently of bringing it about, that he should become less subject to them. To attain this result, therefore, we must chiefly direct our efforts to acquiring, as far as possible, a clear and distinct knowledge of every emotion, in order that the mind may thus, through emotion, be determined to think of those things it perceives, and wherein it fully acquiesces: and thus that the emotion itself may be separated from the thought of an external cause, and may be associated with true thoughts; whence it will come to pass ... that the appetites of desires, which are wont to arise from such emotion, will become incapable of being excessive (Spinoza, 1955, EV P4n).

Though Spinoza's task seems impossible, for if we need to understand and grasp the cause of every emotional response, it seems there would be no end to self analysis, the process need not require a detailed analysis of *all* our mental and physical states, but only of those, in each of us, which are basic to *all* mental states, specifically, in the first analysis, those which cause sensations of pain. For even if we cannot have an adequate idea of every emotion, as Spinoza suggests (due for instance to amnesia) we can learn to recognise that any negative affect e.g. a feeling of anxiety, has its source in an external cause and is therefore not 'part of us.' Once we recognise that the cause of a negative affect or emotion does not constitute who we are, in essence, but derives from an idea that we associate with an external cause, then the way we view ourselves dramatically changes. For what happens to the affects once we conceive an adequate idea of them is that they no longer affect us. In other words, we may then understand a notion such as 'jealousy' but no longer *feel* jealous. We can understand what it means 'to hate' but no longer hate anybody, including ourselves. And for those who have been subject to abuse, they may come to see that the question 'who am I', is not *in reality* merely an object of someone's hatred (which is what the perpetrator of such abuse *wants* the victim to think) but a person who recognises that feelings of pain and anxiety are ideas (felt sensations) associated with an external cause, and not part of who they really are, regardless of how they are treated.

Once we are able to understand the cause of our emotions we begin to experience a sense of our own inner worth. This does not mean we will be able to avoid being affected but that we will begin to recognise the part that we ourselves play in our response to the turmoil's that befall us, a part in which, we begin to play an *active* role rather than remaining passive. Through recognising that all ideas of the body and others are mitigated through our own understanding and felt affects, we can begin to recognise freedom as something determined from within and to distinguish those ideas which are adequate and those inadequate.

If this sounds an almost impossible goal, then it should be pointed out that even Spinoza admitted that few would realise their true nature but this seems less important than the fact that people try (Spinoza, 1955, EV P42n). In trying, we consciously choose to take responsibility for our own states of mind, and thus for our affects, to recognise our limitations and not allow the other to destroy our self-worth or to be overcome by external causes.

Whilst a process of self-analysis can help us to attain our end, we must be clear not only in what we want to achieve but have some idea of who we are, in essence. For if we regard ourselves in terms of what we do or what we have, then we face, not only the possibility, but the reality, of succumbing to events that will always be tragic to our well being. In the case of those who have been subject to abuse, and who, as a result, abuse themselves, such an analysis is of vital importance, as evidence suggests that these people are most likely either to become victims of later acts of abuse or to become abusers themselves (Finkelhor, 1984; Pritchard, 1995). Yet, if we still want to believe that our happiness can only be obtained from others, then we must also accept that others have the power to make us unhappy. In this case, Spinoza says, we must accept that we are suffering from self-delusion (Spinoza, 1910, p.79). And this, he believed, characterises most of us.

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