Condemning Oneself to Death

The Semantics of Suicide in Self-Narratives of the German Enlightenment

Andreas Bähr

In 1751, Christian Friedrich Illing, son of a chirurgus from Thorn in West Prussia, left his native town in order to study medicine in Leipzig. However, the university in the Saxon metropolis proved to be a poor choice. Illing allowed himself to be led astray into drinking sprees and fornication, and these increasingly affected his academic performance. After three years, the situation had become unbearable. In Easter of 1754, Illing’s conscience awoke and relentlessly rebuked him for the sins he had committed. Conscious of having squandered his salvation in Leipzig, Illing intended to continue his studies at Göttingen, a university town which was known as a place in which hard work and duty were the order of the day. However, Illing’s hopes of a new beginning were quickly dashed. The diligence of the students and professors at Göttingen only demonstrated to him the extent and the irreversibility of his own failings. Faced with this situation, as Illing wrote in a letter to his father, he “thus had no grace with God.”

On August 21, 1754, a few days after his arrival in Göttingen, Illing “despaired” and committed suicide by shooting himself with a pistol.

In this article, I will examine the issue of suicide during the German Enlightenment in the second half of the eighteenth century. Already in this brief outline of Illing’s hopelessness, we can detect a fundamental model: In taking his own life, Illing obeyed the voice of a ‘tender’ conscience which had condemned him to death for his moral offences. Since, in the past, Illing had failed morally, and since, given this failure, he would not be able to avoid...
similar failure in the future as well, suicide appeared to him to be the final opportunity for moral action. Such a pronouncement points to the basic conditions of the modern conscience in the second half of the eighteenth century. It also indicates something significant about that conscience, for a revealing problem emerges from it: although Illing justified his suicide as a morally necessary act, it was for him, at the same time, the “most prohibited” means of escaping his miserable condition. Even for Illing, his own suicide was a ‘self-murder’ or Selbstmord. Thus, the act had the same moral significance for him that Enlightened contemporaries attributed to suicide in general: As German theologians, philosophers and anthropologists emphasized tirelessly, a person who took his own life had fundamentally violated his duties to God and to society. These duties were based upon man’s duty to himself: With the Enlightened individual’s capacity to act as an autonomous moral subject, the conservatio sui became the principal moral precept. Man was obliged to preserve himself in order to be able to fulfil his duty to others. Only a person whose conscience was asleep could kill himself; scrupulous people, on the contrary, chose to stay alive.

By killing himself, Illing followed the voice of his conscience and, at the same time, did something which his conscience strictly forbade. In what follows, I will attempt to explain this paradox of the scrupulous suicide. I will try to show the extent to which this paradox is the key to understanding the (paradoxical) possibility of being condemned to death by one’s own conscience; and I will try to show the extent to which this paradoxical possibility is the key to understanding the Enlightened duty to self-preservation – a concept of moral subjectivity in which the subject retains his emancipatory dignity by subjecting himself to those laws which he himself has made. Historicizing the question of suicide for the German Enlightenment means, in this context, grasping the historical specificity of Enlightened thought from the perspective of the problem of suicide. Suicide can be understood as an act describing hopelessness. This hopelessness becomes evident in the aporias of its own justification, and these aporias, in turn, make evident the aporias and limits of those categories according to which this hopelessness was justified.

---

4 Ibid.