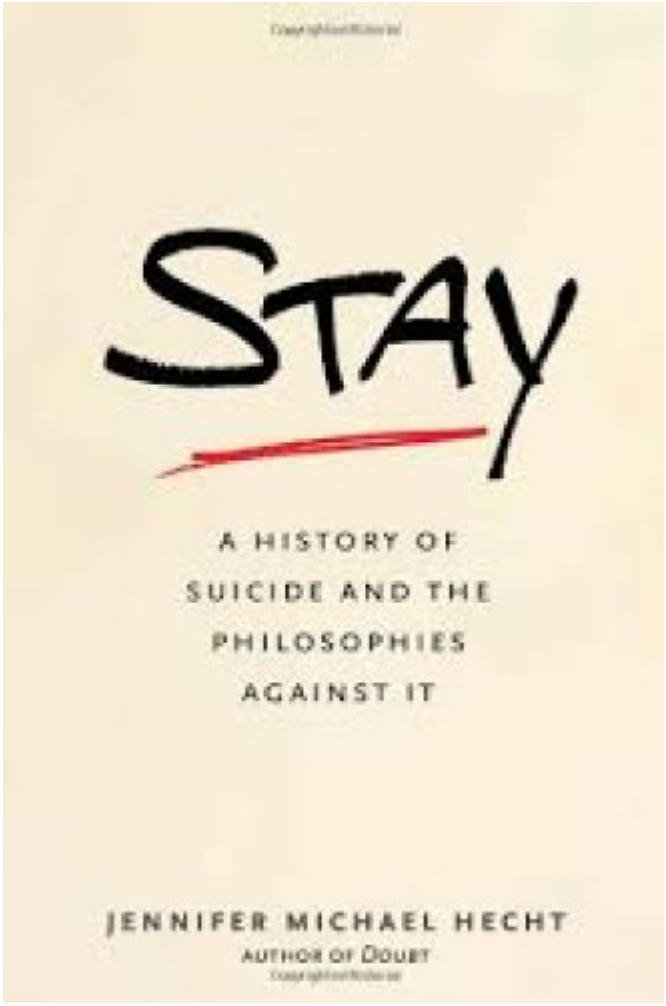
Stay, by Jennifer Michael Hecht

reviewed by Gordon D. Marino in the April 30, 2014 issue

In Review



Stay

By Jennifer Michael Hecht
Yale University Press

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was a kind of poet. The distinguished poet Jennifer Hecht is a kind of philosopher and a first-rate historian of ideas. In her previous book, Hecht traced the vicissitudes of the meaning of doubt in our culture, and in

these beautifully written pages she jogs our collective memory about the topic of suicide. But this study is much more than a compilation of summarized and well-packaged positions.

Most arguments contra the moral legitimacy of suicide are built on premises of faith, on the view that you are robbing God of God's property. Hecht, in contrast, is intent on providing secular reasons for refraining from what historically and rightly has been called self-murder.

From the outset Hecht stresses that the book is "chiefly about despair suicide, rather than what might be called end-of-life management." In her reckoning, when the terminally ill terminate their lives, it is more of a matter of choosing how to die than it is self-murder.

This history of our thinking about suicide reaches back to the Old Testament and the story of Samson. Petitioning the Lord for superhuman strength, the prisoner Samson took revenge against his captors by pulling down the temple walls, killing himself and the Philistines.

Hecht notes that although there is only one suicide in the New Testament, that of Judas, early Christian thinkers such as Eusebius did not bring the gavel down on suicide. They even celebrated it under certain circumstances. Thought-provoking reflections on the nexus between martyrdom and suicide hint that in at least some cases, martyrs were eager to take the express lane to the seventh heaven.

The great advocates of self-annihilation were, of course, the Stoics. They believed that there is no freedom for the individual who is chained to this crazy life by the desire for self-preservation. The Stoics consciously reminded themselves that the door is always open, that so long as you are willing to take your own life, there is always a remedy. Still, as Hecht perceptively observes, Seneca and company did not recommend the noose as a way of coping with, say, being jilted by a lover. At one point Seneca was profoundly depressed; Hecht quotes him: "I saw not my own courage in dying but his [Seneca's father's] broken by the loss of me. So I said to myself, 'You must live.' Sometimes even to live is an act of courage."

Aquinas, Augustine, and later Luther and Calvin all classified suicide as an egregious transgression. And throughout the Middle Ages, those who did themselves in were done in again after death. Hecht registers this grizzly but common event: "When a Parisian man killed himself by plunging into the Seine in 1257, his body was fished

out and his case tried. He was found guilty, and his body was sentenced to torture; most commonly, that meant being drawn and quartered, or eviscerated and hanged by the neck before the community and left there until birds and maggots consumed the corpse." Or again: "In 1590 the coroner of London ordered that the top of the stake pinning down the corpse of Amy Stokes be left exposed to provide deterrence of other would-be suicides." Furthermore, the property of those who took their own lives was confiscated by the state.

The years following the Reformation issued in a more tolerant attitude toward suicide, and some even argued that it was religious guilt and especially the doctrine of predestination that drove individuals to the ledge.

One of the great merits of this work is that Hecht does not give short shrift to those who carry a brief for suicide. During the Enlightenment, there was a shift from thinking of suicide as a sin to understanding it in clinical terms, as the terrible and final blossom of melancholy. And the pro-suicide reasoning that we find in the likes of Hume, d'Holbach, and Voltaire were supercharged by animosity toward religion.

Recall that the religious reasoning for pressing ahead through the vale of tears was that we are the property of our Creator and therefore have no right to disturb the Creator's plan. Hume, however, contended that even if there is a God, "we are no more disturbing his plans by taking a life than by saving it." Bioethicists such as John Hardwig have maintained that we have a duty to die when keeping ourselves alive depletes the resources of the family and the community. Presaging that position, Hecht paraphrases Hume as saying, "When our existence becomes a burden we ought to kill ourselves," if only to provide an example and help our fellow human beings to grasp that so long as you keep death as an option, you are never condemned to misery. But Hume's claim that suicide adds to the common good contradicts Hecht's main point: that the ramifications of suicide are long and destructive.

As the old adage goes, "I have a right to do what I want as long as I am not hurting anyone else." This belief prompts the conclusion that we are morally entitled to take our own lives. Hecht, however, marshals many facts in support of her axial position that suicide not only devastates families but "causes suicide." She pins this well-established fact on the board: "A suicide by a parent while a child was under the age of eighteen tripled the likelihood that the child would commit suicide." And then Hecht sighs over her fellow poet: "It is hard not to think of Sylvia Plath killing herself

in her kitchen in England, while her children slept, and some forty years later, . . . her son Nicholas Hughes taking his own life, too." One could argue that we have a duty to resist the temptation to imitate terrible actions, but make no mistake about it, the temptation is real.

I have an acquaintance who refuses to drive because his father took his own life with an automobile, and he fears that he might be taken over and unable to resist the same impulse. Freud termed this "identification," and Hecht is wise to remind us of the mysteriously powerful impulse to imitate those with whom our lives are inextricably bound up. Hecht might have added that the psychological gravity that tugs us toward mimicking those we love or hate holds not just for suicide but for substance abuse, anger management problems, and a host of other behaviors—all of which affirms the point that Hecht keeps circling around: that no man or woman is an island. No matter how alone we might feel in our inexplicable pain, we are creatures in community. Or again, "The whole of humanity suffers when someone opts out."

Speaking personally, I have spent time in the basement with some very dark thoughts, and like the author, I have friends who pulled the trigger, so it is an unwelcome task to raise an eyebrow about Hecht's laudable efforts to wrap her intellectual arms around those who are desperate unto death. Yet I suspect that no small portion of those who try to take their own lives do so believing that they are sparing their loved ones from having to live in the cloud that follows them. Hecht encourages people to hold on because good things might be in the offing. That is often true, but far from always. Life is good—sometimes.

This gift of a book is as much about the issue of pain in life as it is about not ending your life because of the pain. Following in both a religious and a secular tradition, Hecht submits that suffering is soul-making. When I am not walking under the black sun I am inclined to agree, but there are other times and other moods in which it seems reasonable to believe that there are pangs so intense and so persistent that they threaten to perform a root canal on what is most precious to us, our ability to love. Nietzsche's famous "what does not kill you makes you stronger" is an overstatement.

One might think that Hecht is going to press to the judgment that those who pull the cord because they cannot or will not endure some psychic pain are cowardly and blameworthy. Although that might seem the logical conclusion, Hecht has the

wisdom to understand that life is not an argument. She is simply intent on providing people who are at the razor’s edge a reason to endure, a reason to stay. She writes: “I do not mean to pass judgment on those who have committed suicide. I mean instead to express to the suicidal person who has rejected suicide that you deserve gratitude from your community and from humanity.”

This tender and well-reasoned book is sure to save lives.