

## **Brief History of Suicide in Western Cultures**

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### *The contest between reason and passion*

Western culture has never been completely indifferent towards those who take their own lives. Although some were considered heroic, the act of suicide was mostly considered an offense against God, an insult to the state, or a particularly painful gesture towards the people left behind. Yet, considerable tolerance toward suicide is evident in ancient times when death was considered more natural than in modern times. Nevertheless, suicide was punished as a criminal act in many cultures for centuries before becoming a medical-psychological issue in our current society and culture.

In ancient Greece suicide was not accepted, though most cases were not explicitly accused of having committed a criminal act, they were considered to have committed a grievously antisocial act. During the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, suicides usually were denied burial or traditional pre-burial preparation or cremation; in Athens, for instance, the hand of a suicide was cut off and buried away from the rest of the body (Manson 1899). Only suicides for which it was possible to find sufficient reason for self-destruction were deemed comprehensible; such reasons might include heroism, love-rejection or serious and painful illness. Others were considered to be unjustified and were punished, e.g., soldiers who had deserted or culprits avoiding punishment or prison. The standard of “understanding” was – and largely still is – considered the key to assessing suicide as a justified action. Even nowadays, the suicide of a young healthy person is likely not to be “understood” while that of an elderly person with a terminal illness becomes more reasonable.

Judgments concerning suicide changed when ancient Greek philosophers became interested in the primacy of reason over the emotions. Their influence became dominant and continued to influence Western culture and the great religions of modern times. The dominant view had been that suicide was an immoral or criminal act. The early philosophers based their prohibition of suicide primarily on the basis of its incomprehensibility or irrationality. It was viewed as an aberration against the natural urge of the individual to survive and became interpreted in the Jewish, Christian and Moslem religions as an insult to God. The culture of

ancient times, as well as today, tried to subject the emotional side of the individual to rational control; this fundamental principle guided many laws and customs seeking to impose limits on the expression of emotions. Religions borrowed the thinking of the Greek philosophers and transformed many passions into sins with the simple equation that rational behavior is directed by God and the emotional by the devil.

### *Ancient cultures*

A possibly first recorded suicide dates from the era of Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II (1303-1213 BCE) in a written description of the story of two brothers who had committed suicide nearly two centuries previously. At that time, death was often actively sought for various reasons, to the point that groups gathered to discuss the least unpleasant ways to die and suicide was probably so frequent as to pass often unnoticed (Moron 1976).

The spirit of ancient Greece (mainly in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE) highlights a widespread melancholy towards life that caused some appreciation for its end, in contrast with limited acceptance of suicide. A rejection of life, joined by a deep spirit of freedom, characterized the Epicurean, Stoic and Cynical philosophical schools which supported decisions to die. Many celebrities of the time killed themselves, including the philosophers Empedocles; Democritus (to avoid old age); Diogenes; Zeno (held his breath after falling at the age of 98); Hegesias; Cleanthes (held deep contempt of life); Socrates (forced to kill himself); and poets including Sappho (love pain), Aristodemus (remorse), Cleomenes (honor) and Demosthenes and Isocrates (for patriotic reasons). Heroic suicide or self-sacrifice was almost unanimously approved and often was considered an example to follow. Kodros, the last legendary king of Athens, probably would have killed himself to avoid loss of a battle with the Dorians, as prophesied by the oracle of Delphi, but was killed. Themistocles, according to some historians, killed himself because of the guilt resulting from his betrayal of Athens to join the service of the Persian king.

Plato (424-347 BCE), however, was opposed to suicide claiming that men are social individuals with responsibility to others and therefore property of a state that could not afford the loss of its citizens. Along the same line, Aristotle (383-322 BCE) disapproved of suicide, seeing it as a transgression against a civic duty and an act of cowardice; he states (Moore 1790):

*“The law never commands a man to kill himself; but what it does not command, it forbids. Moreover, when any one hurts another contrary to law, having received no previous injury from him, he voluntarily commits an injury against that man... Now*

*when any one, impelled by anger or resentment, kills himself, he does this voluntarily against right law, because the law does not permit it... But to whom? Rather to the state than to himself... To die only in order to avoid poverty, or [for] love, or uneasiness of any kind, is not the character of a brave, but rather of a servile spirit. For it is the part of an effeminate mind to fly from calamitous and laborious situations."*

In ancient Rome suicide was not a rare event. Gris  (1982) describes 314 suicides among prominent Romans between the fifth and second centuries CE. For different reasons, but always with a character of integrity, many prominent politicians killed themselves rather than being subjected to Caesar; they included Cato Uticensis, Appius Claudius, Atticus, Crassus, Anthony, Brutus, Cassius and Quintilio Publius Varus. Even the Roman emperors Marcus Cocceius Nerva and Nero killed themselves. In the year following the death of Emperor Nero, 32 politicians committed suicide. Suicides in imperial Rome included many famous writers and philosophers, including Diodorus, Seneca, Petronius, Lucan and Lucretius. The two prominent philosophical schools of Ancient Rome, Epicureanism and Stoicism, approved of suicide for different reasons. The Epicureans stated that the goal of man was the pursuit of happiness and when this could not be achieved, life lost its purpose. The Stoics placed reason, virtue and morality above pleasures and common interests, sometimes to the point of reaching a state of detachment and a lack of interest in life. This philosophy influenced the laws to the extent that weariness for life (*tedium vitae*) leading to suicide was approved if it resulted from incurable diseases, accidents, deaths of others or even from squalor or wounded pride (Manson 1899).

Although suicide was culturally accepted, Seneca considered death as a refuge against the evils of life but did not support suicide. He emphasized control of the emotions and submission to the will of superiors, according to the *light* of reason, but these principles led to his own suicide when ordered to do so by Emperor Nero for alleged treason.

The Neo-Platonic philosophers saw suicide as the result of a disturbance. However, Plotinus, the most important leader of the movement, argued that this type of death prevented the soul from breaking away from the body and reaching the Elysian Fields.

In general, in ancient Rome free men could choose to commit suicide without problems. In fact, suicide was praised for widows who followed their husbands after death or had been raped (e.g., Lucretia) and for men who wanted to avoid dishonor or were becoming old (Minois 1999). Nevertheless, by the sixth century suicide was widely considered dishonorable or a crime, particularly by soldiers, slaves and embezzlers.

Despite several exceptions, the general attitude toward suicide in ancient Greece and Rome was relatively tolerant and suicide was considered legitimate in many circumstances, especially when life was no longer considered worth living, based on philosophical principles or even individual judgment.

### *Early Christianity*

Christianity spread easily, especially among the most wretched, offering hope for a better life, at least in the next world. At the same time it had to stand against reaching the next world too early in order to avoid losing too many believers too quickly. Initially, the appeal of the afterlife resulted in a propensity toward death. For several centuries religious writings recounted enthusiastic stories of martyrs until St. Augustine forbade suicide in his *City of God* (ca. 420 CE), considering it an act against God as an extension of the fifth Commandment to Moses: *Thou shalt not kill*. Suffering, rather than being deemed a reason to commit suicide, became a positive value that only increased the worthiness of those who would bear it (Manson 1899).

With Roman Emperor Constantine, in the fourth century, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, with support of evolving laws. Sanctions by the church and the state against suicide gradually became increasingly strict and punitive, including confiscation of property if suicide was a means of avoiding a legal trial (interpreted as an admission of guilt). It is likely that legal and religious reasoning was very similar—probably less spiritual and more practical, if not of an economic nature. It was important, even for the civil power of Rome, to encourage interest in life, given the high mortality of the times, with its life expectancy of less than 40 and concern about maintaining the population of a vast empire that needed an enormous amount of labor. In fact, in 374 AD infanticide was banned by Roman law, which soon after condemned suicide by servants or slaves and the military, who were considered property of their owners or of the state. In the following centuries, large-scale confiscation of property was established by both temporal and religious powers, with advantages for both, even without a direct punitive effect on the deceased.

However, a problem of no small importance emerged: how to punish criminal suicides after their death. In addition to confiscation of property, there gradually arose increasingly imaginative and dramatic forms of brutality to the bodies of suicides, not only for a symbolically direct punitive effect, but also for a spectacular and hoped-for deterrent effect upon onlookers. Legal authorities collected the assets of suicides and the Church attempted to avoid the loss of the faithful by discouraging the practice of voluntary martyrdom. It is also surely not a

coincidence that, in the same era, the Church emphasized the sacredness of marriage, the blessing of procreation of many children, as well as the repression of all non-procreative sexuality as a sin.

### *Judaism*

The Old Testament (likely written between ninth and fifth century BCE) reports on five suicides that were not associated with a sinful judgement. However, it also includes that the body of a suicide could not be buried until sunset and without the usual rites. Laws and customs were then transcribed in the *Mishnah* between second and third century CE in which it is written that the suicide's body should not receive respect from family and friends. However, the laws were enforced only if the act was intentional and without external pressure, whereas suicide was considered as natural death if the act was induced by a mental illness or by the fear of a terrible torture.

The 1998 Committee on Jewish Law and Standards affirmed the prohibition of suicide, recommending the obligation of understanding why some people think of suicide and of ameliorating those circumstances. Even for terminally ill patients it is suggested more pain control and medication be provided.

Despite that suicide is forbidden with the same arguments proposed by Christians, there may be some extreme circumstances where another choice is impossible, such as in the case of mass suicide in Masada (73-74 CE) when more than 900 Jews killed themselves instead of falling prisoner to the Romans.

### *Islam*

As in the other monotheistic religions, for Islam suicide is one of the worst possible sins. Unlike the Old Testament in which there is no explicit condemnation of suicide, the Koran warns: "Do not kill yourselves, certainly Allah will be more merciful with you." In several other passages in the holy book of Islam, there are warnings against suicide. In fact, most of the scholars forbade suicide even in the case of terroristic attacks citing that Koranic verse. This seems not to have prevented Islamic fundamentalists from killing themselves and, at the same time, scores of others.

Muhammad taught that it is necessary to submit to divine will under any circumstance. For this same reason, Islam does not allow any form of euthanasia. Suicide is so sinful in

Islamic countries that it would explain why official data on it are lacking or extremely low, although a substantial increase is seen in Muslims living in Western countries.

### *Middle ages*

Mass suicides occasionally occurred at the end of banquets in Scandinavia as a means of gaining to entry to Valhalla, possibly close to Odin's seat, a concession granted only to those who had died violently but courageously in battle and then extended to all who self-inflicted death (Moore 1790). The Gauls and Visigoths sometimes elected suicide to avoid being enslaved by the Romans and to reach heaven (Moron 1976). Yet, through their contact with the Romans, these northern peoples quickly absorbed Roman laws regarding voluntary death (Manson 1899).

Perhaps in part to avoid legal penalties, suicide was replaced by medieval knights with violent and dangerous practices, such as tournaments or duels. Indeed, the French Church synods in 813 (Châlons), 829 (Paris) and 855 (Valence) declared death in a duel prohibited.

Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury, acknowledged the Roman tradition of legal non-liability in cases involving obvious lack of rationality at the time of suicide. This tradition was incorporated into English law and later accepted by the Church of England following the reign of King Henry VIII. Early English laws against suicide are attributed to King Edgar I of England and were promulgated in 967, including the distinction maintained over the centuries between those who committed suicide when of sound mind or insane (*non compos mentis*). That is, suicide was not considered a sinful or criminal act in cases of insanity. The laws also included that the goods of a suicide had to be forfeit not excluding though other forms of punishments on the dead bodies.

During the brief Viking conquest of England (1013-1042), Danish rulers introduced confiscation of goods from suicides. In *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae* (Treatise on the Laws and Customs of the Kingdom of England ca.1188), Henry of Bracton formulated the relationship between crime and intent in suicide by importing Roman law as interpreted by the school of Bologna. He stated that: [a] a suicide could not have heirs and his goods were to be confiscated because his act was an admission of guilt; [b] this measure could not be implemented if the suicide was not accused of crimes; and [c] moveable assets were confiscated from those who suicided for apparent weariness of life, severe physical pain or grief, but the family would inherit their real estate. In the same publication, a difference was drawn between suicides

resulting from *felode se* (crime against himself) versus from *non compos mentis*. In England, consideration of the issue of confiscating the property of suicides became increasingly sophisticated following its first application (MacDonald and Murphy 1990).

MacDonald and Murphy (1990) report data of the King's Bench which show a steady increase in suicides in England from 1510 to 1590 and an initial criminal (*felo de se*) judgment in 95 percent of cases. There was an evident conflict of interest in the certification of suicide. It is quite likely that this increase reflected payment of a fee to coroners in the case of a verdict of voluntary or criminal suicide resulting in the confiscation of goods by the Crown. However, coroners could sometimes be persuaded to make judgments of mental illness after receiving bribes greater than their "commission" and these were gladly paid by the families of many suicides. With the passing of centuries English laws gradually were interpreted less strictly and mental illness was recognized more frequently among suicides, to the point of recognizing the very act of suicide as an indication of mental illness after 1600.

Laws concerning the confiscation of property of suicides gradually spread across Europe and were applied unless the suicide was associated with insanity. Starting in about 1600, attitudes in European legal systems towards suicide became more indulgent and less punitive so that in the 1700s the majority of suicides were judged to be based on mental illness (*non compos mentis*). It is also likely that the accuracy, recording and reporting of data from the English courts since the Middle Ages led to increased awareness of the issues surrounding suicide and may have contributed to the steady decrease in suicides from about 1700 to modern times. Even today, the English suicide rate is far less than that in other European countries, although suicide rates vary markedly among countries and over time (Baldessarini et al. 2007).

Throughout Europe between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many ordinary people entangled hopelessly in wretched living conditions committed suicide, evidently in despair (Minois 1999). Hanging was a prevalent method among both commoners and aristocrats. Such acts committed by aristocrats might be considered honorable, but for the poor they were usually considered cowardly and a way of avoiding responsibility, calling for selective and furious punishment and retribution. It was also deemed noble and understandable when Christians who did not want to fall into Ottoman hands carried out collective suicides, or for a woman to avoid sexual assault. In addition, deaths in war were considered heroic despite being preceded by the killing of many other human beings.

The clergy could arrange for suicides to avoid punishments or refusal of burial in consecrated ground by ascribing suicide to physical or mental illnesses and when they suicided

they were usually considered mentally ill (Minois 1999). In addition, many Christian religious enacted mystical forms of suicide with their isolation from the world until dying of starvation or thirst.

MacDonald and Murphy (1990) reported that suicide rates among the rich in early modern England (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) were much lower than in the lower classes and that they increased during periods of poor harvest, hunger and disease. Ironically, people who were punished for suicide most often were laborers or peasants with little property to confiscate; with its confiscation, their families were impoverished even further.

The Italian Dominican theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas adduced several reasons to condemn suicide: it was an act against nature and against the benevolence we should have toward ourselves and therefore was considered a mortal sin. It was also an insult against the community to which we belong and to which we have duties. Finally, it represents an act of usurpation of the laws of God, who gave us life and is the only one who may decide to take it back (Manson 1899). Aquinas concluded: "Whoever kills himself sins against God" (Clark 2000).

Following strong ecclesiastical condemnations of suicide from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, jurists viewed suicide as requiring punishment in addition to the eternal damnation expected by canon law. This view led to severe sanctions concerning disposition of the body of a suicide: often it was not buried, was dismembered or left as food for the animals, exposed at crossroads, buried under large boulders, dragged through the streets face-down, taken out of the house through a window or a passage under the threshold of the house or nailed to a barrel and left to drift at sea (Minois 1999). It was believed that the body of a suicide could contaminate the land, lakes or rivers and that if a pregnant woman approached the burial site of a suicide her offspring would follow the same fate. The spirits of suicides were considered vengeful and able to evoke anger and despair in those who came in contact with them. Of note, it was believed that suicide was a result of anger (more than melancholy) which could be aimed at the survivors (Kushner 1989).

In France, suicides were hanged by their feet then dragged through the streets as a warning to others (Minois 1999). Similar procedures were followed in Germany and included exposure of the unburied corpse, as well as removal of stones on which a suicide had walked. In Zurich, the Swiss stipulated, precisely, that a person who had stabbed himself was to have an awl driven into his head; those who had drowned were to be buried in the sand two meters from the lake shore; and those who had died by jumping off a cliff should be buried under a pile of stones.



Although spectacular, the punishments inflicted on the bodies of suicides apparently did not have a desired deterrent effect. Nevertheless, such fury continued for centuries. The last known abuse of the bodies of suicides occurred in Paris in 1749 and London in 1823 (Minois 1999).

### *Modern times*

During the Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries) living conditions and culture improved markedly and there was a renewed interest in the teachings of the classical Mediterranean world. This renewal of scholarship and learning was greatly facilitated by the rapid adoption of the printing press in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, many suicides were prominent ancient leaders or philosophers, as reviewed above, and their popularization tended to cast doubt about the sinful or criminal nature of suicide.

Growing interest in humanism resulted in frank admiration for suicide in which intellectuals found an implicit message of freedom. The re-evaluation of suicide in that period manifested itself in the appreciation for Lucretia, whose suicide after being raped was featured in *De Claris Mulieribus* (Of Famous Women) by Giovanni Boccaccio; in the *Divina Commedia* (Divine Comedy) by Dante Alighieri among the noble spirits of Limbo; and in more than 100 paintings produced between the 1360s and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cutter 1983).

In addition, the Protestant Reformation stimulated growth of individual thinking and efforts to set aside the rules and rigidity of the Catholic Church, as notably manifested in the Inquisition. This development strongly favored a more liberal and questioning attitude toward suicide. Civil and religious convictions resisted acceptance of suicide, but one could discuss the matter more openly and relatively freely.

Sebastian Brant, in his poem *The Ship of Fools* (1494), justifies suicide as a means of eliminating the suffering of life. Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, in his *Praise of Folly* (1511), expressed sympathy for suicide as a way out of a life full of problems and evils, although he still considered suicide an insane act.

In the Renaissance period a high number of suicides was recorded throughout Europe. Nevertheless, doubts remain about the accuracy of the reports since estimated rates of suicide were easily inflated, perhaps in response to increased attention afforded to the phenomenon by philosophers, writers and moralists.

In 1594, William Shakespeare wrote *The Rape of Lucretia* which stresses the political effect of her suicide during the transition from monarchy to republic in ancient Rome. In the

following 40 years, in the early 1600s, more than 200 suicides of characters appeared in British theatrical works. The dramatic effect of suicide fit very well in a play associated with special events, often romantic in nature, and was used for the conclusion of a drama for cathartic effect. In Shakespeare's plays, suicides are those of the classical world (Anthony and Cleopatra), for love (Romeo and Juliet), for blame (Othello) or for despair (Ophelia) and Hamlet debated whether to live or die. They anticipated the association between madness and suicide.

The most intense expression of the English debate on suicide was by clergyman John Donne in an essay on the topic, *Biathanatos* (violent death), in which he wrote about the "paradox" that self-murder is not a sin against nature (1647). Donne, despite being the Dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London, justified suicide. Given the controversial content, his book was initially shown only to close friends and finally published 16 years after Donne's death. He argued that suicide was not contrary to nature, as there were other ways of mortification of human nature imposed by civilization. Human nature was guided by rationality and it could be considered appropriate to commit suicide and not contrary to reason. Moreover, Roman law had not condemned it for a long time. Donne also rejected the persisting argument that suicide deprives the army of a soldier, since soldiers could retire from military life without being condemned. A third point concerned the development of the divine law; Donne had no difficulty arguing that the Bible did not condemn suicide, though murder was deemed sinful. A further irony is that many more men die during wars and are considered patriotic or even heroic than those who die by their own hand.

English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes saw suicide as a destructive act against natural law and therefore should not be allowed. However, suicide could not be considered illegal even accepting the Platonic position on the loss of an individual belonging to the community. Also, the relatively moderate French philosopher René Descartes argued against suicide pragmatically, considering that leaving the safe for the uncertain did not make sense, that life is not always happy but often offers consolation and that good things may be even more frequent than bad ones. He rejected the idea of sin and punishment with regard to suicide. He believed these to be unnecessary since suicide is a punishment by itself. Finally, in a letter Descartes expressed doubts about the mental health of suicides (Minois 1999).

Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) saw suicide with a much more modern view than his contemporaries. For the first time, he suggested the presence of mental illness behind suicidal behavior, considering melancholy of the Hippocratic and Galenic traditions. He put suicide in a non-religious, modern perspective and described facilitating

conditions, including agitation, hopelessness and impulsivity. Nevertheless, most writers of the next century continued to oppose suicide, supported by ecclesiastical powers (Brown 2001).

English physician William Rowley wrote *A Treatise on Female, Nervous, Hysterical, Hypochondriacal, Bilious, Convulsive Diseases; Apoplexy and Palsy with Thoughts on Madness, Suicide, et cetera, in Which the Principal Disorders are Explained from Anatomical Facts, and the Treatment Formed on Several New Principles* in 1788. It reiterated the views of previous centuries, arguing that suicide was an act against religion and so a crime against civil society because it deprived others of expected physical and mental services and immoral for being contrary to the individual's duties to maintain relational ties. Following such thinking, Rowley attacked the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as expressed in *Julie, la Nouvelle Héloïse* (Julie, The New Eloise 1761): "Seeking good and avoiding evil when you do not cause harm to others, it is a law of nature. When life becomes bad for us and it is not good for anyone, we can get rid of it." Rowley's position was mainly utilitarian in seeing only the duties of men towards others. However, he introduced advanced ideas concerning *remote* causes of suicide, which might include mental illness (*insania*) or bodily pain. In addition, he described *proximate* causes in not being brave or balanced enough to endure misfortunes, or basically, not being of sound mind (*non compos mentis*), because "in every violent passion there is a degree of madness." He concluded that when an individual contemplates suicide his mental status must necessarily be compromised.

Rowley's condemnation of suicide was out of keeping with contrary trends that had been evolving on the Continent. For example, two centuries earlier, French Renaissance writer Michel Eyquem de Montaigne spoke in his *Essais* (Essays 1580) quite favorably about suicide: "death makes life precious, but at the same time decrees its vanity." Following the footsteps of suicides in the classical period, he argued that "the wise man lives as much as he ought to, not as much as he can" and he even thought that "death... is the remedy for every illness." Nevertheless, in his essays, Montaigne did not invite anyone to commit suicide and, moreover, although he became very ill and was in a constant pain, he did not hasten his own end. His point of view is close to that of those who must deal with a person at risk of suicide: understanding the wish to die, but at the same time making all efforts to avoid it. Charles-Louis Baron de Montesquieu in his *Lettres Persanes* (Persian Letters 1721) spoke of legal convictions for suicide as an injustice because, if the gift of life is a blessing, it is justifiable to give it up when it seems no longer to be a blessing. French philosopher François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire), more than

many other writers, influenced thinking about suicide in the direction of liberalism, defending self-destruction in cases of extreme necessity.

Another tolerant view of suicide was expressed by Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume in his *Essays on Suicide and the Immortality of the Soul* (1755). He stated that suicide could not be seen as an offense against God. It was not condemned in the Bible and he considered the Augustinian interpretation of suicide as homicide and therefore against the fifth Commandment, as not justified. He noted that the commandment *Do not kill* “evidently has sense only to exclude the killing of others over whose lives we have no authority and that many precepts derived from the Scriptures should be changed by reason and common sense.”

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries suicide was sufficiently common in England as to be called *la maladie anglaise* (the English disease) by the French, evidently following the still-present tendency for each country to attribute eccentric, outrageous or distasteful customs to the other. It is likely that suicide was not at all more common in London than in Paris, although the British press reported on suicides more frequently. The first weekly publication, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, appeared in London in 1731 and frequently reported news about suicides. In contrast, in France the subject was considered private or shameful and not often reported in publications. Later, however, evidence was uncovered that the suicide rate in France was nearly threetimes higher than in England at the same time.

A particularly harsh position against suicide was taken by Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant who, in his *Metaphysics of Ethics* (1786), reasoned that suicide is contrary to the love we owe to ourselves. In addition, he claimed that suicide could not be considered an act of freechoice since it limited the universal duty of acting as if individual actions belonged to the universal law of nature.

English clergyman Charles Moore wrote a treatise, *A Full Inquiry on the Subject of Suicide* (1790), whose introduction reported:

*“Though many excellent sermons and short essays have been written on the guilt of suicide, yet it has never been treated (as far as the author's knowledge extends) on a large and comprehensive scale, so as to unite all its several parts branches in one and the same work.”*

Moore leaned toward then-prevalent religious ideas but added that “the usual arguments brought in favor of suicide will be proposed and answered.” He also discussed Donne’s *Biathanatos*, Hume’s *Essay on Suicide* and “the book of most pernicious influence, Goethe’s “Sorrows of the Young Werther” (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*), as well as works of famous

philosophers of his time, including Beccaria, Montaigne, Montesquieu, More, Rousseau and Voltaire.

A court case in London in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century shook prevailing moral opinion. It involved the suicide in 1822 of Robert Stewart (Lord Castlereagh, Second Marquis of Londonderry, 1769-1822), a very powerful and conservative man. The London coroner had to decide between the act as a crime or the product of an unsound mind. If the death were adjudged to be a crime, a member of the ruling class had to be buried ignominiously under a crossroad; if it was considered the product of mental illness, that information would become public. The coroner decided in favor of mental illness, noting his recent expression of suicidal thoughts and persecutory ideas and Lord Castlereagh was granted a funeral at Westminster Abbey. His funeral provoked angry reactions from the public and many of his colleagues, but also consideration that suicide could be a noble act. The debate raised a range of considerations about suicide, prominent among which was the frequent connection of suicide with mental disorder.

In the following year (1823), Abel Griffiths, a 22-year-old law student, clad only in drawers, socks and a winding sheet, was interred at the cross-roads formed by Eaton Street, Grosvenor Place and the King's Road in London. His bloodied, unwashed body was quickly dropped into a hole following removal of a stake driven into his chest. The young man had killed himself after killing his father. A neighbor reported that he had suffered “depression in the brain.” Nevertheless, despite this and other evidence, a jury decided that Griffiths had been in a sound state of mind. Remarkably, there was no public resistance to this outcome. However, in the same year, a law was promulgated to prohibit further burials under crossroads (Gates 2013).

In the British colonies in America, laws towards suicide were the same as in England. For instance, in Massachusetts Chief Justice Samuel Sewall (1652-1730) was opposed unconditionally to suicide and applied full sanctions against people who attempted or committed suicide (Kushner 1989). For the Justice it was the worst kind of murder and melancholy – even when recognized – instead of being considered a defense-added culpability because it made one vulnerable to Satan’s temptation to suicide. Puritans insisted that suicide was an individual act and punishments had to be directed to them and not to their families so that, contrary to English custom, there was no confiscation of goods (Kushner 1989). Also, attempted suicides were punished with whipping and incarceration.

Puritan values in the British colonies resisted the evolution of thought in 17<sup>th</sup> century England that viewed melancholy as a disease. Even the recognition of a *non compos mentis* was

left to interpretation. The county Justice Michael Dalton in 1619 explained: “If a lunatike person killeth himselfe” while lucid “he shall forfeit his goods.” Although there were isolated cases in which the law against suicide was strictly enforced in other colonial jurisdictions, such as Providence Plantations (today part of Rhode Island), Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, North Carolina and Virginia, as well in some coroner’s juries in Massachusetts, suicide associated with melancholy was considered a mental illness and not punished. However, in most cases a suicide was still a sinner and thus denied religious burial.

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was not in favor of suicide and argued that it did not really offer a plausible escape from difficulties intrinsic to an essentially irrational world. Suicides indeed want to live, but not on terms that are offered; they need to give up life because they are unable to give up the will to live better. Schopenhauer’s suggested solution in his book, *On Suicide*, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), was to reach a negation of life through asceticism.

The French Enlightenment philosopher Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron of Holbach, even more vigorously proclaimed the legitimacy of suicide, considering it neither an act against nature nor an act of cowardice. At the same time, he rejected the idea that philosophical suicide be attributed to moral or physical suffering, whether conscious or unconscious.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while old ideas were still present, the prevailing attitude seemed to be that suicide was a result of an altered mental state. Modern studies of suicide were about to appear and views of suicide as either noble self-sacrifice or escape from responsibilities were less and less often associated with voluntary death. In England, reports of suicides were often included in published reports of the news, with varied interpretations of the persons involved and their decisions to end their lives. Prevalent were stories of women (including Virginia Woolf) throwing themselves into the sea or a river or of men who hanged or shot themselves. Female suicide was usually related to emotional delusions or loss of chastity which were repented, whereas suicides in men were often ascribed to financial difficulties. Apparent attempts to avoid punishment or shame were sometimes offered as rational conclusions and proof of sanity. In addition, an association was being suspected between suicide and alcohol abuse— by 1877 alcoholism was granted the dignified status of being a disease (Harrison 1971). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, magazines included engravings in stories (mainly about women) of persons who threw themselves from bridges or were pulled out of the water, often barely clad. By contrast, on the Continent, most news reports excluded suicides.

The publication by Belgian mathematician and statistician-sociologist Adolphe Quetelet, *Sur l'Homme et le Développement de ses Facultés, ou Essai de Statistique Social* (About Man and the Development of His Facultes, or an Essay on Social Statistics, 1835), began a phase of intense statistical study of suicide. This tradition was continued by the work of Professor of Psychiatry at Turin, Enrico Morselli (1852-1929), in his book *Il Suicidio. Saggio di Statistica Morale Comparata* (Suicide. Essay of Moral Comparative Statistics, 1879); and by French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1857-1919) in his *Suicide: un Essai Sociologique* (Suicide: A Sociological Study, 1897). In these texts, the central point was to look for possible causes or predicting factors of suicide outside the individual, though from differing perspectives. Their most important contribution was the initiation of modern epidemiological, sociological, psychological and medical investigations aimed at describing, understanding and preventing voluntary death.

### **Acknowledgments**

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The study of suicide in the century after the publication of Emile Durkheim's *Suicide* (1897) has largely been the province of sociologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists, but in the 1990s, beginning with Michael MacDonald and Terence Murphy's *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England, 1500-1800* (1991), there has been a spate of historical studies of suicide: Alexander Murray's (1998, 2000) [End Page 311] volumes on suicide in the Middle Ages, and others on suicide in early modern Germany, Geneva, and Stockholm. Suicide, which in the days of republican Rome, had only been a crime if indulged in by slaves or soldiers, now came under general attack. St. Augustine provided the definitive condemnation, making suicide a crime against God, nature, and the state. History of Suicide book. Read 7 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. In this compact and illuminating history, Georges Minois examines... In this compact and illuminating history, Georges Minois examines how a culture's attitudes about suicide reflect its larger beliefs and values—attitudes toward life and death, duty and honor, pain and pleasure. Minois begins his survey with classical Greece and Rome, where suicide was acceptable—even heroic—under some circumstances. With the rise of Christianity, however, In this compact and illuminating history, Georges Minois examines how a culture's attitudes about suicide reflect its larger beliefs and values—attitudes toward life and death, duty and honor, pain and pleasure. Academic journal article *The Historian*. *Cultures of Suicide?: Suicide Verdicts and the "Community" in Thirteenth-And Fourteenth-Century England*. By Butler, Sara M. Read preview. Murmurs of disagreement have prompted warnings against rashly discarding the medieval community. Historians did not invent this fictive community; rather, as Christopher Dyer and Gervase Rosser remind us, medievalists drew on a contemporary sense of community to which villagers turned in times of hardship. Both Dyer and Rosser call attention to the taxing years of the later medieval period when, despite increasing economic and social strife in the postplague world, villagers became determined to preserve communal harmony by asserting a united perspective.