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Suicide in a cultural history perspective, part 1
Western culture; attitudes to suicide up to the 19th century

Part 1 will focus on our own culture and antiquity, tracing various philosophical disciplines and their perception of suicide up to the 19th century. Part 2 examines modern times and legislation on suicide in various countries. Part 3 deals with other cultures.

Many books have been written about suicide in a cultural history perspective, such as Farberow's "Suicide in Different Cultures" from 1975. My book, "Suicide"(1995), also examines suicide from a cultural history perspective, as does Hammerlin and Schjelderup's book "Når livet blir en byrde" (When Life Becomes a Burden, 1994). Anyone working on suicide issues will benefit from studying the cultural history aspects.

Suicide has been with us as along as there has been recorded history. "Suicide", or literally *self-murder* (in Norwegian the word is indeed *selvmord*), appears to be a relatively new term, dating perhaps from the 1500s. It has probably been adopted into the language as a direct translation of the Latin term for this act, *suicidium*. Before the term suicide was adopted by the Nordic languages, other expressions for this phenomenon were used, primarily words equivalent to the English expression "take one's own life". The term "self-murder" is used in Norwegian, Danish, Swedish and German. The Latin term *suicidium* is composed of *sui*, the genitive of *suus*, meaning his or self, and the term *cidium*, deriving from the verb *caedere*, which means to kill, chop or stab. Directly translated suicide thus is "to kill oneself". Both the English and French languages use the Latin "suicide".

If suicide is considered from a cultural history angle, it is easy to distinguish between two forms of suicide: social and institutionalized suicide and individual or personal suicide.

Social or institutionalized suicide

This is a self-destruction virtually demanded of the individual by society due to the individual's role in a group. This type of suicide has had general recognition in many cultures. Examples include the death of a widow, servant or slave because of the death of the master or lord. Other examples might be found in countries ravaged by famine and privation, where it was expected that the old or sick ones would sacrifice themselves so those who were younger and well would survive. When an old person no longer was able to follow the tribe, he or she would be left behind, either at his or her own initiative or the tribe's.

For most nomadic tribes old and sick people would considerably curtail the mobility required for hunting, fishing and moving to another location. An old, feeble and sick person might take his or her own life through a "blessed ride" on a sled off a precipice.

They might also drown themselves, let themselves be slain or stay behind in the wilderness.

Some cultures have expected suicide if a person has landed in an embarrassing situation or suffered humiliation. Examples could include a general who has lost an important battle, or a nobleman who has lost face and has been humiliated through the discovery of some unfortunate act, making life impossible to continue in a noble manner.

Personal or individual suicide

These suicides have generally also stemmed from the same causes we find behind suicides today: A boxed in and difficult life situation found impossible to resolve through regular means, escape mechanisms, aggression toward others that one feels disappointed by, and not least mental ailments of various kinds.

Below we shall consider suicide in our own cultural sphere, and then examine suicide in other cultural spheres.

The Greco-Roman culture

Ancient Greece

In ancient Greece suicide was considered a disgraceful act. A person who had committed suicide thus did not receive the death rites accorded common citizens. Life was considered a gift bestowed by the Gods, and life and death was subjected to the will of the Gods. Hence taking one's own life was seen as rebellion against the Gods. Mankind being the property of the Gods, as it were, a suicide would, needless to say, invoke the wrath of the Gods. Such ideas can be traced back to around 500 BC.

Pythagoras, known for his theory of the right-angled triangle, where the area of the square on the longest side (the hypotenuse) is equal to the sum of the areas of the squares drawn on the other two sides, lived around 540-500 BC. Based on his in many ways revolutionary formulas, he found that the world could be calculated to hold a finite number of souls at any given time. A suicide might topple this balance, as there might not be anybody to fill this sudden vacuum after a surprising death not intended by the Gods.

If we examine the next century, we can look to Plato. Living between 427 and 347 BC, he was loyal to the laws of Athens that did not allow suicide. He considered suicide a wrong and improper act. Man is not only the offspring of the Gods, but also their soldier, and committing suicide would be akin to desertion. In one of his works he states that a person who has committed suicide should be buried with no honours in a lonely place where no monuments could be raised on the grave. Nevertheless, he was also convinced that there would be exceptions to the rule, for example persons who suffered from horrible ailments, intolerable poverty or profound grief and need. In his time it was a common custom that the bodies of suicides were burned outside

their towns, while the hand or other part of the body used for the actual act of suicide would be cut off and buried separately far away from other burial sites.

If we step into the next century in Greek history we find Aristotle, who lived from 384 to 322 BC. He also condemned suicide. Primarily he emphasized that it was a sin of weakness against the fatherland. "As man owes the fatherland his life, an act voluntarily relinquishing this life is in reality criminal neglect of clear duties as a citizen".

However, there was no absolute condemnation of anyone who committed suicide. Ancient Greece also considered some instances of suicide as heroic acts. Cases in point would include Kodios, who gave up his life to save Athens from the Lacedaemonians, and Themistocles who preferred to poison himself rather than show the Persians the way to his countrymen.

The School of Stoics

The stoic school was founded in Greece by Zenon around 400 BC. It flourished during the Roman Empire, a period of time when it appears that religious beliefs were gradually eroding. Condemnation and fear were maintained in the lower social classes, while the higher classes developed a slightly more accepting attitude to suicide. The stoic school developed clear ideas on suicide, ideas that were developed particularly in the period of time around the birth of Christ. Suicide was defended as an honourable and appropriate act in a number of situations:

- When the act of suicide served others, for example the fatherland.
- When the suicide by his act avoided being forced to commit an illegal or morally reprehensible act.
- When poverty, chronic illness or mental disease made death more attractive than life.
- To uphold one's honour.

However, the stoics also believed that man was duty bound to live for others. The highest law for the stoics was to live in harmony with nature and in accordance with reason. The stoics would wander in the so-called Stoa, the columned halls of Athens. The stoic school was not only a presence in Athens, but it also spread to Rome and to the sphere of Roman culture.

Zenon, the founder of the stoic philosophy, had found life enjoyable until he was all of 98 years old. Then he fell down and dislocated his big toe. This disturbed his existence to the point that he went home and hanged himself.

Pliny the elder considered the existence of poisonous herbs as royal and divine proof that man could allow himself to die painlessly. Seneca, another stoic, argued for suicide as a method to escape or end suffering, in particular due to the weakening of age and bodily degeneration. Seneca spelled it out this way, "I will not flee old age if I may retain my wits, but if age starts to weaken my reason and starts to destroy my possibilities, if it only allows me to keep my breathing but not my life, then I will part from my body. I do not wish to escape into death for illness that may be cured and

allow my reason to remain sane. I will not direct my hand against myself for the reason of pain, for that would be to be defeated by death. But I do know that if I must suffer without any hope of succour, then I will leave life, not in fear of pain in itself, but because pain will prevent me from doing all the things that make life worth living for me."

Pliny the elder, mentioned above, and Pliny the younger, his sister's son, both had a stoic attitude to suicide. They deemed it right to weigh motives for and against when life grew difficult and illness flourished. They would balance accounts with pro on the one side and con on the other. "Voluntarily balance the motives for and against, and then on the basis of the advice decide for life or death, that is the decision of a great soul".

An example of a cool and premeditated act of suicide deserving of honour and signifying love of the fatherland was the death of Cato from Utica. He stabbed himself in preference to living under the tyranny of Caesar's rule, based on his concern for his fatherland and his rigid principles. Caesar was so impressed by this act that he said, "Cato, I grudge your death as you have grudged me my power to keep you alive". Caesar sensed a kind of defeat when he no longer held Cato's fate in his hand.

The stoics were also very concerned with the manner in which a suicide was to be performed. Marcus Aurelius (121-181 AC.), an Emperor who enjoyed universal respect, emphasized that a suicide must be performed quietly with no theatrical gestures.

The Cynic and Epicurean schools. Roman law

The Cynic and Epicurean schools accepted suicide under certain circumstances. Gradually suicide legislation was formulated in the ancient Roman Empire. Financial considerations were brought into the picture. The suicide of a slave meant a substantial financial burden for the master. The suicide of a soldier weakened the Roman armies. Attempted suicide became a punishable offence. For a Roman soldier the penalty could be death as an attempted suicide was considered comparable to desertion, and the punishment for desertion was death. The property of a suicide would be confiscated. However, a heroic sacrificial suicide would be highly prized. One example is Decius Mus, a Roman consul, who knowing that an oracle had prophesied that a decisive battle could only be won if a nobleman sacrificed himself, threw himself on the ranks of the enemy before his own troops attacked.

The ancient Roman Empire considered a suicide positively if performed to avoid dishonour, if it was an expression of grief over the loss of a loved one, or if it was committed in the service of the country. Dido committed suicide at her spouse's funeral pyre rather than being forced into a new marriage. Paulina, Seneca's wife, followed him into death when he was forced to commit suicide by Emperor Nero. During the first five centuries A.D., the ancient Roman Empire foundered. Gradually the attitude to suicide in our cultural sphere was more and more influenced by Christian religion.

The Judeo-Christian cultural sphere

History appears to tell us that suicide was a rare occurrence among Jews. The Old Testament regarded life as sacred. A Jew was allowed to break religious laws if necessary to save his life, but three acts were prohibited to any Jew. He could not:

- commit murder

- deny God

- perpetrate incestuous acts

Suicide was considered wrong and unworthy by Jewish law. Those who committed suicide were denied burial according to the common rites, and also rites of grief. However, exceptions were found, primarily if suicide would help avoid disgrace through captivity or torture.

The Old Testament describes a number of instances of suicide, but four suicides are normally emphasized.

- Samson (The Book of Judges Chap 16) killed himself and the Philistines by pushing over the pillars of the temple, so that he died along with the Philistines.

- Saul (The First Book of Samuel Chapter 31) killed himself after suffering defeat in battle to prevent dishonour or torture on surrender.

- Abimelech (The Book of Judges Chapter 9) killed himself after being mortally wounded by a woman. He could not accept that he would be remembered for being killed by a woman.

- Ahitophael hanged himself after failing in his betrayal of David to Absalom (the Second Book of Samuel Chapter 17).

The Talmud, the holy book of the Jews, reported an increasing number of suicides and a severely condemning attitude on this.

The Early Christian era

The New Testament offers one instance of suicide that is widely familiar: Judas Iscariot, who after betraying Christ in the garden of Gethsemane later went off and hanged himself.

During the early Christian period acts of martyrdom were common. The number of suicides increased during this period because many people wished to come closer to God and Christ and live with them forever. A certain pessimism concerning life's prospects was prevalent at the time. Life after death was substantially more important than life on earth, and there was a corresponding yearning for the values of eternity.

However, suicide was not actually banned until we move quite a way into the history of Christianity. Changes came during the fourth century, and the Church developed an antagonistic attitude to suicide. Eventually suicide came to be viewed as evidence that the individual had no faith in God's grace, or that he or she lacked confidence in God, rejecting God by rejecting life, God's gift to man.

During the decline of the Roman Empire Augustine (354-430 AD) wrote his huge opus "God's State". Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire during the fifth century. The ideas propounded by Augustine in his works were to influence the practice of the Church with respect to punishment and condemnation for centuries. Augustine considered life a gift from God. Rejecting life meant committing an unforgivable sin against God and robbing him of his command of life and death.

Augustine believed that the fifth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill", applied to both killing others and oneself. Hence he writes that whoever kills himself is a murderer, and such an act is not allowed for a person who worships the one and true God. Augustine also condemned suicides by women after rape. Whoever took her life in such a way was equally guilty as the perpetrator of the rape. He comforted women by claiming that spiritual values would not be lost even if the body had been subjected to abuse. Pain exists to be suffered, and one should not commit a sin against oneself because of suffering. Augustine only saw one form of suicide that he would accept: in the event there is an absolute command from God. A true and noble soul will suffer pain such as Job did. Job withstood the most horrible pain he was subjected to without giving up life. A person who commits suicide dies as the worst sinner.

Augustine drew up four arguments to justify the Church's condemning attitude on suicide.

1. Suicide is murder. No one has the right to kill anyone, including oneself, as that would be both a crime and a sin. The only acceptable exception would be an undisputed command given by God.
2. A person who takes his own life is a murderer and has killed a man.
3. A true and noble soul accepts suffering and pain, and trying to escape from pain is a sign of weakness. 4. A person who commits suicide dies as the worst sinner. Not only does he escape from the fear of temptation, but he also robs himself of the possibility of absolution (forgiveness of sins).

We shall next consider how suicide was regarded at the decisive church synods over the next 600 years.

The Church synod at Arles 452

This church synod prohibited suicide based on the idea that "whoever kills himself, kills an innocent person and commits murder".

After this, Christianity developed a strongly condemning attitude to suicide, which for a period of time caused the idea to hold sway that Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Christ was a smaller sin than the later sin he committed when he hanged himself.

The Church synod at Braga 563

This Church synod determined that no church rites would be dispensed after a suicide. However, it appears that in actual practice suicide would be accepted under the following circumstances: voluntary martyrdom, self-inflicted death through an act of asceticism, and the suicide of a virgin or married woman to preserve her virtue.

The Church synod at Antisidor 590

At this meeting a system of restrictions was determined for the first time to condemn suicide.

The Church synod at Toledo 693

Here it was decided to implement sanctions by banning, excommunicating, anyone who killed him/herself.

The Church synod at Nîmes 1096

The Church synod decided that those who commit suicide, would be denied the right to be buried in "white soil" (consecrated soil). Eventually a custom developed that allowed a suicide's body to be buried outside the churchyard or nestled by the churchyard wall.

Many peculiar customs were developed in various countries in Europe in the following period of time. In many places the body of a person who had killed her/himself, would be dragged through the streets and buried in a crossroads with a stake driven through the body and a stone over the face. This custom appears to have continued in England for a very long time. Other strange customs were developed, for example in Danzig, where the body of a person who had killed her/himself, could not be brought out of the house through the door, but rather had to be taken out through a window. If the window was not big enough, it would occasionally be necessary to make a hole in the wall. Apparently these customs were introduced to ensure that those who had committed suicide, would not return as a ghost.

The Middle Ages

The attitudes we have reviewed from the initial Christian period largely prevailed during the Middle Ages. An exception was during the reign of Charles the Great (768-814). This period was one of intellectual aristocracy, and not least respect of reason. During this period the first indications appeared that suicide could be excused if insanity was the cause. This lapsed after the time of Charles the Great, however, and the old attitudes returned.

Nevertheless, these attitudes did not prevent suicide and not least mass suicide from taking place, for example in connection with persecution and suppression. The most

famous mass suicide concerned the Albigenses of southern France. Five thousand persons who did not share the prevailing faith were persecuted as heretics, and they killed themselves in 1218. There were also pogroms against the Jews, for example in England, where persecutions were especially intense during the reign of Richard Lionheart. Thus in York in 1190, more than 600 persons killed themselves to escape persecution.

One of those who attempted suicide without succeeding was Joan of Arc. She attempted to commit suicide while in jail in Beauvoir. When she was brought to court, a church court in Rouen, the bishops used her suicide attempt against her, considering this another piece of evidence that she was allied with the devil. She was burned at the stake in the town square in Rouen in 1431 for witchcraft and heresy, but the verdict was declared invalid by the Pope in 1456, and she was canonized in 1920.

In the 13th century Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) expressed the official Christian view of the time in his Summa Theologiae. He developed the so-called natural law, which he believed originated from God, but which was also based on human reason. Suicide was utterly wrong in his eyes due to the following reasons:

1. It was unnatural.
2. Each person is a member of a society, and suicide is thus anti-social.
3. Life is a gift from God and is not to be disposed of by man.

At this time Dante's "Divina Commedia" was published (approximately 1307). This book reflected the contemporary attitudes to suicide. Dante is taken through hell and purgatory to Paradise. The persons who had killed themselves, were condemned to eternal unrest in the forests of self-destruction in the seventh hell, underneath heretics and murderers in the sixth hell.

The renaissance and the reformation brought modifications in the perception of suicide. Luther's ideas opened for a change from absolutism and subservience to personal standpoints and personal responsibilities. He opened for doubts where previously only absolutes had been perceived. Nevertheless, it appears that Protestantism by and large carried on the Christian ideas that had been expressed by the Catholic Church. It also appears that the perception of suicide in the medieval period was less condemning in higher social strata, while the general populace continued to condemn it as strongly.

The same ideas that were applied in the areas influenced by Luther's creed were also expressed in the areas influenced by Calvin's teaching, primarily in Britain and France. In his famous book "Anatomy of Melancholy" Burton (1621) disagreed strongly with contemporary Church dogmas, actually asking whether a person who had taken his/her own life, would be eternally condemned. This was a very risky question to ask at the time.

The 18th century

During the 18th century there was a certain liberalisation of attitudes to suicide. Montesquieu (1689-1755) sharply criticized the prevalent official perception of suicide, not least when considered from the viewpoint of the survivors. Both Voltaire (1674-1778) and Rousseau (1712-1778) defended the individual right to take one's life, criticizing the official attitude to suicide. Voltaire particularly emphasized reason, while Rousseau had a more romanticized approach.

One of the most important publications from the Middle Ages was by the Scots philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) in his "Essay on Suicide" (1783). This book was so radical according to contemporary ideas that the publisher did not dare publish it. Thus it was not published until after his death. Hume maintained that it must be the right of an individual to decide his own death if pain, illness, shame or poverty make life unbearable. Man does not do anything wrong by committing suicide, but ceases doing good. Suicide cannot be a crime against oneself, for no man will discard a life while it is still worth living.

Merian (1763) introduced an important new idea, what we may call a type of medical view. He underlined that suicide was no crime but rather mental illness. All suicides were actually committed while in an unsound state of mind. These ideas eventually caused the Church to moderate its attitudes on suicide committed while of unsound mind.

At this time the idea developed that suffering pain and crises were valuable experiences, and that man would become a better person by suffering difficulties, such as claimed by Madame de Staël (1766-1817). She thus claimed that suicide was against the moral dignity of man, because it would remove any possibility of further growth and development.

Goethe's "*Werthers Leiden"* (Werther's Sufferings) appeared in 1774. This book took Europe by storm triggering whole epidemics of suicide. It was a love story written while Goethe was deeply in love with 19-year old Charlotte Buff, and influenced by the suicide of one of his close acquaintances, Jerusalem the embassy secretary, who unhappily in love with a married woman, shot himself.